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Cynthia Lewis

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Emphasis Added: Reading Shakespeare's Language Clearly

CYNTHIA LEWIS

In his uneven first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Jonathan Franzen includes a hilarious send-up of a St. Louis broadcaster's tendency to emphasize all the wrong words while announcing the news:

Jack, it appears the situation *is* under control. I spoke moments ago with Chief Jammu, who is *at* the command post here, the explosive charges beneath the stadium *have* been located, and it *appears* that we're looking at enough explosives to do what was threatened, namely, to kill all of the fans—at—the *game*.¹

We've all had occasion to wince at the counter-intuitive emphases on prepositions and auxiliary verbs that Franzen mocks. They emerge constantly on TV, on the radio, and on airline flights, when attendants advise us to "remain seated until the plane has come *to* a complete stop *at* the gate" and to be wary of bags in the upper storage compartments that "may *have* shifted." And would someone let the NPR announcer know that the NEA's slogan isn't "*Art Works*," but "*Art Works*?"

Few of us who have attended a live performance of a Shakespeare play have escaped noticing a similar problem in some actors' delivery of their speeches. Either an emphasis falls on an indisputably wrong word, rendering a line incomprehensible, or an unexpected emphasis changes the meaning of a line we always thought we'd understood, until now. In that case, an unfamiliar emphasis has the capacity either to clarify a long-standing misperception or to introduce an alternative understanding of a line. But misplaced or dubiously placed emphasis, whether in professional staged productions or in a classroom, is a tell: it exposes an actor or a reader who hasn't fathomed the meaning of the lines being spoken. More to the point, if the actor doesn't understand the lines, neither will the audience.

As someone who regularly uses performance in the service of teaching Shakespeare, I've had ample exposure to the importance of attending to emphasis in characters' speeches. Finding the right emphasis—or understanding which choices in emphasis are acceptable—is a fundamental means of understanding and communicating the literal meaning of a passage that may not be as straightforward as it initially seems. It is thus an indispensable teaching tool. In classes where my students mount a full-scale production of a play from the ground up, we spend a

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large portion of our rehearsal time locating the emphases that will enable auditors to follow what the actors are literally saying, literal meaning being the basis of all other interpretation. My role as troupe leader often involves my suggesting to a student-actor, “Try emphasizing X in that line,” so that the sense of the speech can come across clearly. Time and again, in audience members’ responses to my students’ public performances, I hear comments like, “The students really understood what they were saying.” Parents often tell me that these productions, accessible as they are, have introduced their children to a love of performed Shakespeare.

Although emphasis can work hand-in-hand with metrical stress and is not completely distinct from it, emphasis can also work independently of metrical stress, in which certain syllables are stressed in alternation with others that are unstressed. In Shakespeare’s usual meter of iambic pentameter, every other syllable is stressed, as every high school student knows. Although very few of Shakespeare’s iambic lines conform to perfectly regular iambic pentameter, this line of Hero’s, in response to Leonato’s interrogation in act 4 of *Much Ado about Nothing*, comes close:

What kind of catechizing call you this? (4.1.78) ²

In the word *catechizing*, a primary stress falls on the first syllable and a secondary stress on the third, which completes an iamb with the word’s second syllable. As a four-syllable word with two stresses, *catechizing* establishes its prominence in the line, but the word that warrants even more emphasis in the line is *this*. Used as a pronoun, *this* calls attention to Leonato’s implications, which inappropriately question Hero’s morality and are out of place at a wedding.

In the case above, emphasis and metrical stress align, but emphasis can override metrical stress or even determine it, as in the Friar’s query to Hero:

Lady, what man is he you are **accus’d** of? (4.1.176)

The bolded syllables in this rhythmically irregular, eleven-syllable, feminine line denote stress, but not stress of equal force. The three words *what man* and *accus’d* receive most emphasis, a conclusion derived partly from fathoming the Friar’s intent: identifying Hero’s alleged paramour would help get to the bottom of the accusation—hence the emphasis on *what man*—and the Friar signals that Hero is only *accused*, not *guilty*, of infidelity. As in this example, determining emphasis often involves mental shuttling between the options afforded by a given line and mining the line’s meaning and motivation from the speaker’s viewpoint.

