

# HAMLET TO HAMILTON

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Season Two, Episode One

*The Earliest Arthur:*

*Sir Thomas Hughes' The Misfortunes of Arthur*  
(1587)

**EMILY.** This is *Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama*. I'm your host, Emily C. A. Snyder. You're listening to Season 2, Episode 1 of "Arthur Through the Ages," looking at Thomas Hughes' *The Misfortunes of Arthur* from 1587.

[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 out]

**EMILY.** Welcome, friends. We've made it to Season 2 of *Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama*. Now, in Season 1, we were looking at what makes verse drama. How does a line ending work? How does scansion work? How does silence work? What is a line of verse? Why is a line of verse important to verse drama? All sorts of questions and goodies like that. That season was meant to be listened to chronologically. This season, you're going to be able to hop around if that is of interest to you, and you'll be able to jump in wherever you like and give a listen to whatever episode seizes your fancy. Now, if you haven't listened to Season 1, you should be fine. But if at any point we mention a word that you don't understand or a concept that, perhaps, you haven't gone over, you can always visit [hamlettohamilton.com](http://hamlettohamilton.com), take a look at the glossary, and grab the word that you need.

Also, if you prefer to have the texts, which are available on [hamlettohamilton.com](http://hamlettohamilton.com) – and also big thanks to The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester, where a lot of these texts are stored – if you would prefer to have this perhaps in a YouTube format where you can both see actors and see the text on the screen, as soon as we hit our first 20 patrons over on [patreon.com/hamlettohamilton](https://patreon.com/hamlettohamilton), we

will start converting some of these into YouTube clips that you will be able to see if that's your preferred method.

If you are interested in joining us for things like verse nerd parties, then also go on over to [patreon.com/hamlettohamilton](https://patreon.com/hamlettohamilton). You can become a patron and start being able to meet others and come to parties where we actually have living playwrights there and they talk about their texts, where we try out different pieces of text ourselves and see what we think. We would love to have you there. We had a kickoff party for Season 2. It was wonderful, and I do think that we'll have some more in the future as well.

Other things that are of note: whereas last season we were looking at the mechanics of verse drama, this season we're going to try it out. As you know, verse drama is a performance of text that is written in lines of verse – that's what makes it verse drama – and because it's performed, there's the generative stage, which is what we were kind of looking at last time, which is to say the stage where you're writing it, in our case. Then there's the interpretive stage, which is what we're going to be looking at a little bit in Season 2. How do actors interpret this work? How does the verse actually help us or hinder us as actors? What are we getting from inside the character? What does this verse inspire? Or how does the verse trip us up? That's what this Season 2 is going to be taking a look at.

And to that end, it will not be just my dulcet voice that you'll be hearing all season, but I am joined all season long by Nick Ritacco and our own Colin Kovarik, with Nick playing all the Lancelot parts, myself playing all the Guinevere parts, and Colin – bless him – coming in as Mordred and as Arthur and as stage directions and all sorts of different characters in between. I'll let Nick introduce himself in just a second, but I do want to note that we actually recorded the majority of these episodes far before we dropped Season 1. We did it in the summer of 2020, so we were baby podcasters and we had yet to learn entirely how to cast pods, so the audio quality is going to be slightly different – still fine, but just slightly different from what you're accustomed to. I'll be popping in from the future to give any context that I may not have given in the moment, and otherwise you'll be able to hear the conversation between us as actors.

The criteria for this season is we are only looking at Lancelot and Guinevere scenes, just so that we can compare and contrast through the centuries. And if you do not know the King Arthur myth, we will guide you through in this episode, but all you need to know is that King Arthur is King of the Britons. Lancelot is his right-hand man. Guinevere is his wife. Lancelot and Guinevere are having a very sexy affair, most of the time. Each episode of Season 2 will also follow this format: we'll begin by giving you a bit of context. In this case, we're going to start with telling you about the season and our thoughts and our goals for the season. Then we'll take a little break. We'll come back. We will read the text and we will give our initial impressions about the text. A lot of these parts are very heavy in actor-speak, so if you're not fluent in that, A) how cool is it, then, you'll be able to

listen to actors give their honest opinions about things? But B) don't worry, because after a little break, I will conclude each episode with a third part that will go through point by point as to what worked and what didn't work on a verse level for the actor. So part one gives context, part two will be the text itself, and part three will be a deeper analysis of why the text did or didn't work.

With that, let's jump in and I'll let Nick introduce himself, and we'll talk a little bit about what this season will be.

[brief music]

So hi, Nick! Thanks for being here in the wee hours of the Eastern Seaboard. (laughs) Much better for you out in LA. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you've done on stage or on screen?

