Abstract: This article explores the change in dynamics between matter and style in Shakespeare’s way of depicting distress on the early modern stage. During his early years as a dramatist, Shakespeare wrote plays filled with violence and death, but language did not lose its composure at the sight of blood and destruction; it kept on marching to the beat of the iambic drum. As his career progressed, however, the language of characters undergoing an overwhelming experience appears to become more permeable to their emotions, and in many cases sentiment takes over and interferes with the character’s ability to speak properly. That is, Shakespeare progressively imbued his depictions of distress with a degree of linguistic iconicity previously unheard of in Elizabethan commercial drama. By focusing on the linguistic properties of three passages of iconic distress – Hamlet’s first soliloquy, Othello’s jealous rant, and King Lear’s dying words – this article analyses the rhetorical adjustments Shakespeare undertook in his effort to raise the level of verisimilitude of emotional speech in his plays.¹

Overwhelming Emotions on the Shakespearean Stage

The stage is set, and the scene well known. Hamlet welcomes the players to Elsinore and requests the recitation of a specific speech, the one with Pyrrhus. Afterward, the deeply moved prince delivers one of his famous soliloquies:

¹ My thanks to Ann Thompson, Andreas Mahler, Jonathan Sell and Robert Stagg for their generous advice at various stages of work on this article, which I respectfully dedicate to the memory of Russ McDonald.

*Corresponding author: David J. Amelang, Freie Universität Berlin
E-Mail: david.amelang@fu-berlin.de
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all the visage waned
– Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing. (Hamlet 2.2.485–492)

The speech goes on for another 48 lines, in which Hamlet pits the player’s ability to capture perfectly what a person overcome with passion and grief should look and sound like against his own lackluster response to his father’s probable murder. The speech is rhetorically rich, its eloquence self-evident, and its syntax lengthy and embellished. Everything the prince says when describing the actor’s performance rings true, with one obvious exception: the reference “broken voice”, the meaning of which is not clear.

It could of course refer to actor’s affected delivery of the lines, and not to the lines themselves. But it could also reflect the theatrical convention in Shakespeare’s age of asking the audience to let content and style plausibly go their separate ways. Especially in the 1580s and early 1590s, the early modern stage was an artificial milieu whose inhabitants spoke in a poetic dialect not rooted in the principles of verisimilitude. Any hint in their speech of linguistic iconicity – derived from the concept of the ‘icon’, which Olga Fischer defined as “an image that more or less reflects a situation, concept, or object in the real world” (1997: 65) – would have sounded foreign. The artificiality of Elizabethan stage language becomes particularly striking in moments of acute passion and grief, as exemplified by Hieronymo’s ornate declamation upon discovering the murder of his son in Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (c. 1582):

O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
O life, no life, but lively form of death;
O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,
Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds! (The Spanish Tragedy 3.2.1–4)

This soliloquy, with its rhetorical parallelisms and isocolic iambic verse, faithfully represents the style of the 1580s and early 1590s in which “artifice”, as Russ

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2 Fischer, along with Max Nänny, identifies linguistic iconicity as a driving force behind literature and poetry as a whole, but with stronger presence in certain literary and artistic movements and periods. More in Fischer and Nänny (1999); Fischer and Nänny (2001).

3 For a thorough account of the “rhetoric and the techniques of emotional engineering” related to acute grief in Elizabethan poetry and drama see Döring (2006: 124–148).
McDonald explains, “was considered an instrument for the transmission of thought, not an obstacle to it”, even in instances of extreme emotion (2001: 24). Indeed, Shakespeare in his early years as a London playwright also partook of this convention, most famously in Titus Andronicus (c. 1592). Its concoction, bombastic verse and nightmarish violence in equal measure, has not aged as well as other Shakespeare recipes, but it was exactly what Elizabethan audiences willed and as they liked it. In one especially jarring scene, after Marcus Andronicus finds his mutilated and raped niece Lavinia, her hands and tongue having been cut off by Tamora’s sons, he delivers a 47-line long speech heavily garnished with rhetorical figures and mythological allusions:

If I do dream, would all my wealth would wake me;  
If I do wake, some planet strike me down  
That I may slumber an eternal sleep.  
Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands  
Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare  
Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments  
Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in  
And might not gain so great a happiness  
As half thy love. (Titus Andronicus 2.3.13–21)

Not only does Marcus’ speech exemplify an early modern appreciation for eloquent gore that has (partly) waned over time, but it also exaggeratedly embodies the disjunction between what is being staged and the way it is articulated that was so common in 16th-century plays.

