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Introduction, or, Is Blank Verse Black?

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the special issue 'Shakespeare and Versification', and then turns to think about the colouration and 'race-making' of blank verse. Could blank verse be **black**, and (how) can we think about questions of race in prosody?

KEYWORDS

Race; colour; blank verse; black; white; ethnicity; premodern critical race studies; versification; prosody; metre/meter

In Roland Emmerich's movie *Anonymous* (2011), which advanced an Oxfordian conspiracy theory of Shakespeare's authorship, there is a scene of some metrical interest. During the scene, Ben Jonson (played by Sebastian Armesto) is astonished that the Earl of Oxford (played by Rhys Ifans) has written a drama – *Romeo and Juliet*, as it happens – 'in iambic pentameter'. Eyebrows raised, Jonson asks the Earl, 'All [of it], my lord? Is that possible?' The Earl nods insouciantly. 'Of course it is', he replies.

In one sense, the Earl is right – although not quite in the sense that the movie intends him to be right. Of course it was possible for a late sixteenth century playwright to have written a play 'in iambic pentameter' (although very few plays of the period, *Romeo and Juliet* included, are in unadulterated iambic pentameter, which is usually set off by bursts or stretches of prose and of other metres). Yet Jonson is also right to be surprised, to leave the scene (as John Orloff's script has it) 'still amazed at the manuscript as he walks'. For one thing, the term 'iambic pentameter' is a somewhat anachronistic way of describing either 'blank verse' or rhymed decasyllables (the OED's first recorded usage of 'iambic pentameter' is from the early nineteenth century). But more to the point, or more to the point of this special issue, there is indeed something to marvel at in Shakespeare's sustained metrical composition over the course of four decades. He needn't have written in metre at all. When he began writing blank verse for the theatre in the late 1580s, the form was only fifty years old (and even more recent as it manifested itself on the public stage). Plenty of

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sixteenth – and seventeenth-century playwrights wrote mostly or entirely in prose. And any ‘poetic drama’ does not proceed ‘on the same assumption as prose drama, except that it happens to be in verse’ (Wain 4): for Shakespeare’s audiences, there would have been plenty new, fresh, and startling about the form in which he wrote, especially when transposed upon or counterpointed against the stylistic, and other, expectations aroused by a theatre that played itself out in prose (or in other kinds of verse).

This special issue of *Shakespeare* accordingly tries something a little different in its form, which might (albeit in a minor way) unseat some readerly expectations. Lodged between its long-form scholarly articles are short and close metrical readings of lines or couplets or passages from the Shakespeare corpus, ranging from the conclusions of Sonnets 91 and 92 (Heather Dubrow) to a speech by Richard, Duke of Gloucester in *1 Henry 6* (Goran Stanivukovic) via a rhyming couplet in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (Molly Clark) and an unrhyming couplet, of sorts, in *Romeo and Juliet* (Neil Rhodes).

The longer articles have a correspondingly larger reach. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor write about metre in the ears of its editors, who ‘usually assume that [Shakespeare’s] dramatic verse is written in iambic pentameters’ and are therefore ‘tempted to emend the verse’ when they encounter apparent ‘anomalies’. Stephen Guy-Bray thinks about how a metrical form like a couplet, and its relationship to larger structures preceding and succeeding it, can refashion how a whole verse tradition – in this case, ‘English sonnet form’ – might behave (or not behave, especially in the case of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 126). Laura Seymour tests what could happen if we think of repetition, especially the repeated or recapitulated verse lines of the Bastard in *King John*, as an ‘echo-*lalia*’, hearing as we do so an ‘autistic potential’ in Shakespeare’s plays, an opportunity to ‘conserve and revel in the linguistic temporalities of autism’ rather than to read Shakespeare’s metre with a single-minded or ‘neurotypical’ ear. Lucia Martinez Valdivia hears the ‘polysemy’ of Shakespearean metre, too, listening for the many things it does in ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’. She ‘resists the allegorical interpretation of the poem’s heptasyllables and instead hears them as sounding out the poem’s myriad paradoxes, affiliations, and obscurities. Ros King’s essay exhibits a similarly flexible and capacious ear for Shakespearean metre, listening for ‘the meaningful *non*-semantic values in Shakespeare’s verbal patterns, and the *super*-metrical rhythms they create’ – and King also listens for that elusive and yet commonplace aural property, ‘silence’.