**NICK.** Yes. It's my pleasure to be here, and yes, it is much more convenient for me at this hour, being three hours behind you all. A little bit of the work I've done: I moved to New York to go to school there. I went to Tisch, studied there for four years, and then I started doing theatre around the city, working with various companies. Did a lot of Shakespeare and eventually, through a lot of my Shakespeare connections, I ran into you, Emily, and Turn to Flesh. That's when I ended up working on the Arthurian epic, *The Table Round and Siege Perilous*, and I have yet to have any theatrical experience that mirrors that. (laughs)

**EMILY.** Yeah, that was a unique one where we kind of LARPed our way through the show, and then I would try to write as fast as I could so that you guys could memorize. (laughs) So thank you for putting up with that.

**NICK.** It was my pleasure. I'll never forget the preshow speech, one of which you threw me under the bus and told the audience that I changed lines at the last minute. I will never forget.

**EMILY.** You added lines, which were necessary to the character, and I want to point out, dear audience, that Nick *wanted* to add lines.

**NICK.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** The blame is on him. Also, the line you added was really necessary and good. (laughs)

**NICK.** Good, good. I'm glad.

**EMILY.** Wasn't it just "My brother?"

**NICK.** Yep.

**EMILY.** Wasn't it just a moment between you and Arthur at the end of everything?

**NICK.** Yeah, that I'm sure only Arthur could hear me say, because we were face to face. So I don't think the audience got to experience that as much as I did.

**EMILY.** No, we heard it. I mean, it was a small, intimate – we were in the round. We were literally in the round around you guys, so no, we felt very, very immersed. (laughs)

**NICK.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** We'll be talking a little bit about that, but today's episode is about the Arthurian myth and the fact that there are just a million – that might be a slight exaggeration, but not by much – just a million verse plays that deal with the Arthurian myth, most of them also dealing with the events of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Today what we're going to be looking at is some of, mostly the Lancelot/Arthur – the Lancelot/Arthur... The other romance. (laughs) Whoo-hoo!

**NICK.** Oh, we can do a whole episode on that one too.

**EMILY.** That would be great, actually. There's some really terrific scenes throughout the centuries. But today, I'm going to be playing Guinevere and Nick's going to be resurrecting Lancelot, and we're going to be looking at and comparing different verse scenes from the past several centuries and how these characters are treated, because there's a lot of overlap in... There's the Guinevere/Lancelot scene where they first meet, and a lot of authors deal with that. There's the scene where they're discovered, and there's a lot of those discovery scenes, and how is it slightly different? There are scenes that deal with Elaine, the Lady of the Lake – oh, actually, Elaine, the Maiden of Astolat, who Lancelot marries and Guinevere's feelings about that. There's a lot of overlap, and it's very rare that we get to see the same subject matter dealt with in the same type of art form to the type where most of it is blank verse. We do have one piece that's in rhyming couplets, which we'll be taking a look at. (laughs)

**NICK.** That should be exciting.

**EMILY.** Rhyming couples and very bad puns, which is very exciting. (laughs)

**NICK.** Very, very, very bad. (laughs)

**EMILY.** We're going to take a look at these pieces. For those who have been listening along in this first season, all of these pieces... Actually, you want to talk about, Nick, the fact that as you were looking through them, they're all end-stopped lines? You've worked with me, and you know that when we get to me,

I've got slightly weirder line endings. Do you want to talk a little bit about what you were seeing even before we jump into the text?

**NICK.** Sure. My experience with you but also my experience with Shakespeare, so generally most of my verse experience, has been informed by those two things, shall we say? The intricate and sort of fluid way that you use verse, where you rarely have end stops at the end of lines.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**NICK.** And Shakespeare too. He's not punctuating the end of every verse line either, and here, looking at these, especially these early scenes and this earliest one here from 1587 where we have a lot of end stops on all of the verse lines. I just think that that's so interesting, because talking about Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship, which we're going to do a lot tonight, I found that when you were writing, the... How do I put it? Finding the two characters and sometimes their loss for words and the verse not quite fitting perfectly and things gushing over into the next line, I found that really helpful to me, the actor, when playing the roles. But also looking at the verse here, I'm like, "Well, this is interesting. We have these very well thought out points, almost, as you go through the text." It's interesting.

**EMILY.** Yeah. It's interesting to see, as well, which... Because there's going to be... I found a new favorite verse playwright that we're going to be coming across, and he uses line endings in the not necessarily end-stopped way. As I was working on some of the lines last night, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, if I take a break here or... Oh my goodness, it's informing so much interesting stuff in me." When we get to him, it's such a shame. He wrote about four Arthurian verse plays. We'll be taking a look at some of his work. He was American. He lived in Connecticut, and he died at the age of 35 from a disease, from something that happened where it would have been easily preventable in a hospital today. I swear, his stuff is... At least I really like his stuff. I'm already telling you what to think, dear listener. (laughs)

**NICK.** But no, I think it's interesting, though, that you pointed out, wow, this could potentially... It was informing you already, just reading it, informing your writing and use of verse too. I think that's so interesting to watch the development of this as we go through from the early stages to the later plays, how that changes.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and I was excited to see that there are verse plays... When I started writing in verse back in 2008 and then I started... I did some early blog posts on trying to find other plays in blank verse that were being written now and, thanks to the internet, ran across someone who had just done a play in 2009 on Arthur at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. She has given us leave to do her Lancelot and Guinevere scene, which is very exciting. But then I even saw that

not only did we have mine that we sort of all wrote together in 2019, but there was another play that hopefully we'll be able to get to, that also had its premiere in 2019 from a different playwright about the same material. It's interesting, you'll see, he's trying to look like First Folio text, so he's using extra e's on the ends of words and he's really using capitalization a lot. It's going to be very interesting to see how that informs us as well, as actors.

