

HAMLET TO HAMILTON

Season One, Episode Two *Content Dictates Form*

EMILY. This is [Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama](#). I'm your host, [Emily C. A. Snyder](#). You're listening to Season 1, Episode 2: Content Dictates Form, because even Shakespeare gals love themselves a little Sondheim.

[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?

EMILY. Hello, friends. Welcome back to Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama. In the previous episodes, we took a look at what the definition of verse drama might mean, and then specifically the difference between prose and verse as forms. Today, what I want to talk about is when we should be writing in verse. What are the stories that want to be told in verse? And in point of fact, really, any story can be told in verse, just like any story could be a musical or any story could be a film or a play or an audio drama or a Zoom production. But the question is, what is the best way to present your story?

This particular episode, I'm going to be speaking especially to those of you with a musical theatre background. If you don't have a musical theatre background, I hope that what I have to say still translates insofar as hopefully you've seen a musical or two, or a musical episode or two, and so hopefully you have some basis. If you have examples that I may have missed, please drop them in the comments. Again, I would love to grow this community, and I would love to know what I don't know, so please educate me.

[music]

The question is, when is the tool of writing in verse helpful? As we've talked before, verse itself is a great way to express complex ideas. It's a great way to express complex emotion, just like musical theatre. It's a great way to show

regularity if it's a very strictured world, if you want something extremely metric. There are loads of reasons. Perhaps someone is just incredibly florid. One of your characters may just be extra.

Before we go on, I actually think that Stephen Sondheim, who's a very well-known lyricist and composer – you may know him from *Into the Woods*, one of his more famous and certainly accessible pieces. If you haven't studied Sondheim yet, I would go and watch *Into the Woods* first. And if you're going to watch a version, *pleeeeee* watch the Broadway version with Bernadette Peters as the Witch before you watch the more recent version. That was done as a movie, and it really chopped up the play a lot. While it's an interesting adaptation, if you're going to have your first experience, treat yourself to Bernadette Peters.

So Stephen Sondheim, this is what he writes at the beginning of the first volume of his collected lyrics. Now, Stephen Sondheim himself was the protégé of Oscar Hammerstein, and you might know that name if you've heard of *Oklahoma* or *The King and I* or *The Sound of Music*. He was the lyricist for all three, and he took Stephen Sondheim under his wing and taught him all he knew. Stephen Sondheim has gone on to become one of the premier musical theatre geniuses of the past century, and he collected all his lyrics. This particular volume is called *Finishing the Hat*. It's expensive, but if you're interested in lyric writing, it's absolutely worth it. I'm going to read to you his preface, because I think it's important. He writes:

There are only three principles necessary for a lyric writer, all of them familiar truisms.

And even before I go on, I'm going to pause. A lyric, in this case, is verse or poetry that is written for the purpose of being sung. If we say that poetry is the overall form, and within that you have individual poems, you have epic poems, you have rap poems, you have dramatic verse, you have narrative verse, and you have lyrics. He's, in this particular case, talking about lyrics, which is poetry that is meant to be set to music. He says, again:

There are only three principles necessary for a lyric writer, all of them familiar truisms. They were not immediately apparent to me when I started writing, but I've come into focus, via Oscar Hammerstein's tutoring; Strunk and White's huge little book *The Elements of Style*; and my own sixty-some years of practicing the craft. I have not always been skilled or diligent enough to follow them as faithfully as I would like, but they underlie everything I have ever written. In no particular order, and to be written in stone:

CONTENT DICTATES FORM.

LESS IS MORE.

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS.

All in the service of clarity, without which nothing else matters. If a lyric writer observes this mantra rigorously, he can turn out a respectable lyric. If he also has a feeling for music and rhythm, a sense of theatre, and something to say, he can turn out an interesting one. If, in addition, he has qualities such as humor, style, imagination, and the numerous other gifts every writer could use, he might even turn out a good one, and with an understanding composer and a stimulating book writer...

A composer is the one who writes the music. The book writer is the one who writes all the words in between the music. So he says:

With an understanding composer and a stimulating book writer, the sky's the limit.

I want to go back, particularly to the first thing that he says that he received from Oscar Hammerstein, content dictates form. I'm going to say that again. Content dictates form. One more time. Burn this in your brain. It is one of the most important things you can learn as a writer, full stop. Content. Dictates. Form. Right.

So what does that mean? Why is that important? Well, what it means is that, for example, if you look at the Lemony Snicket *Series of Unfortunate Events* books, they were originally written making full advantage of the book form. If you haven't read them, they were written for young adults, for children. (laughs) They vary in quality. I do enjoy them. They can be a little formulaic. But I would suggest, if you want to study what he does, rather to flip through his books, because what he'll do is he'll make jokes that can only be made in book form. He does this best in sort of an apocryphal book that he writes, which is, it's kind of his version of an appendix or like Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. It's an additional book that hopefully helps explicate all the mysteries in the series that he wrote, but you can read it on its own, and it's called – brilliantly, it is called *The Unauthorized Autobiography of Lemony Snicket*.

He makes use of every part of the form. Because it's all about secret societies and things like that, there's actually a book jacket, a removable book jacket, on the inside of which is a reversible cover that has *The Pony Party*, this sort of completely banal and innocuous and saccharine, that "Oh, this is a book just about happy little people that love ponies and have parties." Then the actual cover looks like it's brown paper wrapping and typewritten notes saying "Confidential" and things like that. So when you pick it up, you feel like you're part of the mystery, like you've been handed this book of mysteries, this notebook that Lemony Snicket has put together. It's full of, again, all these sort of visual jokes that you can't do if it's a podcast and you can't really translate into if it's on the stage, right? Even down to all of his books are beautifully bound and have a

sense of nostalgia about them. They've got that wonderful unfinished edge to the side of the paper, and so again, when you receive it or when you have it on your bookshelf, as I do, there's this sense of a complete set of volumes of novels, of older sort of novels, and that is absolutely the milieu of his books. In this case, the content of his books, which is all about older, quirky mystery that are all connected over these 13 books, you get even when you receive the book in your hand.

Now, when they turned it into a movie with Jim Carrey, they didn't let content dictate form. The content of each of these books, they're incredibly episodic, but they do build on one another, hopefully rather like these lessons, which if you have not listened to the previous episode, I suggest you pause it here, go back, listen to those first, because hopefully these lessons are scaffolded and are in an order to sort of guide you through, especially this first season. In future seasons, if you want to learn about rhyming poetry, listen to Rhyming Poetry. If you don't care, you don't need to tune in. But this particular season is going to be fairly structured.