The essays and close readings in this special issue challenge the (still widespread) notion that Shakespearean metre must be a dry, quasi-mathematical, or remote subject. They find much of interest in Shakespearean metre itself, and make a case, too, for metre’s essential connection to all other domains of Shakespearean study (it is a kind of *grundrisse* or even *gesamtkunstwerk*, operating both as a groundwork for and encapsulation of all things Shakespearean).

That critical shuffle between the small, the scansional, and the large, the whole body of Shakespearean scholarship, is characteristic – for Shakespeare’s versification has a proliferating quality in these essays, often amounting to more than the sum of its parts, or finding ways to expand beyond or upon its initial apprehension or estimation.

It is in such a spirit that this volume will now shuffle away from another formal convention of the special issue, what might even be thought of (after Alexander Pope) as the dull duty of a special issue editor: that is, the deadening paraphrase of the lively arguments and pleasures herein. Leaving summary and digest and thematic throat-clearing behind, I will instead attempt to evoke the variety of this collection – the ways in which it thinks about metre, what metre does, and what in (and outside) Shakespeare it co-operates with, or jostles against – by posing a version of a question put by Peter Erickson (‘Can we Talk about Race in *Hamlet*?’) and asking: Can we talk about race in prosody? More specifically, could blank verse also be **black** verse?

*

In a recent essay about ‘foul papers’ and ‘fair copy’, Brandi K. Adams notes how ‘observations about whiteness, fairness and race are just beginning to happen in bibliography and book history, despite over fifty years of concentrated study on the history of race in early modern England’ (48). The same can justly be said of prosody. In this critical moment, a special issue editor might expect to receive an article or two centrally concerned with race and/or ethnicity. Yet, despite my soliciting, and a few tentative suggestions, no such article arrived at *Shakespeare* HQ. This is most likely because metrical terminology like ‘blank verse’ has come to seem ‘fundamental and seemingly neutral’ (as Miles Grier describes ‘our supreme character system: the black and white page’ (321), which was nonetheless depicted in explicitly racial terms in some sixteenth – and seventeenth-century poems (see Hall, ‘Poems of Blackness’)). It is thought to be in some way free of or distinct from questions of race.

But what *is* ‘blank verse’, or what is ‘blank’ about it? The OED defines blank verse as simply ‘blank’ of rhyme (‘blank’ adj. and adv. 8a ‘verse without rhyme’) yet the dictionary’s adjacent definitions of the word ‘blank’ populate a word that could seem ‘Mere, bare, simple’ (OED ‘blank’ adj. and adv. 7b) with a host of meaning. Thus we can conceive of the blank as ‘A vacant space, place, or period; a void’ (OED 7 fig.), even as ‘An empty form without substance; anything insignificant; nothing at all’ (OED 6b), but we can also hear it as being ‘never truly blank’, ‘left blank to be filled up’ (OED 6a), whether by a marginalist or a lexicographer. Accordingly, a sixteenth-century archer would aim to fire his arrows into the ‘blank’, the central white spot on the archery board, and workers in a seventeenth-century mint would stamp or imprint the coin’s ‘blank’, its small metal circle, to endow it with value. For Thomas Nashe, who coined the term ‘blank verse’ in 1589, the blankness of blank

verse was not to be discerned in any absence but in a pleonasm of presence. Blank verse was ‘blank’ because it was padded with unnecessary words, replete with ‘ifs and ands’, stuffed up with phatic substitutes for ‘the just measure’ of a classical hexameter (3r). So blanks have at once a vacancy and a ‘fillability’ (Gitelman 21).

Filling in the blank could be a relatively plain exercise (and thereby open to comedy: think of the audacious bureaucratic love letters with a ‘blank space for different names’ sent by Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2.1.70-1)). James Shirley’s play *Changes, or Love in a Maze* (1632) humorously accounts for blank verse in just these terms, with ‘the title of blank verse’ deriving from ‘[w]rits, that are first made, and after filled’ (D4v). The codex of sixteenth – and seventeenth-century texts was explicitly designed to encourage and accommodate readerly intervention, whether in wide margins or interlinear blank spaces or blank pages or the practice of ‘blank casting-off’. The history of sixteenth – and seventeenth-century printing is, as Peter Stallybrass puts it, ‘crucially a history of the “blank”’ (340). These various sorts of textual blanks recall Jacques Lacan’s *manque à être*, or ‘want-to-be’ (xi), in which the blank space’s ‘lack’ is only ever a temporary condition *en route* to being filled up or filled in. ‘Desunt nonnulla’, it seems to say, with ‘what we might call the voice of the book, which may or may not be that of the author or printer’ (Sherman 73): I am not blank, I am unfinished, so finish me.