This convention alone would explain how someone supposedly overwhelmed with emotion to the point of crying and breaking voice, such as the first player in Hamlet, could carry on marching without faltering to the beat of the iambic drum. It did not sound realistic, so to speak, but it sounded appropriate on stage. And yet, by the time he was writing Hamlet Shakespeare was already exploring ways of imbuing this type of emotionally affected passages with a degree of palpable iconicity, as is clear when in his first soliloquy the prince breaks down as he recalls his mother’s remarriage to his uncle after his father’s recent death:

But two months dead – nay not so much, not two –  
So excellent a king, that was to this  
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother  
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven  
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,  
Must I remember? Why, she should hang on him  
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on. And yet within a month
(Let me not think on’t – Frailty, thy name is Woman),
A little month, or e’er those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,
Like Niobe, all tears. Why, she –
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have her mourn longer – married with my uncle,
My father’s brother (but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules) [...] ([Hamlet] 1.2.138–153)

In a way, Hamlet’s description of the first player’s speech suits this passage even better. Herein distress manifests itself both conceptually and linguistically, matching a beleaguered mind with a broken voice. From Hamlet onward, Shakespeare further pursues this path of heightened iconicity for situations in which characters become overwhelmed by their circumstances. Two of the most memorable passages in this regard are the nonsensical handkerchief-laden mumbling of a deranged and jealous Othello after Iago convinces him that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him, and King Lear howling over the corpse of his daughter Cordelia while he also ponders the memory of his late fool:

Lie with her? lie on her? we say lie on her
when they belie her! Lie with her, zounds,
that’s fulsome! – Handkerchief! confessions!
handkerchief! – To confess, and be hanged for
his labour! First to be hanged, and then to
confess:
I tremble at it. Nature would not invest
herself in such a shadowing passion without
some instruction. It is not words that shakes
me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is’t
possible? Confess! handkerchief! O devil!
(Othello 4.1.35–43)

And my poor fool is hanged.
No, no, no life! Why should a dog,
a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all?
O thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never. Pray you
undo this button.
Thank you, sir. O, o, o, o.
Do you see this? Look on her: look, her
lips, Look there, look there!
(King Lear 5.3.304–310)

Something about the language in these three passages – Hamlet’s first soliloquy (1.2.129–159), Othello’s handkerchief rant (4.1.35–43) and Lear’s final words (5.3.255–261, 267–272, 304–310) – is undeniably new and different. Yet its precise identification has eluded scholars, as E.A.J. Honigmann admitted when he noted that, in considering these three parts, “Shakespeare’s poetry persuades us that they are life-like, but we lack the critical vocabulary to prove it” (1998: 72). Taking

4 That said, there have been some notable appraisals along the lines of this article into the style of the selected passages that have influenced my own analysis. Frank Kermode defined Hamlet's
up this challenge, this article scrutinises Shakespeare’s verisimilar style of writing distress in these three iconic scenes. It focuses on not the why but the how, on the patterns and systematic procedures that sustain his new (and highly successful) rhetoric of overwhelming emotions expressed through verisimilar broken voices. Reconstructing how this effect is achieved requires putting oneself in the shoes of the dramatist at the moment in which he decides to defy conventional practice and find a new way of capturing the pathos of distress. By analysing first the arrangement of words (syntax), then the choice of words themselves (lexis), and finally the relation between words and their immediate context (deixis), I argue that, even though the language in these passages seems chaotic and ungovernable as it mimics the thought process of the anguished mind, there is method in’t.

Loss of Structure: A Study in Syntax

In a playful provocation, Stephen Booth claims that Shakespeare is “our most underrated poet” (1997: 1). To justify this assertion, he adduces two reasons why Shakespeare’s stage poetry is special:

(1) Shakespeare’s sentences don’t always make sense.
(2) Shakespeare’s language is exciting to the minds that hear it – exciting to minds because what is being said in a Shakespearian sentence often comes to us in a soup of possibilities, possibilities engendered by substantively negligible, substantively irrelevant relationships among elements in a syntax to which those relationships do not pertain and by which those relationships are filtered from consciousness. (1997: 3)

Subjective as these descriptions are, it is hard to argue with Booth’s further assertion that at some point, when reading or listening to certain passages of the Shakespearean corpus, “one is hearing sense in nonsense” (1997: 3). This statement seems particularly fitting for the three passages analysed here, which while discarding the standard conventions of communication – let alone those of poetic drama – remain perfectly coherent within their performative context. One such set of shared and agreed-upon rules or principles of communication are those that pertain to syntax, that is, the arrangement of words and phrases into coherent soliloquy as Shakespeare’s “new way of representing turbulent thinking” (2000: 16), very similar to John Porter Houston’s prior “turbulent inner monologue” (1988: 97); Maurice Charney includes Lear’s final words among the instances he identifies as ‘unpoetic poetry’ (1997), and describes Othello’s ramblings as a character speaking “disconnectedly” (2014: 114); finally, in her memorable essay “Shakespeare and the Limits of Language” (1971), Anne Barton described a distressed Lear’s style as “broken” and “dislocated” (25).
structures of language. The following section focuses on the ways Shakespeare’s instances of iconic distress challenges the conventional syntactic features of the stage dialect via a conscious deployment of rhetorical devices meant to mimic the brokenness of inchoate thought.