Anyway, the difficulty when they were making the movie of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is they had the form and they weren't looking at what the content was, and how the content was going to change the form. Each of the books is episodic. Each of the books is absolutely self-contained, and the first thing that the movie decided to do was, again, they sort of had a vote of no confidence, and they took three of the books – and now, granted, the first four and a half books of the series are incredibly repetitive. It's very clear that Daniel Handler – who is the actual author, and his nom de plume is Lemony Snicket – that Daniel Handler was a little cynical. He didn't really have an overarching plot or an overarching big bad, if you know that term from serial TV, which we can attribute, again, to Joss Whedon and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I did tell you I'd be mentioning *Buffy* quite a lot. Every book is kind of the same for the first five books, and then at the end of book 5, you receive a really important piece of information, and then all the books that follow after have a really kind of thrilling plot. Which, again, I suggest you take comfort in that, because allow your first four and a half pieces of storytelling, at minimum, to be kind of only okay. How great is that?

But because the studio executives looked at it and said, "Well, the first three books, the first four and a half books, are really kind of meh. Let's just shove the first three books together and not look at what each one of them is adding to the story. We're not going to translate the story into film. We're just going to kind of shove it together and hope that people like it enough that we can cash in." Anyway, they shoved it all together, and while Jim Carrey was great in it and they kind of got the sense of quirkiness in the set design and things, it wasn't a cohesive whole. The content was not dictating the form.

One of the things that's very strong in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is that the whole thing is supposedly being narrated by Lemony Snicket, that the author himself is trying to find out what happened to the Baudelaire children, right? That's the conceit of the entire story. And so it's very cool because throughout the books, every once in a while, Lemony Snicket will say, I don't know, "They felt like they were on a sinking ship, rather like how I am writing with my typewriter right now and trying to get water out of this canoe." And all of a sudden, you've got this really exciting image that the narrator is in real time and is going through adventures of his own that we're only getting glimpses into. That's an important part of this particular content, and so it needs to be an important part of the form. They had Jude Law, in the movie, have an occasional aside as Lemony Snicket as the narrator, but they kind of used him as just a narrator and not as a character who's integral or will become integral to the plot, even peripherally. I kind of don't want to give it away if you haven't read them, if you haven't seen the Netflix series, which I'm about to talk about. Yeah, it's very cool, sort of layers within layers.

In the Netflix series, though, they understood that content is going to dictate the form, and so this is a series of 13 books. He has written apocryphal information that all the fans have read. He himself, since writing these books, has tried to sort of retcon, frankly, those earlier four books and make them important to the remainder of the story. What they decided was, "Okay, each book needs to be its own movie. We're going to give two hours to almost every book." The thirteenth book they only gave an hour to. It was probably the right decision, but that's the only outlier.

One of the very first things they do in the Netflix series, which understood the content and created the form around it, so they've still got a sort of quirky set. They keep the character of Lemony Snicket as a narrator, but they introduce Lemony Snicket immediately as a character that we're going to get to know. They translate several of the jokes that were in the book. They either leave it out if it's a joke you can only have in a book – for example, in *The Carnivorous Carnival*, there's one where he's talking about déjà vu, and it's the whole first page of this chapter, and then you turn the page and it's the exact same page, so you get déjà vu. You actually get it. In book 6, *The Ersatz Elevator*, there's a point when they fall down the elevator shaft – sorry, spoilers – and it's like, "and then they fell," and you turn the page, and it's two pages of blankness. Now, you can't have those jokes if it's a filmed media, so again, because they knew they had to somehow get this content, they found the ways to translate the content into the form.

So for us, again, content dictates form. As I said in the very first episode, I believe in the trailer episode, in musical theatre – and I'm going to say musical theatre, but when I say that, I mean musical theatre, opera, hip-hopera, even, to some degree, plays with music, anything that's going to involve music, ballet, dance shows, and whatever else may be invented in the future. How exciting is

that? But anything that uses music as the means to serve the story. In musical theatre, people will burst out into song because they cannot contain their emotions anymore, because whatever they're talking about is so big that to speak about it in a prosaic way would do the content a disservice. Prose would be the wrong form.

When we then think about the musicals that have done well, and let's take a look, for example, at musicals that were still running on Broadway or were recently running on Broadway. And again, I am recording this in 2020, July 2020. I am sweating on your behalf without any air conditioner on in July, New York City, 2020. We've got old standards, such as *The Phantom of the Opera*. Obviously, *The Phantom of the Opera* should be an opera. (laughs) This makes sense, right? It wasn't running recently, but it ran for, what, 25 years? And I think it was running on the West End while theatre was still up. Shows like *Les Miserables*. I loved what the composers of *Les Miserables* said, which was they finished this epic, over 1000-page novel by Victor Hugo, which is a beast to get through but well worth it if you've got the time. If you're listening to this in real time, you're in a pandemic. Go and read *Les Miserables*. But they finished reading it and went, "That was the best opera I ever read," and they're not wrong. Again, *Les Miserables* crosses, what, 20, 30 years, and it's got revolution in it and it's got death and suicide and prostitutes and prisoners who break their parole and questions of justice versus mercy. I mean, it's just frickin' enormous, and sort of the only thing that could contain it is an opera. Not just a musical, an opera. There's not going to be almost any time when we can stop and catch our breath in this thing.

It's interesting, in the case of *Les Miserables* or in *Phantom*, but particularly *Les Miserables*, if you're interested in studying this particular text, there are multiple prose-written movies that you could watch of *Les Miserables*, multiple versions, including one with Liam Neeson that came out a dozen years ago or so. There's a very famous one from the '40s, I believe, with Charles Laughton. The musical is three hours long, maybe three and a half, depending on when you caught it, and also whether you're watching the "children's version," which you may have seen at a local high school, which I have feelings about, but okay. (laughs) But *Les Miserables*, let's say it's three hours. Most of these movies are two hours, and these movies are still, you can tell they're bursting at the seams. You can tell that they don't have enough time to contain everything that's in this novel, and frequently they will leave out key characters. If you know *Les Miserables*, half of the movies leave out Eponine. The other half leave out Gavroche. They seem to think that the two characters are interchangeable. If you know *Les Miserables*, they're super not interchangeable. But that's one of the common changes, for example. And then the recent Liam Neeson one just kind of gives up. The entire movie stops with so much more of the novel to go. It's really, really weird. (laughs)

But with the musical, you feel swept along, but you also don't feel like it's straining at the seams. I would suggest that verse drama, although it doesn't have music underneath it, is also really good for whenever your characters feel that they are in the middle of something huge and enormous. Now, that doesn't mean that your characters may actually be in the middle of something huge and enormous. They may be in the middle of incredibly low stakes, but they feel like the stakes are huge.