We tend to read the term ‘blank verse’ as a noun phrase or compound noun, i.e., as defining a verse form that is structured by the absence of rhyme and/or by the presence of certain accentual and syllabic features. However, we could just as well think of this verse as being figured only by its fecundly vacant adjective: ‘blank’. Appropriately for an argument about prosody, the difference between these two grammatical readings of the term can be illuminated or wrought by intonational stress: ‘blank **verse**’ emphasises the versification involved while ‘**blank** verse’ emphasises the blanking of said versification by the adjective – hence, in the latter case, Samuel Johnson’s famous warning that blank verse will become ‘*verse only to the eye*’ if (m)any distinguishing acoustic features of the verse get blanked out (2.294). Indeed, the blanking of one of those sonic features – rhyme – means that blank verse depends rather more on the presence of typographical blank space at the end of the verse line to signal its conclusion. This is not only noticeable in the eyes of readers. Laurence Olivier recognised the blankness in blank verse when he ‘disingenuously asked [his fellow actor] John Laurie [...] “What is this thing called blank verse?” When Laurie explained, he said: “Is that all?”’ (Croall 200-1).

This apparent tension or paradox in blank verse’s blankness – that it is empty and full – can be seen as well as heard if we consider the business of blankness’s colouration, and with it ‘race-making’. The first of the definitions in the OED’s entry on ‘blank, *adj.* and *adv.*’ haws over whether a blank is ‘white’, ‘pale’, or ‘colourless’. The dictionary is right to haw, because whiteness is not the same

thing as paleness nor as colourlessness. Twentieth – and twenty-first century critiques of ‘race thinking’ (Arendt) have lamented the ‘invisibility of whiteness’ (Smith, ‘We are Othello’ 107), the way it has become an ‘unmarked property’ (Little 92), considered colourless rather than a colour in its own right, except perhaps in an egregiously ‘cosmetic construction of whiteness’ (Karim-Cooper 174) like Elizabeth I’s lead-lined face and the ‘cult of white’ (Strong 21) or ‘cult of whiteness’ (Erickson, ‘Representation’ 517) which therefore appeared to shine out of it (a cult that ‘made whiteness strange’ (Dyer 4)). A white blank verse, properly considered, would actually be full of colour (something communicated by the French term *vers blanc*).

However, even this perception depends upon a ‘presumption of whiteness’ (Smith, ‘Handkerchief’ 1). What if the blankness of blank verse is not white or colourless or pale but **black**? The OED declares that ‘black’ is ‘the darkest colour possible’ (1a) before admitting in the small print that ‘From a scientific perspective, the quality of being black is due to the absence or absorption of all the wavelengths of light occurring in the visible spectrum’. In other words, from another ‘perspective’, which need not be ‘scientific’, there is nothing blanner than blackness.

Hence perhaps the textual crux in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 77, where the 1609 quarto text renders the last word of lines 9–10 ‘Look what thy memory cannot contain / Commit to these waste blanks’ as ‘blacks’. The apparent editorial albification or blanching of ‘blacks’ to ‘blanks’ might not be founded on a ‘presumption’ (Boose 46) of or determination for whiteness (with, behind it, a typically sixteenth- and seventeenth-century perception that black was ‘more powerful than white and capable of absorbing it and colouring it’, a fear that ‘blackness was dominant and could contaminate whiteness’ (Loomba 211)). In editing the Oxford single-volume text of Shakespeare’s poems, Colin Burrow acknowledges that “blacks” might refer to ink’, recalling the ‘black lines’ of Sonnet 63 (13) or the refulgently ‘black ink’ in the final line of Sonnet 65, but finds the quarto reading ‘hard to reconcile with “these”, a pronoun which seems most naturally to be in concord with the ‘vacant leaves’ referred to [in line 3 of the sonnet]’ (534). For Burrow, the ‘blanks’ are most readily read as ‘blank pages’. In his Penguin edition of the sonnets, John Kerrigan had similarly concluded that Sonnet 77 was ‘meant to accompany the gift of a blank notebook’ (271; a conjecture first advanced in the eighteenth century by George Steevens). Alternatively, Stephen Booth has provided a bibliographical explication of Sonnet 77’s crux, suggesting that there may have been a tilde over the ‘a’ in the sonnet’s manuscript, an abbreviation for ‘an’ which was then misread by compositors (268). More recently, however, Adam Barker has argued that the blanks may be black after all. Barker observes that numerous almanacs of the period house black pages with ‘fair paper’ on their reverse, which are described in the almanacs’ own words as ‘waste’, ‘empty’ and ‘blank’. These readings are not necessarily opposites since

blankness is a definitionally fungible property. It can be coloured and colourless, full and empty, white and black.

