

Stage Talk

There is a funny moment at the beginning of *The Case Is Altered*, Ben Jonson's early comedy of humors, when the cobbler Juniper is summoned to work and briefly addresses his clothes: "Lie there, ye weeds that I disdain to wear."¹ The line comes from *Tamburlaine*, Christopher Marlowe's tragedy of overreaching, but the humor of the moment comes from the gap that separates character and intertext. Conscripted into service and singing songs no one wants to hear, Juniper is a far cry from the shepherd who takes Asia by storm. In fact, it would seem that by 1597 (the year that Jonson's comedy was probably first performed), the trope of the servant who talks *Tamburlaine* to feel tough had become something of a joke.² To quote Marlowe's play was merely to underscore the distance that separated play world from real world, poetic flourish from prosaic command. That distance is the stuff of Jonson's comedy. It is also the subject of this chapter. Although scholars have finely delineated the cultural and historical appeal that *Tamburlaine* held for its audiences, chronicling the reasons playgoers like Juniper would want to quote its verses, they have only passingly acknowledged the strange static electricity that gets generated when the language of Marlowe's play is brought into ordinary social interactions.

That disconnect is a direct result of *Tamburlaine's* style, perhaps the most important example of the "grand" or "high" style to grace the early modern stage, the signature features of which become readily apparent in the passage from which Juniper takes his citation:³

¹ Ben Jonson, *The Case Is Altered*, 1.1.21.

² Here and elsewhere, I use *Tamburlaine* as a shorthand for both the original tragedy and its sequel.

³ On *Tamburlaine* and the grand style, see Sylvia Adamson, "The Grand Style," in *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language: A Guide*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Lynette Hunter, Lynne Magnusson, Ann Thompson, and Katie Wales (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001), 31–50.

ZENOCRATE: I am, my lord, for so you do import.

TAMBURLAINE: I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove;

And yet a shepherd by my parentage.

But, lady, this fair face and heavenly hue

Must grace his bed that conquers Asia,

And means to be a terror of the world,

Measuring the limits of his empery

By east and west, as Phoebus doth his course –

Lie here, ye weeds, that I disdain to wear!

This complete armor and this curtle-ax

Are adjuncts more beseeing Tamburlaine.

And madam, whatsoever you esteem

Of this success, and loss unvalued,

Both may invest you empress of the East;

And these that seem but silly country swains

May have the leading of so great an host

As with their weight shall make the mountains quake,

Even as when windy exhalations,

Fighting for passage, tilt within the earth.

(*Tamburlaine the Great*, 232–247)⁴

A capacious if not quite exhaustive anatomy of so mesmerizing a mode might look as follows. First, it is characterized by a hard iambic beat. Second, there is a close correspondence between the end of syntactic and poetic units, which sees *Tamburlaine's* lines get firmly end-stopped. Third, the style's hypnotic rhythm is sustained by a careful coordination between Anglo-Saxon monosyllables and polysyllabic words of more far-flung origins ("emperry," "exhalations," "Phoebus," "Tamburlaine"), the former of which provide a kind of background against which the latter can shine like precious objects, momentarily accelerating the rhythm of their lines before the pause that concludes them. Fourth, sonic echoes tend to repeat within the space of a single line, as in the near-rhyme between "here" and "wear," or "weight" and "quake," creating an incantatory effect that elsewhere finds its consummation in epistrophic repetitions of the same word at the end of different lines. Finally, the style is distinguished by a syntax that enlists sentences of relative simplicity – "I am a lord," "this fair face . . . must grace his bed," the bare imperative of "lie there" – to serve as the pegs on which more elaborate modifying clauses can be hung with relative ease, demonstrating the fundamentally adjectival structure of *Tamburlaine's* style, by which I mean not simply that the language is

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all citations of *Tamburlaine* and *Tamburlaine Part II* are taken from *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. C. F. Tucker Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

marked by a preponderance of adjectives (which it frequently though not always is), but that even larger grammatical units do not so much push the language forward as suspend it by elaborating on what has already been said, often through descriptors that testify to their speaker's sheer oratorical competence.

This list could go on. It could include Tamburlaine's penchant for hyperbole and self-aggrandizement, his tendency to dwell in the future tense, his constant recourse to imperatives and epideictic descriptions.⁵ Yet so far as *Tamburlaine's* style is concerned, what presses itself upon us and is therefore most important to our understanding is not so much a list of formal features as the rousing incorporation of those formal features into a single style of talk. To say that *Tamburlaine's* style is iambic *and* hyperbolic *and* heavily end-stopped *and* sonically resonant *and* constantly elaborating on itself is to say that it cannot be reduced to any single formal achievement, since the formal achievement is the combination of formal achievements. It is this sense of formal achievement that *Tamburlaine's* style is crafted to broadcast with every iambic line. Indeed, it is hard to shake the sense of unspoken satisfaction that Tamburlaine takes in delivering these lines, each of which has the air of a speaker admiring his own oratorical proficiency. What makes *Tamburlaine's* style is not simply its particular form but a density of form that projects a mastery of form. The style is the emblem, at heart, of verbal, oratorical, stylistic skill.

So it is interesting to note that the very formal features that make this style into an emblem of rhetorical competence are also exactly what evince Juniper's lack of it. We might say that the issue is one of decorum, since this consummate example of theatrical "high" style is getting brought into the decidedly ungrand setting of a cobbler's workshop (and, also, of a comedy). But to leave it at that would also miss the mark, for such a description would omit the mediating role that theater has to play here. More than just a mismatch of style to occasion, Juniper's citation is a higher-order version of a scene we have already considered in this book's introduction: the scene in which one character accuses another of memorizing beforehand lines that are delivered with seemingly extemporal polish. Like Katherina accusing Petruchio of rehearsing the decorated language he uses to seduce her, Jonson is asking us to laugh at Juniper for using the theater to do his talking for him. Specifically, he is asking us to laugh at Juniper for drawing on one of the most rhetorically overlaid

⁵ For a thoroughgoing anatomy of Tamburlaine's style, see Tucker Brooke, "Marlowe's Versification and Style," *Studies in Philology* 19 (1922): 186–205.

styles of the theater as an emblem of discursive polish. The problem is that that style is so formally marked and so conspicuously removed from the rhythms of ordinary conversation that it cannot be appreciated as anything *other* than the language of the stage. In fact, as Charles Whitney observes, there is a knowing wistfulness to Juniper's quotation, which communicates the tacit awareness that Marlowe's overtly theatrical language is really just that – the language of a play.⁶ Juniper's tone is instructive, for it suggests that irony is only way to lighten the rather weighty affective load of *Tamburlaine's* lines and communicate the recognition that the language one cites is not actually one's own, merely a nod to the stage from which it was taken. As a necessary counter-balance to what Catherine Nicholson has called the improbable "eccentricity" of Marlowe's style, irony merely reveals, by opposing, how distant *Tamburlaine's* language is from ordinary speech.⁷ Instead of talk, *Tamburlaine* offers a kind of anti-talk – or what I am calling "stage talk."

Stage talk is not just language that is uttered on the stage. Rather, it is a style of talk so spectacularly overwrought, so formally elaborate, and so rhetorically demanding that it can *only* be uttered on the stage – precisely because it so formalizes ordinary talk as to stand at a marked remove from it. We can accordingly define stage talk as follows: stage talk is a style that makes theater out of one's own mastery of style by generating a density of formal coherence in place of the messiness and incoherence of form that ordinary talk entails. As Erving Goffman has proposed, "[e]very transmission of signals through a channel is necessarily subject to 'noise,' namely, transmissions that aren't part of the intended signal and reduce its clarity."⁸ So far as conversation is concerned, this noise takes the form of interruptions, overlaps, false starts, rewinds, lapses, slips, spoonerisms, mispronunciations, stutters, gaffes, hesitations, awkward pauses, embarrassing boners, and other influences. And yet we manage to filter out such static as extraneous to the conversation at hand, often with such success that we might find ourselves surprised to discover their inclusion in a transcript or recording of what we had just experienced.⁹ In fact, our

⁶ Charles Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21.

⁷ Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2014), especially 124–163 and 164–172.

⁸ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 181.

⁹ In addition to Goffman, see also Donald S. Boomer and John D. M. Laver, "Slips of the Tongue," *British Journal of Disorders of Communication* 3 (1968): 2–11; and Patricia Clancy, "Analysis of a Conversation," *Anthropological Linguistics* 13 (1972): 78–86. What Goffman and his interlocutors are all describing is a conversational instance, enacted in real time, of what Greg Urban and Michael Silverstein call "entextualization," the process whereby a given strip of discourse is rendered as a text

capacities to disattend to such conversational noise allows us to project a kind of idealized version – a perfected and abstracted text – of what fluent conversation looks like. As Goffman goes on to argue, our abstract entextualizations of our own conversations constitute the basis for subsequent representations of speech. Think, for example, of plays or novels, where the controlled chaos of turn-taking is refined and modulated into the back-and-forth ping-pong of stichomythia, repartee, or simply dialogue that has been regimented into clear strips of turn-taking.¹⁰ In this way, representations of talk idealize by excising the noise that defines it. The result is a kind of purity of form that imparts to idealized representations of talk the special status of a standard – a standard of speech that in turn engenders bids for competency, fluency, and polish in spoken interactions. It follows that representations of talk such as early modern dramatic scripts are worth studying not because of the special light they cast on actual, early modern habits of speech, but because they constitute, indeed play up, standards of competence for early modern audiences and readers to match in their own conversations – and fail to match.

Stage talk aestheticizes, by raising to a fever pitch, the idealization of form that subtends any representation of speech, but especially early modern representations of speech, in which the written word provides a sort of model of composure to which speech can aspire.¹¹ This happens through an assiduous purification of the noise that defines ordinary talk – interruptions, mispronunciations, false starts, gaffes are gone – so that the poetic function can be activated with such emphasis as to impart to every utterance the most conspicuous formal coherence. In this respect, the style emphasizes what is latent in the other styles of talk this book will consider, which likewise seek to purify speech of its attendant static in their bids for

“detachable from its local context,” a process that turns out to involve the deletion and addition of words for the sake of maximal discursive coherence. Greg Urban and Michael Silverstein, eds., *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21.