If you want to see an excellent example of this sort of juxtaposition used for comedy, 100% go check out the TV series *Community* by Dan Harmon. It's on a couple different streaming services as I speak this, and if you're going to watch only one episode, watch "Introduction to Modern Warfare," which is in season 1, which is sort of the easiest one to access. They're going to use the form of an action-adventure, post-apocalyptic, *Die Hard*, *Fury Road*-esque type movie, *Terminator*, things like that. Any sort of movie like that. But the stakes are ridiculously low. It's about a community college, and so the stakes are at the level of a community college, but all the characters feel that the stakes are ridiculously high.

If you enjoy that and you want to watch *Community*, and again, take comfort in the fact that in the first season, until they hit "Modern Warfare," the showrunners, the show creators and writers, were not entirely sure what their content was, and therefore what form they could get away with. Then what's going to be really fascinating, if you keep watching through in seasons 2 and 3, they settle into a groove, which is common, right? So again, don't beat yourself up if you're just staring writing in this form or any form. It's all a learning curve.

And then season 4, Dan Harmon, the show creator was removed because of various political things that's fascinating to know, but I won't go into because this is not a *Community* podcast. But they brought in showrunners who said, "Oh, you just want the form. You just want episodes that are like other forms. You want a puppet episode, so we'll do a puppet episode. You're into *Doctor Who*, so we'll do a *Doctor Who* episode." But what they didn't understand was that when *Community* works, it's because the content dictates the form. One character is going through a crisis. The best way to explain that crisis is by referencing *My Dinner with Andre*, which is a very weird movie, but that is the best way to explain what this character's going through, and so that's the form we're going to use, because that's what the content is.

All right, so content dictates form. The first thing that I would ask you is not just, is this a play about kings and queens and, I don't know, space giants? I'm watching *Thor* at the moment. I'm doing a re-watch of *Thor*. Uh, give me that Marvel money. (laughs) Anyway, it's not how big your characters actually are, but how big your characters feel. It's the same reason that I'm not, for example, entirely convinced that *Mean Girls* – the Tina Fey-written movie, which is based on a book – I'm not entirely convinced, even having seen only a few clips from

the musical, that *Mean Girls* is a musical. I mean, it's set in a high school, right? And so sure, again, a la *Buffy*, high school is hell, or *Mean Girls* makes the case that high school is the same thing as a safari and living in the wild. But in that case, again, I'm not sure... If you're going to do that, then I would much rather have it be something that uses music that sounds like a safari and not music that sounds like it was written for a boy band, right? Do you see what I'm getting at? Even though the musical is set in a high school and so, okay, all the kids are listening to pop music, maybe, so let's make them all sound like pop stars. But that's not the metaphor. That's not how they feel. That's not the interior truth, and that's why, for me, at least, *Mean Girls* doesn't entirely work.

As opposed to, if you have the opportunity to, really, I would suggest to see more than to listen to *Heathers*, the musical of *Heathers*, which you can probably find a version on YouTube because it's been closed for a while but bootlegs are up. Ssshhh. We can talk another day about ticket prices on Broadway, which is a whole problem and which is a conversation that ought to be happening now since the whole system is shut down. Oh, good, then. It's fine. I didn't tell you to go on YouTube and find a bootleg of *Heathers*, but go on YouTube and find a bootleg of *Heathers*. So *Heathers* the movie, some of you may know, is about sort of proto-emo kids in high school. Once again, high school is hell. In this case, high school is full of sociopaths who are literally going to blow the place up. The music, when you listen to the musical of *Heathers*, it makes sense. It makes sense. It's weird and grungy and dirty, and it's appropriate. It's right.

Okay, this particular podcast, and I said I was going to talk about musicals. Thank you for bearing with me. I'm hoping that some of these you can say, "Oh yes, I know that. Oh yes, I know that. Okay, yes, this makes sense." Therefore, we're going to look at *Hamilton*, because I'm presuming that many of you Googled Hamilton or put Hamilton into the search bar for a podcast, stumbled on this particular series, and ha-ha, now you're listening. Thank you so much. We're going to look briefly at *Hamilton* versus *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, both of which have, really interestingly, the same DNA, both of which are musicals. So to begin with, it makes sense. The content, with *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, we're going to talk about the president, Andrew Jackson, and we're not going to pull any punches. We're going to show how awful he is, etc., etc., etc. It makes sense that it's a musical or it's some sort of heightened form. I think this is something that would probably do very well in verse drama because this is a guy that was a huge racist and apparently was into some literally weird, bloody stuff that also involved sex, so it's an HBO series waiting to happen. There you go. Content dictates form, right? And so it makes sense that it's a musical. Everything's sort of heightened. The stakes are high.

Then we've got *Hamilton*, which is about the American Revolution, about the founding fathers, in particular about this one founding father who's an immigrant, who did the American Dream of pulling himself up by his bootstraps, and who died before his time, so he's even got tragic elements. He's got tragic elements

all throughout his life. He loses people that are really important to him. And again, he's in the middle of the American frickin' Revolution. He's in the middle of the writing of The Constitution. These are not small events. They're not small questions. So of course it makes sense that this should be a musical.

Now, with *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* – and perhaps you're someone who's going to love the soundtrack – I watched a little bit (clears throat) of a bootleg, and I listened to the soundtrack, and the music... The idea for this was that, the argument they were making was that Andrew Jackson was an emo kid, basically was a punk emo kid, and so the idea would be that all the music would be sort of punk and emo. And that works, especially if you think of sort of the screamy, but the wonderful screaming melodic-ness of My Chemical Romance. It even works, I think, if you think of something like Evanescence or Night Witch, which really is just opera but with, like, incredibly heavy bass and overdriven guitar. But instead, except for the opening song, which is "Populism, Yea, Yea!" it doesn't really get the edge of punk music or emo music or any of the music that sort of comes from a primal scream.

The other thing, too, is that I'm not sure that their metaphor was right, that they understood what their content was. I think if they had done Andrew Jackson... If he sees himself as emo, but all of his music is actually overblown Scandinavian rock opera, that would have read better. I'm thinking, if you've seen, not the Eurovision, actual Eurovision, but the recent comedy and the Dan Stevens character plays a Russian who's over the top with his... I mean, he's got lions and really hot dancers. (laughs) And Andrew Jackson, I think, is a bit more of a poser like that. He sees himself as being, I don't know, a rebel, but really he's creating the horrible racist establishment. He's helping to perpetuate the racist establishment that we are currently suffering from. He was a product of his own time. He was a product, unfortunately, of our nation. That is its own subject. This is not a political podcast. I'm going to try to stay away from that ish.