In the second quarto of *Hamlet* (1604/5), Hamlet talks not of ‘blank verse’ but of ‘black verse’ (2.2.289-90). Once again, the simple compositorial explanation is an adequate one: someone in the printing house had misread a tilde. Yet Patricia Parker finds herself ‘unable to read Q2’s “The black verse shall halt for’t” – with its personification of a halting or limping as well as “black” body – without thinking once again of the blackened and limping Vulcan’ (145) whom Hamlet will conjure as the mythic locus of his ‘foul’ imaginations later in the play (‘my imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan’s stithy’ (3.2.89-9)), an imaginative blackness which he foists on his mother (‘Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct’ (3.4.102)), which also becomes the ‘smeared’, ‘dread and black complexion’ of the rugged Pyrrhus later in 2.2.(480), and which becomes part of the play’s wider ‘vocabulary of black and white imagery’ (Erickson 212). The ‘blank verse’ of 2.2 could be a white blankness or a black blankness.

Reading with and for a ‘poetics of colour’ (Hall, *Darkness* 66) in our eyes and ears, even for what Kim F. Hall has called ‘an homology of form and colour’ (‘Literary whiteness’ 76), we might expose a ‘lyric whiteness’ (66) in some of prosody’s terminology and/or in some ubiquitous understandings of it. While a ‘sole emphasis on [skin] colour’ (Smith, *Race* 3) will not yield the most sophisticated analysis of race, especially when it is ‘impossible to know with any certainty’ what our ‘premodern predecessors saw when they saw colour’ (Seth 351), it is worth pausing to wonder why the blankness of ‘blank verse’ has been so routinely considered ‘white’ or ‘colourless’, and what we might lose, as well as gain, in seeing (or not seeing) it as such. Rather as Shakespearean scholars of race have turned from ‘the so-called “race plays”’ (Thompson 3, e.g., *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*) to ‘Shakespeare’s other race plays’ (Brown), i.e., all of Shakespeare’s plays, none of which achieve an escape velocity from questions of race any more than they do questions of gender or questions of sexuality, we might turn (with Adams, Grier and others) to provinces of Shakespearean scholarship – like versification – in which race has been little if at all considered. Can we talk about race in prosody after all? Could blank verse be **black**?

In the trailer for Emmerich’s *Anonymous*, and in the movie itself, we catch a glimpse of Shakespeare’s (or the Earl of Oxford’s) manuscripts. They are pristine, with scarce a blot in his papers. So is their versification, at least to the eye. We see the verse lines arranged in neat consecutive order, all appearing to be the same length, with a typographical straightness and an unerring fluency. They look nothing like the verse lines of Harley MS. 7368, the only known instance of a Shakespearean draft, in which the verse lines are disturbed by interlinear and supervening additions (where, for example, Shakespeare

writes the words ‘Alas, alas!’ above the middle of one of his verse lines, fashioning a weirdly wordy caesura which Hand C intervenes to delete (9r)).

Yet the movie’s manuscripts chime with its trailer’s portentous slogans, themselves like little verse lines: ‘BETWEEN THE LINES / LIES THE TRUTH’. In this *mise-en-page* conspiracy theory, the true Shakespeare (that is, the Earl of Oxford) can be found in the white spaces between the well-ordered black lines. ‘THE TRUTH’ is located in prosodic whiteness and not in the inert, tediously-level verse lines themselves. There is no suggestion here that Shakespeare’s versification might be a matter both of white space and black words, each requiring the other for prosodic sustenance and existence, or that his blank verse might be at once black *and* white, black *and* blank, with the ‘early modern English “black” and “blank”’, so ‘typologically and aurally proximate’ (Chakravarty 29), behaving as ‘not only polarities – like “white” and “black” – but synonyms, capable of turning “tropically” into one another’ (Parker 145). The essential plurality of Shakespeare’s versification, attested to in the ambiguities and multiplicities of the essays that follow, offers something more interesting than the otherwise whitewashed versification of Emmerich’s movie and the tidy, tidying prosodic and editorial traditions it inadvertently evokes.

This special issue tries not to be so colourless.

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