



VerseBuster

Sir Thomas More

Shakespeare's Sheriff More speech, Act 2.[4]

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Shakespeare in Times Square, New York by kind permission of Mirko Ilic

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GUIDE TO NO.4 'VERSE AS PROSE' SCRIPT

TO HIGHLIGHT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A VERSE-READING OF VERSE AND A PROSE-READING OF VERSE

How, performance-wise, are these different?

Premise

1. By removing the verse-line endings the rhetorical suspense that comes with some of them is removed. The speaker becomes less compelling and theatrical boredom beckons.

As it relates to this speech

The speech, exceptionally long, has dramatic verse-line endings in key places that would otherwise help maintain the audience's attention.

2. By losing the typographical mid-line endings (full stops / periods) delivery risks slowing down. This is because mid-line endings in verse indicate new thoughts are tumbling thick and fast; even that the germ of the new thought is being born while the previous thought is still being spoken. Thus energy and pace will suffer.

As it relates to this speech

The speech has numerous mid-line endings typical of Shakespeare's later work.

3. By removing elisions* (no metrical need in prose) there is less compression in the affected lines which then take fractionally longer to deliver. Over the course of a play (average 3,000 lines), that adds significant running-time without any benefit. Moreover, some characters use a lot of contraction (e.g. Leontes in *The Winters's Tale*), so in certain instances one is losing characterisation.

**except for modern commonplaces 'I'll', 'you'll', etc.*

As it relates to this speech

If metrical conventions are followed, the speech has some interesting contractions notably 'mut'nies' [*MUTE-nies*] for mutinies (l. 120) and 'appropri'ate' for appropriate (l. 142).

4. By removing performance punctuation and replacing it with literary punctuation which is generally less free flowing. In some school texts, to break down long thoughts into smaller bite-size chunks, punctuation is confined to commas and full-stops (periods). The editors eschew subtler colons, semi-colons or dashes that would otherwise keep the highways and by-ways of the argument buoyant. Performance-wise, a surfeit of full-stops saps the energy and tests the audience's patience.

As it relates to this speech

In this particular speech, Sheriff More uses a lot of conjunctive 'and', so the effect, on this occasion, is muted.

The following is best understood alongside no.2 or no.3 script, or with the ePlay open

Try speaking it aloud to hear the difference

CROWD (*of the prevailing mood*)

Remove the strangers !

SHERIFF MORE

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise hath chid down all the majesty of England. Imagine that you see the wretched strangers, their babies at their backs and their poor luggage, plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation ; and that you sit as kings in your desires, authority quite silenc'd by your brawl, and you in ruff of your opinions clothed. What had you got?

I'll tell you. You had taught how insolence and strong hand should prevail, how order should be quelled. And by this pattern not one of you should live an agèd man, for other ruffians (as their fancies wrought) with self same hand, self reasons, and self right, would shark on you ; and men like ravenous fishes would feed on one another.

DOLL

Before God, that's as true as the Gospel.

LINCOLN or **GEORGE BETTS**

Nay, this is a sound fellow, I tell you—let's mark him.

SHERIFF MORE

Let me set up before your thoughts, good friends, on supposition ; which if you will mark, you shall perceive how horrible a shape your insurrection bears.

First, it is a sin which oft the apostle did forewarn us of, urging obedience to authority. And it were no error, if I told you all, you were in arms against your God Himself !

ALL

Marry, God forbid that !

SHERIFF MORE

Nay, certainly you are ; for to the king God hath His office lent of dread, of justice, power and command ; hath bid him rule, and willed you to obey. And—to add ampler majesty to this—he hath not only lent the king His figure, His throne, His sword, but given him his own name, calls him 'a god on earth'.

What do you then, rising against him that God Himself installs, but rise against God?
What do you to your souls in doing this?

O, desperate as you are, wash your foul minds with tears ; and those same hands that you like rebels lift against the peace, lift up for peace ; and your unreverent knees make them your feet to kneel to be forgiven !

Tell me but this : what rebel captain, as mutinies are like to hap, by his name can still the rout? Who will obey a traitor?

Or how can well that proclamation sound when there is no addition but a 'rebel' to qualify a rebel?

You'll put down strangers, kill them, cut their throats, possess their houses, and lead the majesty of law on leash to slip him like a hound.

Say now the king (as he is clement if the offender mourn) should so much come too short of your great trespass as merely to banish you—whither would you go? What country by the nature of your error should give you harbor?

Go you to France or Flanders, to any German province, Spain or Portugal ; nay, anywhere that not adheres to England—why you must needs be strangers.

Would you be pleased to find a nation of such barbarous temper that, breaking out in hideous violence, would not afford you an abode on earth? Whet their detested knives across your throats? Spurn you like dogs? And like as if that God owned not, nor made not you?

Nor that the elements were not all appropriate to your comforts but chartered unto them?

What would you think to be thus used?

This is the strangers' case ; and this your mountainish inhumanity.