

HAMLET TO HAMILTON

Season One, Episode One *Defining Verse Drama*

EMILY. This is [Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama](#). I'm your host, [Emily C. A. Snyder](#). You're listening to Season 1, Episode 1: Defining Verse Drama. Because there's nothing sexier than a Platonic ideal.

[music]

Hamlet 1: To be...

Hamlet 2: To be...

Hamlet 1: ... or not to be?

Hamlet 3: To be or not to be?

Hamlet 1: That is the question.

Hamlet 3: ... or not?

[music]

EMILY. Welcome, friends. I'm Emily C. A. Snyder, your host for this podcast and a verse playwright myself. Today, we're going to start the series of lectures that I've been giving (laughs) wherever anyone will listen to me, that gives the fundamentals of how to write new verse drama, and I hope that this is helpful not only to the playwrights, but also, frankly, to directors, to dramaturges, to actors, as well as to those who perhaps have not had the opportunity to study verse drama for whatever reason, who've always wanted to, and helpful as well for those who've been meaning to break into verse drama but feel that perhaps it's too scary or too foreign or not for them. Because in point of fact, verse drama is just a form, and all forms of art are available to anyone who would like to explore them.

So if you've always wanted to explore verse drama and have always felt that you were not allowed, welcome. And forget those people who said you weren't allowed. Welcome. Same thing, if you've always wanted to write it and you've been beating your head against what in the world is iambic pentameter, well, first of all forget iambic pentameter. It is so basic. But welcome. We're going to help you find your own voice, because you are way more interesting than trying to just sound like (laughs) someone else's voice.

[music]

All right, so we're going to begin with the fundamentals, and our question today is: what is verse drama? What makes it different from prose drama? What makes it different from musical theatre? Just what is the definition of verse drama? And I do ask you to forgive me if I'm going to... Not if. When I go deep Aristotelian, which means that I'm going to be (laughs) I'm going to define everything, because when you don't define things, that's when people misinterpret what you mean, and then you can't back up what you mean and it just gets messy, so we're going to define things. What a concept. Our yes will mean yes. Our no will mean no.

And I'll do an entire episode on what drama is, but for our purposes today, what we mean when we say drama is not sort of, is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? We're not saying that it's something that's only for film or only for the stage or only for Zoom or only for audio. Instead, what we mean by drama, very simply, is that it is written out as text for another person, for an actor to embody and to interpret. So this is different from poetical narration, right? From sort of long-form romantic poetry, or even from stories that are told in poetry, which are basically books that happen to be told in verse, happen to be told in poetry. Think of *Gilgamesh*. Think of *The Iliad*. Think of *Beowulf*. Think of *The Canterbury Tales*, right? Those are all in poetry, but they're not drama. They are narratives, but they're narratives that are complete in themselves. You can read *Paradise Lost* and never have it acted out, whereas a drama is written in such a way that it is meant to be acted out by a second party.

Peter Brook defined drama in his *The Empty Space* – which is an excellent book, very short, very well worth the reading – but his definition of drama is that essentially, so long as one person walks out and stands in front of a person who is viewing them, that is an act of drama. It may not be an act of drama that you particularly want to watch, (laughs) but it constitutes an act of drama. So not all drama is scripted, but in this case, we are talking about scripted drama, so drama of one person performing, another person watching, at minimum, that is already prewritten by a third party, and in our case is written primarily in poetry, in verse.

So that's what I mean by drama. Again, we're going to talk about how drama is not literature in a different episode, because it's a whole *thang*. But for our purposes, that's what I mean by verse drama, as opposed to poetry that someone might write to be sung, such as a lyric, or poetry that someone might write to express their feelings, which is the majority of poetry that we see, or poetry that might be written pretty much like a novel, just in poetry form.

The rest of this episode now, let's ask the question of what is poetry versus prose? Why in the world would we ever use poetry when we could just use prose? What does poetry give us that's an excellent tool for the embodiment of a story on a stage? Now, if we're going to be looking at the most well-known verse dramatist, we're going to be looking at William Shakespeare, and he had a healthy mix of prose versus verse, and what's curious – again, I'm going to be

referring a lot and a little obliquely to people who have sent me their verse drama over the years, because I've seen a wide array of really excellent verse drama to really stodgy verse drama to unintelligible verse drama, the whole gamut, right? You know, as all art is going to cross a gamut. And one of the things that I see in my students early on is the sensation that, "Oh, if I'm a verse dramatist, if I am writing a story in verse, I have to prove myself by writing exclusively in verse."

I'm going to be referring a lot to Shakespeare here. I'm going to be referring a lot to Shakespeare and a lot to musical theatre. I'm going to hope, and please call me out on this, that if I am not giving enough context, that you call me out – call me in, rather – so that I can provide better context and not just presume that because I know something, it is known by everyone. But if you were to look at early Shakespeare, whether you've read early Shakespeare or not – and if you're interested and you want to give yourself some homework, early Shakespeare, in this particular case, I'm thinking particularly of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *Comedy of Errors*, of *Richard II*, which is my favorite of his history plays. And *Richard II* in particular was written without a single line of prose. Even Mercutio, who's one of the comic figures in *Romeo and Juliet*, will still break into prose. That is, he won't be speaking in poetry necessarily. But *Richard II*, which, again, is one of the earliest of Shakespeare's history plays, is written entirely in verse, and his early plays tend to be entirely in verse.