One of Shakespeare’s most common means of indicating emphasis lies in the antithetical balancing between two words or phrases in a line. The euphuistic play in both the verse and the prose of *Much Ado about Nothing* offers no end of word pairings that perform this work. Don John’s facile response to Leonato’s dazed question in the disrupted wedding scene picks up on and manipulates the elder man’s euphuistic coupling. “Are these things *spoken*, or do I but *dream*?” asks Leonato. “Sir, they are *spoken*,” responds John, “and they are *true*” (4.1.66-67). Don

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John's deft wording is a verbal sleight of hand, characteristic of him. He insinuates that Hero's character is degenerate merely because it's been described as such; his "and" means "therefore." Also characteristic is the way, a few lines later, John virtually overturns his misleading implication that speaking something makes it true with another euphuistic line. Referring to the dark deeds with Hero to which her lover has allegedly confessed, Don John says to Don Pedro, "Fie, fie, they are not to be *named*, my lord, / Not to be *spoke* of," because they would defile the very language required to "utter them" (4.1.95-98). Once Don John has created the illusion of Hero's tainted character through speech alone, he then magnifies her taintedness by referring to it as unspeakable. The euphuistic emphases in his lines map out his cunning verbal trickery.

Locating such emphases can thus enable a reader or an actor not only to comprehend a line, but, further, to tease out subtext. Sometimes, however, a choice presents itself that can completely alter a line's meaning by shifting emphasis from one word to another. Macbeth's line on learning of Lady Macbeth's death is such an instance: "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). In the theater today, the actor playing Macbeth usually emphasizes *should*, implying that Lady Macbeth died at the wrong time, at a juncture when her death barely receives notice because of the chaotic circumstances. Better she should have died, as Macbeth's next line suggests, when "There would have been a time for such a word"—that is, when word of her death would have received more notice (5.5.18).

In an alternative reading, *should* is an auxiliary verb and is not the word emphasized; *hereafter* is. In that case, the line is far more cynical, indicating that Lady Macbeth was going to die sometime, so why not today? What difference does the timing of death make if it's inevitable? That reading, opposed to the other one, is in keeping with the nihilism of the ensuing speech, "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow . . ." (5.5.19-28). If this second reading is less favored in the contemporary theater, one likely reason is that the use of *should* as an auxiliary verb has become archaic; today, we'd say *would* instead of *should* to mean "she was going to die sooner or later anyway."

Turning to editors does little to resolve the issue. Some come down decidedly in favor of the second reading (e.g., *The Riverside* editors). A few single out the first reading (e.g., *The Norton* editors). Many turn the choice between the two options over to the actor. Kenneth Muir, having remarked upon the line's ambiguity in the older Arden edition, oddly concludes that "Perhaps 'should' is used indifferently to denote either what will be or what ought to be" (5.5.17 n.). However indifferent an editor may be to the meaning of *should*, an actor must choose, and where the actor's emphasis falls—whether on *should* or *hereafter*—will communicate his meaning. This choice is particularly crucial, extending as it does not just to what the line says literally, but to the character's frame of mind and even his moral state as he says it. Either he still reserves some capacity to treat his wife with humanity or he's chillingly apathetic toward her passing. He cannot be both.

A decision like this one from *Macbeth* indicates that deliberation over emphasis resists shortcuts. But shortcuts—or something akin to efficiency—is the very objective of guides that seek to help ambitious actors get started with

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Shakespeare's script. All such guides attempt simple, straightforward explanations of blank verse, and they offer tips for determining emphasis in a line. In *How to Speak Shakespeare*, for instance, Cal Pritner and Louis Colaianni suggest that aspiring Shakespearean actors

learn to stress both verbs and nouns, almost always putting slightly more stress on the verb than on the noun. This is a guide to communication. This relative emphasis helps the audience 'get' the ideas you're expressing. Occasionally there will be exceptions; but this system of emphasis is dependable in helping the audience understand meaning. **Remember, stress the verbs most, and **stress** the nouns almost as much!** ³

In general, Pritner and Colaianni's advice is sound: if good writers know to pay most attention to strong verbs and nouns, then actors, for whom writers of drama write, would do well to follow suit. But exceptions to this rule are more than "occasional," and following this guideline as a rule can lead to an actor's missing important cues.