**NICK.** That's exciting. Okay, cool.

**EMILY.** We will be going through these scenes chronologically. Nick, you and I were talking about this off mic. We're really excited to see how verse develops. You want to talk, actually, a little bit about the fan fiction that you were noticing in the Victorian stuff?

**NICK.** Yeah, you get to the Victorian time period here with some of these texts, and you notice the melodrama, the almost heightened obscenity of some of their... It's almost comedic, some of the lines that we were looking at.

**EMILY.** They're trying so hard to sound like...

**NICK.** Yeah, sound like, I guess, would it almost be to sound like a certain type of archetype? A certain...

**EMILY.** It was interesting because I noticed on one – actually, one or two of the plays – but one of them had an entire printed prologue that was basically defending verse plays as a viable form in the late 1800s and saying, "Hey, look, if Shakespeare could do it, I can do it."

**NICK.** I can still do it. (laughs)

**EMILY.** Right, which is still the battle cry of all the verse playwrights that are working today in the 2000s, that are like, "Hey, if Shakespeare could do it, I can do it." So this is, apparently... I get sad when people are like, "No one's writing verse plays anymore," and I'm like, "Dude, we never went away." (laughs)

**NICK.** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**EMILY.** It never stopped. It just, the popular form-

**NICK.** It morphed, right?

**EMILY.** It morphed, and the popular form became musicals, which is still informed by verse and lyricism.

**NICK.** Yeah, watching the verse change and watching how the verse, as the verse changes, it informs the characters differently. I think that's something we

should really just pay attention to. Some of the scenes maybe are written similarly in the sense that some of them are thematically similar, right?

**EMILY.** Right. It's the same plot point, yeah.

**NICK.** Same plot point, yeah, same, this is the Guinevere and Lance. Like you were saying, some of the plays, this is their one scene, sort of idea. But watching how the verse can completely change how that scene comes across to an audience, or to an actor, just how it informs us differently as well.

**EMILY.** Right, and that's... As I've said before, one of the points that I want to do with this big, long, epic comparison of all these scenes is to show that verse is just a tool. All of the verse that we're about to see, none of it is like some of the early examples I was giving you earlier in the season of bad verse or of difficult verse or of verse that needs to be rewritten and edited because they've just make a lot of mistakes. All of this is perfectly functional verse, but it's not going to magically give you character or plot, and so one of the questions is, how did each author, using the same plot, the same form, how does it work? How well does it work? What is working? What isn't? Then the question – because you've developed things with me, Nick – that I always like to ask is what are we feeling from the inside? We've said these words. How is it changing and moving and informing us both to speak them and to hear the other person and receive it? I'm interested in how it changes our pacing. I think there's one scene that's going to be ridiculously quick that I'm really looking forward to. I'm interested, too, in... Because a lot of them use long monologues, chunks of text, and whether we start to just black out, like, "Okay, I'm saying words, I'm saying words, I'm saying words," versus when it gets into stichomythia where we're trading back and forth words really fast.

**NICK.** Sharing lines, that sort of thing. In this first text, you'll notice it's not the case. (laughs) Not the case at all, yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and whether we're trading lines tells you a lot about the relationship of this particular Guinevere and Lancelot.

**NICK.** Exactly. Their emotional life, all of that is informed by that, yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, so come with us, won't you, as right after this break, we'll get into some text.

[music]

It's *Much Ado*.... about something. Following a sold out class focused on *Macbeth*, our own Esther Williamson is delighted to offer another round of classes of her Exploring Shakespeare series. This class is [Exploring Shakespeare: \*Much Ado About Nothing\*](#). In this eight-week, Zoom-based class,

students will read this beloved comedy aloud with Esther, stopping along the way to investigate all the tools that Shakespeare uses to communicate. You'll look at rhythm, rhetoric, hidden clues for the actors. You'll spend time digging into tools for navigating Shakespeare's prose. This class is intended for all types of language enthusiasts, from actors to playwrights, directors to educators, and free-range word nerds are all welcome. Classes for Exploring Shakespeare: *Much Ado About Nothing* with Esther Williamson begin on March 1, 2021, and students can choose between Monday or Tuesday nights. For more information, please visit [estherwilliamson.com](http://estherwilliamson.com), and you can follow the link on the homepage to Exploring Shakespeare: *Much Ado About Nothing*, beginning on March 1, 2021. If you're listening to this later and you've missed it, still check out Esther and see what class she's offering now. Esther is an amazing teacher, and her classes sell out quickly, so visit [estherwilliamson.com](http://estherwilliamson.com) and start exploring Shakespeare.