And the reason why he did that was because when he was writing, prose was the new thing, actually. Prose was the dissident, crazy, rule-breaking way of writing something. Oh my gosh. Because, as I was mentioning with early medieval novels and early medieval poetry, and earlier than that is *Beowulf*, right, was written when there were only three digits in the year. Everything used to be poetry. It just was all poetry. *The Iliad*, by Homer, is all poetry. *The Odyssey*, also by Homer, is all poetry. *The Aeneid*, by Virgil, who (laughs) was basically fan-boying over Homer, is all poetry.

So prose versus verse. What do we mean by prose versus verse? Prose is essentially anything that's in a block of text. It's paragraph form. It's what you're largely writing on Facebook. It's what you're reading in articles. It's how we speak. It's the vernacular. (laughs) It's not structured. It's not metered. Now, poetry does not have to be metered. It frequently is. Meter is a tool. Meter, again is the rhythm, or the beat, I should say. Meter is the beat that you can feel pulsing in some poetry. But poetry can be incredibly free blank verse as well, and we're going to be talking about both forms, and again how they can help to serve your story, because the more important thing is that you're telling a story. Some of it may be told well by using poetry. I'm going to reiterate that: verse drama, the verse is a subservient tool to the telling of your drama, to the telling of your story.

So verse drama, as mentioned, can make use of prose, can make use of a block of text, but there should be, I would say what sort of qualifies verse drama is significant chunks should be in verse. And it's sort of, for all my musical theatre

people, it's sort of the fine-line difference, right, between a play with music and a musical, right? Like *La La Land* I think treads that line, because the first half is a musical and the second half kind of isn't. Or if you look at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, right? And I'm going to apologize and not apologize right now that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Joss Whedon-verse will probably be mentioned more frequently than you would think of in a podcast about stodgy old verse drama, but there we are.

So you've got the musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which is in season 6, "Once More with Feeling." Highly recommend. Even if you never see any other episode of *Buffy*, highly recommend seeing "Once More with Feeling" from season 6. The crucial thing there, right, is that all the action of the play – of that episode, I should say – is moved forward in the musical, and it has regular times of being a musical versus being a regular prose episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But the action is moved forward by the tool of music.

However, if you were to look at, oh, gosh, is it in season 7? I think it may be. All you better Whedon-verse people than I am can tell me. The episode where we get the flashback of all of Anya's, life, there's a part where we hit on a sort of deleted scene from the musical episode, and she sings a new song. But I wouldn't call that episode a musical episode, because, first of all, the song that she sings doesn't entirely move the plot along. And again, we'll be talking about different forms of arias, different forms of soliloquies. Soliloquy does not have to move the plot along. Music doesn't have to move the plot along. Again, everything is a tool for what you're trying to convey. But this particular, the milieu for this episode happens to include a piece of music, but the whole thing is not a musical, right?

So in the same way, verse drama, such as, again if you want to take a look at *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, by William Shakespeare. That's one of his middle period comedies. It's really excellent, too. It's a great one to read if you're just starting to read Shakespeare, because the jokes still hold up, quite frankly. I remember my mom even saying, when I directed it, "Did you guys add in extra jokes, or is that actually Shakespeare's language?" It's like, "Yeah, Mom, he wrote a funny joke and it wasn't weird and obscure. It still holds up." So I would definitely recommend taking a look at *Much Ado About Nothing*. But the curious thing is that a lot of it is in prose, but it's still considered verse drama because enough of it is in verse. Again, you sort of break out into verse when the emotions get really heightened.

Same thing with *Hamlet*. It's really weird to go back and reread that play, and again, if you've never had the opportunity to explore Hamlet, oh my gosh, are you in for a treat. There's a million video versions. Each one of them has their merits. We'll be pulling apart the text of *Hamlet* quite a lot. In fact, we're going to be talking about it in this episode, so I highly recommend seeing a version or reading a version, or I'm sure you can listen to a version, whatever your favorite

way of consuming drama is. But so much of it is in prose, but there are significant sections, including Hamlet's seven soliloquies, which the play really hangs upon, that are in verse.

Now, I've been talking and freestyling with a lot of ums and ahs and interruptions (laughs) in prose to you now, and I want to take a moment to simplify what I mean by poetry in this particular case. So poetry, for our purposes, is not pretty language, necessarily, but rather hinges upon that there are line endings, that it's chopped up not as a block of text wherein we're looking mostly at punctuation, but instead we're looking at short lines – shortish lines. It could be a very long line, it could be a very short line, but at a piece of text that has line endings that will not necessarily correlate to the end of a sentence. And this is important because that validates, honestly, that you don't have to have verse drama and have it be in iambic pentameter, which we'll be talking about in another episode. You don't have to have it and make it sound like Dr. Seuss. It doesn't have to rhyme. Each line does not have to be of a certain length. You're not bound by anything except that you are chopping up your lines and it is not primarily in a paragraph. If it's in a paragraph, it's prose. If it is chopped up lines that is not necessarily in line with the end of a sentence, you're writing in poetry. All right? We're going to keep that simple. That is our difference between prose and verse. Prose: paragraph. Verse has line endings. Simple as that.

And the thing that you want to ask yourself is why in the world (laughs) would you ever chop up a sentence? Isn't that going to make things much more difficult to understand? Well, yes, if you chop it up poorly. No, if you chop it up with intention. And I think I can best illustrate this to you with a couple of examples, right after this break.

[music]

Hello. This is Emily popping in here to take a minute to tell you about Turn to Flesh Productions. Turn to Flesh is a New York City theatre company that develops new plays in heightened text with vibrant roles for women and those underrepresented in classical art. So basically, we create new Shakespeare shows for everybody that Shakespeare didn't write for. Since our founding in 2013, we've given various levels of development space to over 50 plays through playwriting workshops, such as our monthly MUSE Program, or through our in-person classes, through the staged readings of full works, and even workshop productions and world premieres of entire shows.