¹⁰ As Goffman puts it, while stage acting “[o]stensibly exhibit[s] the temporal sequencing of natural conversation, actors in fact inhibit the overlapping found in such talk and build in pauses between turns to allow audiences to ‘respond’ without this response interfering with audibility.” Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 241, n. 29. We do well to remember that theatrical dialogue is not always purely regimented. Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern have demonstrated the ways theatrical cues can be enlisted to produce interruptions and other conversational overlaps. Yet even these choreographed interruptions, being momentary and engineered for the audience’s uptake, are but idealized versions of the real thing. Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ For important studies of the way text provides a model for early modern habits of speech, see Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in the Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 142–174; and Ian Munro, “Shakespeare’s Jestbook: Wit, Print, Performance,” *ELH* 71 (2004): 89–113.

formal competence. Yet the sheer emphasis that stage talk puts on display makes it into a form of hyperfluency, which is to say, a form of talk that is too poetic, too skilled, too polished, *too good* to pass for ordinary talk. Uttered on stage, this masterfully copious style gets avidly accepted by its auditors as a refinement of talk that is also a model for it. Indeed, the actor who delivers this hyperfluent language to a crowd of strangers gathered together in an open-air amphitheater constitutes something like an animating fantasy of the period, which is the fantasy that a style of talk can turn one from a stranger into a spectacle for other strangers to imitate and to identify with – to identify with, indeed, through imitation. It is for this reason that figures like Juniper crop up repeatedly in early modern drama, seeking as they do to arrogate for themselves something of the resplendent theatricality that stage talk confers on the actor who utters it.

But when we move from onstage utterances of stage talk to offstage imitations of it, we confront a mirror image of the “parasitism” that ensues when performative speech-acts, by J. L. Austin’s account, are brought *onto* the stage – the linguistic short-circuit known as “unhappiness.” Though in this case, it is an infelicity that throws into relief the awkward mismatch between play text and con-text, between extravagant theatrical verse and prosaic social world.¹² Central to understanding what makes stage talk “work” and also what makes it “fail” is distance: the distance that the physical structure of the playhouse establishes between spectacle and spectator, and the distance that stage talk reflexively creates in turn. In stage talk, an improbable and for that reason aspirational mastery of language flourishes in tandem with its own mediation, giving the physical distance that the stage interposes between actor and audience a verbal form. As a verbal analog to the physical barrier that separates any stage from its audience, stage talk turns the subject from a speaker who can be addressed into a spectacle who cannot. This effect has everything to do with the hyperfluency that stage talk so theatrically projects. Its operative surplus of skill is so formally removed from ordinary talk that it can be appreciated only when it is kept at a physical remove from ordinary interaction. The stage is an apparatus that maintains such distance. That is why stage talk fails so frequently when it is taken off the stage: It creates a distance that cannot be maintained, because it presupposes a distance that

¹² J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For an application of Austinian speech-act theory to early modern literature, see David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

isn't there. Such failures only reveal the secret to stage talk's success. By abstracting the speaker from audiences, it makes the speaker available to them as an object of vicarious engagement.

Stage talk thus inaugurates *The Pursuit of Style in Early Modern Drama* by underscoring the friction that attends so many attempts to import theatrically represented styles of talk into real-life interactions, a friction that has everything to do with a hyperfluency that undoes itself by bearing too legibly the mark of its own theatrical origins. Although Evelyn Tribble has illuminated the centrality of nonlinguistic skill to the early modern theater – focusing on dancing, sword-fighting, and other embodied acts that are practically occluded by early modern scripts – there is no compelling reason to exclude language from our understanding of early modern theatrical enskillment.¹³ After all, as Thomas Heywood noted, “where a good tongue and a good conceit both fail, there can never be a good actor.”¹⁴ To attend to stage talk is to account for how a style of talk functions as a standard of skill – a model of discursive competence – even as it is also to account for how such an ostentatious surplus of skill comes to signal its opposite. Routed through the stage, the pursuit of style in early modern England gets undone by its own fulfilment, as the improbable reduction of noise ends up producing another kind of noise altogether.

Distant Relations

By quoting Marlowe's tragedy, Juniper makes himself into a paradigmatic mouthpiece of what Thomas Cartelli has called the “Tamburlaine phenomenon.”¹⁵ Exerting an almost planetary pull on everything in its orbit, the Tamburlaine phenomenon was the early modern equivalent of rock concert hysteria. By its rapturous power, the declamatory acting style of Edward Alleyn – don of Elizabethan acting, first celebrity player of his age, and the man who brought Marlowe's scourge to life – was vaunted into a touchstone for dramatic criticism of the period.¹⁶ By its power, too, a flurry of tragedies featuring ambitious conquerors and bombastic blank

¹³ Evelyn Tribble, “Skill,” in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 173–189.

¹⁴ Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (London, 1612), sig. E3r.

¹⁵ Thomas Cartelli, *Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 67–93.

¹⁶ On Edward Alleyn's celebrity and career, see S. P. Cerasano, “Edward Alleyn, the New Model Actor, and the Rise of the Celebrity in the 1590s,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2005): 47–58.

verse glutted the playhouses of its day, including Marlowe's own sequel.¹⁷ And by its power, most remarkably, playgoers like Juniper reproduce the tragedy's most memorable lines far beyond the playhouse where it was performed.¹⁸ Their many citations are a testament to how the Tamburlaine phenomenon flourished at the intersection between two defining historical conditions of the period: on the one hand, humanism's celebration of stylistic polish and, on the other, the emergence of the public amphitheater as a new playgoing experience that brought together crowds of anonymous strangers on a daily basis. In Marlowe's Tamburlaine, playgoers like Juniper discovered a figure whose unparalleled linguistic skill made him into an avatar for the audience that gathered around him – into an avatar, in other words, of publicness.

The interest of this chapter is in tracing the aesthetic logic of the Tamburlaine phenomenon in order to show how it reveals an important relation that was emerging at this time between style, the theater, and early modern experiences of publicness. The last of these items, in fact, gets obliquely registered in critical responses from the period, which suggest that the Tamburlaine phenomenon was intimately bound up with a new sort of social experience. Richard Jones, the play's first printer, noted with some disdain that "conceited fondlings greatly gaped" at the spectacle of Edward Alleyn strutting across the stage in his red velvet pants. Joseph Hall sneered at the "dead-stroke audience" who was "ravishe[d]" by Tamburlaine's "frightful shows."¹⁹ And Ben Jonson likewise scoffed at the "ignorant gapers" who were enthralled by "the Tamerlanes and Tamer-Chams of the late Age."²⁰ As this little list suggests, responses to *Tamburlaine* were not unanimous, but whether one was seduced by its charms or contemptuous of them, the Tamburlaine phenomenon was first and foremost a phenomenon of social gatherings. It manifested itself in crowds, in audiences, in "gapers" – in group-words and plural nouns of all sorts – because it was an experience of mass intersubjectivity conducted through a figure of singular presence, the self-made hero of Marlowe's

¹⁷ On the many plays written in imitation of *Tamburlaine*, see Peter Berek, "Tamburlaine's Weak Sons: Imitation and Interpretation before 1593," *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 55–83; James P. Bednarz, "Marlowe and the English Literary Scene," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90–105; and Scott McMillan and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 158–168.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive assessment of the many early modern citations of *Tamburlaine*, see also Richard Levin, "The Contemporary Reception of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984): 51–70.

¹⁹ Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum* (London, 1597), sigs. B3v–B4r. ²⁰ Jonson, *Discoveries*, 526.

tragedy. As a product of collective experience, the Tamburlaine phenomenon offers an early modern example of “effervescence,” Emile Durkheim’s term for the rapturous exaltation that is generated by crowds when they are organized around some totemic figure – a totemic figure that is imputed the larger-than-life status of the crowd that worships it.²¹ Durkheim’s religious concept applies only too well to the secular social energies that characterize the Tamburlaine phenomenon. It too is a phenomenon of collective experience, an affective relay opened up between audience and actor, between the many and the one. It too results in a rapture, transporting playgoers from out of themselves and into the throes of collective experience.

It makes sense that the Tamburlaine phenomenon should be so bound up with crowds. Wherever the tragedy made its debut – either at the Theatre in Shoreditch or at the Rose – the Tamburlaine phenomenon is a register of the swirling social energies that the early modern amphitheater produced by gathering together crowds of anonymous strangers. But the Tamburlaine phenomenon is about more than being part of a crowd, for crowds were to be found long before and long after Marlowe’s tragedy made its debut. Rather, the Tamburlaine phenomenon is the register of the new and acute experience of publicness that the early modern theater produced.²² What was new and acute about this experience was not only that going to the theater meant coming into contact with other strangers as such a stranger oneself – though that certainly was the case. Rather, what was new and acute about the Tamburlaine phenomenon was that it was an experience of publicness mediated by – and conducted through – the theater. A reflexivity lies at the core of this early modern episode in mass hysteria. When playgoers referred to Tamburlaine, or mocked him, and above all quoted his language, they were partaking for themselves in the strange capacity of this character – and the theater of which he was a representative – to give the mass and abstract experience of publicness a local habitation and a name, to conduct that experience through anonymous figures of nevertheless singular presence.²³ When Michael Warner

²¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 158–168.

²² On the potential venues of *Tamburlaine*, see Roslyn L. Knutson, “Marlowe in Repertory 1587–1593,” in *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, ed. Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), 27.

