

A Note on Shakespeare's Versification\*

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Outlaw: (sizing up a potential comrade)  
And partly, seeing you are beautified  
With goodly shape and by your own report  
A linguist and a man of such perfection  
As we do in our quality much want -

Two Gentlemen of Verona, 4.1

0. In this short paper, I want to show how linguistic theory can be used to provide a principled analysis of what has been called a 'peculiarity' in Shakespeare's verse. In section 1, I'll sketch the problem. Section 2 contains a treatment of the problem in terms of an aspect of generative grammar. The concluding section 3 is a brief remark on the place such an investigation holds in the study of literature.

1. The Problem

1.1 Iambic Pentameter

In order to get a clear characterization of the puzzle we'll attempt to solve in the next section, it will be helpful to first review some basic aspects of Shakespeare's verse.

The bulk of Shakespeare's poetry was written in blank verse, that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter. The prototypical line of iambic pentameter is analyzable into five feet, each foot containing two syllables, the first weakly stressed and the second strongly stressed. For example, consider the line in (1), with its stresses and metrical pattern marked:

w s/w s/w s/w s | w s  
(1) The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw R2 5.1.29<sup>1</sup>

If all lines fit the pattern so perfectly the verse of course would be quite monotonous, and Shakespeare diverges from it in a number of different ways. Consider (2) and (3):

w s w s/w s | w s/w s  
(2) Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us

Ham. 1.1.25



- W s|W s|W s | W s|W s  
 (3) Turn melancholy forth to funerals MSND 1.1.14

In (2) we see an inverted first foot and a strongly stressed monosyllabic word in a weak position. (3) contains a weakly stressed syllable in the final strong position.

But while there is considerable deviation from the prototypical line, the deviation is not random. Consider the construct (4) which contains an inverted foot inside a word:

- (4) Turn melancholy forth to retirement

Shakespeare did not write lines which depart from the pattern in this way. The problem for the metrical theorist then is to determine the principles that the poet adhered to in matching up the linguistic material to the metrical pattern; in other words, the theorist must characterize the notion of 'metrically possible line of iambic pentameter for Shakespeare', and of course, extend the study to other poets as well. For discussion of this sort of inquiry, see Halle and Keyser 1966, 1971, and Kiparsky 1975, 1977.

## 1.2 Weak endings

The study of stress placement alone, however, will not be sufficient to characterize the stronger notion of 'possible line of iambic pentameter for Shakespeare'. In the next few paragraphs, I want to display an aspect of Shakespearean verse that resists explication by appeal to stress pattern.

Contrast the lines in (5) with those in (6):

- (5) Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments;  
 Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth:  
 Turn melancholy forth to funerals;  
 The pale companion is not for our pomp. MSND 1.1.12-15
- (6) Now, fair Hyppolyta, our nuptial hour  
 Draws on apace; four happy days bring in  
 Another moon. But, O, methinks, how slow  
 This old moon wanes! MSND 1.1.1-4

Each line in (5) is end-stopped; the end of the line coincides with a natural pause. But in (6), the sentences 'spill-over' into the next line. This phenomenon is sometimes called 'enjambment' and the lines are called 'run-on' lines.

People have rather intensely studied run-on lines in Shakespeare for well over a century. One of the main reasons for all the interest is that the percentage of run-on lines a play contains is a fairly good indication of the date of its composition. Some of the plays are dateable fairly accurately on the basis of 'external' evidence (e.g. records of various sorts, references to the play by contemporaries) and on the basis of 'external-internal' evidence (e.g. a play alludes to something the date of which we know). Having established approximate dates for some of the plays we can see a trend in the versification. The percentage of run-on lines tends to increase. This tendency then can be used to roughly determine the date of a play for which external and external-internal evidence is slender.

This technique was suggested as early as 1857 by Charles Bathurst in his charming<sup>2</sup> book Remarks on the Differences in Shakespeare's Versification:

For I consider that though the changes of style in different periods must not be assumed but proved from actual dates, yet when the fact of such changes in general is well established, we may infer some few individual dates backwards, from these general rules...