We love to feature actors of all ages, abilities, shapes, and sizes, ethnicities, and orientations, usually swinging swords and falling in love and having epic battles, or just being terribly clever, frequently, although not always, speaking in blank verse.

Now, in 2020, Turn To Flesh is excited to being working internationally over audio programming and workshops and productions held via digital platforms like Zoom. And we'd like to hear from you. You can find us on all social medias @turntoflesh and to keep up with the latest events, such as our monthly MUSE Program, where playwrights bring in the first draft of their new scenes and actors embody and give feedback. Right now, The MUSE Program is also being held virtually over Zoom. I mean, (laughs) you can, from your own living room on your laptop, watch a new Shakespeare play get written and workshopped right before your eyes. You might even have your own piece workshopped. You might be the new Burbage playing in the new Shakespeare's show. That's pretty cool.

So make sure to like us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @turntoflesh and join the Turn to Flesh community. If you want to do more, you can support us by visiting turntoflesh.org and hitting that Donate button. Or if you want to book a one-on-one session with me, Emily C. A. Snyder, make sure to listen to the end of the podcast for more information.

Right, back to the show.

[music]

So now it's time to move into the part of the show where it's a little bit less lecture and a little bit more showing off text and showing how it works. In this case, we're going to be taking a look at *Hamlet*, *Hamilton*, and Deb Victoroff's short play *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King*, all of which, at least *Hamlet* and *Citrus King*, both use prose and poetry, and we're going to be taking a sort of sneak peek at how line endings work when we're talking about *Hamlet*. And I want you to hear the difference in the clarity of thought, all right? I think it will be more apparent with the second piece than with the first piece.

Let's delve into it. Okay, so Shakespeare, English Renaissance verse playwright. His most famous work, and arguably the play that is considered one of the pinnacles of drama, full stop (laughs) and certainly of verse drama, is *Hamlet*, which he wrote sort of on... Well, he seemed to write it multiple times. He wrote what's known as the Bad Quarto, which we'll be talking about more, but which I believe is his rough draft of the play, and then he rewrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it, it looks like, until it's good. We should take comfort from that, (laughs) I think. I love seeing geniuses fail. It's one of my favorite things, because if they can fail, then I can fail.

So *Hamlet* is one of his later plays. As mentioned it has a lot of prose in it. It also has a lot of verse. So I'm going to read one of his prose sections and then read one of his verse sections, and I want you to hear if you can hear the difference. You may not be able to, and again, we will provide links to this in the show notes so that you can read along with. I'm, in fact, going to highly encourage you to crack open your text of *Hamlet*, which you can read for free online, to Act II

scene 2 towards the middle-end of that scene. It's an incredibly long scene. A lot happens in this scene (laughs).

We're going to be reading a prose section, a very famous prose section, first, and this is a monologue. Both of these are going to be monologues. We'll be talking more about monologues versus soliloquies, but in short, a monologue is a big chunk of text or a big speech that is said to another character who is sharing the stage, whereas a soliloquy is said generally to the audience, but while the actor is alone, so there isn't an auditor. There isn't someone listening. Both the pieces that I'm going to reference in *Hamlet* are monologues, not soliloquies. Hamlet is talking to someone.

All right, this first one is prose, and what I'm going to do is I'm going to read it and only honor the punctuation. That means that I won't take a breath, I won't stop unless there's a hyphen or a comma or a semicolon or a period. Any sort of punctuation is my guide, all right? So, *Hamlet*. Prose.

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

All right, so that was in prose, and in that, largely, I followed the punctuation, taking breaths if there was a full stop with an exclamation point or with a period, trying to take slight pauses if there's a comma or a semicolon or a hyphen. However, in point of fact, the punctuation is all I'm given in prose, and I can still run over that. So if I were to do the first few lines, for example, again, following the punctuation, it would go:

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth,

Which is I have of late, hyphen, but wherefore I know not, hyphen, lost all my mirth, comma, foregone all custom of exercises, semicolon, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, comma, the earth, comma, seems to me a sterile promontory, comma, and so on. But I'm, in prose, the actor, so I'm talking to all the actors now, and to the playwrights (laughs). The actors are only *suggested* that they might use your punctuation. So I could read this

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory...

Okay, so those are all commas if I took a breath, commas or hyphens. But I could read it:

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone... all custom of exercises and indeed it... goes so... heavily with my disposition that, uh, this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a (pfff) sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, I- look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why (laughs), it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

Okay. So basically, I'm free to make a lot of choices in prose, if you heard the difference. I'm not given particular clues unless we use bold or underline or italics as to what words to emphasize. When we go deeper into line endings, I'm going to sort of be showing you how verse actually forces the rhythm and the sound that you, the playwright, hear onto the actor so that if you want a word emphasized, you don't necessarily have to put it in italics. You can just put it at the end or the beginning of a line.

And so anyway, in some ways, prose is very loose. You're really saying to the actor as a playwright, "Take this piece of text. Interpret it how you will. Here are a few suggestions with my punctuation." This is different from verse. Particularly the more metered the verse, the more you're basically telling the actor how to say your words. And as I have mentioned, as I'm going to mention a lot, musical theatre, opera, dance, the world of music overlaps so much with verse. It shares so much DNA. So if you're someone that was raised on music, (laughs) there's a lot that you're going to be like, "Oh, yeah, we do this in jazz. Okay."