Hamilton, however, if you listen to how Lin Manuel Miranda first introduced even his idea back when it was going to be a mix tape and not necessarily hip-hopera, but his first sentence is, I'm writing a mix tape about – and I'm paraphrasing, but I'm writing a mix tape about the life of Alexander Hamilton, who's one of the founding fathers of the Revolution, who caught beef with all the other founding fathers. And that means it's big enough that, yes, it should be in some sort of heightened form. It should be an opera. It should be in verse. It needs to be big. And again, it covers, what, 30 years, something like that? Just a huge amount of time, which you're going to cover easier if there's a heightened style. For whatever reason, it's just easier to contain it. Also, people are willing to watch a three-hour musical, so you give yourself the extra elbow room of an hour. So that all makes sense.

It would not be the work of genius that it is... And I know I keep saying the word "genius." Deal with it. It is genius. But it would not be the work of genius if he had

written pop songs for all the founding fathers. It would not be a great piece of musical theatre, of opera, if it were in even something that sounds like opera or like Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Sound of Music*, right? It would not sound right if it were sort of the Broadway jazz sound. I mean, imagine if it sounded like *Chicago*, if you know *Chicago*, Kander and Ebb. Sort of 1920's blues music. None of those are right. The absolute right form for the content of someone who is argumentative and verbose is rap, and specifically is hip-hop, which brings in the political element to begin with. The metaphor is correct for the content. The form is correct for the content.

I might take some flack for this, but if you're interested in seeing a different version of the founding fathers, do take a look at *1776*, another musical which inspired Lin Manuel Miranda. It's apparently one of his favorites. It's about the signing of The Declaration of Independence. It is played by almost an entirely male cast, usually an entirely white male cast. And I'm going to be honest, the music is fine. It's really not great music. It's not. The most powerful parts of that particular musical are when they're speaking prose. *Soooo*, did they have the right form? I'm not convinced they did. Did Lin Manuel Miranda have the right form? I'm positive he did.

So when should you be writing verse? Because it sounds really, the way that I've been speaking, that I'm saying to you, "Really, you should be writing a musical." Well, I'll tell you (laughs) I'll tell you how I began writing verse, at any rate, and perhaps this will give you a little bit of insight. The first piece of drama that I wrote in verse, because I'd been writing poetry prior to that, right? And I'd been writing musical lyrics and things of that ilk. But I was in grad school at Emerson in 2007-2009, and I had a friend who actually, her background was in opera. She wanted to direct more. Her name is [Brenda Huggins](#). Do look her up. She's a great director and still directs opera as well as puppetry, to this day. Brenda wanted to direct more, and I had already had a career prior to going to grad school. In my career, I had been a writer/director. I am a writer/director, but I'd always directed my own work, and so I wanted to experiment and see what it would be like to write a piece and then to step back from the directing, and so this seemed to be symbiotic.

Brenda was saying to me, "Great, well, we've got one more year of grad school" – this was over the summer – "How quickly can you write a play? Because we're going to need to cast it and start rehearsing pretty much in September-October." And so I said, "Well, what's going to help with that is if you tell me what your favorite myths or stories are so that I have a blueprint for a plot, so that I'm not just coming up with everything on its own." Also, adapting fairy tales and myths and legends and bringing them, not into the modern day, but with a modern lens, is just my favorite thing in the world to do.

She mentioned immediately that one of her favorite stories ever was *Cupid and Psyche* from *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, whose name I am probably

butchering, which is a collection of Latin stories, which may have had some Grecian origins, but they're Roman myths. The story of *Cupid and Psyche* – you may have heard of Cupid, right? He's not, in this case, the little baby boy with wings. He's a grown-ass man, thank you very much. With wings. (laughs) It's about himself, who is the god of love, and the girl that he ends up marrying, Psyche, and her name means a couple different things. It's where we get the word "psychology," so it has to do with the mind. It has to do with reason. It has to do with the soul. And this happens to be one of my favorite stories as well. I'm not going to spoil it for you in this particular podcast, although I will be using my play *Cupid and Psyche* to show you, honestly, some of the pitfalls you might run into, to show you where I made mistakes. So you can keep an ear out for that, and if you want to read the bad quarto version or a version, you can go on Amazon and there is a copy of the bad quarto there that you can read. There also is, honestly, the true, the workshop version that you can Google on YouTube, so you can see my very, very, very, very, very first attempts at writing verse. And feel free to critique it and to learn from it, because I sure did.

Anyway, when she said *Cupid and Psyche*, I was like, "Well, awesome. Okay. In that case, I have to write you an opera. Because this particular piece is about the god of love and the gods of death, and it's about marriage and it's about sex, and it's about very difficult mothers. I mean, who knows what else is going to be in it, but this is not a small story. This is an opera. This is going to be big." And she looked me in the eye and she said, "I am not directing an opera, Emily." And it was purely for logistic reasons, which is she did not want to have to rehearse in singers and musicians, because when you're doing an opera or a musical, you're really directing three different shows simultaneously. You're directing an opera, you're directing a concert, and you're directing a dance show. Well, actually, no, I guess four. And then in the middle, there's also a play. There's a lot to rehearse, and that's why if you go and you see a high school musical, usually that's why the acting is a little under-rehearsed, where the dance and the music and the pit orchestra might be quite good. That, again, is its own problem and might be addressed at another time. But in this case, she said, "No, do not write an opera. I do not want to rehearse an opera. I want to rehearse a play." So I said, "Okay. Well, in that case, it has to be in verse drama," and she looked at me and she said, "Well, can you write in verse?" And I was like, "Well, we're going to find out."

I felt fairly confident, as I imagine many of you do. I'm going to guess, and I would love to know. Please tell me what your backgrounds are in the comments. Please tell me what hats you wear in the theatre and what you've studied. And also, please, I've been given a very Eurocentric education, which is not unusual for an American theatre artist. I would love to know what I don't know, so please point me towards what I need to research. I'm a Slytherin, for those of you who know your Harry Potter, but I've got Ravenclaw ascending. Anyway.

So by that point, I had spent about ten years directing Shakespeare and acting in Shakespeare and studying Shakespeare, so I was like, “I’ve got a handle on this. I know how to count to ten. I can do this.” Little did I know (laughs) little did I know that writing verse drama is so much more than that.