²³ This is not at all to suggest that audiences were entirely unfamiliar with the actors who performed before them. The example of Allyn’s celebrity is enough to suggest the notoriety that actors enjoyed through performance. The point, rather, is that audiences came to “know” Allyn and other

writes that “all discourse or performance addressed to a public” is “poetic” in the sense that it seeks to “characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate,” he is describing the important part that style has to play in any public, the salient character of which always exceeds explicit reference or semantic content.²⁴ In the case of the Tamburlaine phenomenon, the reflexive interplay between style and public – whereby the former seeks to give shape to the latter – is uncommonly aggravated by the experience of distance – physical, affective, and, as we will see, linguistic – that distinguished the public amphitheatre. *Tamburlaine* is early modern England’s consummate instance of stage talk, because it works so programmatically to codify a style of speech that will give verbal form to this distance.

The argument this chapter will be putting forward is that the Tamburlaine phenomenon is above all an effect of this distance, and that that distance was realized in two forms. In the first place, it was linguistic, the product of humanism’s imperative to cultivate style by polishing language of the roughness and noise that characterizes ordinary talk. In the second place, it was theatrical, in the sense that it was a function of the public amphitheater with its elevated platform stage. So it is worth recalling, first, some of the central features of humanist pedagogy. Under the aegis of humanism, famously, style constituted a new and coveted form of knowledge. Speech was thought to be a minefield of embarrassments – “the tongue and the genitals,” Erasmus deliciously complains, are “the two most rebellious organs,” the infelicities of the one apparently as mortifying as the shortcomings of the other – but it was founded on the faith that such unheralded glitches could be “curbed” through the studious cultivation of stylistic excellence.²⁵ Erasmus’s famous word for such discursive mastery was *copia*, which English writers variously refer to as “variety,” “eloquence,” or “puritie” of style.²⁶ The last of these terms is important, for it points to the normative cast that conceptions of style were acquiring in the period. No longer merely the form of an utterance, style gets reconfigured by humanism as a standard that an utterance should fulfill

actors first and foremost *as* actors, as celebrities, rather than as familiar persons. Chapter 4 of this book considers in more detail the rise of the celebrity as a figure of publicness.

²⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 112–113.

²⁵ Erasmus, *Lingua*, trans. Elaine Fanthem, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Elaine Fanthem and Erika Rummel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 367.

²⁶ On “puritie” of style, see Roger Ascham, who writes in *The Schoolmaster*, “A good student will be therefore carefull and diligent, to read with judgement over even those Authors, which did write in the most perfitte tyme: and let him not be affrayd to trie them, both in proprietie of wordes, and forme of style, by the touch stone of Caesar and Cicero, whose puritie was never soiled.” Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (London: 1570), 296, emphasis mine.

through its form. That that standard is only ever hazily and incoherently defined is incidental to the more important fact that the pursuit of style entailed the prospect of failure, the lingering and embarrassing persistence of those unwanted imperfections that a “purity of style” was supposed to rinse away.²⁷ It is the attendant risk of failure, along with the possibility of success, that reconfigures style from the mere form of one’s talk into a mastery of the form one gives to talk. Ever threatening to beat out of its students the “impurities” that they could not purge out of their speech themselves, humanism instituted style as a skill that could be either mastered or mangled.²⁸

Erasmus lends some definition to this skill when he writes that “it is not by learning rules that we acquire the power of speaking a language, but by daily intercourse with those accustomed to express themselves with exactness and refinement, and by the copious reading of the best authors.”²⁹ The movement from speech to refinement to writing is suggestive, for it points to one of the central criteria that allows humanism to conceive of style as a normative skill. The best style of speech – the most copious, the most eloquent, the most perfectly purified – is the one that most resembles writing, specifically, as Richard Halpern notes, the one that most resembles literary writing: “Erasmian humanism wished to teach classical literary Latin as if it were a colloquial tongue, and thus while it borrowed the methods of ‘natural’ or spontaneous linguistic learning, it banished much of what had made Latin a practical or colloquial language. ‘Latin,’ in other words, was not an empirically given language but a *style*.”³⁰ The difference between the media of colloquial, informal speech and formal, literary writing is important, but the point here is not to situate the humanist classroom at the center of any shift from oral to literate cultures, as Walter Ong might have it. Rather, the reason that literary writing enjoys such special precedence in the humanist classroom is because writing – literary writing most prominently – is typically free of the noise that characterizes

²⁷ On such unwanted impurities, see Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance*, 19–55.

²⁸ On humanist pedagogy and corporal punishment, see Alan Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 84–121; Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 26–29; and Lynne Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 33–61. On the disciplinary regime that humanism exerted upon the tongue, and the fantasies of mutilation it engendered, see Mazzio, “Sins of the Tongue in Early Modern England,” *Modern Language Studies* 28 (1998): 93–124.

²⁹ Erasmus, *De ratione studii*, as cited in William Harrison Woodward, *Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education* (New York: Teacher’s College, Columbia University, 1964), 164.

³⁰ Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 32.

face-to-face conversations. Not only can writing be revised before its publication, but the act of writing generally entails the filtering out of all those faults, infelicities, missteps, and interruptions that constitute spoken interaction. In this respect, writing represents that purified text, filtered of all its noise, into which we project our spoken utterances. Recall that for Erasmus, it is the comedies of Terence that provide one particularly suitable model for teaching students how to speak good Latin. In literary texts normatively rinsed of formal imperfections, talk gets turned into what it is not.

The aspiration of humanist education is accordingly to project writing back onto speech, to make literary writing into the model of “stylistic purity” that students could attain by way of a rigorous disciplining of language into form. Indeed, what makes style into a skill is the speaker’s capacity to apply the criteria of purity found in literary writing to their ordinary speech, to devise strategies for filtering out of their talk all the noise – the stutters, the mispronunciations, the swallowed words, and everything else – that gets in the way of the perfection of form that is to be found in the well-turned written word. The erasure of verbal influences constitutes something like the first step in achieving that conspicuous manipulation of form that Erasmus called *copia*. For the reduction of noise facilitates the effect of a style that writers of the period would call “smooth” or “flowing” or “easy” style, which means a style whose rhythm carries it forward without interruption. The production of such unencumbered rhythm in turn allows the coherence of the copious utterance to shine forth in the fullest relief. In the absence of noise, the message itself can stand out as a coherent discursive achievement.³¹

The copious, “abundant,” or “flowing” style that was the principle desideratum of humanist training is a higher-order relation to this achievement, for it enlists rhetorical and poetic figures to key up the formal coherence of the utterance to such an extent that it appears completely formed, and hence entirely autonomous of any context. Indeed, insofar as “text” names a “form and meaning that are imaginable apart from the

³¹ Jakobson never puts it this way, in part because of his aspirations to a quasi-scientific objectivity, but the self-reflexivity he attributes to the poetic function of speech is an achievement first and foremost of skill. This is not simply because the poetic function emphasizes the speaker’s capacity to establish unlikely or surprising correspondences between words. It is also and just as importantly because any skill, as a skill, entails a focus on its own, self-reflexive achievement – a focus on the completion of an action “for its own sake.” To evaluate an action in terms of skill, or to conduct an action through skill, is to emphasize the means over the ends, the manner of the action over its instrumental effect. Skill entails a detachment of action from its situated or ostensible ends – our appreciation, say, of the manner of one’s speech over its content – which puts it squarely in the realm of the aesthetic.

spatiotemporal and other frames in which they can be said to occur,” we can understand the humanist classroom to be codifying style as the skill of turning speech into texts, of disciplining language into what D. A. Miller calls “the austere abstraction of structure.”³² By this, Miller means that the thickening and coherence of form associated with style entails a “willed denial of particularities” that can afford a comforting if never quite impenetrable safeguard against shame.³³ For Miller, writing about the novels of Jane Austen, the principle shame against which style gets crafted is the shame of the “conjugal imperative.” For students of humanism, it is something decidedly more circular: the shame of influent speech. In early modern England, style is crafted against the threat of stylelessness.³⁴

The humanist classroom provided a framework within which students could test a variety of rhetorical figures, speech genres, and pedagogical exercises in order to cultivate a style that could fend off the shame of not having a style.³⁵ Their training had a famously theatrical cast. As Joseph Roach has shown, humanism demanded more of its students than the cultivation of “copious” sentences; it required the embodied performance of them.³⁶ In plays, recitations, and mock orations, students learned to hone the skill of turning writing into speech, of achieving the purity of style that their teachers praised by wedding words to bodies. As Lise-Lone Marker has put it, the aspiration of Elizabethan acting was “not to reduplicate behavioristic ‘naturalness’ ... but to create a structural through-line cleansed of all distracting accidentals, disfiguring blemishes, indecorous declamation, and unsuitable gestures.”³⁷ In a significant respect, acting was the consummation of humanist training. We might even say that the public amphitheatres that emerged throughout early modern London were the places where humanism found its fulfillment. When Thomas Nashe recounts “the teares of ten thousand spectators” that erupted at the sight of Talbot’s death in *1 Henry VI*, or when Stephen

³² Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, “The Natural History of Discourse,” in Urban and Silverstein, eds., *Natural Histories of Discourse*, 1; D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 27.

³³ Miller, *Jane Austen*, 27–28.

³⁴ Of course, the capacity to speak or write with style was construed as the index of one’s civilization, refinement, and hence humanity. But it is exactly for this reason that a lack of style was such a source of shame in the period.

³⁵ T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare’s Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1944), 2: 355.

³⁶ Joseph Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 23–57.

³⁷ Lise-Lone Marker, “Nature and Decorum in the Theory of Elizabethan Acting,” in *The Elizabethan Theatre II: Papers Given at the Second International Conference on Elizabethan Theater Held at the University of Waterloo, Canada, 1969*, ed. David Galloway (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1970), 87–107, 100.