So verse. What I'm going to do this particular time through, so this is verse, also from *Hamlet*, much earlier in the play, so we're no longer in Act II scene 2. Instead, we're going to go back to Act I scene 2. Hamlet, again, this is a monologue, which is to say he is speaking a chunk of text, but there is someone listening. He is addressing it to another actor on the stage. In this case, he's definitely talking to his mother, but as there are multiple people in this scene because it's a court scene, meaning a royal court scene, right, so his girlfriend's there, his girlfriend's family is there, his stepdad is there, who he super doesn't like. His mom is there. There are probably spear carriers. This is something that a lot of people hear.

And what's interesting – and again, we'll be talking more about when to use verse, when to use prose – but the way that Shakespeare tends to use the two of them is that prose tends to be, he tends to use it when people are just being

themselves. So in the previous scene when Hamlet was speaking prose, he was speaking to his two college buddies. That's kind of why he was speaking prose. Whereas in this scene, he is behaving as the Prince of Denmark, who just lost the election to his uncle, and his uncle just married his mom, and it's all very terrible. (laughs) And so Hamlet, this entire scene, is in verse, because Shakespeare tends to, whenever a king or a noble is behaving in their royal function, tends to put it in verse because there's a little bit more... It's not the musical theatre thing of, "Oh, I feel a great emotion so I'm going to sing," but it's metered. There is a rhythm. There's a way that we're going to speak. Everything is structured. Everything has its place, including our words. I don't get to choose as much as an actor or as a character, as a person, how I'm going to speak. I have to speak within a certain meter, within certain rules.

So this happens to be in iambic pentameter, largely. Well, it's in pentameter. I'd have to go through and see if it's really iambic. Again, we'll be talking all about that in later episodes, but this is in metered verse, so it's not freestyle verse. It's not verse that's going to sound like Gregorian chant. This has a strong under-rhythm. This. Has. A. Strong. Beat. All right? And it is interesting that in fact Hamlet's even more strictured than Shakespeare was writing at this time because Shakespeare, and again we'll be talking about line endings probably next episode, but Shakespeare was exploring what you could do with line endings and not just ending a line on the end of a sentence. But in this particular speech, Hamlet is going to end every single one of his lines at the end of a fully formed thought, so everything is structured. See if you can hear the difference.

Again, this is Act I scene 2. We'll have the link to the free resource in the show notes. Read along or listen. See if you can catch the difference, and then go back and read along. So in this one, I'm going to be obeying line endings. Specifically, I am going to take a breath at the end of each line. That's not the only way to do it. I'm hoping it helps you hear the difference between prose and poetry, though, okay? Here we go. Hamlet speaking poetry, talking to his mother: *(NB in this transcript, breaths/pauses in verse are indicated by an *)*

Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not 'seems.'^{*}
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,^{*}
Nor customary suits of solemn black,^{*}
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,^{*}
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,^{*}
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,^{*}
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,^{*}
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,^{*}
For they are actions that a man might play:^{*}
But I have that within which passeth show;^{*}
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Okay, so the curious thing for the audience, because one of the things that I want all playwrights, all directors, all dramaturges, all producers, as well as all actors to think of is an audience is always lagging behind, right? They're always a few seconds behind, and depending on the medium, they're more or less behind. I would say in theatre, I tend to find that people, the audience is maybe three seconds behind, a second behind. In Zoom theatre, I'm finding the audience, at least right now, is considerably more behind. I think that the lag time's a little bit faster with audio drama, with cinema, with things that are prerecorded, and it helps that you can go back, right, and rewatch something that's recorded. You're not trying to catch it in the moment, and if you missed it, it's gone.

So the thing that most of you probably caught was the ending couplet, and by couplet, I mean that the last two lines rhymed. That was:

But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

And your ear perks up at that, right? It actually helps you to hear faster, and what's really curious is that everyone will recognize that if it rhymes, it's poetry. They won't necessarily know, they won't necessarily be picking up that you're writing in poetry when they're experiencing the play. In some ways, the poetry is there as a clue for everyone behind the scenes. It's a clue for the actors. It's a clue for the director. It's a clue even for set designers, right? This is a highly structured scene, so what does that tell us about what the great hall should look like for this royal court scene, if everything's incredibly structured?

So this is more for the people who are interpreting the work than it is for the people who are receiving the work. The people who are receiving the work may only hear an ending couplet. That's not always true. Again, we'll be talking more about it. But I'm going to go through it again, because one of the things that I want you to note that you may have picked up on is that everything was of the same length, all right? Now, that's true, again, largely of Shakespeare's way of using poetry. It's not going to be the same for T. S. Eliot, for example. T. S. Eliot is like, (laughs) "I'm going to put the line ending wherever I damn well please." Whereas Shakespeare's like, "I do iambic pentameter, and that's it. I got one beat, and that's what I do."

But you may have felt the line endings, that everything was about the same length. So I'm going to read the first few lines again so that you can feel that regularity, all right?

Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not 'seems.'^{*}
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,^{*}
Nor customary suits of solemn black,^{*}
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,^{*}
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye...

Okay, so you can hear that each one is the same, and actually what it's doing – because he's also using repetition and a bunch of different poetic devices that we'll be going into in future episodes, which are really ornaments, which, again, are tools – is he's sort of building this repetition, and so the audience is feeling that build, even if they don't know it's poetry, okay?

If I were to read this as prose, and by that I mean, so I'm going to read it as prose now. I'm only going to take a break... I'm going to take a little pause (*) if it's a comma or a hyphen or a semicolon or a colon. I'm going to take a full stop (**) if it's a period, if it's an exclamation point. There are no question marks in this. And see if you hear the difference, in some ways, the lack of rhythm, all right? So I'm going to read this as if it were prose, only following punctuation.