[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 @turntofresh 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, 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 @turntofresh and join the Turn to Flesh community. If you want to do more, you can support us by visiting turntofresh.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]

Welcome back. In this next section, we’re going to take a look once more at some examples of pieces that are in poetry or in prose, and seeing how the prosaic tends to stay fairly prosaic, fairly workaday, whereas the poetical tends

to, in fact, be poetical, and when the story wants to be in one or wants to be in the other. In this section, as always, we will have links in the show notes, and I highly recommend that you read along so that you can see where the line endings are or see where the punctuation is for the prose, but that you follow along. If you prefer to listen and then go back and look at it, you're more than welcome to.

The first piece of text that we're going to be looking at in this section is by Stuart Spencer, who you may know since he wrote a little book on playwriting called *The Playwright's Guidebook*, which has done very well and is used in many different universities. Spencer himself is a teacher, a novelist, and he has written a few plays, including one play in verse. We will link to his play, and we will also provide just the a little bit of text that we are critiquing for you. This is what he's written about it. It's called *Go to Ground: a play about a fox hunt*. Three men, three women, open staging, and his description goes:

A play of high style, dark secrets, and rich comedy. Oliver, the uber prodigal son, returns to his family home intent on finally behaving himself and joining the traditional Thanksgiving fox hunt. But his family wants nothing to do with him. And the memory of the previous evening? dark night of the soul in New York City keeps intruding on Oliver? plans to remake his life. Part modern urban speak; part iambic pentameter; part human; part horse this play is a wild ride of great theatricality and serious fun.

If you take a quick look at his piece, and in some ways the cool thing about verse drama is you can look at it as a piece of art. You can scan your eye over it and see what parts are in verse and what parts are in prose sheerly by formatting. This play, *Go to Ground: a play about a fox hunt*, has enough significant pieces that are broken up into verse that we can call it a verse play, but it is not entirely in verse. What we're going to be critiquing is not the way that he goes from prose to poetry – we'll be doing that in a little bit with two other plays – but rather asking whether two of his parts which are in verse, whether they're both actually verse or if one of them actually is in prose that he cut at every ten syllables. I suggest that he fell into the trap of cutting at ten syllables when it's actually very good prose, but not so much poetry.

For this particular reading, however, I'm going to read it more according to his punctuation, this beginning part. I'm going to read it as if it's prose, and when we get to the line endings and scansion, you'll hear why. I may do a few lines that respect the verse as he wrote it just so you can hear the difference, but we'll see how this goes. I've never actually been the one to read these words aloud, so this is very exciting, very new. Once again, this is Stuart Spencer, his iambic pentameter play, as he calls it, *Go to Ground*, and it begins, this is the very first page, Act I scene 1. "Oliver appears nattily dressed, speaking to us." And this is all going to be a soliloquy, which, again, is direct address to the audience, not speaking to anyone else onstage necessarily, although it looks like there are

meant to be people who come onstage when he speaks about them. But he's speaking to us, and Oliver speaks in poetry. I'll be reading it in prose.

OLIVER. Go To Ground. A play about a fox hunt.

How many of you ride a horse? Not many. Not to worry. Fortunately we're prepared to give a demonstration for the uninitiated. Horses go at different speeds – we call them “gaits”. My fam'ly has agreed to show you what they look like so that you can tell a gallop from a trot. My mother, Joy. As you can see, a simple walk. Her back is straight but not inflexible. Her shoulders are relaxed, the elbows in, and loosely, in her hands, the reins. You never want to grip the reins. I don't know why. When standing still, the horse will often cock his foot. It's normal; the horse is fine. So: moving on. My brother Tony. This is called a trot. Which means that Tony has to post. He's posting now. Okay, that's it. It never fails. And this is called a canter. That's my father, by the way. You notice how he's rolling with the horse's gait. You never want to fight the horse's gait. That's very bad. The horse and rider should be one. Like so. He's very good. Okay, that's fine. Hey Dad. Hey Dad! That's fine. Appreciate it. Now. The final gait will be the gallop. Are you set? Oh sorry. Caitlin. Sister. Sorry. Set? Then go. The gallop's not for novices. It's very fast as you can... ..don't try this at home. I think we got the point. Hello! And so, that's it. The basics. All you really need to know. Although there is one thing – it's me, you see, just so you understand...

And then everyone else interrupts him, saying things like:

THE OTHERS. Oliver!/Hey!/Let's just do it!/They'll see for themselves!

And he comes back in, speaking:

OLIVER. In that case may I offer you:

ALL. Go To Ground.

OLIVER. A play about a fox hunt.

All right, so the purpose of this particular piece of text, which, again, is... It is written in poetry. I spoke it in prose. I think I may actually take a moment and speak some of this as he wrote it in poetry for you, so you can hear the difference. It's pretty straightforward. There's no heightened language. There's no heightened emotion. It's expository.

Now, if you remember from the previous episode, though, the opening song for *Hamilton* is all exposition as well, and that's in verse, right?

How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten...

It goes on. How can they get away with an exposition song, and *Go to Ground* essentially is not allowed to get away with a spoken exposition song? Well, (laughs) that's a great question. There are no stakes in this particular piece, right? The content is just telling us about... Sorry, I'm not a rider myself. It's about posting, trotting, walking at a canter, walking, galloping, etc. I think if the author had used heightened language, if he had let us know what Oliver feels about each of these, then it should be in verse. But because he's just giving us information, that's prose, and he's written it in a prosaic way. Again, listen to the first few words of *Hamilton*:

How does a bastard...

Okay, so by the fourth word, because the way that it's presented – content dictates form – we are narrated, rather like the Lemony Snicket books. We have a narrator. We have a point of view when we are watching *Hamilton*. It's written very much like *Amadeus*, if you know the play or the fantastic movie. I feel like perhaps this podcast is going to be nothing but telling you what to watch next on Netflix and Hulu and whatever you're streaming on. Watch *Amadeus*. Oh my gosh. Incredible movie. Incredible performances. F. Murray Abraham as Salieri, it's so good. It is so good. Perhaps we can, if I can get a copy of that script, I would love to look at it and see if there are sections which are secretly in verse and the playwright might not even realized it.

We've got a narrator in Aaron Burr, the guy who – spoilers, if you don't know your history. He's the fellow who kills Hamilton by the end. It's not really a spoiler. That's entirely how the opening song ends, is Aaron Burr saying, "And I'm the damned fool who shot him." But do you hear, immediately the language is charged with what Aaron Burr thinks about Hamilton. This is not just, "Oh, look at what Hamilton did. Once upon a time, there was a guy. He grew up in the Caribbean, da da da." No. We are immediately given emotion about the exposition.