The great and primary point in which I conceive Shakespeare's versification altered, was the change from unbroken to interrupted verse.

By interrupted verse, I do not mean so much that there is a pause or break in the middle, as that you cannot dwell upon the end. (p.2)

In the statistics compiled by Fleay, Furnivall, and König printed in Hardin Craig's Introduction to the Complete Works, the run-on lines go from about 10% in the early plays to about 40% in the late plays, and the change is fairly gradual.

Bathurst went on, however, to note something quite interesting:

But the interruption of the verse was carried, in the latter part of his life to an extreme, or rather, he fell into a further peculiarity, in making the verse end upon a perfectly weak monosyllable - such as if or and. (p.3)

We can illustrate this 'peculiarity' by observing a line from the Tempest, a very late play:

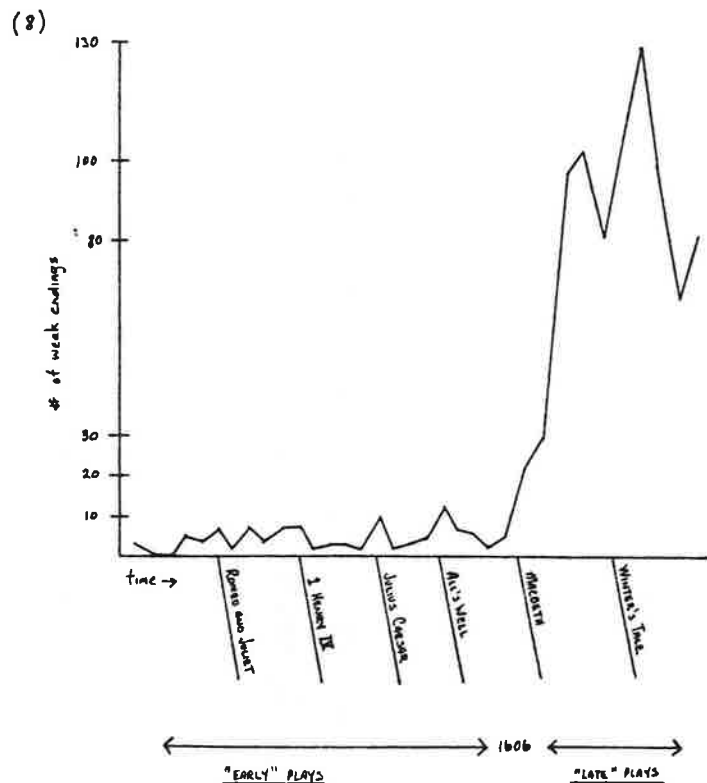
s|w s

- (7) Thy father was the Duke of Milan and  
 A prince of power.

Temp. 1.2.55-56



We saw a case above (3) of a line which ended in a weakly stressed syllable, but ending the line with a weakly stressed monosyllabic word like and in (7) is an innovation. Lines like these, which have what have been called 'light' or 'weak' endings,<sup>3</sup> rarely appear in the plays written before 1606. That the change was quite dramatic can be seen by looking at the graph in (8) (statistics again from Craig<sup>4</sup>):



But Bathurst didn't notice, or wasn't interested in, a very important fact: It simply is not the case that just any perfectly weak monosyllabic word can end lines in the late plays. Lines like the construct in (9) are impossible throughout the corpus:

- (9) Thy father was the Duke of Boston the  
City of Beans

Compare (7) and (9) with the construct (10):

- (10) Thy father was the Duke of Washington  
The District of Columbia.

The patterns of stresses in (7), (9) and (10) are identical in the relevant respects; metrical theory alone cannot tell the difference between them. But lines like (10) appear throughout the corpus, lines like (7) appear only in the late plays, and lines like (9), as we noted, never appear. Surely Shakespeare was sensitive to some aspect of the language other than simply the patterning of stresses. What was it?