Seems,* madam!** nay it is;* I know not 'seems.'** 'Tis not alone my inky
cloak,* good mother,* nor customary suits of solemn black,* nor windy
suspuration of forced breath,* no,* nor the fruitful river in the eye,* nor the
dejected 'havior of the visage,* together with all forms,* moods,* shapes of
grief,* that can denote me truly:** these indeed seem,* for they are actions
that a man might play:** but I have that within which passeth show;* these
but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Okay, so you can hear that there's starting and stopping, and you may have found it difficult to follow my thought. Again, we're going to be talking so much more about this when we talk about the construction of lines and line endings. It is the crucial piece. If you want to think of it this way, and again, I challenge you now to go to listen to any, particularly any piece of rap music, and what you're going to hear is that a full thought is expressed, and it may be an incredibly long thought with a million syllables in it, but an entire thought is expressed largely on one breath, and that thought might have a million different sub-thoughts and sub-clauses and conditions and what not, but you string together an entire thought, and that is your line. That's where you cut the line ending. Generally speaking, you want a line ending on sort of a turn of thought more than the end of a sentence.

Okay, so I want to take a moment now to read you some new verse drama. This is very exciting. This particular play, it is a one-act play. It was written recently in 2018, 2019, I believe. Or at least that's when I had the opportunity to work on this play as a director. It is written by Deb Viktoroff, who is a New York based playwright. The play is called *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King*. Those of you who know your US history regarding 2020 (laughs) and the years from 2016 to 2020, please God not beyond... I'm interested in what people are thinking in the years to come listening to this, but you may know who *The Election of the Citrus King* is about.

Now, the reason why I was brought onto this project initially was because a fellow director and producer and a theatre owner knew Deb, and the first page was written originally, I believe, in rhyming couplets that then devolved into blank verse, which is to say unrhymed poetry, and then it became all prose. And so I took it on as a directing project because I'm a verse drama nerd, and as we were working on it, the paragraphs – because only that first page was in verse – the paragraphs were so dense with thought that to me, they cried out that it would be helpful for the actors if she broke it up into verse.

And so what I asked her to do was not to count to 10, not to say, "Oh, it's within this particular meter," because she was clearly not writing in a sort of metrical fashion. She was writing in very freestyle fashion. But I asked her to put a line ending wherever she wanted the actors to take a breath, and lo and behold, we found from the first read-through to the second rehearsal, in between which time she went through her entire script and broke it into verse, that it incredibly helped the actors understand and follow these convoluted thoughts, and then be capable of expressing those thoughts to the audience and to guide them along, because the entire play is a dialogue or conversation between a supporter of the Citrus King and someone who opposes the Citrus King.

All right, so I'm going to read to you two paragraphs, one from the Trumpist, one from the Citizen, in prose form and then read those same words the way that she divides it up in poetry form, and we will hopefully also provide just this page for you to be able to read along. In this particular case, if you can, I suggest that you listen, because, again, poetry, like music, is a great way to get the audience to listen, to follow your thought, to not tune out.

All right, so here we go. The Trumpist speaks first. I'll be speaking it as prose, as written, which means only taking full stops if there is definitive punctuation, and otherwise taking slight pauses on other punctuation. All right, here we go. The Trumpist speaks:

Stay, sir. If you brother be, stay your vocal 'plaint. You say, "I know," yet know not, else, why say this result was an error of judgment or bad luck, and not the choice of a free people who spoke and loudly, against oppressions of their own?

Then the Citizen rebuts:

If oppressions pressed their hand, then these oppressions they loved dearly and embraced. Why else these fellows now reward themselves by raising upon a pedestal the thing that enslaves them; the living form and embodiment of each listed 'plaint that 'ere they uttered. Prayed they for salvation and thereby did manifest one who prayed not, but happily, did

prey, upon *them*. Praying thus, did then bring forth the predator, to rend their flesh and dreams.

Okay, so some things that you probably picked up in that, and I know I wasn't, like, *acting* it, but one of the things that I really am going to double down on is the playwright, if it's in prose, you are telling the actor do whatever they want, and so you're kind of not actor proofing it. (laughs) So I'm going to try to give, in some ways, neutral readings of some of these things so that you can hear just the work of a playwright without the assistance of the actor doing half your work for you and making your words sound good. All right. If they're doing just what it would sound like if they were reading it cold, which is a great test to see whether your prose or your poetry makes any sense at all.

All right, so I asked her then, as I said, to break it up and to put a line ending wherever she wanted a breath to be, and so while, for example, the first line is "Stay, comma, sir, period, if you brother be, comma," I'm going to, instead of going, "Stay, sir, if you brother be, stay your vocal plaint," I'm going to be reading all of her verse lines through on a single breath, only taking a breath at the line ending. Again, this is not the only way. I really need to reiterate this. This is not the only way. This is not even the preferred way to perform verse. It is a great litmus test for all you playwrights to see whether your lines of verse make any sense at all. Okay. We're going to get into performance of verse lines in another episode. Right now we're applying the litmus test, taking a breath at the end of each line ending.

All right, here we go, same piece. Trumpist speaks first. She's broken it into verse:

Stay, sir. If you brother be,
Stay your vocal 'plaint.
You say, "I know," yet know not,
Else, why say this result was an error
Of judgment or bad luck,
And not the choice of a free people who spoke
And loudly,
Against oppressions of their own?

The Citizen rebuts:

If oppressions pressed their hand,
Then these oppressions they loved dearly and embraced.
Why else these fellows now reward themselves
By raising upon a pedestal the thing that enslaves them;
The living form and embodiment of each listed 'plaint
That 'ere they uttered.
Prayed they for salvation and thereby did manifest

One who prayed not, but happily, did prey, upon *them*.
Praying thus, did then bring forth the predator,
To rend their flesh and dreams.

