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Close Reading: *Romeo and Juliet* 3.5.9–10

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ABSTRACT

This short close reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.9–10, pays attention to the stress patterns of those lines and how they play into their apprehensions of aural and semantic sense, and indeed serve as a microcosmic enactment of the play's broader business and larger forces.

KEYWORDS

accent; scansion; metre

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.9–10)

Romeo and Juliet may be the only play of Shakespeare's where the title itself is metrically challenged. The play's eponymous heroine was once a tripping dactyl (**J**uliet), as she was in Shakespeare's own day, but at some point in the late twentieth century she morphed into a heavy-gaited cretic (**J**uliet).¹ Why this should have happened is a puzzle, since we have 'Marian' and 'Marianne', 'Julian' and 'Julianne', and we say 'Harriet', not 'Harriette'; nor has 'Capulet' become 'Capulette' – so far. To resolve any doubt about the correct pronunciation, try scanning

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun (2.2.3)

or

Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight (5.1.34).

Or the last line of the play, where the feminine ending is contrasted with the masculine rhyme ending of 'Romeo':

For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. (5.3.309–10)

So the modern actor is presented with a difficulty: in the National Theatre's 2020 production, for example, at moments like these the short 'e' of 'Juliet' is

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¹*Romeo and Juliet* was chosen for the first Original Pronunciation production at Shakespeare's Globe in 2004. I am grateful to René Weis for providing me with an extract from an OP reading of the play made by David Crystal.

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enunciated but suppressed, articulated but half-withdrawn, as if in recognition that it shouldn't be there at all.

The two scansion of Juliet's name are flat-footed and light-footed, or we might say 'fleet-footed', since this is a play in which everything is speeded up and time is of the essence. 'Enter JULIET somewhat fast' reads the Q1 stage direction in 2.6 (retained in Arden 3), which elicits the comment 'so light a foot' from Friar Laurence. This and much else is captured in two lines of exquisite metrical brilliance, compressing hope, expectation, tragedy, and the dead-end, though uttered not by Juliet but by Romeo:

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. (3.5.9–10)

The mood shift is marked by the strong caesura after 'out' in line 9; before that, the first and second and the fifth and sixth positions are almost undifferentiated, flattened out as virtual spondees in a mood of post-coital tristesse. For this is the brief moment between consummation and departure, and the setting itself is liminal, as the couple stand by the window, between the bed and the world outside. This too is enacted metrically in the lightening of aural effect after the caesura as they watch the dawn breaking over the horizon. This lightening is created partly by the perfectly judged alliteration, with labials playing off dentals, in the line and a half following the caesura, but there is also a sense of effort, or holding back, which is suggested metrically. Although it can be read iambically, the first three syllables of the second line carry what is almost evenly distributed stress to create an effect of precarious balance, as well as straining. Here the play's hasty feet are momentarily poised and trembling. And while the first half line is predominantly monosyllabic, the disyllables that follow are all trochees, with the rhythmical play between iambic and trochaic helping to create a delicate, tripping effect.

'Jocund', which Shakespeare uses elsewhere, but not often, is the perfect locution here: sprightly sounding, in contrast to the first part of the line, it marks a sudden opening up of expectation. (Try substituting 'joyful' or 'cheerful', which fit both the sense and the metre, to see the difference.) The second half of the next line is also regularly iambic, emphatically so on account of the alliteration. But in between, the metre is more uncertain, with the stress clash between the first two syllables forcing a slight hesitation, as it does again in the articulation of 'tiptoe on' (smoothed out in the Q1 reading 'tiptoes on').² This is a moment of transition, tremulous and fragile. At the same time, when we read these lines visually there is some ambivalence: does the image present the circumference of the sun just resting on the horizon, or are we to imagine a beaming face and its owner standing on tiptoe to peer over the top of a wall? The aural effect perhaps

²Arden 3 reproduces the whole of Q1 in facsimile.

nudges us in the latter direction. And if ‘Juliet is the sun’, then here she is, rising, and eagerly looking forward.

The alternation of lightness and weight in these two lines is the aural equivalent of the movement between darkness and light that they describe more literally and which ultimately constitutes the action of the play itself. The lighting up of the horizon goes hand in hand with metrical lightening, but the moment itself offers the briefest illumination,

Too like the lightning which doth cease to be
Ere we can say ‘it lightens’. (2.2.119–20)

With regard to both sound and sense, the two lines follow a movement of pause and pivot, with the suspended moment a silent echo of the scene itself, the briefest of interludes, out of time, in the play’s accelerated, precipitate drive towards tragedy. And the pivot is back to front, preposterous, moving from darkness to light, flat-footed to light-footed, giving the prospect of a new life of love unfolding ahead, when the dawning of the day will only bring the couple closer to darkness.

Close reading typically focusses on the image. But in verse drama, and especially in Shakespeare, and above all in this play, the most intensely lyrical of the tragedies, we need to read the visual in concert with the aural and listen for the sense. Metre’s terms are timing and measure, and because these are also fundamental elements in a tragedy of young love, they help us to see how metrical reading can provide a microcosmic enactment of the forces at work in the play as a whole.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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