[music out]

All right, we're going to be beginning with *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Hughes. It was written and performed in England in 1587. That is concurrent with Shakespeare, and concurrent, technically, with early Shakespeare. This is maybe ten, fifteen years into the switchover from the primary form of drama being iambic tetrameter, four strong beats, right, the Dr. Seuss

ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM  
ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM

and always being in rhyming couplets. We're switching over from that. We're about fifteen years into people playing with blank verse as iambic pentameter, and, I think as we're going to see, as all early playwrights do when they're like, "I'm going to do it in iambic pentameter," it's perfect. Yeah, exactly. Nick is making a motion. He's like, it's blocks of text.

**NICK.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** It's blocks of text. (laughs)

**NICK.** Yep.

**EMILY.** This first piece, it's a curious play because it begins at the very, very, very end of the whole myth. Actually, a word on Arthurian myth very quickly for those of you who may not know. Arthurian myth, it's interesting because it's like the entirety of Europe decided to do fan fiction around a campfire together over the course of a few centuries.

**NICK.** Yeah, I was going to say, for centuries. (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs) Yes.

**NICK.** Just still going on.

**EMILY.** Yeah, so unlike Greek mythology wherein there's a lot more, "No, Persephone is always married to Hades, right?" And then there's sort of fan fiction about whether she likes that or not. But the plot tends to be the same. That's not what it's like when you start digging into the Arthurian myth. Someone wrote something about King Arthur, which may or may not have been based on a historical dude, and then someone read that and said, "I don't like it," and immediately they changed it to something else. Everyone who read both went, "We accept both as canon." Then someone read the first one and the second one and said, "Do you know what we need? We need a completely different person, and I'm taking these same characters and I'm making them act completely opposite than they did."

**NICK.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** And everyone looked at these three completely different things and was like, "This is fine. I see no difficulties, and all of it is canon." (laughs)

**NICK.** It's all canon, yeah. It's all canon.

**EMILY.** It's all canon. So it is one of the weirdest mythological traditions, and it wasn't just England. We associate it with England because it takes place in England, but it was informed by the English, and there's an Italian Arthur.

**NICK.** There's French. There's a French...

**EMILY.** French? Oh yeah. They took it and they were like, (French accent) "We are going to be very French and we are going to make Lancelot ze hottest man." (laughs)

**NICK.** Yeah, Lancelot gets a good run in that one. (laughs)

**EMILY.** He does, and then in come the Germans and the English, and they're like, "Ooh, what's this? No, we can't have it." And then they start laying down a lot of morality. There's sort of this tug-of-war. The whole of Europe took part in this epic fan fiction creation that's still going on today. So here we go. This particular one starts after Guinevere and Lancelot have split up. There is no Lancelot/Guinevere scene in this play, which is unusual when you start diving into the theatre. Almost all of these verse plays focus on the love triangle. It's very rare that any of these plays don't. But the first few ones seem to be a little tetchy, and it makes sense. Henry VIII was just king. Mary and Elizabeth were doing their thing. You may not want to talk about adultery as directly. (laughs)

**NICK.** Yeah, adultery is not necessarily popular.

**EMILY.** No, no.

**NICK.** Or you paid the price. (laughs)

**EMILY.** Right. If you want to write tomorrow, maybe avoid that topic today.

**FUTURE EMILY.** Emily popping in from the future just to give a few more accurate dates. As mentioned, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, subtitled “Uther Pendragon’s son reduced into tragical notes,” was written by Sir Thomas Hughes, who’s an English lawyer and dramatist. This was performed at Greenwich in Queen Elizabeth I’s presence on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February in 1588. There were a few people that were involved with it, including Francis Bacon, who apparently helped out with the dumb show. It’s written in what’s called the Senecan tradition, which basically means that it’s a little bit more presentative. “This is what’s going to happen, and now I have a speech about it,” rather than showing what is happening. It also, rather notably, seems to have been influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Brittonum* rather than the *Morte d’Arthur*. As we go through it, if we know who is influencing the retelling of the myth, we will let you know.

Other things of note include that the exact time between *Gorboduc*, which was the first iambic pentameter blank verse play to make a huge splash, is 26 years. *Gorboduc* was written in 1561. *The Misfortunes of Arthur* was written in 1587, performed in 1588. To put that precisely into Shakespeare’s timeline, Shakespeare was born in 1564, just three years after *Gorboduc* made such a splash. It seems that his first play is generally believed to have been written between 1589-1590, so we’re talking just a few years, like a year or two after *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. It’s entirely possible, then, that Shakespeare might have been acquainted or have even seen *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. There may be a reason, then, why he didn’t ever write an Arthurian play himself, which is very strange when it seems that everyone else who could write a verse play seems to have written a King Arthur play.