Okay. Something else I was doing there was essentially emphasizing the last word of each line ending. Right. So I'm going to read the first few sentences of the Trumpist as prose again, and then read those same sentences the way she broke it up into verse. See if you can hear the difference.

This is the prose:

Stay, sir. If you brother be, stay your vocal 'plaint. You say, "I know," yet know not, else, why say this result was an error of judgment or bad luck, and not the choice of a free people who spoke and loudly, against oppressions of their own?

This is how she broke it up when she broke it into poetry, and I want you to hear how it's going to force me, as an actor, to emphasize certain words. This is the poetry:

Stay, sir. If you brother *be*,
Stay your vocal '*plaint*.
You say, "I know," yet know *not*,
Else, why say this result was an *error*
Of judgment or *bad luck*,
And not the choice of a free people who *spoke*
And *loudly*,
Against oppressions of their *own*?

The one I really want to focus in on is that "And not the choice of a free people who spoke and loudly, against oppressions of their own?" I could say that in prose a million different ways. "And not the *choice* of a *free people* who *spoke* and *loudly*, against oppressions of their own?" In fact, the "and loudly" is weird in the prose. But "and loudly" she gives its own line in the poetry, so in the poetry it's "Else, why say this result was an *error*," and "error" is where she ends, and all of a sudden what the audience is hearing is the word "error." "Of judgment or *bad luck*," that's another line ending. All of a sudden, error, bad luck, right? We're hearing these words more. "And not the choice of a free people who *spoke and loudly*," so "spoke" is the line ending, and then "and loudly" is its own line, ending with "against oppressions of their own."

So you can hear that as a playwright, she went, then, and forced the actor, to help the actor, frankly, and to help the audience follow the argument that's being made, and especially since this particular play, again, is a play of two people arguing, which is why it's great for verse, because verse is verbose, right? And

the other thing about verse, and we'll be talking more about this, is that verse, rather like music, but even more than music, verse, like rap, it's the reason why *Hamilton* was written in verse. It's dense words, dense thoughts that are broken into bite-sized pieces that the audience is allowed to take in and able to follow just incredible lines of thought, of thought and feeling. And we're going to be talking about how you need to be careful not to lose the feeling (laughs) when you're writing verse.

[music]

Hello. Emily popping in between her own show to tell you a little bit about [Patreon](https://www.patreon.com/hamlettohamilton). Patreon is a great way to support artists that you love, to help them create the content that you like, like *Hamlet to Hamilton*. Signing up will get you perks, such as early access to episodes, extra bonus episodes, access to the super secret Facebook group, and it can also get you perks like critiques of your own verse or one-on-one coaching sessions. You can sign up over on [patreon.com/hamlettohamilton](https://www.patreon.com/hamlettohamilton). That's [patreon.com/hamlettohamilton](https://www.patreon.com/hamlettohamilton).

Or if you can't do that right now, give us a like, a share, a great review on Apple Podcasts. All of that goes a really long way to helping us keep this educational content free and on air for you and yours to learn about verse drama. And to sign off in typical versical form: enough with the sad, let's get back to the norm.

[music]

I'd like to finish with, we've looked at *Hamlet*. I think maybe we should look at some *Hamilton* as well. So let's take a look at the very, very first song of *Hamilton*, and this will be what finishes up for today's first episode of, what is verse drama? What does verse versus prose sound like? And why in the world would we want to write in verse?

Now, for this section, I'm going to be reading the lyrics, and these are lyrics. It is meant to be sung, but we're going to be looking at it as text that is unsung, and I'm reading from *Hamilton: The Revolution*, which is the collected lyrics for *Hamilton*. It's also got notes in it about how the show was conceived. It is a very cool book, very well worth the money. And in it, I'm going to be taking his line endings at face value. So I'm going to be treating it as though this is the way he meant to write it, if we were looking at it just as if it were a play and not, as it is, a hip-hopera.

I'm going to be putting just the lyrics that we require in the show notes, because this upcoming section, we're going to look at the clarity of thought of the fact that he can do some really complex ideas and make them capable for us to hear or to follow because it's in poetry. But also, we're going to take a sneak peek at the line endings that I keep talking about to see whether the way that he broke up his own poetry, the way he wrote the line endings for his own verse, forces us to rap

the way he wants us to. And for that, it's going to be important for you to be reading along, and it's also going to be important for you to have already heard the musical and to have that sort of in your bones, in your blood. We're looking at the first song, "Alexander Hamilton." I'm not going to worry too much right now about what character is singing what. This particular piece is broken up throughout the entire company, so it serves not only as a way of introducing each of the major players in Hamilton's life, so it works as an exposition song. The entire thing is an exposition song, really. It's also sort of the "Previously On: Alexander Hamilton," everything that's going to get him to all the stuff we want to talk about.

If you haven't seen it yet, and I'll drop the link in – I hope I can find the link on YouTube – of when Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author/composer/genius of *Hamilton* first presented sort of the first draft of this first song to the White House in the Obama era, and he performed it as a soliloquy, which, again, a soliloquy is a single person speaking directly to the audience. Again, I'm going to argue that they really should be speaking directly to the audience. We will get into different views on how soliloquies should be delivered later on. But since Lin-Manuel Miranda treated this as a soliloquy the first time he performed it for the White House, I'm also going to treat this as a soliloquy for the purposes of examining the text.