Consider, for example, Romeo's response to Juliet's wishing him "good night" in the balcony scene:

O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied? (2.4.125)

Certainly the verb *leave* receives emphasis, but *unsatisfied*, an adjective, warrants even more. *Unsatisfied*, after all, gives the punch to the punch line. This is but one of thousands of instances in which a word other than a noun or a verb is emphasized most, and as a relatively obvious instance, it is easier to catch than many others that might go unnoticed by a reader or an actor doggedly following a rule.

An even less legitimate rule—a rule I've been hearing from theater practitioners during my entire career and that was the original inspiration for this seminar paper—is that against emphasizing pronouns. I tried following that rule for about ten minutes and then gave up. Yet, curiously, it persists. Take, for example, this nugget, under the heading "Advice about weak and strong pointing words," from Ron Cameron's *Acting Skills for Life*:

When you examine the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in Shakespeare's verse, rarely do you find he has placed emphasis on pronouns. As a general rule, actors should try to minimize the stressing of pronouns. These weak words—such as I, you, me, he she, they, it, himself, herself, themselves—do little to bring out the meaning of most lines. The same holds true for many weak adjectives, such as: my, his, yours. ⁴

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Cameron echoes the early twentieth-century *Ben Greet Shakespeare for Young Readers and Amateur Players*, in which Greet charmingly admonishes, “As a general law do not emphasize the personal pronoun or make any gesture of pointing to yourself or others. It is bad manners, bad grammar, and bad art.”⁵

Good manners or not, it is, at best, a questionable directive, founded in Cameron’s case on the false assumption that meter determines emphasis, rather than vice versa. Although I’d stop short of asserting that pronouns are emphasized more often than not, I’d venture to say that they’re foregrounded in countless passages. Pronouns represent the characters’ identities, their interactions, their familial and social relationships—all the very substance of drama. Often they figure prominently in situations where a character’s ego is pronounced or is on the line. Once again, Leonato’s hate-filled speech in 4.1 of *Much Ado* yields illustration. He’s imagining why he would have been better off having no children, rather than a single child who, as he believes about Hero, has humiliated him. If Hero were someone else’s offspring, he wonders, couldn’t he have said

“No part of it is *mine*;
This shame derives itself from unknown loins”?
But *mine* and *mine* I lov’d, and *mine* I prais’d,
And *mine* that I was proud on, *mine* so much
That I *myself* was to *myself* not *mine*.
Valuing of *her*—why *she*, O *she* is fall’n
Into a pit of ink. (4.1.134-40)

(Note, by the way, that both *unknown* and *proud*, two adjectives, also receive emphasis.)

A lighter example from the same play arises in 5.2 when Benedick asks Margaret to “deserve well at my hands by helping me to the speech of Beatrice” (1-3). Margaret responds, “Will you then write *me* a sonnet in praise of *my* beauty?” (4-5). Margaret’s tone may be teasing, but it’s nevertheless in keeping with Leonato’s self-involvement. Margaret’s flirtation sets her up as Beatrice’s rival, even if only in jest.

In another passage that comes closer in gravity to the disrupted wedding scene in *Much Ado*, Lord Capulet loses patience with Juliet’s rejection of Paris in 3.5 of *Romeo and Juliet*. I see this scene, which also abounds in egoistical behavior, as the play’s climax. Opening with the newlyweds in their marriage bed, it closes with Juliet’s resolve to seek help from Friar Lawrence or, failing that, to end her life (3.5.241-42). In between those bracketing events, the three characters who have most potential power to help Juliet calm down, and ultimately save her life, desert her: Lady Capulet, Lord Capulet, and the Nurse. The scene reveals Capulet’s hot temper, which we can only suppose his wife has witnessed and borne the brunt of before now. Although she appears to leave the scene because she’s disgusted with Juliet’s resistance—“Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee”—she is likely appearing to ally with her husband and looking for an opportunity to exit out of self-protection (203).

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The Nurse has her own self-interested motive for urging Juliet to marry Paris and forget about Romeo: her job security. If her role in the clandestine marriage of Romeo and Juliet should come out, Capulet would no doubt leave her to “beg, starve, die in the streets” along with Juliet (192). In addition to being a pragmatist—after all, “Romeo is banished,” never to return—the Nurse, like her mistress, has a healthy respect for Capulet’s temper, which he unleashes on her in this scene (213, 170-75). She is motivated to smooth things over for everyone, most especially herself, and carry on as though nothing is amiss.