The other thing that I want to make known is that, purposely, Nick and I did not over-study the texts. We were reading them kind of lukewarm, not entirely cold. But we did this purposely so that the playwrights had no place to hide. If the verse is good, then someone who is accomplished at cold reading, which is its own skill and some people have it and some people don’t – it is neither a virtue nor a vice – but if you want to test out whether your verse is working, get someone who can do a cold or a lukewarm reading and see how it affects them, because there’s no place to hide. No director has done work to make your verse better. No actors have done work to make your verse better. That’s how we are going to be approaching these texts.

Now, something that I want to say before we listen to this very early text is that this is not a good play. (laughs) Sorry, it's not a good play, and I don't want you, the listener, to think that you're the crazy one when we start reading these lines. You may very well immediately start going, "Wait, hold on. Stop. What are you saying? What are you saying?" Let that happen to you. There is a problem with the verse in this play. You're going to hear it as soon as we start speaking, because you're going to have difficulty even hearing it. That's going to be valuable. So hang on. When we get to later plays, there are other plays that use verse better. But this is very early baby beginning blank verse plays. (sighs) We're all going to hang in there, okay? With that, off we go. *Misfortunes of Arthur*.

**EMILY.** Ready?

**NICK.** Pick it up and read it. Here we go.

**EMILY.** Here we go.

**MORDRED.** I see mine end draws on, I feel my plagues.

**GUENEVERA.** No plague for one ill-born to die as ill.

**MORDRED.** O Queen! my sweet associate in this plunge  
And desperate plight, behold, the time is come,  
That either justifies our former faults,  
Or shortly sets us free from every fear.

**GUENEVERA.** My fear is past, and wedlock love hath won.  
Retire we thither yet, whence first we ought  
Not to have stirr'd. Call back chaste faith again.  
The way that leads to good is ne'er too late:  
Who so repents is guiltless of his crimes.

**MORDRED.** What means this course? Is Arthur's wedlock safe,  
Or can he love, that hath just cause to hate?  
That nothing else were to be fear'd:  
Is most apparent, that he hates at home,  
Whate'er he be whose fancy strays abroad.  
Think, then, our love is not unknown to him,  
Whereof what patience can be safely hop'd?  
Nor love nor sovereignty can bear a peer.

**GUENEVERA.** Why dost thou still stir up my flames delay'd?  
His strays and errors must not move my mind:  
A law for private men binds not the king.  
What, that I ought not to condemn my liege,  
Nor can, thus guilty to mine own offence!  
Where both have done amiss, both will relent:  
He will forgive that needs must be forgiven.

**MORDRED.** A likely thing, your faults must make you friends;  
What sets you both at odds must join you both.  
Think well, he casts already for revenge,  
And how to plague us both. I know his law;  
A judge severe to us, mild to himself.  
What then avails you to return too late,  
When you have passed too far? You feed vain hopes.

**GUENEVERA.** The further past, the more this fault is yours.  
It served your turn t' usurp your father's crown:  
His is the crime, whom crime stands most in stead.

**MORDRED.** They that conspire in faults offend alike:  
Crime makes them equal, whom it jointly stains.  
If for my sake you then pertook my guilt,  
You cannot guiltless seem: the crime was joint.

**GUENEVERA.** Well should she seem most guiltless unto thee,  
Whate'er she be, that's guilty for thy sake.  
The remnant of that sober mind, which thou  
Had'st heretofore ne'er vanquish'd, yet resists.  
Suppress, for shame, that impious mouth so taught,  
And so much skill'd t' abuse the wedded bed.  
Look back to former fates: Troy still had stood,  
Had not her prince made light of wedlock's lore.  
The vice that threw down Troy doth threat thy throne.  
Take heed: there Mordred stands, whence Paris fell.  
*(Exits.)*

**NICK.** Exeunt.

**EMILY.** Exeunt. What did you get from that? What were you feeling from the inside there?

**NICK.** When I'm reading... I guess, in this case, reading Mordred, a lot of his words, just how it felt in my mouth, felt very blockish. Does that make sense? It felt very...

**EMILY.** Yeah. No, same.

**NICK.** I'm not sure that he has half the beautiful language of some lover in a verse play. Do you know what I mean?

**EMILY.** I mean, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" That actually feels light on my tongue.

**NICK.** Yeah, that feels right in your mouth. Yeah, you feel like a lover. This does not. This feels very blockish, very rhythmic, but not in a musical sense, just in a plodding-on sort of sense, right?

**EMILY.** It feels like all spondees.

**NICK.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** It feels like I'm just hammering away. I was finding... There were tongue twisters, but not fun tongue twisters.

**NICK.** Exactly.

**EMILY.** I was also finding I was having difficulty following the argument sometimes.

**NICK.** Agreed, yeah. Yes.

**EMILY.** I could see it. They're talking about guilt and whatnot, which is going to be a huge topic. (laughs) But sometimes I was like, "What's the antecedent? Who's 'she?' Am I 'she?'" Does Mordred have a lover in this? Are we talking about the country?"

**NICK.** Does Mordred have a woman? Also, are we talking about, does some of this refer to Arthur and maybe we're not picking it up? Are we actually...

**EMILY.** Yeah. There was one that sounded like we're talking that Arthur's guilty, but then we're not.

**NICK.** Yeah. (laughs) Where is this?

I know his law;  
A judge severe to us, mild to himself.