As other people have pointed out, the beginning of this particular piece – and we'll only be looking at a section of it – it begins with a really convoluted, extremely long sentence, which, once again, I'm going to read it as prose, which means I'm only going to look at the punctuation, not at the line endings. And then I'm going to read it again with the line endings as he put it in, which is fascinating. And by the way, if any of you out there are rap artists, please drop me a line. I am desperate to speak with you and to talk a little bit about line endings and the question of how you would have someone else perform your rap, which I understand is a little taboo. But Lin-Manuel Miranda managed to do it in *Hamilton*, so let's explore that, if you're willing to explore it. I would love to chat with you, maybe interview you for this podcast. Let's decolonialize verse drama, friends. That sounds good.

All right, so I'm going to read this first, as best I can, as prose. And I say as best I can because one of the things that Miranda does that is just simply genius is he is so good at rhyming and interior rhyme and rhyming on assonance and not just consonance, and these are all words that I promise to define later, and all of you people who like to earn gold stars can go look it up before I get to it, (laughs) and then you can feel very smart in later episodes. Which is to say I think you're going to feel the rhythm, even if I try my hardest to make it prose. But this is how it would be if it were prose. See what it does to you as you receive it as you're listening.

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

And again, you probably felt really comfortable when you heard the ending rhyme of the same length. I'm going to go on and do the second verse.

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father got a lot farther by working a lot harder by being a lot smarter by being a self-starter by fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.

Moving on.

And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up. Inside, he was longing for something to be a part of, the brother was ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter.

Then a hurricane came, and devastation reigned, our man saw his future drip, dripping down the drain, put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain, and he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain.

Again, you probably felt incredibly comfortable once it became regular, and that was mostly due to commas and to lines. Going on:

Well the word got around, they said, "This kid is insane, man" took up a collection just to send him to the mainland. "Get your education, don't forget from whence you came, and the world's gonna know your name. What's your name, man?"

Alexander Hamilton. My name is Alexander Hamilton. And there's a million things I haven't done but just you wait, just you wait...

Okay, so one of the things that I discovered from inside, and that's going to be something I'm going to be asking all of you actors, and I'd love the playwrights, directors, dramaturges, and again, I feel everyone really does good work when you keep rotating through the different hats that you're capable of wearing and even try on hats that you feel uncomfortable wearing. So speaking as an actor from inside, I was really fascinated to discover that if I just follow the punctuation and treat it not as poetry but treat it as prose, it starts sounding like a weird children's story, right? Because it's got occasional rhyme that you can't avoid. And I'm going to argue if there's rhyme that a playwright put in their verse, actors, don't avoid it. It wasn't there by accident. It's there, again, as a tool. There's no reason to be shy about it. It's as ridiculous as when the *Phantom of the Opera* movie, *Phantom of the Opera*, of the *Opera*, *Phantom of the Opera*. It's in the title. When the movie kept insisting on putting some of the music, some of the

operatic music, in spoken dialogue like they were ashamed that they were doing Phantom of the *Opera*. Hmm. Okay, anyway, sorry. Feel a little strongly about that. (laughs) But if you're going to sing, sing. Right? Don't speak it, sing it.

So it feels very weird to speak this as prose, so now I'm going to read it the way that he chopped it up, and I mean, I, obviously, like probably many of you, I've got the backing track in my ear and the original Broadway cast recording in my ear on a loop. So I'm going to attempt not to replicate the original Broadway cast, but again to only take a breath if there's a line ending. This is our litmus test. All right. And we're going to see sort of how much, and I don't know the answer to this because I'm reading this live – ooh, it's not preplanned. How exciting is this? I'm going to see sort of how much his line endings force me into the rhythm that he intended. Let's see what happens.

Here we go:

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten
Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor,
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder
By being a lot smarter
By being a self-starter
By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.

And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted
Away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up.
Inside, he was longing for something to be a part of,
The brother was ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter.

Then a hurricane came, and devastation reigned,
Our man saw his future drip, dripping down the drain,
Put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain,
And he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain.

Well the word got around, they said, "This kid is insane, man"
Took up a collection just to send him to the mainland.
"Get your education, don't forget from whence you came, and
The world's gonna know your name. What's your name, man?"

Alexander Hamilton.
My name is Alexander Hamilton.
And there's a million things I haven't done
But just you wait, just you wait...

Okay, so I think his line endings, especially as it goes on, become much closer to the way he intends me to rap this than in the beginning. So let's – and again, speaking from the inside, I start getting excited, because, as you could hear, even taking a breath at the end of the lines, because it was forcing me through all these really dense interior rhymes and assonance and consonance and all that genius, it was actually getting me to go faster. And I don't know if you've noticed this, that actually prose tends to go much slower. Poetry tends to go much faster, and when you have rhymes, it's kind of like each one of those accelerates the speaker a little bit more because it's building up this inertia, right? A thing at rest stays a rest. A thing in motion tends to stay in motion.

But let's take a look at the first verse, because, so now I'm going to do my incredibly, again... If you've taken (laughs) a look at what I look like, or if you've made some suppositions about the fact that I started talking about Shakespeare and I sound like I do, you would be correct to suppose that I am in fact a white woman, and (laughs) and I am a neophyte. I was raised on opera and musical theatre. I was not raised on rap. I am learning, so please forgive me as I butcher this. But, so one of the things that we have as well, right, is that beat is really important. And this is what makes it a musical and not verse drama, right? It actually makes it a hip-hopera, makes it an opera.