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 do you hear the language that's chosen? If you remember, the third tenet of Sondheim is specificity, right? God is in the details. We immediately know what Burr thinks about Hamilton. We know the musical is called *Hamilton*. We already know that we are being invited to question everything we're seeing. We have an unreliable narrator. We have a narrator with a point of view. And then we get the twist at the end of this exposition song, which does more than exposition,

because it reveals to us the interior heart of these characters, particularly Burr and Hamilton.

But then listen again to the very beginning of *Go to Ground*, which again is written in verse, but doesn't have a point of view. The beginning, again, is:

OLIVER. Go To Ground. A play about a fox hunt.

How many of you ride a horse? Not many.
Not to worry. Fortunately we're
Prepared to give a demonstration for
The uninitiated.

The lovely thing about verse is you can get away with being poetic. That's the whole point of writing in poetry. You can get away with Oliver, perhaps, saying... Oh, gosh, I don't know. "How many of you have ever clung onto the back of a horse? How many of you have ever felt the freedom of a man attached to a horse, feeling like a centaur?" You know what I'm saying? There's no point of view here.

Now, the other thing that I want you to hear, because I read it in prose. I want you to hear the actual poetry, and this will set you up for our next session, our next lesson, which will invariably be about the ever-tantalized line endings and scansion, eventually scansion. This is how it's written. I'm going to, as usual, for the litmus test, take a breath at the end of every line ending. Wherever he put a line break, that's where I'm going to take a breath. I'm going to read the first few sentences for you as prose, and then I'll read those same few sentences for you the way he wrote them, all right? This is the prose version again.

OLIVER. Go To Ground. A play about a fox hunt.

How many of you ride a horse? Not many. Not to worry. Fortunately we're prepared to give a demonstration for the uninitiated.

All right, that's the prose version. Here's how he wrote his poetry:

OLIVER. Go To Ground. A play about a fox hunt.

How many of you ride a horse? Not many.
Not to worry. Fortunately we're
Prepared to give a demonstration for
The uninitiated.

So. (laughs) Didn't really pass the litmus test there. In future episodes, and for those of you who may have already studied a bit of how to perform Shakespeare, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and I'm going to do a different

litmus test on it. There are different ways that you can perform a line ending. You can lift the end of the line. You can lean into the end of the line. We're going to have an entire episode about it. Here's a little foretaste. I'm going to try, instead of taking a breath at the end, to maybe elongate the sounds, to try to justify his line endings, basically. Ready? Here we go.

OLIVER. Go To Ground. A play about a fox hunt.

How many of you ride a horse? Not many.
Not to worry. Fortunately we're
Prepared to give a demonstration for
The uninitiated. Horses go
At different speeds – we call them “gaits”. My fam'ly
Has agreed to show you what they look
Like so that you can tell a gallop from
A trot.

Whoo, sorry. I was not able to justify “what they look like” as having a break between “look” and “like.” Okay, but now I'm getting into the next lesson.

We're going to take a moment. We're going to scroll down. If you're on the PDF, what we just read was page five. We're now going to scroll down and take a look at a monologue by the character called Ford. This is page 29 of the PDF. Again, we'll make sure that the link is in the show notes. I think I'm going to do my best to justify all his line endings, so I'm going to read it as poetry. Again, I haven't read this out loud, so I'm fascinated. The litmus test in this particular case is to see what it evokes from myself as an actor from the inside. But it looks like, from a quick glance at this particular monologue, that he leans a little bit more into the poetry, that he justifies why this character is suddenly going to burst into poetry. Let's take a listen.

The character of Ford, page 29. Stuart Spencer's *Go to Ground*.

FORD. No? It can't?
You haven't got a clue. This horse is half
A ton of muscle, bone, and hoof. And when
It hears the hounds give tongue, that half
A ton starts moving twice as fast as you
Could ever think of running. And it doesn't
Want to stop. It loves to run. That's all
It really loves. And you're a puny little
Flea with only one thing in your favor.
That's persuasion. Nothing else. There's not
A chance in hell that you, or anyone,
Is strong enough to stop a thousand
Pounds of horse from running where it wants

And jumping what it likes. The only thing
You've got is what you know. And you know nothing.
You can hilltop if you like.

Okay. If I were to critique this, again, there are a couple line endings that were a little difficult to justify, but even so, actually, some of the irregular line endings offered me some interesting options. You can hear that, to begin with, we've got the repetition of language, "pounds of horse," right? We're using much more visceral words, "muscle," "bone," "hoof." "Puny little flea," we're using metaphors. We're using poetic language, and although, to be quite frank, I have not read this play all the way through, so I don't know who Ford is, but Ford 100% has a bond with horses. He has a point of view, and he has a point of view about the guy he's talking to. Yes, this is verse. This ought to be in verse. Again, I have some notes about where he ended some of the lines as to whether that's where he really meant to end them or not. But this particular piece ought to be in poetry.

I hope you could sort of hear the difference between two pieces that were both written in verse, that is written with line endings, but one of them was prosaic and one of them was poetic.

[music]

Hello. Emily popping in between her own show to tell you a little bit about Patreon. Patreon is a great way to support artists that you love, to help them create the content that you love, 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. That's patreon.com/hamlettohamilton.

Or if you can't do that right now, give us a like, a share, a great review on Apple Podcast. 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.

We just listened to a new verse play that was written more or less entirely in poetry, with argument that some of it might have been happier in prose and then some of it might have been happier in poetry, because the content, again, should dictate the form. Now we're going to transition into looking at two different pieces where the content did dictate the form, and what it's like to move a scene from prose into poetry. The first one will be from a new verse play, and the second one will be from Shakespeare. As always, links for the text itself, links to the text, will be in the description. Feel free to follow along, or feel free to listen first and then follow along.

Keeping with this, I want to start looking at comedies. I'm using examples where the stakes are fairly low. The previous one is about love of horses or good horsemanship, and the stakes in that may not be considered as high as whether or not we have an American Revolution or whether Hamlet kills his uncle. It may seem lower. But again, the important thing is that we break into verse when the stakes are high for the person speaking. This is going to be an example from my comedy *The Merry Widows of Windsor*, which is a sequel to Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In this particular case, I'm not going to encourage you to go read *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Shakespeare. It is not a good play. Which, I mean, again, if you're having a bad day, maybe go read *The Merry Wives of Shakespeare*. Read *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and feel better about yourself. *Merry Wives* notoriously was apparently written in about two weeks. What happened was Shakespeare had written a character, Falstaff, who was this larger than life glutton and coward and a very funny clown that became incredibly popular and was in several of his history plays, most notably in *Henry IV parts 1 and 2*. Apparently, Queen Elizabeth loved the character of Sir John Falstaff so much that she ordered Shakespeare to write fan fiction and wanted to see Falstaff fall in love. Since she basically controlled what she streamed in her own court, Shakespeare, so the story goes, wrote the story in two weeks, and boy can you tell. It is not a good play.