**EMILY.** Actually, I liked that line. I did like that line.

**NICK.** I did, and I was like, “I know what I’m saying here.” (laughs) And that’s why I liked it. I was like, “Okay, this feels right.”

**EMILY.** Right? (laughs) Right? And it was fun to mention Troy at the end, because I’m like, “Oh, I like that,” but I’m also like...

**NICK.** For what?

**EMILY.** I kind of wish we’d started there.

**NICK.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Okay, so what am I... I guess I’m not sure what I’m trying to say to Mordred, other than... I get intellectually that I’m saying to him, “Hey, look, I’ve sinned. Don’t you sin. We’ve already sinned against Arthur. Let’s not sin again.” You know, “Turn back, O man.”

**NICK.**

The further past, the more this fault is yours.

**EMILY.** Yeah, but I’m so calm about it all. (laughs)

**NICK.** I felt the same way. I didn’t feel stirred to... I felt if I were to put some sort of energy and urgency behind this, it wouldn’t feel right in my mouth in terms of how the text was feeling. Does that make sense?

**EMILY.** 100%, and I notice, too, you were taking it fairly like this (snaps), and I was thinking, this is a slow scene. You almost can’t...

**NICK.** Where is the urgency, right? Yeah.

**EMILY.** I’ve been thinking about that word, urgency, because that was the thing that we discovered in the creation of *The Table Round*, is that everything’s so urgent. There’s no time for plotting, at least as we discovered. This doesn’t have to be true, but this is what we discovered, and which I feel like the people in the 1800s are going to give us as well, is it’s just all happening and you’re just going to react.

**NICK.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Whereas this is very much like, “I’ve got all the time in the world. Oh, and Camelot might fall. But I’ve got all the time in the world.” (laughs)

**NICK.** (laughs) But I've got all the time in the world to say these blocks of text to you. I think that's also a key here. I mean, looking at it, once you really get into the conversation between the two of them, these are large chunks, and a lot of the lines – I'm looking here. I want to say half of Mordred's lines, all of the syllables are because there are 10 single-syllable words in his lines.

**EMILY.** You're right. There is very few multisyllabic words.

**NICK.** Multisyllabic words, yeah.

**EMILY.** If you also look, they don't trade any half lines at all.

**NICK.** Uh-uh.

**EMILY.** So they're talking at each other, and I felt that.

**NICK.** Yeah, you feel like they're not necessarily responding to what they're hearing.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**NICK.** It almost feels pre-planned, this speech, but you happen to not even cut each other off, but speak in between while we're piecing together this sort of speech we've planned.

**EMILY.** You're waiting for the other person to finish talking, for you to pick up your own argument. Yeah, there's not a tennis match of we're arguing over something.

**NICK.** Yeah. I guess they feel like peers, but not necessarily peers that are speaking to each other or hearing each other, if that makes sense.

**EMILY.** I don't feel like either of them come in with a possibility of being swayed.

**NICK.** I'm with that too. Yeah, it feels to me like all of the questions that are asked, it doesn't seem like there's any hesitancy in their, I guess we can call it argument, even though to me it doesn't always feel like an argument as much as just a statement.

**EMILY.** Right, right.

**NICK.** But yeah, any of the question marks here that I'm looking at in terms of punctuation, most of this is just...

**EMILY.** They're very statement, statement, statement, statement.

**NICK.** Statement, statement, statement, yeah, exactly, as if all of these are, we already know how this scene ends before we've started it.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and what's curious is this is actually from Act I. It's scene 4 of Act I. Act I is all about Guinevere, and the whole play is like this, where it's chunks of perfect text. (laughs)

**NICK.** Yeah. Where's the play? You know what I mean?

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**NICK.** Where is the... I don't want to say... Where is the play, as in where is the lightness?

**EMILY.** It's good verse.

**NICK.** Yes, the verse is kind of perfect, right? Like we were talking about, it's perfect, but it feels very plastic. It doesn't feel like there's depth to it. It doesn't feel like there's play to it, and when I say play, I just mean a lightness, like we're going somewhere with this. It feels like we have to kind of pick up the dropped mic after every single line.

**EMILY.** Yeah. I felt that I was really pushing the energy just because I'm like, "I've got to push this energy," because if I pick up on your length, then you're going to pick up on mine. It was hard to throw the energy to each other, which I don't think is going to be a problem for the next one.

**FUTURE EMILY.** And, in fact, it's not a problem in the next play that we're going to look at, but we're not going to look at the next play chronologically until next time. What we are going to do is we'll take a little break, and then when we come back, I'm going to break down in a bit more detail what, on a verse level, in this case, wasn't quite working and why. See you in a second.