And (*speaking in rhythm with a snap to mark the tempo*):

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten
Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor,
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

Okay, so that's kind of the rhythm. I was actually slightly off on that, I know. That's what he wants. What he's written is:

How does a *bastard, orphan, son of a whore* and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a *forgotten*
Spot in the *Caribbean* by *providence, impoverished, in squalor,*
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

Do you hear, like actually his line endings are a little off. Where I would maybe do line endings is:

How does a *bastard, orphan, son of a whore* and a *Scotsman*

I would probably do after "Scotsman," or maybe in the middle of the word "Scotsman:"

How does a *bastard, orphan, son of a whore* and a *Scotsman,*

dropped in the middle of a forgotten Spot

I would do it after “spot.”

*... a forgotten Spot
in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor,*

“In squalor, grow up,” I might put “grow up” at the end. So might do “how does a bastard-“ what’s written is:

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten
Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor,
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

I might do:

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman,
dropped in the middle of a forgotten Spot
in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor...

And I might keep “Grow up to be a hero and a scholar.” Okay. So it’s tricky, and this is where because rap can be so incredibly, even more dense than most European verse drama tends to be, I’m fascinated by where the line ending might go, how you would get that sense of beat and rhythm, how you would translate the music so that someone reading it without a backing track, without it written out as music, would know how to interpret your rhyme and your thought patterns.

So taking a look at his second verse:

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father

Line break.

Got a lot farther by working a lot harder

Line break.

By being a lot smarter

Line break.

By being a self-starter

Line break.

By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.

And it's interesting because "by fourteen," it's got a comma after it. I almost want a hyphen. And we'll be talking about how to use punctuation, again, to get the idea of rests, to get the idea of fermatas and caesuras, which, all words that once again, you gold star folk listening out in the podcast land and can look up and go, "Well, I know that." And those of you who want me to explain it to you, hang on. I promise you I will.

But I think the second one is much closer:

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder

And that is one thought.

By being a lot smarter

That's its own thought.

By being a self-starter

That's its own thought.

By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.

Again, "by fourteen" needs a little white space. I wish he had a hyphen there.

And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted
Away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up.

That works for me, actually. Even though you would expect it to be:

And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted Away
across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up.

And it'd be fascinating, for any of you who want to go back and really listen to the nuance of where, whether it's before or after the word "away" it kind of took the little break there.

Inside, he was longing for something to be a part of,
The brother was ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter.

And because now we're getting into stricter and stricter and stricter rhymes, the lines tend to be much more regular, and so the line breaks are much more

regular, and so, again, you're being forced into the regularity, but you can even hear, like you can feel the beat.

Then a hurricane came, and devastation reigned,

Break.

Our man saw his future drip, dripping down the drain,

Break. And again, but we've got hard rhymes at the end of each.

Put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain,
And he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain.

Well the word got around, they said, "This kid is insane, man"

What you're also hearing is we're now having double and triple rhymes, as well as interior rhymes, so we're accelerating.

Took up a collection just to send him to the mainland.
"Get your education, don't forget from whence you came, and
The world's gonna know your name. What's your name, man?"

Alexander Hamilton.

And we're going to be talking about switching up meter and the reason why Alexander Hamilton as just two words stops the show in an awesome way. But for that, you're going to have to wait a couple episodes until we get further in talking about meter and then about changing meter.

[music]

That about wraps up today's episode. I want to just take a moment to go over what we went over. We went over what the definition of verse drama was, breaking down the word "drama" to mean any text, for us any text, that is interpreted by an actor and viewed by an audience. So it's text that is supposed to be enacted, as opposed to text that is meant to be read as a complete thing on its own. We went over what our working definition of verse or poetry is, which is in this case that verse is signified by having intentional line endings that don't necessarily correlate to the end of a sentence, whereas prose is a chunk of text, a paragraph of text, wherein we obey more the punctuation, because it's sort of all we have. With verse, as we're going to be talking about, there are multiple ways to obey the line endings and to use the punctuation as a guide.

Then we listened to examples from *Hamlet* and *The Tragedy of the Citrus King*, listening to parts of them that are in prose and then parts of them that were in

verse, particularly listening to *The Tragedy of the Citrus King* and how putting it into poetry actually helped to clarify the playwright's thoughts.

Finally, we listened to *Hamilton* with a sneak peek of the upcoming line endings saga. (laughs) And we looked at how well his own writing down of just the lyrics, even without a backing track, forced us, when it was in poetry, to still get his rhythm. That's rather interesting, isn't it? That as we discovered, hopefully, poetry helps tell the actor a bit more about the music that the playwright hears and hopes will be interpreted.

Next time, we're going to be asking the question, so that's all very well and good. We know what drama is. We know what verse is. We know what prose is. But when, and on what subjects, should we be writing in verse? Does verse always have to only be about kings and things like that? Hmm? Maybe not.

If there's something that you feel I missed or a revelation that you had or something that you want to share to the conversation, I sure would like to hear it. And as for now, I'll leave you with Horatio's final words to Hamlet:

Good night, sweet prince. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

[music]

Hamlet to Hamilton is a special project of Turn to Flesh Productions audio division. Turn to Flesh is a theatre company in New York City that develops new plays in heightened text with vibrant roles for women and those underrepresented in classical art. In other words, we create new Shakespeare shows for everybody Shakespeare didn't write for. *Hamlet to Hamilton* is hosted by Emily C. A. Snyder with audio engineering and sound design by Colin Kovarik and original music by Taylor Benson. Special thanks to Esther Williamson for transcripts.

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Are you a verse playwright, an educator, an actor, an interdimensional space traveler with a love of blank verse? Well, we want to hear from you. You can join the Turn to Flesh community and the community of *Hamlet to Hamilton* by finding us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram @hamlettohamilton or @turntofresh.

Thank you for joining us, dear friends, for all things true, good, beautiful, and frequently in verse.