When Shakespeare began his career as a playwright, to speak of syntax was to speak of verse, and vice versa, and dramatists in the 1580s and early 1590s relied on long, embellished, and heavily patterned sentences that emphasised the rhythmic and musical potential of the iambic verse. This is true of Marcus’ speech in Titus, for instance: the average sentence length is over two lines, and there is a certain syntactic regularity of rhythm marked by the dominating cadence of the iambics. The syntactic arrangement of this and of any other soliloquy from this early period, regardless of its matter, was thus subordinated to the musicality of the line. The years following Titus saw a slow, progressive change in the relationship between sentence and verse on the English commercial stage. It was a change in favour of ‘naturalness’, George Wright explains, while never forgetting that this ‘naturalness’ remained “embedded in a highly figured medium” (1988: 230).

Nevertheless, in his canonical study Shakespearean Sentences (1988), John Porter Houston singles out Hamlet’s first soliloquy as a considerable departure from the broader national trend. It is Shakespeare’s “most surprising display of syntax adjusted to a turbulent inner monologue”, he argues, and one that achieves a delicate compromise “between the demands of representing inchoate thought and the exigencies of Renaissance eloquence” (1988: 97–98). The soliloquy eschews highly figured naturalness, syntactically speaking, for something else: sentences are much shorter and more irregular than in emotional passages written before Hamlet, both by Shakespeare himself or by any of his contemporaries. And what is even more striking is the number of non-sentences in this passage, that is, instances in which the prince interrupts himself without ever verbally finishing his train of thought (1.2.138, 145, 149). The rhetorical device of writing incomplete sentences is known in classical rhetoric as aposiopesis, vernacularised by the Elizabethan rhetorician George Puttenham in his Art of English Poesy (1589) into “the figure of silence”:

Ye have another auricular figure of defect, and is when we begin to speak a thing and break off in the middle way, as if it either needed no further to be spoken of, or that we were ashamed or afraid to speak it out. The Greeks call him aposiopesis. I, the figure of silence or of interruption indifferently. (2004: 151)

5 This is to a large extent also the case for the portions of plays written in prose: although freed from the formal limitations of verse, prose passages were still expected follow some sort of rhythmic regularity and syntactic logic.
Aposiopesis, by its nature, challenges grammatical correctness as a rhetorical ploy, and as a result forces the aural prosody of the line to flirt with irregular rhythm. As Henry Peacham defined it in his 1593 Garden of Eloquence, aposiopesis is “a forme of speech by which the Orator through some affection, as either of fear, anger, sorrow, bashfulnesse or such like, breaketh off his speech before it all ended” (as qtd. in Alexander 2001: 188). And yet, these illustrative definitions notwithstanding, aposiopesis was rarely used in 16th-century drama for the purposes suggested by both Puttenham and Peacham. However ‘natural’ one considers late Elizabethan dramatic verse to be, one would be hard-pressed to define it as in any way flirting with ineloquence: the divide separating the theatrical and the real would have rendered such an agent of verisimilitude strangely out of place. However, when Shakespeare used aposiopesis in Hamlet’s soliloquy, during which we the audience/readers come to understand how poorly the prince has been dealing with the recent events surrounding him, he immediately imbues the language with the limp of a tortured mind. By having Hamlet not finish his utterances, or breaking his utterances with lengthy interjections, Shakespeare fulfils Peacham’s vision of a character overcome with some sort of emotional affectation: fear, sorrow, anger, bashfulness or all of the above. The many trains of thought that haunt and taunt him end up colliding, and what emerges are the remains of broken sentences, halting witnesses to the inability of regular syntax to carry the weight of the character’s emotional distress.

Aposiopesis is not the only figure device Puttenham and other period rhetoricians describe as having the potential to resemble emotional ineloquence. Another such trope is ecphonesis, which Puttenham dubs “the outcry” (2004: 173), consisting of an interjection exclaimed by a speaker as a sign of emotional outburst. While Hamlet’s speech is laden with exclamations such as “O God” (1.2.132, 150) or “O most wicked speed!” (156), his frequent outbursts pale in

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6 In his aural analysis of grammatical education in an Elizabethan classroom, Robert Stagg illustrates how Shakespeare would have been encouraged creativity more than was previously thought: “Shakespeare’s schoolroom was a place of rhythmic density and delight: of verse lines jostling against each other, of rhythmically charged call-and-response between teacher and pupil, of poetry written and chanted, of pulses vibrating against patterns, of systems directing and divagating syllables, and all of this giving rhythmic rise to a Shakespearean style that would eventually fly” (2015: 181–182). However, as Stagg’s compelling endorsement of multi-rhythmic creativity in the Shakespearean schoolroom points out, this educational model would have still been geared towards a rhythmic – and not arrhythmic – result. Another interesting text considering the intersection between rhythm and emotions is Groves (2015).