[music]

**CHA.** Hey there. I'm Cha Ramos, and I will be teaching the Boundaries and Needs class in partnership with Turn to Flesh Productions. This course is a six-part series designed to help you get into better communication with your own boundaries and needs in the privacy and comfort of your home. So often nowadays, we're being asked in rehearsal rooms and on film sets and in contract negotiations about our boundaries and needs so that we can do our best work, and that's really exciting. But so few of us have actually had the opportunity to figure those things out by ourselves and for ourselves and with ourselves so that we can know how to answer those questions. This class will give you some concrete tools. We'll do some movement exercises, some guided meditations, and have some discussions about how you can begin to discover those things

and examine them and practice them regularly for yourself. We will meet once a month on Saturdays on Zoom, often with our cameras off for some of these exercises, and you're welcome to join for one class here and there or for the whole six-part series. The idea is to better equip you to bring your whole self to your art and to your workspaces, no matter how you identify as an artist. If you want some more information about the class or about me, there's a lot to read on the Turn to Flesh website, on social media, and of course you are welcome to reach out with questions at any time. I'm really excited to do this work with all of you in community, and I hope to see you in class. Until then, take care.

[music out]

**EMILY.** Welcome back. Let's take this third part of the episode to briefly look at this verse using the tools of the tool boudoir. As mentioned before, this is in what would be generally considered "perfect iambic pentameter." You can't see me, but I'm doing air quotes around that. If we were to do our scansion work, we would see that this is in a strict repeated meter of iambs, which are set up in pentameter, that is five strong beats. For example, Guenevera is the name of the queen in this one, and her first line is:

**GUENEVERA.** No plágue for óne ill-bórn to díe as íll.

Mordred comes back with:

**MORDRED.** O Quéen! my swéet assóciate ín this plúnge

Ooh, very exciting.

And désperate plíght, behóld, the tíme is cóme,  
That éither jústífies our fórmér fáults,  
Or shórtly séts us frée from évery féar.

If you were to go through pretty much the entire play, you would find this singsong iambic pentameter blank verse through the entire thing. It's perfect repeated meter.

But as you heard, that perfect repeated meter didn't tell us anything about our character. There were no shared lines, which meant that we kept dropping the uvriel. We kept dropping the energy. It also meant that it was very hard to generate energy as the actor in our own piece. That actually comes down to something that we haven't talked as much about, because it's something that's just true for all playwriting, which is that playwriting is a form that is listened to. The way that most people receive a play, hopefully, is by it being enacted in front of you, which means that you're not reading the script, you are hearing the words. For most plays – at least at this time in 2021, if theatre does happen, as we're hopefully towards the end of a global pandemic – but a lot of theatres, for

example, don't have supertitles or subtitles to read along with it as if it were a movie. Generally, there's not a sign language interpreter, if that's something that you can read. There's no way to get the text except to get it in real time.

What that means is I mentioned the word "antecedents." Now, for those of you who need to brush up on your English, an antecedent merely means that you essentially have said what the noun is, what the subject is, what the thesis statement is. For example, if I were constructing a play, it would be very important for me to say the subject of what I'm speaking about first. I might say, "Emily has walked into the room," or, "Lo, hither comes Emily," if we're going to be a little fancy about it. "Emily" now is my antecedent. "Emily" is the noun, is the subject that we are going to talk about. From here on out, I can use all sorts of different euphemisms to talk about Emily. I could say, "See where she comes." I can use a pronoun. I can say, "What girl is that?" I know I'm still talking about Emily. I could just describe her: "See how the raiment becomes the noble form." I don't know, something like that. But the idea is I've said my antecedent. I've said my thesis statement, and now I can talk about it in poetry, in verse, whatever I want to do.

The major problem, honestly, in this verse is that the thesis statement is never said. We're very rarely given anchors, as actors or as audience, as to what we're talking about. If you want to contrast this, one of the reasons why I think we both went to Romeo, actually, even though Romeo kind of has nothing to do with Mordred in King Arthur, but the "But soft, what light through yonder window springs" – breaks. Springs? Wow. (laughs) That speech is really well set up with antecedents. You say:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

What's the antecedent there? It's the light. We know what we're looking at. We know what we're thinking about. Then he clarifies the antecedent:

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Then he builds off of that:

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon

He keeps introducing not just pronouns, but definitive objects, and objects that are sort of built off each other. If you're going to take a look at this text, even if you read it without just listening to it so you can take all the time in the world to do all sorts of analyses, the problem is that in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, Sir Thomas Hughes never lays out what his antecedent is. He's not alone in this. I find that Fletcher, who studied under Shakespeare, also never uses antecedents.

Curiously enough, rule number one of playwriting is be really, really, really obvious. Even if you're writing in a heightened text, even if you're writing poetry, be really obvious about what you're writing about. Then you can be poetical. You can't start with the poetry and then hope someone understands the antecedent. You have to start with the antecedent, anchor us, then you can talk about it.