Gosson impugns actors for exerting a mesmeric force on their audiences – “when Bacchus rose up . . . the beholders rose up . . . when they sware, the company sware” – one quickly gets the sense that the early modern theater is the place where the oratorical energies unleashed by humanist training found their proper expression.³⁸

And yet the early modern playhouse also presents a challenge for which the theatricality of the humanist classroom never fully prepared its pupils. In the classroom, one spoke to an audience of peers. On the stage, one spoke to an audience of strangers, the indefiniteness of whom lent talk exactly that uncertain character – *who are you?* – that is endemic to public address. The upshot of this dynamic is that, on the public stage, the cultivation and demonstration of linguistic skill comes to serve a special function. Style becomes a way of reflexively characterizing the very publicness of speech that defines the early modern theater in the first place. Such characterizations were importantly mediated and constrained by the physical structure of the early modern playhouse. Steven Mullaney has recently underscored how “the newly formalized playing space” of the public playhouse “allowed for complex and contradictory forms of affective cognition,” thanks to the ways that they created audiences that were “more fixed in [their] relation to the performance than . . . previous forms of popular drama.”³⁹ To note that audiences were fixed with respect to the platform stage is also, importantly, to note that the London amphitheatres also established an unwavering boundary between the actors and the audiences that it gathered together. In order to gather audiences of hundreds to watch companies of actors strut and fret their parts in a play, the public amphitheater had to interpose a physical barrier between the two – a physical barrier that ensured that the relation between actors and audience was, as with any medium, a relation of distance.⁴⁰ So if the early modern playhouse had the special novelty of bringing crowds together on a regular basis and fixing them in place, it also had the novelty of making distance into a central component of the playgoing experience.

That distance was crucially different from the distance that distinguished the proscenium stage of later centuries. Hardly recessed from the audience in the manner of a two-dimensional screen, the early modern

³⁸ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil* (London, 1592), sig. F3r; Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582), sig. G5r.

³⁹ Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of the Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 75.

⁴⁰ On the connection between media and distance, see John Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Winter 2010): 321–362.

amphitheater featured a platform that was thrust into the audience that surrounded it on three sides. The early modern amphitheater thus positioned actors significantly closer to audiences than the proscenium stage of later centuries would, even as they stood at a remove from them. The paradoxical effect of this proximity was to make all the more acute the experience of distance. Erika T. Lin observes that the architecture of the platform stage ensured that whenever actors got closer to some audience members, they “made themselves significantly farther from others.”⁴¹ And even when an actor did get physically close to a member of the audience, the platform stage also managed to keep him at a conspicuous visible remove. Intimacy, in such moments, commingles with distance. We can understand that distance to mobilize a deictic relation: an *I* over *here* speaks to a *you* over *there*. These deictics are spatial, but they are not only that. The actor elevated above the groundlings also inhabits a world that stands at a remove from them – the fictional world of the play – even if he occasionally departs from that world in order to speak to his audience directly. This means that the *you* addressed by the *I* is triangulated, in the sense that the *I* generally speaks to the *you* only by speaking to other characters on the stage. Just as important is that the *I* who speaks over *here* is a definite and concrete person – an actor on the stage – whereas the *you* over *there* is comparatively abstract: It is a *someone*, who could be *anyone*, who could also be *everyone*. The indefiniteness of such deictics is what makes the public theater into one of early modern England’s primary scenes of public address. Mediating between actor and audience, distance is how publicness gets registered – or misrecognized – on the early modern stage.

In the early modern period no less than our own, relations of distance tend to have about them some measure of unease, presumably because they cut against the experience of contact that interactions require in order to flourish.⁴² One measure of that discomfort is the tendency among early

⁴¹ Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 29.

⁴² Goffman proposes copresence as a definitive condition of any social situation, writing that “[a] social situation may be defined . . . as any environment of mutual monitoring possibilities that lasts during the time two or more individuals find themselves in one another’s immediate physical presence, and extends over the territory within which the mutual monitoring is possible.” Today, as various media enable social interactions to unfold across physical distances, Goffman’s investment in physical presence has about it an antiquated cast, but if copresence ever seems like a quaint requirement of Goffman’s pre-internet age, we need only remember the way mediated social interactions tend to flourish by simulating the conditions of physical immediacy. Goffman, “Where the Action Is,” in Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 167.

modern clowns to speak directly to members of their audiences. Unfolding, as Robert Weimann has shown, “not so much *for* an audience as *with* a community of spectators,” such interactions afforded their participants the momentary pleasure of overcoming the distance that the early modern amphitheater makes into a definitive component theatrical performance, and of converting it into a passing experience of contact.⁴³ No less significant is the historical fact that audiences jeered, heckled, and talked back to players on the stage, interrupting or contributing to performances, depending on one’s perspective. Such unpredictable interruptions have led Richard Preiss to propose that early modern performance unfolded as a kind of contest between players and playgoers, and we might accordingly read these contests as a register of how uncomfortably acute and also how uncomfortably precarious the experience of distance was in the early modern playhouse.⁴⁴ *Acute*, because the desire to talk back to performers – like the desire of a clown to talk to an audience – is an index of the desire to traverse the distance that separates and thereby constitutes performers and playgoers. And *precarious*, because audiences were constantly threatening to obliterate that distance. Indeed, the very dynamism of the platform stage comes from the way it thrusts an actor into the crowd from which it separates him, such that the experience of distance becomes an experience ever threatening to collapse into its opposite. So even as distance represented a condition for early modern performance to reckon with, to overcome, to acknowledge, to navigate, or to respond to in some way, it was also a condition that performers had to devise strategies for enforcing, even for creating.

The Tamburlaine phenomenon is a celebration of the theater’s capacity to remedy the indefiniteness of its own public address. Specifically, it is a celebration of the theater’s capacity to remedy the indefiniteness of public address through the skillful cultivation of style. It should be stressed that any style put on the stage could and indeed did come to serve the self-reflexive function of characterizing its own public address. That is, indeed, one of the claims of this book. But *Tamburlaine* is a noteworthy point of departure because its style works so emphatically to emphasize its own skill as to practically distort language into something other than what it is. Elevating diction, keying up the poetic rhythm, and stressing rhetorical figure over semantic content has the effect of twisting language as much as

⁴³ Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 212.

⁴⁴ Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

mastering it. This hyper-aestheticization is hardly accidental. Rather, its purpose is to give form to the very distance that defines public address in the early modern playhouse.

The satirist Joseph Hall gives us a working sense of the way stage talk projects a uniquely theatrical distance when he scorns a group of poets who congregate at a tavern:

One higher pitch'd doth set his soaring thought
 On crowned kings that Fortune low hath brought:
 Or some upreared, high-aspiring swaine
 As it might be the Turkish Tamberlaine.
 Then weeneth he his base drink-drowned spright,
 Rapt to the threefold loft of heavens hight,
 When he conceives upon his fained stage
 The stalking steps of his great personage,
 Graced with huff-cap terms and thundering threats
 That his poor hearers hair quite upright sets.
 Such soon, as some brave-minded hungry youth,
 Sees fitly frame to his wide-strained mouth,
 He vaunts his voice upon an hired stage,
 With high-set steps and princely carriage:
 Now soouping in side robes of Royaltie,
 That erst did scrub in lowsie brokerie.
 There if he can with terms Italianate,
 Big-sounding sentences, and words of state,
 Faire patch me up his pure Iambic verse,
 He ravishes the gazing Scaffolders . . .⁴⁵

In this scene of overwrought expression, Hall is quick to highlight the signature features of *Tamburlaine's* style – its “huff-cap terms,” its “thundering threats,” its “big-sounding sentences” and “pure Iambic verse” – but the force of the satire comes from the way he links those formal components to an imaginary stage from which the poet hopes to “ravi[sh] the gazing Scaffolders.” Crucially, that “hired stage” is more than just a way for Hall to acknowledge the place where Tamburlaine’s “big-sounding” sentences were first performed. Rather, it is Hall’s figure for the distance that is the perlocutionary effect of the poet’s all too Tamburlainean talk. Hall registers that distance through his many spatial words: “higher-pitched,” “soaring,” “upreared,” “high-aspiring,” “upright,” and “high-set.” Their accumulation underscores how Hall’s poet seeks to transpose onto the world of the tavern, where social relations were appealingly horizontal, the

⁴⁵ Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum* (London: 1597), sigs. B4v–B5r.

interaction arrangements of the stage, where interactions between actor and audience unfolded at a distance. By talking like Tamburlaine, that is, Hall's poet attempts to make himself into exactly the sort of spectacle and his interlocutors into exactly the sort of spectators one encountered at the playhouse. It is this wish that dwells at the heart of the Tamburlaine phenomenon, which emerges at the intersection between the public playhouse and the humanist imperative to clear the noise from speech: It is a phenomenon about the capacity of a style of talk to make its speaker, like Tamburlaine, into an icon of the very public he addresses. The style I am calling stage talk gets publicly imitated, Hall's satire suggests, not simply because of its conspicuous skill, but because its conspicuous skill provides a compellingly theatrical model of publicness.

We will have occasion to come back to Hall's satire, but for now what needs emphasis is the infelicity that is its central point: Hall's spectacular talk spectacularly fails. On the "hired stage," the "purity" of this "Iambic verse" can be admired for the skillful talk that it is, but in the absence of such mediation, the style turns the speaker into a person so enamored of his own linguistic skill that he isolates himself from ordinary social contact. To quote Marlowe's play was to project a distance that was not there – and instead to underscore the distance that separated play world from real world, purity from noise, skill from ungainliness. What Hall asks of us, then, is not simply to laugh at a poet whose bid for linguistic skill undoes itself in its spectacular enunciation, but to recognize the friction that gets generated when a style crafted for the stage gets transposed into the ordinary world of the tavern. The reason for such friction is that stage talk, as a style that is crafted for the stage, works to transmute the physical relations established by the playhouse into a social and aesthetic relation. Stage talk is the flexibly conventionalized artificiality that audiences accept as natural to the theater. As we will soon see, that heightened artifice will become more nuanced and subdued in later years. But in Marlowe's tragedy, stage talk's skillful distortion of language serves the purpose of objectifying relations that were already implicit in the early modern playhouse. There, theatrical distance becomes the condition of stylistic felicity, even as style is what turns *Tamburlaine* into theater.