## 2. The Solution

Consider the lines in (11) from the *Tempest*:

- (11) If by your art, my dearest father, you have  
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them

*Temp* 1.2.1-2

Here we have a line ending in a weakly stressed monosyllable, in this case the tensed auxiliary *have*. As we noted in the last section such lines are extremely rare in the early plays. Now it was noted in 1890 by Henry Sweet that items like *have*, which have been called 'function words' or 'non-lexical items', appear in what he called a strong form ([hæv]) as well as weak forms ([həv], [əv], [ə], [v]). But these forms are not in free variation. Alternation between strong and weak forms is conditioned by the syntactic environment in which the item appears. Consider these examples (after King 1970):

- (12) a. I have gone to discothèques.  
b. I've gone to discothèques.  
Does anyone still go to discothèques?  
c. I have \_\_\_ in the past, but I'll never go again.  
d. \*I've \_\_\_ in the past, but I'll never go again.



- (13) a. Mary is coming to the party.  
 b. Mary's coming to the party.  
 c. I wonder where Mary is \_\_\_ tonight.  
 d. \*I wonder where Mary's \_\_\_ tonight.

The line in these examples indicates a position where an item has been deleted (gone to discotheques in (12)) or from which an item has been removed (where in (13)).<sup>5</sup> Consider also a case like (14) where a parenthetical intervenes between the auxiliary and the verb phrase:

- (14) a. I have, in spite of Sue's warning, gone to discotheques.  
 b. \*I've, in spite of Sue's warning, gone to discotheques.

Here, too, the sentence with the weak form is ungrammatical.

The generalization, in Sweet's terms, is that the weak forms may appear only before words they 'modify or belong to'.<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Selkirk, in her doctoral dissertation (1972), relied on this insight to state the syntactic environments which in normal speech require the weak form of function words, which she calls 'dependents'. For our purposes, we can state these environments as follows:<sup>7</sup>

- (15) Condition I: [XP...D...X...]

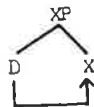
Condition II: ...D W [XP...X...]

Where D is a dependent, XP is either NP, VP, AP, or PP, X is the head of XP, W contains no XP, and D C-commands X.<sup>8</sup>

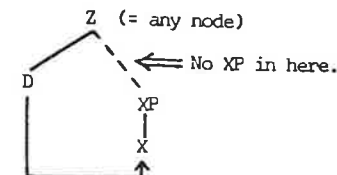
The arrows in (15) indicate what we will call 'dependency relations.' Selkirk argued that, in normal speech, function words appear in their weak form just in case they are in a dependency relation as specified in Conditions I and II. In (12d) and (13d) above, the heads have been removed, therefore no dependency relation holds, and thus weak forms may not appear. In (14b), a major category appears in W, thus breaking up the dependency relation, and therefore disallowing the weak form.

It may be of help to some readers to visualize the dependency relations in tree notation:

- (16) Condition I



Condition II



Condition I and Condition II have the same effect phonetically, but they are different in a very important way. In Condition I, but not in Condition II, the dependent is within the same major category as the head X.

We'll return to auxiliaries like the case in (11) in a moment, but first let's reexamine the examples (7), (9), and (10) above (repeated here) and marked with the relevant dependency relations that obtain:

- (7) Thy father was the Duke of Milan and  
 [NP<sup>a</sup> prince of power]

II

- (9) Thy father was the Duke of Boston [NP<sup>b</sup> the  
 City of Beans]

I

- (10) Thy father was [NP<sup>c</sup> the Duke of Washington]  
 [NP<sup>d</sup> the District of Columbia]

Recall that lines like (10), where no dependency relation holds between lines, appear throughout the corpus. Lines like (7) where a Condition II dependency relation holds, are restricted to the late plays. And lines like (9), where a Condition I relation holds, never appear.

We follow the suggestion of this observation and propose that the following statements serve to characterize possible line breaks for Shakespeare:

- (17) In early Shakespeare, no dependency relations may hold over two lines.  
 (18) In late Shakespeare, no Condition I dependency relation may hold over two lines, but Condition II dependency relations may freely do so.