Interestingly, the majority of it is in prose. It's a lot faster and easier to write in prose because you kind of just spit draft – I can talk about spit draft another time. You just kind of throw words out there. You're not going to be as worried about meter, coming up with imagery, etc., etc. But The American Shakespeare Center had a call-out for plays in conversations with Shakespeare's plays. One of them was *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and I thought, "Well, the heck with it. I can't ruin his play if I write a play in response to it, and I can only improve this rather misogynistic play that he wrote by writing what happens when the merry wives become the merry widows."

I used several of his same characters, most notably the two wives are now the two widows. One of them is the character of Alice Ford. In the original, all you need to know is that her husband (sigh) was jealous and controlling, and it's supposed to be funny, and so this tries to rectify that. As far as Alice Ford knows, her husband is dead, and because she is one of the wealthier women in town and because this is set back around the reign of Henry IV, Henry V, in the English tradition, naturally having a woman of independent wealth cannot possibly be allowed to happen. So in the previous scene, which is entirely prose, there's a nosy old man who's sort of important in the town who, in prose, finds Alice Ford, tells her, "Okay, it seems that a bastard son of Henry V is wandering around. Because of all these wars, we essentially need tourism in the town. You're wealthy. Go find this son. Seduce him. Marry him. Keep his money in town," and help sort of restore the town of Windsor. In some ways, this is really

rather dumb, right? But the stakes for Alice are very high because she finally got her freedom after this lifetime of living with a guy who is controlling and manipulative and gaslighting and all sorts of different things.

I'm going to read to you a little bit of what Justice Shallow says right before he exits the scene, and then I'm interested if you can hear the difference of when it switches from prose to poetry, all right? Matter of fact, I'll back it up a little bit more because I do introduce the poetry with a rhyming couplet, and we'll go over the uses of rhyming couplets in another episode. But, for example, we'll start here. Justice Shallow, old dude in town talking to Alice, and saying:

JUSTICE SHALLOW. Now, when there were no bastard prince, as the highest man in Windsor, I steeled myself to set myself on you. But now I am relieved! For though, when I was young, I was a roister-doister with the rest—hey hey! And have had *seven* daughters by twice as many wives—no wife my own, you understand, for I have never married. But as I say, where are my spectacles? Where are they, Jane? Confound it all.

And a young woman named Jane hands them over, and he picks up and he says:

JUSTICE SHALLOW. Well, well. I asked you, girl, to test you. (*To ALICE.*) But as I say, it is your civic *duty*, Alice Ford, to marry with the highest man in town, and give your coffers back unto the state. We all depend on you.

'Twas I; 'tis he. The deed must needs be done.
For you must go and woo King Henry's bastard son!
Farewell!

And off he goes, and Alice turns and, in soliloquy, so speaking to the audience, she says:

ALICE. O——! The arrogance of power!
I had thought, once Frank was in the ground,
That my wealth, my will, my life and flesh were mine.
But now I see:
Although my husband's dead, he still hath hold on me.
Or so this ancient man believes. To him
The contents of my person and my purse
Were ever for the public use; not mine.
Through Windsor, all my measurements are known:
My body and my books are by their figures weighed.
And so far as I have power, 'tis in my pocketbook.
Well, then: why not use the power I possess?
'Ist not so bad a thing to marry with a king!

Or the bastard son of one—some...~~thirty~~ *twenty* years my junior?
 How will *that* fadge?
 To have an infant in my bed, who might have been
 In other circumstance, an infant at the breast?
 And yet, many an older man will leer and grope
 A woman half his age and be applauded for it!
 So should not I,
 Who am not so *old* but that my appetite hath ripened—
 (Indeed, upon his death I think it doubled)—
 Wherefore should I deny my baser cravings,
 Which, 'til now, were kept in holy check,
 And take unto myself a lusty youth
 Some eighteen years of age!—
 And King Harry's son beside.
 I'll do't.
 Although my soul rebel against the act.
 'Tis for the civic good. I'lllllllllll—*do* him.

Okay, so (laughs) that's her speech, and I think you probably could feel, because it starts with some pretty strong meter, and then I'll be talking about – I tend to use a lot of white space, which we'll be talking about later, as well as asides and reversals and all sorts of different things that we'll talk about. I will leave this particular portion in the show notes, but you can read the entire play over on [New Play Exchange](#). This is *The Merry Widows of Windsor* by yours truly, Emily C. A. Snyder.

But I think you could probably hear the difference between poetry and prose, and while the stakes were high for Justice Shallow insofar as he wants tourism in the town and he wants Alice to do these things, that's also his everyday. He tells people every day what to do. There's no reason for him to be in verse, whereas Alice, who up to this point, even though she's actually had some long speeches to other people, has been almost entirely in prose because, again, it's just been another day for her. This is when she first bursts into verse. I would have to look at the play again to see if this is the first instance of verse. It might be. And it's because all of a sudden, she's stuck again. It wasn't just her husband. Yet at the same time, the thing that's being offered her, well... So, I mean, the stakes are not the end of the world, but they're the end of the world for her. And this is a comedy. This particular play, I would suggest, is one of those problem play comedies because it does deal with toxic relationships, you know, like comedies do. But I just wanted to give you an example of when you would burst into verse from a modern point of view.

If you're willing to bear with me, I'd like to conclude, perhaps, with the way that Shakespeare will burst into verse, burst into essentially spoken singing. Once again, we're going to take a look at *Hamlet*. Once again, we're actually going to look at Act II scene 2. This is at the very, very, very end of that just absurdly long

scene, and the things that you need to know, again, rather like the last piece that you heard – now, this is a drama, right? Although there’s actually a lot of comedy in *Hamlet*, but for our purposes, at the moment, we’re back into drama. We’re away from comedy. Hamlet’s two college buddies and his girlfriend’s dad are trying to basically trick Hamlet throughout this scene and get Hamlet to explain why he’s acting so moody. Basically, they keep going, like, “Why are you emo? Why are you so emo?” (laughs) And I mean, Hamlet’s like, “Well, my uncle is sleeping with my mom, and my uncle is my dad’s brother, and life sucks. Why not think I’m emo?” You know, to give you the definitive SparkNotes version of *Hamlet*.

