

Rhetorical Figures in Action: Using Shakespeare's Dramatic Language On Stage Today

Perhaps the most misunderstood yet recognizable, component to Shakespeare's rhetoric is his rhetorical figuring – or Style. The rhetorical canon of Style – also called Elocution -- encompasses the use of over two hundred rhetorical devices ~ figures of speech and thought. These figures or devices are the linguistic patterns: the twists and turns of sound, spelling, word order, and grammatical construction most often associated with rhetoric.

These literary devices held almost a compulsive interest for early Tudor rhetoricians, who invented, sorted, argued over, and even renamed them -- discussing their elegance, charm and effectiveness. The patterned complexity, rhythmic quality, and pleasing aural aesthetic of rhetorical devices, however, has proven a distraction for scholars, by limiting their focus to one of linguistic decoration. This limited view of figurative language's function in the plays - combined with the world's growing visual and grammar-oriented relationship to language -- has contributed to the modern student's mistrust and misapprehension of Shakespeare's plays as foreign and stilted linguistic poems to be studied and translated instead of theater scripts to be played and experienced. The early modern author, actor, and audience member encountered ornamental language not as a mere flourish, but as a linguistic tool inextricable connected and necessary to the communication of its subject matter.

Even so, many modern theater practitioners find it difficult to believe that ancient and ornamental literary devices can serve any practical purpose on today's stage, and so often try to ignore or 'downplay' them in search of naturalistic speech (ironically often rendering the rhetorical dramatic poetry unintelligible). Some critics go as far as to doubt if theater makers four hundred years ago could use them any more than we can, and so question if Shakespeare put them into his plays for any reason other than poetic flourishes. Yet all agree that Shakespeare was a man of the theater above all, dedicated first to creating great performances by giving his actors the tools they needed on stage in a theater world of few rehearsals. If Shakespeare did not write poetry to be studied, but scripts to be played, then he must have intended his rhetorical figures to serve a dramatic function.

By grouping the figures into the four basic groups of Repetition, Balance, Expansion, and Contraction and then learning to embody them *in space on stage*, modern actors can begin to gain access to this complex system of figures – first experiencing the architectural structure of word and sound patterns, and then discovering their consistent theatrical functions and how to play them. In this way, modern actors can begin to foster the embodied knowledge and linguistic nuance that the aural traditions and education gave to every early modern actor (and audience member).

This 21st century approach to embodied linguistic patterns gives actors (and directors) a way to keep rhetoric from becoming an interesting intellectual exercise reserved for table work, but useless or forgotten onstage. Shakespeare used rhetorical figures to help his actors create good theater that his audiences loved, and by not only understanding but being able to use these linguistic patterns, modern actors and directors will give new life to our theater in a way our audiences will love as well.

A profile of each grouping follows with a description of their structure and function, guidelines for exploring each group in rehearsal, and a physicalized staging technique to help sensitize actors and accentuate the figuring onstage for modern audiences.

FIGURES OF REPETITION

Figures of Repetition are the most basic of rhetorical schemes as well as the easiest to identify. The name of these figures illustrates their structure; they repeat sounds, words, phrases, and lines. The most audibly recognizable group of figures, repetition uses the repeating sound of a word, phrase, or line to play upon the actor's and audience's sensibilities and expand their experience of the moment by clarifying the meaning, delighting the wit, or deepening the emotional resonance. Beyond their own dramatic attributes, however, figures of repetition also serve double duty, working to enhance and support the more sophisticated groupings of Balance and Expansion.

Nothing repeats without purpose, and repetition calls attention to the sound, idea, emotion, or moment that repeats. Figures of repetition work by highlighting a word or thought and so deepening its resonance. With each repetition, the word or thought grows in import either emotionally increasing in its weight or serving as an intellectual sticking point. Henry Peacham called figures of repetition a "double sigh of the heart" or "double stabbe of the weapons pointe."

Shakespeare's Repetition can bounce an idea back and forth like a volleyball calling attention to a speaker's wit or the playful relationship between two speakers. As such it is a proposal from one actor to another to come and play – but as with all ball games there can be bullies who take, twist or pervert an offering. Inside or outside of partnership, repetition can pound like a war drum ever growing in intensity to emphasize the sound, thought or emotion beyond tolerance. A repetition can serve as a homing beacon in a character's thought process bringing its speaker closer and closer to a realization by clarifying the idea or turning the thought to a new conclusion. It can serve as the ammunition in an argument, allowing its speaker to make his or her point again and again, eating away his opponent's defenses. Shakespeare's repetition always grows in import and requires growing attention by the speaker... and so by the hearer as well.