(17) and (18) allow lines like (10) throughout, allow lines like (7) in the late plays only, and make lines like (9) impossible in the entire corpus. This amounts to saying that Shakespeare was sensitive to whether or not the weak form of the function words are within the same major category as the heads they are dependent on.<sup>9</sup>

The proposal here makes many predictions. One is that no dependent determiners may ever appear at line's end. Notice that this is not an absolute prohibition against determiners, but only dependent determiners. Lines like those in (19) from *Antony and Cleopatra* are expected but the constructs in (20) are impossible because the first line in each case has a determiner which is dependent on a head in the next line.

- (19) He was not sad, for he would shine on those  
That make their looks by his; A.C. 1.5.55-56

My very hairs do mutiny; for the white  
Reprove the brown for weakness, and they them  
A.C. 3.11.14-15

- (20) He was not sad, for he would shine on those  
Friends that make their looks by his;

My very hairs do mutiny for the white  
Fibers reprove the brown for lassitude.

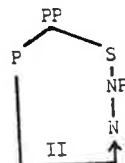
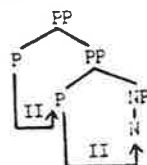
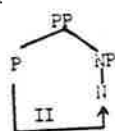
I have not seen a single case like those in (20) in the entire corpus.

We have also seen that (17) and (18) allow conjunctions to end lines in the late plays, but not in the early plays. In my search of the plays before 1606, I have not found one example of a conjunction appearing at line's end, though the late plays abound in such cases. The *Tempest* alone has eight such lines according to my count. Two more examples appear in (21):

- (21) Pray you, go fit you to the custom and  
Take to you, as your predecessors have,  
Cor. 2.2.145-146.

Lord of his fortunes he salues thee, and  
Requires to live in Egypt: which not granted  
A.C. 3.12.11-12

Prepositions are also dependent on the heads of their complements by Condition II:



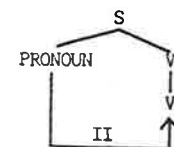
We predict that up until 1606, no lines should end in prepositions with their complement phrases beginning the next line. I found three cases of line-ending dependent prepositions in all of the early work (CE 1.1.46, L.L.L. 4.3.305, *Taming* 2.1.124). In contrast, in the late plays, such lines are common. For example, *Cymbeline*, by my count, has twenty such cases.

- (22) With bloody passage led your wars even to  
The gates of Rome Cor. 5.4.76-77

May, follow'd him, till he had melted from  
The smallness of a gnat to air, Cym. 1.2.20-21

Their manners are more gentle kind than of  
Our human generation you shall find Temp. 3.3.32-33

Another case of correct prediction concerns that of subject pronouns. These will be dependent on the head of the verb phrase by Condition II:

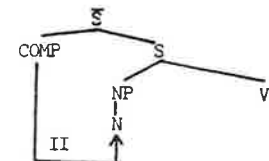


The cases of lines ending with dependent subject pronouns in the early plays are extremely rare. (I know of four examples: L.L.L. 4.3.183, MM 4.3.84, MM 5.1.316, MM 5.1.363<sup>10</sup>). Yet the late plays display many such cases. *Coriolanus*, for example, contains eight by my count.

- (23) for better might we  
have loved without this mean, if on both parts  
A.C. 3.2.31-33

who, if I  
Had servants true about me, that have eyes  
W.T. 1.2.308-309

Consider also relative pronouns which we will assume are in COMP:



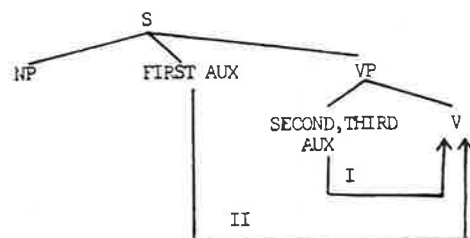


A similar prediction is made here, and it, too, is correct. Dependent relative pronouns end lines only in the late plays. These lines are relatively rare. I don't know of a single case in the early plays. Winter's Tale has three. Others are:

- (24) But had his titles by Tenantin's whom  
he served with glory and admired success Cym. 1.1.28-33

That he approves the common liar, who  
Thus speaks of him at Rome A.C.1.1.59-60

Another interesting case is that of the auxiliary. We'll adopt here the relevant aspects of the recent proposal by Akmajian, Steele and Wasow 1979 (see also Lapointe 1977). The important point for our purposes is that the first auxiliary always is in AUX, a daughter of S, while all other auxiliary verbs that may appear are within the VP. The dependency relations are as indicated:



As the reader can readily see, our proposal here makes rather subtle predictions. Dependent auxiliaries should never end lines in the early plays. In the late plays, however, the first auxiliary should be permitted at lines' end, while the second and third auxiliary should still be prohibited from ending a line.

The predictions turn out to be correct. First of all I know of only one lonely case where a dependent second or third auxiliary ends a line:<sup>11</sup>

- (25) but we have been  
Deceived in thy integrity, deceived W.T. 1.2.239-240

Secondly, in the early plays, dependent first auxiliaries occur at line's end extremely rarely. I know of three cases: R2 3.2.12, JC 3.1.240, JC 3.2.124.

In contrast, the late plays contain many such examples (see also (11) above):

- (26) He still hath held them, that to's power he would  
have made them rules, silenced their pleaders and  
Cor. 2.1.262-263

To make it clear; but do confess I have  
Been laden with like frailties which before  
AC 5.2.122-123

Not he: but yet heaven's bounty towards him might  
Be used more thankfully. Cym 1.6.78-79

I am in heaven for him; or ere I could  
Give that parting kiss which I had set Cym 1.3.32-35

Notice that, in general, no dependency relation holds across the first auxiliary (the only such case would be if there is a pronominal subject). So first auxiliaries should begin lines throughout the corpus, and indeed there are hundreds of such cases, as these from the earliest plays:

- (27) Yet, that the world may witness that my end  
Was wrought by nature, not by vile offense  
CE 1.1.34-35

Whose ugly and unnatural aspect  
May fright the hopeful mother at the view  
R3 2.1.23-24

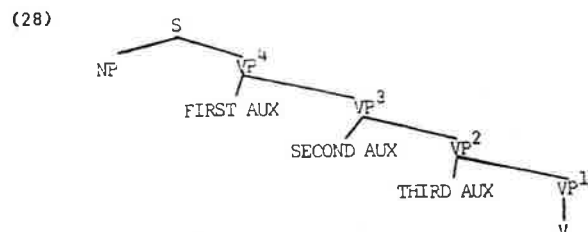
You three, Biron, Dumain, and Longaville,  
Have sworn for three years time to live with me  
LIL 1.1.15-16

This is the gentleman I told your ladyship  
Had come along with me, but that his mistress  
Gent. 2.4.87-88

I mention this because these data pose great difficulty for a similar proposal regarding line breaking in Shakespeare by Paul Kiparsky in his paper "Stress, Syntax and Meter" (1975)<sup>12</sup>. Briefly, the main problem is that in Kiparsky's theory, every line in the corpus should begin with [<sub>NP</sub>, i.e. the left bracket of a major phrasal category. Of course, under Akmajian, Steele, and Wasow's 1979 theory of the auxiliary which we assumed above, this is not true in all the second lines of the examples cited in (27). It would not help matters much if Kiparsky were to argue that the constituent

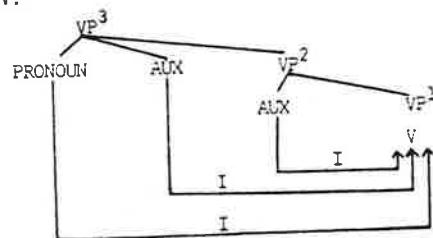


structure should actually be something like that in (28):



The advantage would be that all lines in (27) would be consistent with the theory. But we know that in the late plays, lines also break after the first auxiliary (see (26) above). That means that both  $VP^4$  and  $VP^3$  must be instances of XP. But notice that  $VP^2$  and  $VP^1$  must not be instances of XP because if they were, Kiparsky would predict breaks that never occur. So in order to save his theory, Kiparsky would have to argue that  $VP^4$  and  $VP^3$  above are major categories, but  $VP^2$  and  $VP^1$  are not. I know of no convincing independent motivation for such a claim.

