BLANK VERSE AND IAMBITIC PENTAMETER IN SHAKESPEARE"S PLAYS
By Michael J. Cummings, 2003

Shakespeare wrote most of the lines in his plays in blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. (Note: Shakespeare's sonnets were also written in iambic pentameter, but the lines had a rhyming scheme. For more information on this scheme, see sonnets.)

To understand iambic pentameter, you first need to understand the term "iamb." An iamb is a unit of rhythm consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The words "annoy," "fulfill," "pretend," "regard," and "serene" are all iambs because the first syllable of each word is unstressed (or unaccented) and the second syllable is stressed (or accented). Iambs can also consist of one word with a single unstressed (unaccented) syllable followed by another word with a single stressed (accented) syllable. In addition, they may consist of a final unstressed syllable of one word followed by an initial stressed syllable of the next word. The following line from Romeo and Juliet demonstrates the use of iambs. The stressed words or syllables are underlined:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?

Here are two more lines from Romeo and Juliet that also demonstrate the use of iambs:

...I will not fail: 'tis twenty years till then. ............

I have forgot why I did call thee back.

When a line has five iambs, it is in iambic pentameter. The prefix "pent" means "five." (A figure with five sides is called a "pentagon"); an athletic competition with five track-and-field events is called a "pentathlon." The suffix "meter" (in "pentameter") refers to the recurrence of a rhythmic unit (also called a "foot"). Thus, because the above lines contain iambs, they are "iambic." Because they contain five iambs (five feet) they are said to be in iambic pentameter. Finally, because the words at the end of each line don't rhyme, the lines are said to be in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Blank verse was modeled after ancient Greek and Latin verse. It was first used in 1514 in Renaissance Italy by Francesco Maria Molza. In 1539, Italian Giovanni Rucellai was the first poet to label the unrhymed iambic pentameter in his poetry as blank verse (versi sciolti in Italian). Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, first used blank verse in English in his translation of Vergil's epic Latin poem The Aeneid. The first English drama in blank verse was Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex, staged in 1561, by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. It was about an early British king. Later in the same century, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare turned blank verse into high art when they used it in their plays. Marlowe used the verse form in Doctor Faustus, Tamburlaine, and Edward II. Shakespeare used it in all of his plays. In Germany, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) popularized blank verse in his poem "Nathan the Wise" ("Nathan der Weise"), published in 1779.

VERSE AND PROSE IN SHAKESPEARE"S PLAYS
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Shakespeare wrote his plays partly in verse and partly in prose, freely alternating between the two in the same acts and scenes. It is not unusual, in fact, for one character to address a second character in verse while the second character responds in prose. Sometimes, the same character—Hamlet or King Lear, for example—speaks in verse in one moment and in prose in another.

Verse is a collection of lines that follow a regular, rhythmic pattern—in Shakespeare, usually iambic pentameter, a metric scheme in which each line has ten syllables consisting of five unaccented and accented syllable pairs. In its highest form—when the language is lyrical and the content sublime—verse can become poetry, either rhymed or unrhymed. Prose, on the other hand, is the everyday language of conversation, letters, lectures, sermons, newspaper articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia articles. Prose has no rhyme or metric scheme.

Why did Shakespeare mix verse (including poetry) and prose in his plays? That is a question that inevitably occupies anyone studying Shakespeare’s writing techniques. Before considering that question, the Shakespeare analyst first needs to learn how to identify the verse and prose passages in a play. That task is easy. Here’s why:

In most modern editions of the plays, each line in multi-line verse passages begins with a capital letter, and each line in multi-line prose passages begins with a small letter except the first line or a line beginning with the opening word of a sentence. In addition, verse passages have a shortened right margin, but prose passages have a full right margin. Following are examples of these visual cues in verse and prose passages from Hamlet, Prince of Denmark:

**Verse Passage Spoken by Hamlet (Act III, Scene I):**

... To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
..................................................................

**Prose Passage Spoken by Hamlet (Act II, Scene II):**

Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with mc down; for yourself, sir, should be old as I am if like a crab you could go backward.

Now, then, what about single lines—those spoken in conversation as questions, replies, or ripostes? They are in prose if one line has no paired rhyming line or is too abrupt to contain a metric scheme. The following exchange between Hamlet and Guildenstern in Act III, Scene III, of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark contains such short lines absent of meter and rhyme. The exchange begins when Hamlet asks Guildenstern to play a wind instrument called a recorder, which resembles a flute:

**Hamlet** Will you play upon this pipe?

**Guildenstern** My lord, I cannot.

**Hamlet** I pray you.
Guildenstern Believe me, I cannot.

Hamlet I do beseech you.