Figures of Repetition serve to audibly underline key ideas and directly affect the speaker and audience emotionally. Repetition, however, functions most often as a building block of more structurally and dramatically complex rhetorical figuring. An actor, therefore, should notice and allow the aural highlighting of Repetition – but also know that they often also follow the guidelines of Balance and Expansion.

IN REHEARSAL:

Figures of repetition give actors an opportunity to grapple with and/or share particular words or images. When faced with repetition... here are three things an actor or director should investigate:

NOTICE...

What is repeated ... ask why?

EXPLORE...

How does the echoing of that idea, sound or image affect me (as either character or actor)?

TRY...

Giving the repeated word or phrase growing importance & weight

ONSTAGE: Rhetorical Staging Technique

Repetitious Gesture

When you repeat a word or phrase (of your own or someone else's), find a gesture that embodies the word, phrase or idea and repeat the gesture when you repeat the words. These repeated physicalities can be as tiny or as huge as you choose, they should grow and shift with each repetition as you grow and shift your relationship to the word. If you know someone repeats what you say, give them a clear gesture to work from. (Remember that gestures are not just hands, let it be as full bodied as possible.)

FIGURES OF BALANCE:

Figures of Balance weigh an idea, argument, person, or object with another to reveal its value, importance, or nature by placing words or clauses in relationship to each other, emphasizing their similarity or difference. They help the speaker to comprehend or effectively communicate a complex thought or emotion by illuminating its nature through comparison. This group of figures includes many diverse schemes and tropes; however as the name implies, they all share the same basic structure – the comparison of at least two things. The linguistic structure of Balance take several forms: juxtaposition (simply placing objects to be compared next to another), mathematical equations (such as $x=y$, IF x , THEN y , $x > y$) – but every Figure of Balance has two (occasionally more) components that are compared or contrasted.

The most cerebral of the groupings, Figures of Balance give an actor active ways to linguistically structure their analytical thought – and are particularly useful to clarify and communicate particularly complex ideas; they literally map out the thought. They support when, and suggest that, an actor play tactics of weighing, considering, or figuring out the relationship of ideas. Structurally and rhythmically, they crave, as their name implies, balance in rhythm, space and thought. To clearly communicate the structure of the verse, an actor must give attention although not necessarily equal weight to both sides of the scale or equation.

Beyond a general approach to isolated figures of balance, however, the aural harmony and intellectual properties of these figures amplify when grouped together. Unlike the emotionally overwhelming effects of expansion and contraction, Figures of Balance, because of their comparative nature and rhythmic harmony, appeal to the intellect and create a measured and logical effect. Groups of balancing figures (often combined with repetition) create a rhythmic structure that is measured and can help a character to keep intellectual control, even if only barely over an explosive experience.

IN REHEARSAL:

IDENTIFY...

What is on each side of the balance & what is their relationship?

EXPLORE...

The rhythmic demands of each thing being balanced and make a decision as to their weight and relationship

TRY...

A measured and balanced pacing, that gives rhythmic accent to the structure of the balance figure

ONSTAGE: Rhetorical Staging Technique

Balancing in Space

Option 1: mark each side of the comparison *PHYSICALLY*. Do this by giving each piece of the comparison a location that you occupy or gesture toward – start with the largest choice, do NOT begin by simply looking at the two locations. Option 2: mark the “fulcrum” of the comparison with a movement; In other words, when you say “if, and, or, but” make that word clear physically through a gesture.

SPECIAL CASE - If there is a *group* of many balanced figures, the actor or director might...

IDENTIFY ...

What is the intellectual journey or argument?

EXPLORE...

What is the relationship between the emotional experience & intellectual argument of the scene?

TRY...

Using the balanced figuring as intellectual handholds/anchors to manage/survive the emotional experience?

FIGURES OF EXPANSION

While Figures of Balance discern/communicate truth through the measured comparison of two or more things, Figures of Expansion discover the nature of just ONE thing through a growing exploration of its detail or scope. Figures of Expansion use detail, images, additional words and phrases to expand the speaker/recipient's conscious experience of an emotion or idea that is larger than they are able to grasp or communicate. The big ideas and emotions that exist at the extremes of human experience live in the world of expansion.

Structurally, Figures of Expansion add words, clauses, and images to what we expect to hear in a way that increases our understanding of their subject; they often feel, at first, like restatements and look like lists. They often employ the services of Repetition to unify and clarify how the added linguistic components connect to the theme at hand. Figures of Expansion elaborate on what the character has just spoken, and so express more accurately the complexity or scope of what the character is feeling, thinking, or working to comprehend.