“High-Astounding Terms”

Beginning with a prologue that primes us to listen for “the Scythian Tamburlaine” “[t]hreatening the world with high-astounding terms,” Marlowe's tragedy is keen to insist on the creative interrelation between

the distance of the early modern stage and the signature style of its protagonist. The phrase "high astounding terms" is conventional and metaphorical, as all descriptors of the "high" or "grand" style are, but it is no less interesting for that. For even as this compound construction foretells the infamous overreaching of its protagonist, it also effects the transposition of a physical relation onto an interactive one. Through this metaphor of height, spatial distance becomes verbal distance, and physical altitude gets converted into formal remove – into a remove that is indeed generated *by* form.

That relation is easy enough to overlook when the prologue's lines are read on the page, but the physical location of the public amphitheater would have imparted to the prologue's lines a special resonance.⁴⁶ With the actor playing the prologue being himself elevated above the groundlings beneath him, the prologue's "high-astounding terms" would have conducted the most "astounding" conversion of the distance that defined the playhouse into a distance that defined the language that was uttered there. Indeed, it is that conversion of physical distance into verbal form that makes Tamburlaine's style so "astounding" in the first place. Scholars have long noted Marlowe's interest in the quasi-magical capacity of performative utterances and other speech-acts to "make things happen," yet their interest in diegetical depictions of performative utterances has tended to occlude the nondiegetic context that secures for Marlowe's language its proper felicity: the public playhouse, which gathers people into crowds so that they may behold from a distance the spectacle they have paid to see.⁴⁷ It is that distance which Tamburlaine's style will draw on in order to project a distance of its own.

In this respect, *Tamburlaine's* style is not entirely unprecedented. We can find important examples of stage talk in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561), also written in blank verse, and Thomas Preston's *Cambyzes* (1569). While it is possible to enumerate stylistic differences between Marlowe's tragedy and its predecessors, it is necessary to acknowledge that in these earlier iterations, we likewise encounter important examples of stage talk. The salient difference is the relationship between Tamburlaine's style and its theatrical setting, which these earlier plays did not get to enjoy. Wrapped in Marlowe's story of world domination

⁴⁶ On the potential venues of *Tamburlaine*, see Knutson, "Marlowe in Repertory."

⁴⁷ See Marjorie Garber, "Here's Nothing Writ': Scribe, Script, and Circumspection in Marlowe's Plays," *Theatre Journal* 36 (1984): 301–320; Andrew Sofer, "How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in Doctor Faustus," *Theatre Journal* 61 (2009): 1–21; and Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance*, 107–133.

is thus to be found a story of theatrical domination, of how a character's style of talk holds the stage in his thrall by reproducing in discursive form the physical distance that defines it – a reproduction that gets experienced as a ravishing success, an appropriateness to context that is an achievement of skill. So eagerly does the play compel us to commend its protagonist's stylistic success, in fact, that facility of style could be said to constitute its secret subject. Tamburlaine's very first scene on stage, Theridimas, the captain of an enemy army, is so ravished by the former shepherd's words that he finds himself declaring, "Not Hermes, prolocutor to the gods, / Could use persuasions more pathetic" (405–406). The line serves as a kind of prompt for the audience, an invitation to praise and to marvel not at what Tamburlaine says, but how – to see his style as a form of mastery.

That mastery is exactly the point that Tamburlaine's words to Theridimas are designed to stress:

TAMBURLAINE: In thee, thou valiant man of Persia,
 I see the folly of thy emperor.
 Art thou but captain of a thousand horse,
 That by characters graven in thy brows,
 And by thy martial face and stout aspect,
 Deserv'st to have the leading of an host?
 Forsake thy king and do but join with me,
 And we will triumph over all the world:
 I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
 And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about;
 And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
 Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.
 Draw forth thy sword, thou mighty man-at-arms,
 Intending but to raze my charmed skin,
 And Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven
 To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harm.
 See, how he rains down heaps of gold in showers,
 As if he meant to give my soldiers pay!
 And, as a sure and grounded argument
 That I shall be the monarch of the East,
 He sends this Soldan's daughter rich and brave,
 To be my queen and portly emperess.
 If thou wilt stay with me, renowned man,
 And lead thy thousand horse with my conduct,
 Besides thy share of this Egyptian prize,
 Those thousand horse shall sweat with martial spoil
 Of conquer'd kingdoms and of cities sack'd:
 Both we will walk upon the lofty cliffs;
 And Christian merchants, that with Russian stems

Plough up huge furrows in the Caspian Sea,
 Shall vail to us as lords of all the lake;
 Both we will reign as consuls of the earth,
 And mighty kinds shall be our senators.
 Jove sometime masked in a shepherd's weed;
 And by those steps that he hath scal'd the heavens
 May we become immortal like the gods.
 Join with me now in this my mean estate,
 (I call it mean because, being yet obscure
 The nations far-remov'd admire me not)
 And when my name and honor shall be spread
 As far as Boreas claps his brazen wings,
 Or fair Bootes sends his cheerful light,
 Then shalt thou be competitor with me,
 And sit with Tamburlaine in all his majesty. (361–404)

Citing the declamation in its entirety is necessary to appreciate the signature testament to Tamburlaine's skill, which can be boiled down to his preternatural capacity *to keep on going* – specifically, to keep on going at the same "astounding" height. "Valiant man," "martial face," "Caspian Sea," "brazen wings" – modifiers are never far from Tamburlaine's repertoire, and here as elsewhere, they serve the purpose of metaphorically "elevating" words in the sense of singling them out in order to impart some new or greater value to them. The modifier – in particular the adjective – stages what a single word on its own does not, which is the action of using language in order to change language because it is not enough on its own. "Man" and "face," "sea" and "wings" are simple, monosyllabic words, but the adjectives that precede them suggest some necessary and extraordinary modification to their ordinary and forgettable referents, so that "sea" becomes more than "sea," "wings" more than "wings." What I am calling Marlowe's adjectival mode can thus be understood as dwelling in the recognition that some state of affairs has rendered normal words insufficient to our knowledge of the world, and so new words must be enlisted to enlarge it. The adjectival mode is thus an intimation of the *sublime* in the most basic etymological sense of that word – a reaching of limits. Those limits are as epistemological as they are linguistic; they are found in the knowledge that the word "face" is not quite right for *that* face, that the word "man" is not quite right for *this* man, and more broadly that ordinary language is improper for *these* present purposes. The metalinguistic transformation of ordinary language into extraordinary language thus posits – at once pointing to and producing – a gap between the former and the latter. It is this linguistic gap that gets metaphorized, in descriptions of

Tamburlaine's "high astounding terms" or other "grand styles," as physical distance, frequently a distance of height. Tamburlaine "scales the heavens," and so too does his talk.

We can read the modifier as just one very revealing synecdoche for the many ways that Tamburlaine's style, being so far removed from ordinary talk, projects verbal distance. Others are not long to seek. We might point to Tamburlaine's diction, with its predilection for polysyllabic words of markedly foreign origins, which – in bursting forth out of the monosyllabic words that surround them – similarly buck against ordinary language use: "Borean," "Egyptian," "Bootes," and, of course, "Tamburlaine" itself. We might likewise point to Tamburlaine's syntax. Not only does a boast like "I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains" begin, as so many of Tamburlaine's lines do, with a simple sentence followed by a modifying prepositional phrase, but the line is itself succeeded by boasts of equally magnificent and rhythmic hyperbole: "*And* with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about, / *And* sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere / than Tamburlaine be slain *or* overcome." For George T. Wright, "Marlowe's achievement in presenting characters whose ambition or lust sounds genuine is partly made possible through long sentences whose dignified segments form strong but separate lines," and we do well to note how Tamburlaine's proliferating conjunctions work in the service of this effect.⁴⁸ Facilitating the sentence's continuous and fluent expansion, they are not so much meant to generate new ideas as to repeat them in different ways, through different tropes and images, as though each elaborate modifier were insufficient, and so a new one had to be devised. We might likewise point to the part's embodied performance. The role of Tamburlaine was originally performed by Edward Alleyn, the don of Elizabethan acting and the first celebrity player of his age, who linked Marlowe's verse to an emphatic style of comportment, of what Ben Jonson called "scenical strutting and furious vociferation."⁴⁹ The yelling that Jonson decries is nothing if not an index of communication at a distance.

Or, most important of all, we could point to the tragedy's meter. Although histories of English meter might tell us that blank verse rose to prominence because it was the language's most natural rhythm, Catherine Nicholson has demonstrated that the metrical scheme was hardly so esteemed when it was first deployed. *Tamburlaine's* rousing iambic pentameter was in fact perceived as decidedly "eccentric," an uncommon

⁴⁸ George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 99.

⁴⁹ On Edward Alleyn's celebrity and career, see Cerasano, "Edward Alleyn."

distortion of the English language.⁵⁰ Marlowe goes out of his way to create such a decidedly unnatural effect. The caesura that holds the first line in check – “In thee, thou valiant man of Persia” – sets a standard for the lines to follow, which tend to bifurcate in a similar if subtler manner: a noun or verb phrase occupies the first half of the line, a prepositional or other modifying phrase comprises the second, and an unpunctuated pause – the pause of grammatical completion, of a single unit of thought being introduced and then, after a breath, being altered – arises itself between them. These mid-line caesuras serve as anticipation or preparation for the heavy pause that concludes almost every line. The heaviness of those pauses is very much the point. Russ MacDonald has described the Marlovian line as “offer[ing] a kind of simple symmetry, a framing pattern calling attention to ‘like measure’ or equivalent units of sound,” and the pause that hangs over the end of each line teaches us to discern that symmetry, conditioning us to anticipate its fulfillment in each ensuing line.⁵¹ An unspoken drama gets enacted through such anticipation, the drama of listening for how the rhythm will or will not be kept up, of how fluency will be sustained. Indeed, the pauses that punctuate the end of each of Tamburlaine’s lines are a kind of reflection or transvaluation of exactly those infelicitous hitches that he has successfully purged from his language, for each suspension of the rhythm serves only to underscore its speaker’s skill in resuming it, in generating another iambic line with another heavy pause at its end.