7 Beyond the confines of the stage, the most recurrent use of aposiopesis had previously marked situations in which death interrupts life, preventing the character from physically finishing the utterance (Alexander 2001: 192–193; Sell 2013).
comparison with those in Othello’s rant and in Lear’s dying howls, in which *ecphoneses* are not so much perfunctory breaks from the normative flow as they are the rhetorical bedrock for the scene’s linguistic and performative dimension. Both characters’ parts are full of explosive shouts, with Othello repeatedly crying out the words “Handkerchief! Confessions! Handkerchief! ... Confess! Handkerchief!” (4.1.37, 43) and Lear memorably entering the stage to “Howl, howl, howl, howl!” (5.3.255) as he carries the corpse of his daughter in his arms. Ecphonetic outcries dominate these speeches because as they are repeated over and again, welding together with figures like *epizeuxis* (the repetition of a single word or short phrase that conveys a bizarre psychological fixation on the element in question) or *ploce* (which resembles *epizeuxis* except for a slight intermission in between the repeated terms introduced by adding some other word). The intertwined use of these different rhetorical figures not only works against the ornate conventions of Elizabethan drama, but also contribute to the syntactic paucity that so effectively simulates emotional distress, as they leave no space or place for fully formed sentences or ideas. Replacing sentences built upon parallelisms and *anaphorae* with repeatedly shouting a word or group of words over and over again is, needless to say, a significant change: the reader—and above all the listener—unequivocally feels the effects of these and other like figures on the prosody of the poetry.

In Hamlet’s soliloquy in 1.2 Shakespeare begins a new, sustained and systematic way of depicting characters undergoing emotional duress through the deployment of rhetoric devices meant to undercut syntactic normalcy. And the

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8 *Ecphonesis* occurs in *Hamlet* (1.2.142, 150, 156); *Othello* (4.1.36, 42, 43); *Ecphonesis* in combination with *epizeuxis* occurs in *Hamlet* (1.2.132); *Othello* (4.1.37–39, 43); *King Lear* (5.3.255, 304, 307, 308). *Ecphonesis* in combination with *ploce* occurs in *Hamlet* (1.2.135). *Ploce* occurs in *Hamlet* (1.2.138, 145, 147, 153); *Othello* (4.1.35–36); *King Lear* (5.3.257, 268, 309–310). For Puttenham’s descriptions of *epizeuxis* and *ploce* see Puttenham (2004: 168–169).

9 That said, it must also be noted that Shakespeare was not the first Elizabethan dramatist to use these rhetorical figures with the intent of depicting verisimilar distress. *Ecphonesis* in particular was quite commonly used as the occasional passion-signifying filler. As for the other more unusual tropes (*epizeuxis* and *ploce*), one must give credit where credit is due: it was Christopher Marlowe in the final scene of the first part of *Tamburlaine* (c. 1588), as Zabina finds the corpse of her husband Bajazeth, who first took up the challenge of channelling the dramatic eloquence of the linguistically inelegant (5.2.242–256). He also employed similar tropes of antipoetic repetition in the last lines of *Doctor Faustus* (c.1588–1593), when the title character’s bargain expires and the devils come to collect their debt (13.108–115). Even pre-*Hamlet* Shakespeare occasionally dabbled with disturbed iterations as well: the best known examples are Richard’s outbursts in *Richard III* (c. 1592) after encountering the ghosts of all the people he has murdered (5.3.177–206), and in Shylock’s repetition of his cue “I will have my bond” in *The Merchant of Venice’s* (c. 1598) as he learns that Antonio will not be able to pay the usurer back for his loan (3.3.4–17).
protagonism of unrhetorical figures only increases thereafter, as it becomes an ever-recurring style in Shakespeare’s subsequent tragedies. There is no question that, from a rhythmic perspective, the cadence of language suffers considerably from the use of such structures and tropes. The elegant and musical patterns of the distraught Hieronimo and Marcus of the late 1580s and early 1590s gave way to a different, less poetic and more iconic, arrhythmic and uneven type of speech. By distorting the flow of the spoken word, Shakespeare reshaped the aurality of mental disturbance in ways not heard on the Elizabethan stage until that moment. Later, in his Jacobean plays, Shakespeare recurrently also uses these figures to similar effect. Ecphonesis, epizeuxis and ploce play an important part in depicting the emotional turmoil of characters such as Macduff in Macbeth (c. 1606) when he learns of his family’s murder (4.3.217–235), or in Leontes’ spiralling and elliptical rambling when he starts to question Hermione’s faithfulness (1.2.108–146) towards the beginning of The Winter’s Tale (c. 1609). In this new style of linguistically conveying distress, iconicity and not escapist poetic adornment is the objective, and Hamlet’s first soliloquy signals the beginning of a paradigmatic shift that reaches its apex in Othello and King Lear. And syntactic irregularity and arrhythmia was just one of the features of the language of verisimilar mental agony: the following sections explore the lexical and pragmatic dimensions of these ‘broken’ speeches.