Because the concept of copiousness (an early modern fashion in speaking) is foreign to many modern readers, expansive language can stick out as overblown or redundant. Expansion, however, not only achieves poetic copiousness, but also works dramatically to expand the thought and strengthen the emotional understanding of the subject matter. Expansive rhetoric in Shakespeare's plays does more than merely overwhelm its recipient with a mountain of evidence or reiteration to prove a point. It consistently strives *to match* and communicate a superhuman idea, image, or emotion -- too large to be contained in a simple statement or single image.

When used in groups, Shakespeare's expansive rhetoric contains a searching and deepening quality. The images and thoughts abound but they also grow, almost on their own; and the speaker must keep up, possibly dissatisfied with what has been spoken so far, possibly surprised by what develops in the next step -- linguistically led on by that which is bigger than their ability to communicate, and compelled in some way to find more language.

Figures of Expansion – especially when used in combinations closely together— give voice to the process of a character's struggle to grasp or communicate the indescribable or the unfathomable – a journey to discover what is beyond grasp. Actors and directors do not need to know the many different individual figures of expansion, but they can see when images multiply and the language takes on a life of its own to explore an idea, image or emotion in depth. The following questions will help an actor or director bring expansive rhetoric to life in a theatrically viable and human way.

IN REHEARSAL

ASK...

What am I struggling to comprehend or communicate?... What is the big picture? ... Why is this hard?

EXPLORE...

What new discovery does each piece of language add...What is dissatisfying about what I just said? Why do I need to keep talking?

NOTICE...

When is the searching over? ...What ends the journey (it is often a figure of balance!)

ONSTAGE: Rhetorical Staging Technique

Journey of Expansion

JOURNEY OF EXPANSION – Go for a “physical journey,” either upward or downward. Literally act out where the words take you... down a rat hole, into a heavenly vision, into a constantly changing nightmare. Expand your physicality and allow each new facet of the discovery take you somewhere. Give movement on each stage of the journey to each step in the list.

FIGURES OF CONTRACTION/OMISSION

Figures of contraction play with expected grammatical patterns by removing what we expect to see or hear; in short, something is missing. Contracting figures compress language, communicating through a tighter linguistic construction. Contracting language eliminates words that hearers can infer without losing the thought or sense, often making one subject or one verb do double duty by serving multiple objects or phrases. The compressive nature of contracting figures prove very useful within a dramatic context, and Shakespeare uses the figures of contraction to add dramatic tension, heighten emotional stakes, and give certain characters a powerful tool of coercion.

Structurally, Figures of Contraction omit a word or phrase from the expected grammatical construction; and in contrast to the other three rhetorical groups, they condense rather than overflow and infer rather than elucidate, always tightening language rather than expanding it. For example Claudius, says simply, “And he to England shall along with you” (III.iii.4), removing the understood “go” with its guttural consonant and strengthening the sleek assonance and menacing tone. Other contracting figures are, however, more complex in form. *Zeugmas* use one verb to starts a series of phrases and but do not repeat as expected, and *dizeugmas* conversely govern a series of verbs with only one subject. At heart, though, all Figures of Contraction work by dropping out language that you expect. By compressing grammatical structure, Contraction also compresses thought and time.

Often, the resulting omission forces the recipient to infer meaning; and this creates a dramatically useful connection between speaker and recipient (whether that recipient be the audience, scene partner or the speaker himself). Using the power of the unspoken to move its recipients and serve its inventors, Contraction can create the wink-wink, the nudge-nudge, the hush-hush. It draws the hearers in by making them work -- making them invent a piece of the language themselves – and in so doing take ownership of the thought, by having imagined at least a tiny piece of it themselves. They make the audience complicit in the character’s thought process. These little jumps in language, however, can also signify or lead to little jumps in logic or even truth, little jumps that can grow into grand leaps of logic and morality. Shakespeare gives the vast majority of these figures to characters with hidden agendas – characters who although working to persuade their hearers like so many others in the cannon, are making their arguments through more manipulative means. Figures of compression prevail in the speeches of Macbeth, *King John’s* Cardinal Pandulph, and *Julius Caesar’s* Antony. Each character builds a linguistic bridge for their intended recipient to cross over, entering into a darker arena of questionable logic and motives. Clusters of contracting figures provide an actor or director with tools to discover the psychological rhythms of a character.

IN REHEARSAL

Notice ...

What linguistic gap am I expecting my audience to fill? ... Who is my audience?