While it would not be quite right to reduce stage talk to the blank verse that scholars have hailed as *Tamburlaine’s* principal dramatic achievement, its emphatic measure serves as an important metonym for a style preoccupied with sustaining its own hypnotic fluency. Meter has provided critics with such a compelling scheme for understanding this phenomenon in Marlowe’s tragedy because meter provides merely the most obvious framework for perceiving such fluency, for plotting how a given formal pattern gets skillfully continued (or not) across different words and utterances in place of any hitches, glitches, stops, or stutters. But whether we focus on Tamburlaine’s meter, his diction, his rhetoric, or his syntax, we end up attending to the ways a style is getting maintained and continued across some segmented units of measurement, across some span of lines,

⁵⁰ Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues*, 124–131. See also Paula Blank, *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 41–79.

⁵¹ Russ MacDonald, “Marlowe and Style,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 63.

utterances, scenes, or sentences. The ten- or twenty- or thirty-line verse paragraph is *Tamburlaine's* operative mode because the rudimentary principle of length is what allows the hyperfluency that is stage talk's animating gambit to be performed again and again, in the maintenance of the same incantatory scheme from one densely line to another. In this respect, style constitutes the undeclared drama to Marlowe's tragedy, for what is at stake with each declamation – what is turned into theater – is the capacity of its speaker to fluently maintain across new lines, new scenarios, and new utterances the same incantatory form of talk that he has crafted to keep conversational noise at bay.

We might accordingly analogize Tamburlaine's relentless will-to-style to the "repetition compulsion" that, for Stephen Greenblatt, afflicts Tamburlaine along with so many of Marlowe's other protagonists. By Greenblatt's diagnosis, this compulsion manifests in the Marlovian anti-hero's constant reenactment of magnificent scenes of destruction so that they may "continue to be the same character on the stage."⁵² Greenblatt's interest is accordingly in Tamburlaine's actions, most importantly his unrepentant annihilation of one army after another. But it is suggestive that the word "swords," in the declamation below, should prompt as a kind of reflex another elaborate outpouring of stage talk:

Our conquering swords shall marshal us the way
 We use to march upon the slaughter'd foe,
 Trampling their bowels with our horses' hoofs,
 Brave horses bred on the white Tartarian hills,
 My camp is like to Julius Caesar's host,
 That never fought but had the victory;
 Nor in Pharsalia was there such hot war
 As these, my followers, willingly would have.
 Legions of spirits, fleeting in the air,
 Direct our bullets and our weapons' points,
 And make your strokes to wound the senseless light;
 And when she sees our bloody colors spread,
 Then Victory begins to take her flight,
 Resting herself upon my milk-white tent. (1246–1259)

It is as if action were inextricable from its magnificent stylization, for the simple reason that action for Tamburlaine is valuable only to the extent it can be stylized at all. We might accordingly extend Greenblatt's diagnosis

⁵² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 200–201.

of Tamburlaine's repetition compulsion by noting that it is not destruction but the subsequent stylization of destruction that is the central source of Tamburlaine's self-fashioning. In a theatrical and densely aestheticized version of that dynamic whereby the victors of history win the privilege of writing it – a dynamic that is, as David Quint has taught us, central to the epic genre that Marlowe's antihero seeks to inhabit – what Tamburlaine seeks above all is the capacity to stylize the story of his own improbable victories, to convert destruction into grandiloquent form, and to be the divine and abstracted narrator of his own embodied achievements.⁵³ As with his unremitting impulse to destroy, repetition is central to understanding this dynamic. Setting so high a poetic standard for itself, stage talk turns out to be a style that Tamburlaine has to maintain lest any lapse appear like a loss of his signature control, composure, fluency – like a loss, in other words, of himself. To admit any lapse or broach in this style indeed would be to negate the very performance of skill that makes Tamburlaine who he is.

And yet to speak of who Tamburlaine is is its own critical challenge. Although this character has long been understood as a quintessential example of Renaissance self-fashioning, his style is so conspicuously and muscularly emphasized that it takes the place of the self altogether. This is why we find C. S. Lewis complaining of Marlowe's mode that "[w]e forget Tamburlaine and Mortimer and even (at times) Faustus and think only of Rhodope and Persepolis and celestial spheres and spirits."⁵⁴ Far from expressing the self, stage talk abstracts the self *into* its all too artful form, thereby purging it of any unwanted particularities, contingencies, or aberrations. The style thus functions as an interestingly self-reflexive version of Gerard Genette's maxim that "to imitate is to generalize."⁵⁵ Stage talk's ostentatious fluency – as the metricalized repetition of the same words, rhythms, stresses, phrases, or sentence structures with a difference – entails nothing other than an imitation of itself, of lines and utterances that have come before, in such a way as to negate the self through a mastery of form, and deliver the self into what D. A. Miller calls "the wishfully

⁵³ David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). On Tamburlaine's desire to inhabit the epic genre, see Neil Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 80–81.

⁵⁴ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 481.

⁵⁵ Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 85.

reparative key of abstraction.”⁵⁶ To lose fluency is thus to fall into the nightmare of humanism, which is the shame of having an unidealized – and unstylized – self.

There is thus a kind of strain, even desperation, at the heart of stage talk – a fear of the very lapses and infelicities it is designed to counter – that should be enough to make clear that its particular brand of fluency is a far cry from *sprezzatura*, that graceful ideal of the art that conceals all art which Baladassare Castiglione at once codified and mystified in his *Book of the Courtier*. Instead, as Tamburlaine’s oration suggests, stage talk is an art that emphasizes all art. Such strangeness or unnaturalness may strike us as indecorous, but it is exactly what makes stage talk into such a virtuosic demonstration of skill. Hyperfluency comes from the speaker’s capacity consistently to maintain the most unnatural “elevation” of form across the most expansive declamations, such that form serves as a principle of skilled distortion. Following Ben Jonson’s impatience with the “Tamerlanes and Tamer-Chams of the late Age” who indecorously “fly from all humanity,” scholars of early modern drama have tended to regard Tamburlaine’s style – both in its language and in Allevyn’s performance of its language – as a relic from the prehistory of naturalistic acting.⁵⁷ But if this is so, that is only because the conspicuously unnatural and unnaturally conspicuous artifice of Marlowe’s verse is devised as a direct response to the distance that the public amphitheater had introduced as a baseline condition of playgoing. By “elevating” language to unnatural “heights,” stage talk separates its speaker not only from ordinary speech, with all of its attendant noise, but also from ordinary interaction.

One scene in particular will illustrate this point. Having triumphed over Bajezeth, the emperor of Turkey, Tamburlaine enters the stage and forces the felled king to serve as his footstool. Stepping on top of him, Tamburlaine then proceeds to declaim:

Now clear the triple region of the air,
And let the majesty of heaven behold
Their scourge and terror tread on emperors.
Smile, stars that reigned at my nativity,
And dim the brightness of their neighbor lamps!

⁵⁶ Miller, *Jane Austen*, 35.

⁵⁷ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, 526. Andrew Gurr adopts such an implicitly teleological understanding of “naturalistic” acting in *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 136–138. For a recent and compelling alternative to the naturalistic and nonnaturalistic dichotomy, see Allison K. Deutermann, *Listening for Theatrical Form in Early Modern England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 104–139.

Disdain to borrow light of Cynthia,
For I, the chiefest lamp of all the earth,
First rising in the east with mild aspect
But fixed now in this meridian line,
Will send up fire to your turning spheres,
And cause the sun to borrow light of you.
My sword struck fire from his coat of steel
Even in Bithynia, when I took this Turk,
As when a fiery exhalation
Wrapped in the bowels of a freezing cloud,
Fighting for passage, makes the welkin crack,
And casts a flash of lightning on the earth.
But ere I march to wealthy Persia,
Or leave Damascus and th'Egyptian fields,
As was the fame of Clymene's brainsick son,
That almost brent the axletree of heaven,
So shall our swords, our lances, and our shot
Fill all the air with mighty meteors.
Then, when the sky shall wax as red as blood,
It shall be said I made it red myself,
To make me think of naught but blood and war. (1474–1499)

This searing self-epideixis unfolds by sealing its speaker off from ordinary contact, from even the possibility of mere dialogue. Not a person to be addressed, Tamburlaine is in this moment only a person to be, in his words, “beheld.” This is partly because stage talk – here as elsewhere – functions as the expression of a self-isolating rapture, in this case of that euphoric mix of triumph and disdain that is Tamburlaine’s passion of choice. Yet it is not quite right to say that stage talk is simply the expression of ravishing passions, since the style itself produces the very emotions that we register. In fact, it is hard to ignore the sheer sense of pleasure that Tamburlaine takes not simply in hearing himself talk, or even hearing himself talk about himself, but in hearing himself talk about himself in the style that makes him into a spectacle for himself to admire. It is for this reason that he cannot bear to stop. The lines “And dim the brightness of their neighbor lamps,” “And cause the sun to borrow light of you,” “And casts a flash of lightning on the earth” would even seem to signal a certain climax of rhythm and of thought, but no sooner does each of those phrases end than another begins. As the pentameter clauses accumulate one after another, Tamburlaine begins to appear like someone carried forth by nothing other than his own rhythmic momentum, as though the meter of his lines were pushing itself forward of its own accord, engendering its very own passionate utterance. The purpose of these lines

is to produce the passion they seem merely to express through exactly those formal features that distance them from ordinary talk. Passion is what we project onto Tamburlaine's speech as a way of making sense of its ostentatious artifice, as though formal distance created a gap for us to fill by projecting emotions onto it as objective aesthetic predicates.