The other thing that I would say, just in terms of verse for this particular piece – and again, it's the reason why we, I think as Shakespeareans, automatically went to something that felt more natural – which is

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

is actually, you do want to think about tongue placement as a playwright. What does that mean? English is an accentual syllabic language. That means that it's not just syllables. As Nick was pointing out, many of these were not multisyllabic words, so it was very dun-dun-dun-dun-dun. Each vowel was kind of of the same length. That's not fluid in the English language. In the English language, we like short vowels next to long vowels. "But soft," "but" is a short vowel. "Soft" is a long vowel. "But soft, what," "what" is a short vowel. "Light" is a longer vowel. "Through" is a little bit long, but "through yon," and the other thing, too, is that just saying it, it actually is kind of nice to have it in your mouth, literally.

If you're going to take a look at this, go ahead and read the Romeo speech, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks." See how it feels on your tongue and in your mouth as you're making these sounds. Then take a moment and try reading aloud – not just in your mind, but aloud – the Sir Thomas Hughes lines. I'll take Guinevere's first few lines in his speech.

My fear is past, and wedlock love hath won.

Just that line is actually difficult to wrap your lips around the consonants.

My fear is past

That's fine.

and wedlock love hath won.

is like blah. (laughs)

Retire we thither yet,

"Retire we" and then "thither," these are not where my mouth wants to go next. It's ugly, and it means that I'm focused, as an actor, on just saying the words in the correct order. The words are not actually assisting me. They're not getting out of my way, basically, for me to do the acting. They're not supporting my acting.

They're an impediment to my acting because they're literally difficult to say, and that's not... He's not trying to make Guinevere be tripping over her words. It's not intentional. It's just intrusive.

If you want to go for a deeper dive, all of you who are musical theatre people, take a look at any tongue twister song, such as the "Major General" from *Pirates of Penzance* or "Getting Married Today" from Stephen Sondheim's *Company*. Stephen Sondheim himself talked about vowel placement and consonant placement when he talked about that song. This is from *Finishing the Hat*, Stephen Sondheim's collection of lyrics, and he also has commentary on his lyrics. He says of "Getting Married Today:"

I wrote this song just before the show began its tryout in Boston and never had the chance to polish it properly. The patter sections may seem difficult to sing in one breath as they ought to be sung, but in fact, they're calculated to alternate vowel and consonant sounds in such a way as to make them easy for the tongue, teeth, and breath to articulate.

He was basing it off of "The Modern Major General," which in fact is sampled in *Hamilton*, so even if you think you don't know the song, you probably know the song.

For example, "Modern Major General" goes:

I am the very model of a modern major general.

Right? That's the famous first line. Try saying that. You actually find that it's fun to spit it out. If we look at one of my favorite parts of this one, of "Not Getting Married Today," we have:

Listen everybody, I'm afraid you didn't hear  
Or do you want to see a crazy lady fall apart in front of you?  
It isn't only Paul who would be ruining his life  
You know, we'll both of us be losing our identities  
I telephoned my analyst about it, and he said to see him Monday  
But by Monday I'll be floating in the Hudson with the other garbage.

Actually, doing it, all of it stays literally on the tip of my tongue, both the vowels and the consonants.

Similarly, if you want to take a look, go ahead and listen to some Eminem or Busta Rhymes. How do they go so fast? It's because they are – and I'm not even going to try to cover them. That would be inappropriate. But it's because they're serious about, basically, how to spit, about cadence, about how long the vowel is, how short it is, the repetition of consonants and why that works, how it allows you to go faster than you thought you could. Not that speaking verse needs to be

always fast, but it does need to be fluid. One way to check your fluidity is to think of your verse as a patter song, to think of the consonants, to think of the vowels.

Now, I wanted to say all this because frequently when we approach verse plays – especially when we’re taught Shakespeare, for example – we’re told in the culture that if you don’t understand it, then you’re just stupid, and if you do understand it, then you have higher reasoning functions and whatnot. But I have to tell you, I’ve done *Troilus and Cressida* a number of times, and Shakespeare seems to have forgotten all about antecedents in that play. Ulysses will go on and on and on and on and on and on and on in perfect iambic pentameter blank verse, and with the exception of exactly one actor, who did a lot of work to make it intelligible, every time I listen to it or I read it, I’m like, “This makes no sense, Bill. You have written this poorly, and it’s because you never used a single antecedent. You never anchored us.”

If, for example, you’re someone that’s studying Shakespeare right now or had to study Shakespeare in the past and you’ve always felt like maybe you’re a little stupid because you aren’t picking it up, it could be that the verse is a little... not great. Sometimes verse is not great. But the way to make your verse great is go ahead and be obvious. Use that antecedent. Consider shared lines. We’re going to talk more about shared lines in future episodes. Consider varying your rhythm, your meter. Repeated meter may not be what you need. Consider, as well, vowel and consonant placement. Prioritize those over hitting perfect iambs, right? It doesn’t need to be ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM. It needs to be fluid in the actor’s mouth, and the words needs to support the emotion rather than getting in the way of building character.

Okay, next time we’re going to look at some really fun ones. We’re going to have to skip ahead a few centuries, but I’ll cover what you miss in between as we continue “Arthur Through the Ages,” here on *Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama*. See you next time.

[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 plays 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 our patron Madeleine Farley for helping to produce this episode. 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.