Obviously, these lines are too short to contain a pattern of meter or rhyme. Moreover, the content is mundane and prosaic. “I pray you” does not a poem make. For these reasons, the passage qualifies only as prose. But what of the multi-line passages? Why are some in verse and others in prose? The answer some Shakespeare commentators provide—an answer that is simplistic and not wholly accurate—is that Shakespeare reserved verse for noble, highborn characters and prose for common, lowborn characters. It is true that royalty and nobility often speak in verse and that peasants and plebeians—or wine-swilling hooligans, like Falstaff (Henry IV Part I and Henry IV Part II)—often speak in prose. But it is also true that noble characters, like Hamlet and Volumnia (Coriolanus), sometimes speak in prose and that lowborn characters, like the witches in Macbeth, often speak in verse. Even the lowest of the low—the beast-man Caliban in The Tempest—speaks often in verse. In The Merchant of Venice, the characters associated with the dirty world of money speak frequently in verse, and the characters associated with the rarefied world of nobility and refinement speak often in prose. Shakespeare’s comedy Much Ado About Nothing is almost entirely in prose, with highborn characters only occasionally speaking in verse.

Why, then, does Shakespeare alternate between verse and prose?

Shakespeare used verse to do the following:

One: Express deep emotion requiring elevated language. Because nobles and commoners were both capable of experiencing profound emotion, both expressed their emotions in verse from time to time.

Two: Make wise, penetrating, and reflective observations that require lofty language. Such a passage is a famous one recited by the outlaw Jaques in Act II, Scene VII, of As You Like It. The passage—which begins with the often-quoted line “All the world’s a stage”—philosophizes about the “seven ages” of man, from infancy to senility.

Three: Present a lyrical poem as a separate entity, like the famous song in Act V, Scene III, of As You Like It. The first stanza of that poem follows:

It was a lover and his lass,

With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,

That o’er the green corn-field did pass

In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,

When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding:

Sweet lovers love the spring.
Four: Inject irony. When the highborn speak humble prose and the hoi polloi speak
elegant verse, as is sometimes the case in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare may
be saying up can be down, and down can be up. In *The Merchant*, the noble characters
are just as reprehensible as—or perhaps even more reprehensible than—the workaday,
unsophisticated characters. Portia is often depicted in critical analyses of the play as its
noblest character. But a close reading of the play reveals her as a racist and a self-
seeking conniver. Thus, Shakespeare makes her tongue wag in prose and verse,
revealing her Janus personality.

Five: Suggest order and exactitude. A character who speaks in precise rhythms and
patterns is a character with a tidy brain that plans ahead and executes actions on
schedule.

Shakespeare used prose to do the following:

One: Express ordinary, undistinguished observations coming from the surface of the
mind rather than its active, ruminating interior.

Two: Make quick, one-line replies such as “Ay, my lord” that are the stuff of day-to-day
conversations.

Three: Present auditory relief for audiences (or visual relief for readers) from the
intellectual and connotative density of the verse passages.

Four: Suggest madness or senility. In *King Lear*, Lear speaks almost exclusively in
verse in the first half of the play. Then suddenly, he lurches back and forth between
verse and prose, perhaps to suggest the frenzied state of his aging mind. Hamlet
sometimes shifts to prose in front of observers, perhaps in hopes of presenting his
feigned madness as real.

Five: Depict the rambling, desultory path of conversation from a tongue loosened by
alcohol, as in *Henry IV Part I* and *Henry IV Part II*.

Six: Poke fun at characters who lack the wit to versify their lines.

Seven: Demonstrate that prose has merits as a literary medium. In Shakespeare’s day,
verse (and its elegant cousin, poetry) was the sine qua non of successful writing. As an
innovator, Shakespeare may have wanted to tout the merits of prose. Thus, on
occasion, he infused his plays with prose passages so graceful and thought-provoking
that they equalled, and sometimes even surpassed, the majesty of verse or poetry
passages. Such a prose passage is the following, spoken by Hamlet in Act II, Scene II:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and
moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how
like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this
quintessence of dust? man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your
smiling you seem to say so.