By so isolating Tamburlaine from ordinary contact, stage talk projects a distance that mobilizes, in another form, a deictic relation that we have already considered. As a formal distance separates speaker from addressee, "I" gets rigorously disconnected from "you," the "here" of the speaker from the "there" of his addressees. To note such separation is not to observe the annihilation of interaction but the poetic regimentation that makes interaction legible as such. Specifically, as stage talk's operative density of form interposes itself between "I" and "you," between the "here" of the impassioned utterance and the "there" of the awe-struck auditors, the former becomes so removed as to become an object for the attention of the latter. We might accordingly liken stage talk to the aesthetic effect Michael Fried has called "absorption." For Fried, absorption is a diegetic representation with nondiegetic effects; depicting figures immersed in acts of reading, prayer, daydream, or rapture implicitly absorbs the viewer, too. Artistic depictions of absorption accordingly seek to "come to grips with one primitive condition of the art of painting – that its objects necessarily imply the presence before them of a beholder."⁵⁸ At base, absorption and stage talk are both structures of joint attention. Each amounts to a version of the statement "look over here" that gets silently made by a pointing finger. In the case of Tamburlaine's outsized style, that statement gets "made" through an exaggerated emphasis on the poetic function of speech: each pentameter line, modifying phrase, or even heightened word, in echoing the one before it, can be understood as "pointing" our attention to the form of the talk over and against its addressee or semantic referent. In this respect, stage talk prompts us to understand the poetic function of speech as a self-reflexive form of joint attention. As with Fried's absorption, the effect of this densely self-referential form is not just to isolate Tamburlaine from other characters within the diegetic world of the play, but also to seal him off from the spectators at the playhouse who have already gathered together to watch him.

The paradoxical upshot is the production of a vicarious involvement, of the rapturous loss of the spectator himself in the very spectacle that stage

⁵⁸ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

talk makes so rapturously distant from the spectator. John Davies of Hereford offers one account of that experience in a poem that seems both to shudder and to delight at the almost supernatural effects that Marlowe’s tragedy has on him:

When, with my Minds right Eye, I do behold
 (From nought, made nothing lesse) great Tamburlaine
 (Like Phaeton) drawne, encoacht in burnisht Gold,
 Raigning his drawers, who of late did Raigne:
 I deem me blessed in the Womb to be
 Borne as I am, among indifferent Things.
 No King, no Slave, but of the mean degree
 When I see Kings made Slaves, and Slaves made Kings.
 When, if my Meannesse but on Thought conceive
 That minds but mounting, this Thought keeps it downe:
 And so I live, in Case, to take or give,
 For Love, or Meed, no Scepter but a Crowne:
 Yet Flowers of Crownes, for Poesies expence,
 Poets might take, and give no recompense.⁵⁹

Charles Whitney calls this sonnet the period’s “single most important response” to Marlowe’s tragedy because it offers up an account of the dialectical process whereby a “dissolution or shattering of the self” in the presence of Marlowe’s tragedy is replaced by “moral reflection.”⁶⁰ While Whitney’s claim risks overstatement, the poem finely illustrates the curious dynamic whereby Tamburlaine’s spectacular distance invites the spectator’s rapturous self-projection. Davies’s comparison of Tamburlaine with Phaeton, the ill-fated son of Phoebus who failed in his bid to master his father’s flying chariot, is moralizing exactly where Marlowe’s tragedy is not, but it nevertheless functions as an important echo of the prologue’s advertisement of “high astounding terms” – another metaphorization of formal distance through physical distance. Significantly, that metaphor is itself echoed lines later when Davies describes, even as he resists, his own mind’s “mounting.” The echo is illustrative, for it suggests that Tamburlaine’s god-like distance from his spectators compels their mimetic projection of their very selves onto him – as if to traverse the distance that separates them from Marlowe’s antihero through ravishing emotions of their own. To move from Marlowe’s tragedy to Davies’s poem is thus to encounter an early modern demonstration of Sianne Ngai’s claim that

⁵⁹ Sir John Davies of Hereford, *Wittes Pilgrimage* (London, 1605), sig. I3v.

⁶⁰ Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*, 41–42.

“[t]he creation of distance . . . produces fresh affect and ensures that aesthetic engagement will be maintained.”⁶¹ On the early modern stage, the production of distance is not an impediment but a stimulus to absorption.

The production of distance for the sake of vicarious feeling will undergird other instances of stage talk from the period. In George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar*, the Moorish king Muly Muhammet arrives on stage to give his starving wife the flesh of the lioness he has just killed – and with it the following oration:

MOOR: Hold thee, Calipolis, feed and faint no more;
 This flesh I forced from a lioness,
 Meat of a princess, for a princess meet:
 Learn by her noble stomach to esteem
 Penury plenty in extremest dearth,
 Who, when she saw her foragement bereft,
 Pin’d not in melancholy or in childish fear,
 But as brave minds are strongest in extremes,
 So she redoubling her former force,
 Rang’d through the woods, and rent the breeding vaults
 Of proudest savages to save herself.
 Feed then and faint not, fair Calipolis;
 For rather than fierce famine shall prevail
 To gnaw thy entrails with her thorny teeth,
 The conquering lioness shall attend on thee,
 And lay huge heaps of slaughter’d carcasses,
 As bulwarks in her way, to keep her back.
 I will provide thee of a princely osprey,
 That as she flieth over fish in pools,
 The fish shall turn their glistering bellies up,
 And thou shalt take thy liberal choice of all:
 Jove’s stately bird with wide-commanding wings
 Shall hover still about thy princely head,
 And beat down fowl by shoals into thy lap:
 Feed then and faint not, fair Calipolis.⁶²

The one-line refrain “feed then and faint not” can be read as a figure for other, less overt but no less familiar repetitions that structure the oration by elevating it: the proliferating adjectives (“extremest dearth,” “foragement bereft,” “conquering lioness,” “slaughter’d carcasses,” “princely osprey,” “wide-commanding wings,” “fair Calipolis”), a syntax that prolongs itself through conjunctions and modifying clauses (“And lay huge

⁶¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 84–85.

⁶² George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar* (London: 1594), sigs. C2v–C3r.

heaps," "As bulwarks," "That as she flieth," "And beat down fowl"), and a meter that settles into a familiar pentameter beat ("And thou shalt take thy liberal choice of all," "Jove's stately bird with wide-commanding wings"). *The Spanish Tragedy*, written by Marlowe's roommate Thomas Kyd, begins by treating us to similarly "high-astounding" rhetorical effects:

GHOST: When this eternal substance of my soul
 Did live imprison'd in my wanton flesh,
 Each in their function serving others' need,
 I was a courtier in the Spanish court.
 My name was Don Andrea; my descent,
 Though not ignoble, yet inferior far
 To gracious fortunes of my tender youth.
 For there in prime and pride of all my years,
 By duteous service and deserving love,
 In secret I possess'd a worthy dame,
 Which hight sweet Bellimperia by name.
 But in the harvest of my summer joys,
 Death's winter nipp'd the blossoms of my bliss,
 Forcing divorce 'twixt my love and me.
 For in the late conflict with Portingale
 My valor drew me into danger's mouth,
 Til life to death made passage through my wounds.
 When I was slain, my soul descended straight
 To pass the flowing stream of Acheron;
 But churlish Charon, only boatman there,
 Said that my rites of burial not performed,
 I might not sit amongst his passengers.
 Ere Sol had slept three nights in Thetis' lap,
 And slaked his smoking chariot in her flood,
 By Don Horatio, our knight marshal's son,
 My funerals and obsequies were done.⁶³

The pentameter might not be as forceful as anything in *Tamburlaine*, and yet the same, extended impulse to elevate the speech is nevertheless to be found, manifesting in almost compulsive repetition of adjectives and of modifying prepositional phrases – "eternal substance of my soul," "in my wanton flesh," "gracious fortunes of my tender youth," "flowing stream of Acheron," "his smoking chariot in her flood" – in a rigorous devotion to the end-stopped line, and in a diction of conspicuous if not always consistent altitude (the markedly formal and periphrastic "hight sweet Bellimperia by name" conditions one to expect from "churlish Charon" a verb at once more dazzling and metrically regular than the homespun "said").

⁶³ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (London: 1592), sig. A2r.

Likewise Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, in which we find Aaron the Moor delivering the following impassioned paean to Tamora:

Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top,
 Safe out of fortune's shot; and sits aloft,
 Secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash;
 Advanced above pale envy's threatening reach.
 As when the golden sun salutes the morn,
 And, having gilt the ocean with his beams,
 Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach,
 And overlooks the highest-peering hills;
 So Tamora:
 Upon her wit doth earthly honour wait,
 And virtue stoops and trembles at her frown.
 Then, Aaron, arm thy heart, and fit thy thoughts,
 To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress,
 And mount her pitch, whom thou in triumph long
 Hast prisoner held, fetter'd in amorous chains
 And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes
 Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus.
 Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!
 I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold,
 To wait upon this new-made empress.⁶⁴

Commanding his "slavish weeds" is only Aaron's most obvious echo of *Tamburlaine*, whose influence can be heard in the steady accumulation of modifying clauses; in the eruption of monosyllabic words into polysyllabics like "Caucasus," "Prometheus," and "Olympus"; in the rhythm held scrupulously in check by pauses and end-stops. Yet while Marlowe's influence on early modern drama is undeniable, we ought to avoid thinking about these examples purely in terms of allusion or influence, since those concepts elide the mediating conditions of the stage itself in favor of one-to-one transmission of aesthetic effects.⁶⁵ If we hear Marlowe in these moments, that is importantly because his style elaborated an invaluable rubric for coordinating attention on the stage by sealing off speakers from ordinary interaction, so absorbing them in the art of keeping their elevated speeches going as to create a palpable distance between the

⁶⁴ William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus: Revised Edition*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 2.1.1–20.

⁶⁵ On the centrality of *Tamburlaine's* blank verse to theatrical production, see Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–169; and Lawrence Manley and Sally-Beth MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 138–143.

“I” of the speaker and the “you” of his audience – a relation, in other words, that the platform stage has already established.