Loss of Eloquence: A Study in Lexis

In the induction scene to Bartholomew Fair (c. 1614), Ben Jonson has his bookkeeper mockingly remind the audience that “he that will swear Jeronimo [The Spanish Tragedy] or Andronicus are the best plays yet shall pass unexcepted at here, as a man whose judgement shows it is constant and has stood still these five and twenty or thirty years” (Ind. 79–82). With this jab, Jonson connects Kyd’s play and Shakespeare’s Titus not only because of their similar revenge-driven plots, but also because of their style, still very popular among the types of theatregoers for whom he had little respect. According to Jonson, this theatrical fashion had by the 1610s become outdated in the eyes of most dramatists and audiences, who asked for a theatre that held the mirror up more closely to nature both from its actors and its playwrights. Indeed, the desire for verisimilar language was widely preached, if not always practiced, in Shakespeare’s England, even at the times of the peak popularity of The Spanish Tragedy and Titus. Schoolmasters taught their pupils that there were “at least three kinds of style (high/grand, middle/mixed, low/plain)” in rhetoric and poetry, and that each style should be used accordingly depending on the theme of the text (Alexander
2004: xxxvii).\textsuperscript{10} In his treatise, Puttenham reminds his readers that style and matter should be matched appropriately:

But still methinks that in all decency the style ought to conform with the nature of the subject. Otherwise, if a writer will seem to observe no decorum at all, nor pass how he fashion his tale to the matter, who doubteth but he may in the lightest cause speak like a pope and in the gravest matters prate like a parrot, and find words and phrases enough to serve both turns, and neither of them commendably. (2004: 141)

Considering Puttenham’s treatise was intended for a court audience, one might expect the common theatregoing public not to have shared some of his criticism of bombast and artifice, especially in the early 1590s when the Marlovian mighty line was still novel (Rhodes 2004: 58). With time, though, the Ciceronian metaphor of holding the mirror up to nature begun to captivate the tastes of playwrights, players and playgoers more visibly to the point that Shakespeare has Hamlet famously instruct his actors to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature” (3.2.17–19).

But what does it mean, to suit the word – or, in this case, words – to the action when the action or actor is becoming overwhelmed with grief? In the case of Hieronimo in \textit{The Spanish Tragedy} or Marcus in \textit{Titus}, language flies high and lofty, rooted in the fantasy of allegorical imagery and embellished with aggrandising adornments. However, Shakespeare’s progressive shift towards verisimilitude would translate into the grounding of language in this particular type of passion-ridden speeches. Focusing on the word choices in the passages of \textit{Hamlet, Othello} and \textit{Lear} reveals two specific aspects of this shift: the reorientation and reduction of semantic fields and the progressive decrease of ornamental epithets in the language of characters suffering distress.

“A distinct part of the lexicon defined by some general term or concept” (Matthews 2007: 360), a semantic field is a strong component of coherence and cohesion in a text. Combining different semantic fields in a speech sets the tone for the audience or reader to understand what is being talked about and in which way. As an illustrative example, let us consider once again the Marcus speech in \textit{Titus}. Some of the semantic fields that dominate this passage are to be expected in a speech discussing the rape and mutilation of a young woman, such as that of the human anatomy (‘hands’, ‘body’, ‘lips’, ‘fingers’, etc.). Others not so much: there are frequent references to beauty, music and art. Even more unusual is that one of the most prominent semantic fields being used is that of nature, with words such as ‘branches’, ‘lopping’, ‘hewing’, or ‘leaves’. This signals the articulating pres-

\textsuperscript{10} More on the teaching of rhetoric in early modern English schools in Rhodes (2004: 45–84).
ence of metaphors, similes and other figures of speech that rely on imagery and allegory as a means of creating the desired rhetorical effect. There are also frequent references to characters of classical mythology thanks to the use of rhetorical tropes such as antonomasia, in which a noun is replaced with the name of a famous character with whom he or she shares some descriptive qualities; for example, in “some Tereus hath deflowered thee” (2.3.26), ‘Tereus’ signifies the figure of the rapist in accordance to the classical story of the violation of Philomela to which Marcus constantly alludes. Language in this speech, in a self-referential allusion to an ongoing literary tradition that can be traced back to the classics (Döring 2006: 86), is semantically removed from its immediate context and hovers over the scene of the crime at a lofty and aseptic distance.

This is less the case in speeches with a higher degree of iconicity, in which the bond between semantics and locus is stronger. Figurative language and semantic diversity gradually decreases in favour of a more literal style, containing few comparisons, even fewer similes, and practically no metaphors. While Hamlet’s first soliloquy – a heterogeneous cocktail of semantic fields directly related to the changes taking place in his family with occasional deviating flashes of scholarly erudition – might not be the clearest example of this trend due to the verbosity of the character, it is unquestionably present in the Othello and Lear scenes. In these passages, the characters focus on one or two concepts and make the language revolve around them centrifugally, revisiting the same themes constantly. In Othello’s rant, the key concepts are the human body (‘nose’, ‘ears’, ‘lips’), sinning (‘lie’, ‘passions’, ‘confessions’) – the two of which are very closely related in this case – and the word ‘handkerchief’, the symbol Iago employs to trigger all of Othello’s doubts and suspicions. Similarly, Lear’s final words gravitate around the dichotomy of life and death (‘gone’, ‘dead’, ‘lives’, ‘killed’, ‘life’, etc.) with the occasional digression to refer to the human body parts of his daughter he is analysing (‘eyes’, ‘breath’, ‘lips’), and some material objects he sets his eyes on (‘looking glass’, ‘stone’, ‘button’). Cordelia’s death keeps her father’s language grounded and barren of poetry, with eyes and words only for the death and suffering surrounding and overwhelming him.