Capulet’s anger, then, is the scene’s driving force. Lady Capulet and the Nurse seek to avoid it, and Juliet, probably used to being able to assuage it as her father’s little girl, can at this point only manage to stoke it. Having directed students in 3.5 several times, I’ve learned that it thrives on the dynamic between Juliet and Capulet. The more he strives to please her and appease her grief—with what he thinks is the antidote of a marriage to Paris—the more refractory she becomes and the more damage she does to his ego, which in turn fuels his wrath. The more she weeps and wails, the greater his fury. Painfully ironically, in trying to mitigate her circumstances, she exacerbates them.

Before this scene—and after it, as well—Capulet’s characterization is richly informed by his efforts to entertain people and make them happy. The consummate host at the ball in 1.5, he admits of no disruption from Tybalt; willy-nilly, his guests are going to enjoy themselves and remain carefree. He has similar visions of Juliet’s wedding: in 4.4 he’s bustling at the center of preparations for the next day’s feast. Planning and orchestrating parties that make people forget their troubles is his forte; it’s also his peculiar way of maintaining control over his household, his guests, and his reputation. Woe betide the “headstrong” who thwarts his designs and calls his patriarchal rule into question (4.2.16). From his viewpoint, he deserves “thanks” for arranging to ease Juliet’s “heaviness” (142, 108). He would rather evict her from his house than suffer her ungrateful refusal to let him cheer her up by marrying Paris (3.5.191-94).

Capulet, then, is motivated to retain control over both his family and the attractive public image he cultivates through lavishly entertaining his guests. The rawest expression of that motivation occurs at the end of his tirade in 3.5, where he threatens to disown Juliet—his last line, in fact, before he stomps off stage, leaving Juliet to turn to the Nurse for advice. In reference to honoring his promise to Paris of Juliet’s hand in marriage, Capulet vows to Juliet, “I’ll not be forsworn.” My lengthy discussion of this scene sifts down to the question of what word in that short line makes most sense to emphasize.

The guidebooks’ suggestion to stress nouns and verbs, but most especially verbs, works well in this case. “I’ll not be *forsworn*” calls attention to the value Capulet places on his honor, which here is more important to him than his daughter’s preference, even if it concerns her choice of a husband. Although he tells Paris earlier that her “consent” is crucial to her acceptance of a marriage proposal, he’s now made an inviolable gentlemen’s agreement with Paris (1.2.17). Another option, emphasizing *not*, would seem to point up Capulet’s fury. He can go toe to toe with Juliet’s stonewalling. This choice strikes me as the most emotional, least rational of all three, the third being to emphasize *I’ll*. That option

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rings true in view of Capulet's egotism, outlined above. He implies that other, weaker men might see fit to go back on their word because of a child's "whining," but not someone of his fortitude and stature (184). In production, the optimal choice might be to give primary emphasis to one of the words and secondary emphasis to another. So, for instance, emphasizing *I'll* primarily and *forsworn* secondarily might convey a complex of suggestions, as might emphasizing *not* primarily and *forsworn* secondarily. Even emphasis on all three words is possible to imagine.

I've concluded with an indeterminate example neither to indicate that emphasis is always so complicated to pin down nor to undercut my apparent thesis that painstaking consideration of emphasis leads to divining both Shakespeare's literal meaning and subtextual clues, but, rather, to underscore that very thesis. As a method of close reading, analyzing emphasis enables readers and actors to plumb Shakespeare's language. At the same time, the method fans out into larger, broader questions of characterization, motive, and interaction. As a teaching device, it marries literary study and theatrical performance, reminding students at all levels that exact understanding, like exact wording, is worth the trouble.

Notes

1. Jonathan Franzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, 25th-anniversary ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), 151-152.

2. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 366-396. All subsequent references to Shakespeare's plays will be to *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

3. Cal Pritner and Louis Colaizzi, *How to Speak Shakespeare* (Santa Monica Press, 2001), 47. The bolded words in my text are double-underlined in the book.

⁴ Ron Cameron, *Acting Skills for Life* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 1999), 399.

⁵ Ben Greet quoted in Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 477.

Cynthia Lewis is Charles A. Dana Professor of English at Davidson College, where she has been teaching Shakespeare, Renaissance literature, and creative nonfiction since 1980. She has published numerous articles on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, as well as a book, *Particular Saints*, about Shakespeare's characters named Anthony or Antonio. Her forthcoming book about sports and Shakespeare represents her current interest in writing about Shakespeare for a general audience.