Notice also that the data concerning auxiliaries also militate against a theory which says that S is an instance of XP as in Jackendoff 1977,<sup>13</sup> for this would force the incorrect prediction that auxiliaries and subject pronouns would pattern like Condition I dependents, because they would be within the same major category as the head V.



To sum up: the peculiarity noted by Bathurst is quite systematic. In all of the work up until 1606,<sup>14</sup> line breaking was regulated by a very simple principle: never break up a dependency relation. Beginning with *Macbeth*, Shakespeare made the innovation of allowing Condition II dependents to end lines. The important point is that this appears to be true of all Condition II dependents (though there are some I have not investigated fully). Thus, in the last six plays which we can confidently ascribe to Shakespeare<sup>15</sup>, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, we find many examples of lines ending in conjunctions, prepositions, first auxiliaries, subject pronouns, and wh- pronouns. All Condition I dependents however, are prohibited throughout the corpus from ending lines. This shows, I think, that Shakespeare was sensitive to whether or not weakly stressed monosyllables are within the same major category as the head they are dependent on.

### 3. Conclusion

Linguistic theory can be useful to the student of literature in many ways. Some analysts have made attempts to adopt the terminology and conceptual framework of transformational grammar to literary studies, for example Bierwisch 1965, Thorne 1965 and Ohmann 1964. Others, for example Austin 1977a,b and Freeman 1976 have used the results of linguistics to illuminate aspects of a text's meaning.

But the study presented in these pages is sufficiently different in kind from both of these approaches to require some comment. The important point is that the data on which the analysis is based, and the low level generalizations about these data, have been known and agreed upon for over a hundred years. If it were true (contrary, I believe, to fact) that the appearance of a weak ending in a speech supports a reading where the speaker is 'excited', or if the sudden increase in weak endings signified Shakespeare's 'new freedom of thought' or 'new-found tranquility' (equally dubious), the present study would have nothing to add to or subtract from these views, because they are based on observations that do not change when our analysis is taken into account.

What we have done, however, is to attempt to explicate the nature of the marked shift in Shakespeare's verse, which Shakespeare himself would no doubt have had difficulty doing rigorously, though of course he, like his commentators, was certainly aware of it. We have found that the shift is principled, systematic, and depends upon a rather subtle and abstract aspect of English syntax.

Suppose, for a moment, the shift had been different than it was in that instead of a partial weakening of the constraint on line endings, the weakening was total, that is, in the late plays there was no restriction at all. Or suppose the shift had been



random and we could find no principle which unified the new weak endings and distinguished them from those which were still prohibited. We would, I suppose, be forced to agree with Bathurst, and call it a 'peculiarity'. What we have found instead, I think, is another clear and compelling reason to believe that Shakespeare was a master of his medium.

In one of his papers on the syntax of Holderlin's poems, Emmon Bach 1960:383 suggests that 'critical statements about poems are not mere descriptions, declarative protocol sentences that such and such is the case; they are also directives, imperatives telling us to look in a certain way at what is the case.' I hope this study will serve as an invitation to admire yet another aspect of Shakespeare's virtuosity.

#### Footnotes

\*For their suggestions and encouragement during the research reported here I would like to thank: Emmon Bach, Martha Danly, S. J. Keyser, Barbara Partee, Alan Prince, Lisa Selkirk, and Edwin Williams. Of course the errors and inadequacies that remain are my own.

<sup>1</sup>All lines cited in this paper are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, edited by Hardin Craig (1961).