In a very sensible way, thus, controlling the variety of semantic fields immediately reduces the level of lexical ornament of a speech. But so does stripping removing lexical units whose primary function is, indeed, ornamental, such as epithets. An epithet is an adjective or adjectival phrase linked to a noun for which it provides further description or characterisation. It is a dispensable linguistic appendage whose primary purpose is ornamental (unlike, say, determiners or genitives, which serve a basic linguistic function) and plays an important part in the bombast of the poetic dialect. Thus, if decreasing the number of figurative tropes has the effect of making speech more grounded, getting rid of epithets
effectively reduces its level of embellishment. When taking into consideration all
the speeches cited in this article as representatives of the pre-\textit{Hamlet} way of writing
distress, an extremely high proportion of these passages’ noun phrases contain
epithets or epithet-like figures. This contrasts sharply with the highly iconic
speeches of, say, Lear and especially Othello, as the juxtaposition below clearly
illustrates:

\begin{verbatim}
Speak, gentle niece, what stern
ungentle hands
Hath lopped and hewed and made
thy body bare
Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments
Whose circling shadows kings have sought
to sleep in
And might not gain so great a happiness
As half thy love. Why dost not speak
to me?
Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirred
with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath.

Lie with her? lie on her? we say lie
on her when they belie her!
Lie with her, zounds, that’s fulsome! –
Handkerchief! confessions! handkerchief! –
To confess, and be hanged for his labour! First
to be hanged, and then to confess:
I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself
in such a shadowing passion without some
instruction. It is not words that shakes me
thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is’t possible?
Confess! handkerchief! O devil!
\end{verbatim}

Extracts from Marcus’ speech in \textit{Titus Andronicus} (2.3.16–25) and Othello’s monologue in
\textit{Othello} (4.1.35–43), with their epithets marked in italics

From a lexical perspective, the extract from \textit{Titus} is once again representative of
how early Shakespearean passionate speeches are conventionally driven by
elocution and ornament. Almost half of the nouns in the passage carry modifiers,
most of which are there with the sole purpose of embellishment. On the opposite
side we have the texts in \textit{Othello} and \textit{King Lear}, which are semantically mono-
thetic and unadorned. Again, Hamlet finds himself halfway between these two
tongues, whether because of his hesitating character, the context (the two months
may seem short to him, but it is certainly enough time to polish this speech and
brush up one’s Shakespeare), or because \textit{Hamlet} is a transition play in the
development of the language of iconic distress.

\section*{Loss of Clarity: A Study in Deixis}

As shown above, Shakespeare’s iconic depictions of distress peel off layers of
embellishment and convolution associated with Elizabethan stage poetry in order
to make language more verisimilar and mundane. But it is not simply plainness
that characterises these passages, as Stephen Booth notes, but a certain level of nonsense as well. The idiolect of distress goes beyond rhetorical austerity to wield obscurity and incoherence as ways of representing the troubled train of thought of characters. This is partly achieved through figures of ineloquence such as *aposiopesis* and *epizeuxis*, but also by removing or distorting the audience’s and/or readers’ traditional orientation devices. The final section of this article explores how Shakespeare plays with conventional linguistic aides, specifically deictic markers, in order to reproduce the lack of clarity that is to be expected in the language of characters who have had the rug pulled out from under their feet, as is the case in the passages here analysed.

“The general rule”, Russ McDonald surmises, “is that, as his poetic career proceeds, Shakespeare gives the audience less and less help – literally so, in his removal of auxiliaries, and other such units” (2006: 46). This observation is borne out by this article’s case studies, which are pitched at least one step below normal eloquence due to the emotional demands made on the characters. Shakespeare was fully aware of his compromising the communicability of his words in the service of art, since one of the primary functions of language is to signal and to provide the coordinates of the subjects, place and time involved in any particular utterance. *Deixis*, or deictics, is the branch of the linguistic field of Pragmatics that is concerned with precisely how language encodes the context in which the utterance is made. The language of an audio-visual medium such as the theatre is heavily invested with deictic elements or markers, “a subtype of definite referring expressions [...] which ‘point to’ their referents” and which play an active role in creating the fictional arch of a theatrical representation (Cruse 2006: 44–45).