Explore...

Who am I trying to convince or coerce? ... What am I trying to convince them of?

Try...

Giving attention to the rhythm...tighten the pace, intensify the drive.

ONSTAGE: Rhetorical Staging Technique

Contracting Time and Space

Use the tightening rhythms of omission to tighten time and the stage picture. Close space either by getting closer to the recipient or exploring a closing gesture or body posture. Allow the tightened language to affect your pacing--- speed up whatever you a doing in gesture, movement or speech – accentuating the resultant syncopated rhythms.

ASYNDETON – THE SPECIAL CONTRACTOR

While doing the same thing, Asyndetons are also a special case unto themselves and work very specifically by dropping out conjunctions and creating lists that tumble out of control.

God bread, it makes me mad. Day, night, work, play,
Alone, in company still my care had been
To have her match'd (*Romeo & Juliet*, 3.5.176)

What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
What wheels? racks? fires? what flaying? boiling?
In leads or oils? what old or newer torture
Must I receive, (*The Winter's Tale*)

Clues to asyndeton's dramatic function appear in discussions of the scheme from the middle ages onward. Longinus describes a dramatic effect, beyond a mere streamlining of language, giving the figure a rhythmic function of speeding up the text and flow of images; "words issue forth without connecting links are poured out as it were, almost outstripping the speaker himself." The removal of the connecting words, such as "and" or "or," removes the space between images and provides an inherent acceleration. Quintilian says the very origin of the figure stems from its function to make "utterances more vigorous and emphatic and produce outbursts of emotion."

Asyndeton provides a dramatic engine -- exploding & often contradictory images accelerate a character's speed of thought and the play's momentum. They recreate the disordered and disturbed thought process of people in crisis. As these images crash into the psyche of the character, so should they crash through the mind of the actor. If the actor slows the pace down to become manageable and comfortable, carefully separating, cataloging, and processing each idea, he or she will have destroyed the chaotic impetuous energy inherent in the linguistic structure Shakespeare has chosen. As a figure of contraction, the asyndeton is the accelerator, offering to carry an actor rhythmically into a character's disordered psyche and give him or her power to drive the play. A character can also use it manipulatively to drive disorder into another character's psyche like Macbeth does to the murderers.

A FINAL WARNING ABOUT ALL OF THIS (The Kung Po Chicken Factor)

Finally....We must always remember that these groupings of rhetorical figures are only tools for us to manage a much more complex whole. They never appear in isolation. Like the basic taste elements of sweet, salt, bitter and sour combine to make wonderfully nuanced and complex experiences like Kung Po Chicken or Tirmamisu...Repetition, Balance, Expansion, and Contraction work together to make Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and Hamlet. Shakespeare was writing incredibly complex, integrated linguistic patterns that not only depict the full range of human experience and poetic expression but also affect actors viscerally through breath and rhythm in a way that fosters actual emotional and intellectual response in the moment and so works on its audience the same way.

Translating linguistic patterns into movement in space is not a 'correct' or authentic way of staging. It is however, extremely useful to the actor as a way of training. It facilitates a deeper mind/body connection and is a step towards helping actors allow "the text to play them." It is not necessarily what Shakespeare intended, but it helps modern actors experience what I believe early modern actors took for granted. Finally, it elicits a more integrated and clear performance of Shakespeare's text.

Some Rhetorical Figures Grouped by Dramatic Function

Repetition	Balance	Expansion	Contraction
Anadiplosis	Antanaclasis	Accumulatio	Asyndeton
Anadiplosis	Antimetabole	Antonomasia	Diazeugma
Anaphora	Antanagoge	Auxesis	Ellipsis
(Epanaphora)	Antithesis	Circumlocution	Syllepsis
Antimetabole	Compar	Climax	Zeugma
Diacope	Contention	Complexio	
Diaphora	Syncretis	Congeris	
Epanalepsis	Disjunctio	Correctio	
Epimone	Membrum	Dialysis	
Epistrophe	Simile	Distribution	
(Epiphora)		Ecphrasis	
Epizeuxis		Enargia	
Isocolon		Enumeratio	
Parison		Epanodos	
Paroemion		Epiphonema	
Ploce		Eutrepismus	
Symploce		Exergasia	
Traductio		Hyperbole	
		Hypotyposis	
		Hypozeuxis	
		Icon	
		Merismus	
		Parenthesis	
		Polysyndeton	
		Prosapodosis	
		Synathroesmus	
		Synonymia	
		Synonymia	
		Systrophe	
		Taxis	