<sup>2</sup>For example, his remark on Titus Andronicus: 'I beg to be allowed to reject the whole of this play. I wish I had never read it.'

<sup>3</sup>These terms are from Ingram 1874. He draws a distinction between 'light' endings and 'weak' ones, mainly on an impressionistic basis and an appeal to other poets. Most subsequent investigators collapse the statistics for these kinds of line endings and we will do the same, calling them all henceforth 'weak' endings. The distinction plays no role in the proposal below.

<sup>4</sup>Statistical results like the ones the graph is based on must be treated with extreme care. The chronology of the plays, though almost certainly correct in rough outline, is liable to errors of detail. For example, Love Labors Lost and The Comedy of Errors are almost certainly very early plays, and Cymbeline and A Winter's Tale are almost certainly rather late. But we cannot say with such confidence that Love Labors Lost precedes The Comedy of Errors rather than the other way around, and similar remarks hold for the two later plays. Further, there are difficulties in line counts that arise because of degenerate texts or suspected tampering. This is true for example, in the case of The Taming of the Shrew, and we

have omitted the statistics from this play in the graph. Little confidence should be placed in exact numbers because as Chambers 1930 noted, they give 'a specious appearance of scientific precision' which is unwarranted by 'the nature of the material'. However in spite of these doubts, the increase in weak endings is so robust that confidence in the occurrence of a fairly sharp alteration in verse characteristics seems appropriate, and is agreed upon by every scholar who notes the issue that I have read from Bathurst to the present day. For a discussion of these matters, see Chambers 1930 Vol. 1, Chap. viii. We'll return below to the interesting case of All's Well That Ends Well.

<sup>5</sup>I don't intend any theoretical claim here about the operations involved. The only important point for our purposes is that there is a gap in these sentences in the positions indicated.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Selkirk 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Selkirk actually has two different conditions for what here we are calling Condition II. She later collapses all conditions into what she calls the monosyllable rule. We will not follow her in this because it would obscure what for us is the major idea.

<sup>8</sup>D c-commands X if and only if the first branching node which dominates D dominates X. See Reinhart 1976.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Fowler 1966 who suggests that "the smaller the grammatical unit concerned, the greater its resistance to being stretched over a metrical boundary." (p. 353 in Freeman 1970). Fowler doesn't elaborate on what he means by 'size', but his point seems to be exactly what we're formally stating here. Size in terms of words, morphemes or phonemes does not appear to be relevant. What is important is the occurrence of a major category between the dependent and its head. For example, on this view, as we shall see, on fire is 'bigger' than the transformation.

<sup>10</sup>Measure for Measure is dated by most scholars at around 1603, an early play in our terminology. The appearance of three such cases in one play is quite remarkable, because otherwise Measure for Measure patterns exactly like an early play. Incidentally, this play yields other interesting cases. Consider (i) and (ii):

- (i) Not she; nor doth she tempt; but it is I  
That, lying by the violet in the sun,  
Do as the carrion does, not as the flower MM 2.2.163-165
- (ii) If not a feodary, but only he,  
Owe and succeed thy weakness MM 2.4.122-123





<sup>12</sup>I regret that space limitations prevent a more thorough discussion of Kiparsky's interesting suggestions.

<sup>14</sup> All's Well that Ends Well is a very interesting case. It is dated 1602-1603 by Chambers, on the basis of 'affinities' in 'temper and style' with Measure for Measure (early in our terminology) Coriolanus (late) and the Jacobian tragedies, three of which are early (i.e. Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear) while two are late (Macbeth, Anthony and Cleopatra). 1603 would of course make it an early play, but it is riddled with lines we expect only after 1606. An example is the line that appears in (i)

Others occur at 2.1.27, 2.1.74, 2.1.86, 2.1.119, 2.1.154, 2.3.87, 2.3.123, 2.3.163, 3.3.65, 5.1.15.

15 I exclude the questionable Timon of Athens, Pericles, and Henry VIII, though these fit the pattern as well.

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