Discourse *deixis*, which is what this section focuses on, studies the way in which the deictic centres of the utterance (i.e. the people partaking or being referred to in the communication) are represented and located via linguistic devices. The standard categories of the possible discursive deictic markers are the following:

**Endophoric Reference**: a pronoun referring to a deictic centre linguistically mentioned. There are two types: the anaphoric reference, which points to a centre mentioned previously in the text (ex. After *Sally* went swimming, *she* ate lunch), and the cataphoric reference, which refers to a centre mentioned posteriorly in the text (ex. After *she* went swimming, *Sally* ate lunch).

**Exophoric Reference**: a pronoun referring to a deictic centre not verbally mentioned (ex. After *she* went swimming, *she* ate lunch).

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11 The deictic centre is underlined; the deictic markers are highlighted in italics. More on discourse *deixis* in Levinson (1983: 67–73, 85–89).
In general terms, most dramatic texts clearly define their deictic centres, and these centres are verbally present. This is particularly true of early modern plays, which are heavily embedded with over-explicitness and positive redundancies. Taking the recurring example of the Titus scene, Marcus’ speech revolves around the figures of Lavinia, the man – or men, he is not sure – who raped her, Lavinia’s father, and Marcus himself. Every ‘he’ or ‘him’ pronoun used to refer to the latter two, who are not present on stage, are anaphoric references that look back on a deictic centre in that very same sentence; this makes for a redundant speech, in which the protagonist’s name or address is repeated at the beginning of every full syntactic unit. In this passage the deictic centres are always very clearly referred to in their direct immediacy, and the linguistic evidence does not need extra-linguistic backup in order for the meaning to be understandable:

![Deictic mapping example](image)

An extract (2.3.38–47) from Marcus’ monologue in Titus Andronicus, with the deictic mapping (the deictic centres are underlined, and their corresponding references are marked in italics and connected with arrows)

The iconic depictions of distress, on the other hand, rely on elements beyond the immediate textual loci in order to establish the deictic centres of the utterances. In the Hamlet soliloquy we can only understand who ‘she’ is by connecting the few pieces of linguistic evidence about her with the narratio provided by Claudius previously in the scene (1.2.1–25). That is, Gertrude can never be logically related

12 When discussing “the relationships linking the various sign systems or codes that constitute a dramatic text”, Manfred Pfister points out that in “certain historical periods, the visual means of presentation that we take for granted, such as lighting and set, are almost completely absent, with the result that the verbal element gains in importance – quantitatively at least” (1988: 17).
to the ‘she’ and ‘her’ pronouns in the text without having heard Claudius’ previous summary of events, a deictic mapping completely different from that of a passage like Marcus:

A little month, or e’er those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,
Like Niobe, all tears. Why, she
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer – married with my name,
My father’s brother (but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules). Within a month.
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed!

An extract (1.2.148–157) from Hamlet’s first soliloquy in Hamlet, with the deictic mapping (the absent deictic centre is underlined, and its corresponding references are marked in italics and connected with arrows)

The same can be said of Desdemona in Othello’s pre-trance speech, which is linguistically dependent on the poisonous conversation he has with Iago (4.1.1–34); if isolated, we would not only not know who ‘she’ is, but also why he is obsessed with the words ‘lie’ and ‘handkerchief’. Finally, if Lear does not enter the scene “with Cordelia in his arms” (s.d. 5.3.254) it would be impossible to understand at the beginning who ‘she’ is, for this is the first the audience hears about Cordelia’s death. It is only when he exclaims “Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little” (5.3.269) that the words Lear utters permit us to put a face on the cataphoric ‘she’ which had just been so much on his lips.

The language of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, being so redundant and self-sufficient and requiring practically no non-verbal communication from the performers and memory from the audience, makes these otherwise slight stylistic deviations from the norm stand out. Although most texts can logically survive on their own without needing too much context or stage directions, the turbulent thinkers repeatedly seem to forget to establish clear deictic centres in their speeches, and thus require a minimum of cooperation from the audience in order to fill in the holes left partially uncovered. The language of distress is, as McDonald suggests, one of the instances in which Shakespeare breaks away from convention and makes his reader/listener work – however slightly – to establish logical connections. Thus Shakespeare removes an element of the Elizabethan stage dialect, its constant self-sufficiency, so as to create a sense of psychological disorder. In fact, it is precisely the almost absolute intelligibility of the scene,
despite these minuscule (and perfectly ordinary, considering the circumstances) gaps, that makes them so persuasive: we are hearing sense in nonsense, just as we are witnessing naturalness in a heavily artificial medium.

Toward a Rhetoric of Broken Voices

The cumulative effect of all the stylistic stratagems this article identifies, when put together, is the perception that Shakespeare seeks to transcribe a more verisimilar speech, marked by structural mistakes as well as emotional distortions. One might even go on to create a niche for him in the pantheon of descriptive linguistics. He certainly appears to have shared the humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives’ opinion that “in all discourse, the words and the meaning are, so to speak, the body and the soul” (as translated and qtd. in Sell 2006: 145), and that there is no better reflection of a person’s mind than his or her speech. These are texts with broken, damaged and even agonising literary language, which deal with broken, damaged and agonising souls. But these passages would not be as memorable as they are if Shakespeare’s unrhetorical rhetoric were not as effective at transmitting emotions as it is. In these anguished statements by characters undergoing acute emotional duress Shakespeare found a way to imbue his language with the mimetic iconicity needed to overcome the limitations of a visibly artificial medium.