What they’ve done is they essentially have brought Hamlet Renaissance Netflix, aka they’ve hired players, that is actors, to come and to play a show for them. And so we’ve already been in and out of verse a lot. We’ve done a lot of verse and heightened emotion, but also verse whenever the king and queen are around. We’ve gone into prose a lot whenever it’s a lower class character or whenever Hamlet’s just having a conversation, or, frankly, when Hamlet is... The only way to say it is dicking around with his girlfriend’s dad, who’s a total prick. Girlfriend’s dad’s name is Polonius, and we’re going to be picking up with Hamlet speaking. The people who are there are the actors, Polonius - that’s the dad of Hamlet’s girlfriend, kind of ex-girlfriend, their relationship status is complicated on Facebook – and Hamlet’s two friends.

Again, I think you’ll hear when the beat drops of when we’re suddenly from prose into poetry, and I think you’re going to feel, again, the reason why. You’re going to get that sensation of, “And now I need to burst out. It is not enough to just be clever with language in prose. I need to burst out.”

All right. Act II scene 2 of *Hamlet*. The actors have just finished doing their highlights of one of Hamlet’s favorite plays, and Polonius says to the actors, “Pray you, no more,” and Hamlet says:

HAMLET. 'Tis well: I'll have thee speak out the rest soon. Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used; for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.

POLONIUS. My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

HAMLET. God's bodykins, man, much better: use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in.

POLONIUS. Come, sirs.

And Hamlet, calling out to his college buddies, says:

HAMLET. Follow him, friends: we'll hear a play to-morrow.

But then he grabs one of the actors and says:

HAMLET. Dost thou hear me, old friend; can you play the Murder of Gonzago?

PLAYER. Aye, my lord.

HAMLET. We'll ha't to-morrow night. You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?

PLAYER. Aye, my lord.

HAMLET. Very well. Follow that lord; and look you mock him not.

The First Player leaves. Hamlet turns again to his friends who have not left and says:

HAMLET. My good friends, I'll leave you till night: you are welcome to Elsinore.

And one of his friends says:

ROSENCRANTZ. Good my lord!

HAMLET. Ay, so, God be wi' ye;

And off his friends go, and Hamlet continues speaking:

HAMLET. Now I am alone.
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed

The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I!

Okay. (laughs) Actually, then the soliloquy goes on. It is an amazing soliloquy. It's almost towards the end. Definitely give it a listen if you never have before. Give it a read. Read it out loud yourself. Just to practice, take a breath or elongate or lift or somehow give the end of the line a little bit of extra oomph and see how it affects you, especially when you get to:

bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous...

It reminds you, doesn't it, of:

... bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped...

I mean, you can just hear the verse. You can feel the verse. And everything that came before it, right, it was plot. It was moving it along. We had to get people off the stage. It took us a little while to get rid of our questionable college buddies, but it was all workaday. There was no reason to have a definitive point of view about it that required heightened language. Whereas, and I hope you felt the beat drop on that first line of poetry, which is:

Now I am alone.

I mean, you kind of can only justify that if you're speaking in verse, because if you're walking around muttering that to yourself... Well, first of all, I hope you're

wearing a cape, because that would be appropriate. Content dictates form. But generally we don't wander around and go, "Now I am alone," unless there's kind of drama involved.

I hope that this particular piece has helped you as you're thinking about whatever your own story is, thinking about your characters, thinking about where their heightened emotion is or where the stakes are really high, and also asking yourself, are the stakes high? Are the stakes important? Is this the end of the world for your character? Do they need to burst out into verse? Also, is the content of your play, is it going to sound silly? Does the world of your play allow for you to break out into heightened language? If it does, then keep listening, friends, and start taking notes and start playing with poetry as a dramatic form, as a storytelling, narrative form. And if you're realizing, no, the stakes are personal but maybe no one really expresses their emotion or everyone's using subtext – and we'll talk about text versus subtext. Some people say there's no subtext in Shakespeare. Yes and no, and again, if you want to look that up and give yourself a gold star – and I hope you're giving yourself gold stars. Drop yourself a gold star for every term you already know in the comments. I would love to see that. It is healthy, I think, to boost your ego, particularly when you're in the middle of trying to do something that can be (sings) "exciting and scared," to bring us right back to the man who talked about finishing a hat.

[music]

That concludes things for this episode, Content Dictates Form. In this episode, what we went over was Sondheim by way of Oscar Hammerstein's idea that content dictates form, that basically what your story is about is going to dictate how you tell your story. So to our question of what ought to be told in verse, well, it's whenever the stakes are high, personally, for your characters, or whenever the stakes of the world are so big that you need a little bit more elbow room. You need something a little bit more operatic, perhaps, but perhaps you don't want to write an opera. So write a verse play instead. It doesn't always have to be about kings and queens. It just needs to be emotionally big.

We also went over various different forms, a lot of musicals, and how they either did very well with the form or perhaps fell a little bit short. Then we looked at the modern playwright, Stuart Spencer, who wrote in poetry and prose, but we looked at his verse and asked whether it was better suited as verse or better suited as prose. And one of his pieces was better suited as prose. You could tell because of the way the cadence went, or rather the lack of cadence, and that the other one had a bit more poetry, had a bit more oomph, had a bit more emotion, and so it felt proper that it was in verse.

Then we looked at two other pieces, one of mine and one of Shakespeare's, and how those pieces moved purposely from prose into poetry, that when it was workaday, we were in prose. The content was workaday so the form was

workaday. And when the characters felt an outburst of emotion, all of a sudden they went into verse. Now, obviously there are other reasons to use verse that I didn't go into. If you want some extra homework, I highly suggest that you take a look at *As You Like It* by Shakespeare, because, rather like we talked about in the previous episode, he actually has his characters – and we didn't go over this, but here's a little bonus for you – he has his characters who are talking to each other and they're all in prose and it's lovely, and then in comes the evil duke, and all of a sudden they're in verse. It's not so much an outburst of emotion as it is suddenly, though, it's signaling a change. Suddenly, though, they have to be very proper and very serious, and that's why they go into verse. But again, the content dictated the form. So if you want some extra homework, go ahead and take a look at that.

The regular homework today is just to look at, if you're a writer, to look at your own story and to say, "Is this part really verse? Is this part really prose?" And if you are not a writer, maybe give a thought to what would you put in verse? What would be something that would cause you to burst into verse?

And in the meantime, I will leave you with a little bit more of Little Red Riding Hood from *Into the Woods* by our own Stephen Sondheim, in that I hope that now you know things now, many valuable things, that you hadn't known before.

[music]

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