Shakespeare paid even greater attention to various forms of ‘broken voices’, to language altered or affected by emotions, as he gained more experience as a dramatist. Many characters in his corpus suffer from grief, anger, shock, jealousy, guilt, introspection or insecurity, and these emotions and situations cripple their speech in similar ways. Thus Shylock, when he hears of his daughter’s elopement, speaks in “a passion so confused, / so strange outrageous and so variable” that renders him only able to repeatedly cry out “My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!” (The Merchant of Venice 2.8.12–24). Lady Macbeth, whose guilt over all

13 Andreas Mahler resorts to Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher’s notions of ‘conceptional orality’ and ‘conceptional scripturality’ to illustrate the linguistic and performative modes mediated in the language of the Shakespearean stage. As he explains, “not every text is conceived scripturally (i.e. the minutes of a debate), nor is every spoken text conceived orally (the reading of a verdict). Accordingly, the words spoken on the stage are either conceived scripturally (with the author’s pen textually prescribing what the actor’s voice is to say) or orally (in moments of improvisation)” (2007: 149). What this article suggests is that Shakespeare infuses these ‘conceptionally scriptural’ passages with characteristics associated with the language of ‘conceptional orality’.
the murders committed at her and her husband’s behest overwhelms her, becomes even more incoherent:

Out, damned spot! out, I say! – One; two:
why, then ‘tis time to do’t. – Hell is murky. – Fie,
my Lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard?
[...]
To bed, to bed: there’s knocking at the gate.
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.
What’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed. (Macbeth 5.1.33–35, 62–65)

In one remarkably literal case Shakespeare in Henry V reduced the French princess Katherine’s ‘broken English’ to short and blunt attempts to speak the language properly, thus introducing a speech impediment different in type but no less crippling than any of the forms listed above (5.2.98–265). But perhaps the most interesting direct relationship Shakespeare establishes links the idiolect of distress with that of madness. Insanity was a very popular topic in early modern English society – a grave-digging Clown even joked with Hamlet about it – and even though there are some significant differences between the speech of the distressed-yet-sane and that of the unequivocally mad there are also some strong parallelisms. For example, after having succumbed to madness, Ophelia is described as speaking “things in doubt / that carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing, / yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection” (Hamlet 4.5.7–9). No doubt all these different ‘broken voices’ influenced and reinforced each other, just as Shakespeare transferred some of the techniques he had devised for his language of distress to his language of madness/guilt/translation/etc. and vice versa. Whether he did this consciously or not is beyond our ken. What cannot be disputed, however, is that he understood the value and the effect this nonsensical – or less-sensical – language had on his audience, and that he thoroughly explored its possibilities and dimensions.

What is also indisputable is that Shakespeare’s portrayal of overpowering emotions changes in the course of his career. Just as the style he adopts for Marcus’ speech in Titus has little to do with that of Hamlet or Othello or Lear, Shakespeare’s way of representing distress the language in the late plays is once again further tweaked, while remaining highly iconic. In The Winter’s Tale and especially Cymbeline he cultivates unusually long sentences; that said, the effect of these

14 For recent studies of the relationship between madness and the early modern stage see Neely (1991); Neely (2004); Salkeld (1993); Salkeld (2005).
never ending structures is similar to that of the abortive syntax in the passages here analysed. Jonathan Hope describes language in *The Winter’s Tale* thus:

> What Shakespeare is doing here is following the psychological rhetorical principle: his syntax seeks to work on the emotional level rather than the rational or sensual mind. The use of adverbial clauses, multiple coordination, and apposition produces hugely expanded sentence elements as his characters become fixated upon, and elaborate, trains of thought which are aside from the main sentence structure. [...] Shakespeare’s tendency is to massively expand either the subject or the object/complement, or an adverbial element, to produce complexity which mimics ‘as-it-happens’ thought. (2010: 165)

Conceptually and stylistically, the premise remains unchanged: Shakespeare, whose plays are “situated on the threshold of a ‘modern’ privileging of the mimetic effect over a ‘medieval’/‘early modern’ pleasure of participating in a performative process” (Mahler 2007: 147), pushes the boundaries by having the inner monologue of his characters break with the expectations of early modern dramatic poetry. Every literary trend or technique has its shelf life and expiration date, but the aspiration to put into words the ways and woes of the mind seems to persist, in one way or another. Not by accident, Shakespeare’s classicist counterpart Ben Jonson reminds us in *Timber* (1640) that it was Menander who first stated that “oratio imago animi” [speech is the image of the mind] (as translated and qtd. in Sell 2006: 145). The various and varying echoes of this chime have reverberated through the ages. Here is one of them.

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