An important redundancy is at work here. Stage talk serves in this moment to isolate a character whom the platform stage has already isolated, to separate from contact a speaker whom the platform has already separated from contact, to interpose distance where distance already is. But redundancy is not the same thing as irrelevance, and to note it here is to account for the way Tamburlaine’s unnaturally outsized style “works” on the theater by reproducing in another form what is already there in the theater. By isolating its already isolated speaker from contact, stage talk objectifies the physical and social arrangement of the playhouse – in which an audience of hundreds gathered together to watch a few performers standing at a distance from them – as a social and an aesthetic relation. The unnatural and conspicuous formedness of stage talk thus remedies the discomfort that defines theatrical experience not by overcoming it but by reifying it. It is in this respect that stage talk enforces the distance that was ever threatening to collapse on the platform stage. It converts the uncomfortable but precarious asymmetrical dispersal of persons across a distance into a verbal form that produces the framework for a distinctly theatrical kind of interaction. In this framework, distance is prioritized over contact, and playgoers can accordingly have no transaction with the actor who speaks to them, since he speaks as if from elsewhere. Instead of interlocutors, they are interpolated as spectators, organized around the drama of polished speech. The stage talking actor, meanwhile, is turned into a spectacle for others to regard – and regard for form – rather than to engage with. The skill of reducing noise through form thus becomes, in stage talk, the skill of giving form to distance that defines theatrical experience in the first place.

Public Icons

The upshot of stage talk’s surplus of skill is the abstraction of the speaker into a public icon. For in setting its speaker at a distance from the crowd to whom it is addressed, stage talk does not merely hail the indefinite and outsized audiences that the early modern playhouse assembled. It also makes those audiences visible to themselves as such. Like the crowd, stage talk is abstracting, conducting a sublation of the self into form. And also like the crowd, stage talk is larger than life, being formally “elevated” above ordinary rhythms of talk. The style thus establishes a symmetry between actor and audience, speaker and crowd, through which the former concretizes the latter. Stage talk’s “high astounding terms,” that is, give form to the abstraction that is the mass, the anonymous and indistinct throng

that the playhouse had routinized into a daily component of London life. In this respect, we can understand stage talk as accomplishing what so many styles are used to accomplish. It turns a person from a stranger into a spectacle for other strangers to behold. Stage talk shares with the other styles treated in this book a desire to master strangerhood by making itself into a trope for it, by turning anonymity into a source of identification, emulation, and public attention. The styles that I take up in the remaining chapters of this book are all responses to the conditions of publicity and distance, and they depend on stage talk's special achievement: its turning of the stage into a figure for publicness itself. Michael Warner has written that "[i]n modernity . . . an extraordinary burden of world-making comes to be borne above all by style," for the simple reason that "the world to which one belongs, the scene of one's activity, will be determined at least in part by the way one addresses it."⁶⁶ Stage talk makes a world in which the anonymity of public life gives way, through a perfection of skill, to a fantasy of theatrical visibility.

The Tamburlaine phenomenon is early modern England's infatuation with that fantasy. By its strange power, the vicarious identification coordinated between actor and audience, between spectacle and playgoer, becomes the basis for a subsequent desire to emulate the figure with whom one identifies – to become the very spectacle that seizes one's attention. We have already caught glimpses of this desire in Jonson's Juniper and Hall's stentorian poet. Others are not long to seek. When the unnamed author of *Micrologia* (1629), for example, takes grim delight in a new law forcing prisoners to "purge the street / Of noisome garbage . . . Whilst as they passe the people scoffing say, / Holla ye pampered Jades of Asia";⁶⁷ when the poet John Taylor writes that in riding in a horse-drawn coach, he was "but little inferior to Tamburlaine, being jolted thus in state by those pampered jades of Belgia";⁶⁸ and when the character Quicksilver, in *Eastward Ho*, is found intruding on a scene by bellowing "Holla! Ye pampered jades of Asia!" one is not simply reminded of the scene, in *Tamburlaine Part 2*, when Marlowe's protagonist enters the stage in a chariot drawn by conquered kings and proceeds to shout at them,

Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia!
 What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day,
 And have so proud a chariot at your heels,
 And such a coachman as great Tamburlaine,
 But from Asphaltis, where I conquer'd you,
 To Byron here, where thus I honor you?

⁶⁶ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 128–129.

⁶⁷ R.M., *Micrologia* (London, 1629), sig. D6v.

⁶⁸ John Taylor, *The World Runs on Wheels* (London, 1623), sig. B4v.

More important is that such moments provide a working sketch of how citations of Tamburlaine tended to provide their speakers with a ready-to-hand way to register the transformation of strangers into public spectacles – note, for example, the interplay between the people on the street and the passersby who scoff at them in the example from *Micrologia* – and even to make themselves into exactly the rapturous kind of theatrical spectacle that Tamburlaine was for them. Language in such moments functions as more than an instrument for alluding to this public spectacle; rather, it is the spectacle itself. In a consummation of the humanist injunction to speak well, stage talk's improbable hyperfluency makes its speaker into an object of public admiration. This is why Simon Eyre, in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, bristles when his wife tries to teach him how to talk: "Shall Sim Eyre learn to speak of you, Lady Madgy? . . . Sim Eyre knows how to speak to a Pope, to Sultan Soliman, to Tamburlaine, an he were here." For Eyre, as for so many playgoers, Tamburlaine is the figure for a linguistic competence so extraordinary as to constitute a public spectacle in its own right.

Small wonder, then, that stage talk gets enlisted during this time to constitute emerging scenes of public sociability. Recall the spectacle of Hall's drunken poet, who delivers his oration in a tavern. In taverns, alehouses, ordinaries, inns, and other new, public locales where strangers came into contact with other strangers, stage talk was a compelling form of self-presentation because its hyperfluent speech had the benefit of making one into a spectacle for other strangers to behold. In Thomas Heywood's *Fair Maid of the Exchange*, we watch one character aspiring to memorize "bundles of cast wit" so that "I could now when I am in company / At alehouse, tavern, or an ordinary / Upon a theme make an extemporall ditty / (Or one at least should seem extemporall)."⁶⁹ The fantasy dwells at the intersection between linguistic skill and publicness, and it locates the tavern or the ordinary as the site where the one can grant access to the latter, where a mastery of speech can convert one's anonymity into a public spectacle.

Hall is not alone in noting the way stage talk emerged as a model of public behavior. He is echoed by George Wither's lampoon of the drunken poets who "rehearse / Some fragments of their new created Verse, / With such a Gesture, and in such a Tone, / As if great Tamburlaine upon his throne / Were uttering a majestical oration." And he is echoed, as well, by Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV*, when the character

⁶⁹ Thomas Heywood, *Fayre Maide of the Exchange* (London, 1605), sig. F3v.

Pistol makes his entrance through language lifted from both *Tamburlaine* and from Peele's *Battle of Alcazar*:

PISTOL: These be good humors indeed! Shall packhorses,
 And hollow pampered jades of Asia,
 Compare with Caesars, and with cannibals,
 And Trojan Greeks? . . .
 Then feed and be fat, my fair Calipolis.⁷⁰

It is hardly an accident that the tavern is where Pistol delivers these lines. Jeffrey Doty and Musa Gurnis have recently argued that taverns, alehouse, inns, and ordinaries “created a local publicity hub where audience members processed and reperformed what they saw in the theatres,” in no small part because playhouses and drinking houses “were closely linked commercially and discursively.”⁷¹ Plotting the remarkable traffic between these spaces – the language of the theater becomes a script for tavern sociability and vice versa – Doty and Gurnis make the important argument that a theater public emerges at this time. A far cry from the bourgeois public sphere that would coalesce at the end of the seventeenth century, early modern England's theater public emerges through the production, consumption, and reproduction of theatrical performances. As such, it is a social formation that is organized not around the discussion of news or politics – not even organized around the discussion of anything – but around proximity to the always fleeting event of performance. A character like Shakespeare's Pistol is an important node in this public because, as they note, “he is Shakespeare's vehicle for circulating audience habits back to themselves – which highlights the public's own ways of conferring fame by their creative deployments of theatrical material.”⁷² Contact with celebrated players and playwrights, reenactments of famous scenes outside the playhouse, and the recursive performance of such reenactments on the stage are what constitutes the theater public, which takes shape primarily through what Warner would call the “reflexive circulation of discourse,” specifically of theatrical discourse. The *Tamburlaine* phenomenon is an important flashpoint in the formation of this public, catalyzing as it does a social imaginary in which the dream of self-fashioning is routed through the world of the playhouse.

⁷⁰ William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 2*, ed. James C. Bulman (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 2.4.142–156.

⁷¹ Jeffrey S. Doty and Musa Gurnis, “Theatre Scene and Theatre Public in Early Modern London,” *Shakespeare 14* (2018): 12–25, 12, 14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

While any theatrical utterance could enjoy the special, reflexive circulation that Doty and Gurnis are interested in tracking, it makes a certain sense that most of the examples they consider are examples of stage talk. The theater public is a social formation that emerges in and through the performance of exactly the skill that stage talk entails – and it emerges in and through such performances because the skill entailed by stage talk makes one, like Tamburlaine, into a public icon for others to behold, to identify with, and to appropriate for themselves. Stage talk is central to the emergence of a theater public because its operative surplus of skill, insisting on the gap that separates actor from audience, me from you, has the special power of *making a scene* – of organizing an otherwise unincorporated crowd of strangers around a common focus of attention that turns them into an audience and then, through the recursive reproduction of such scenes, into the virtual entity we can recognize as a public.

Or at least, it does when it is uttered from the distance of the platform stage. But as the examples of Hall's drunken poet, of Shakespeare's Pistol, and of Jonson's Juniper all show, there is more than a little interference that ensues when stage talk is carried over from the stage into other social interactions. The satirist sneers, the spectator laughs, the cobbler makes himself ridiculous. The reflexive circulation that makes the early modern theater public does not happen without its fair share of friction. This is because of the very thing that makes stage talk so attractive in the first place: the distance that the style projects when it is used on the stage. But as Hall's satire makes comically clear, such spectacular talk spectacularly fails when it is used outside the playhouse. In the absence of any stage, stage talk turns the speaker into a person so laughably absorbed by his performance that he cannot realize how distant his language has made him from ordinary social contact. The style that signals an abundance of skill on the stage ends up signaling a risible lack of skill off it – an embarrassing misrecognition of the theater as a vehicle for self-fashioning, an uncomfortable overreliance on aesthetic objects to provide a form that can make one present to others, an incapacity to attend to the differences between stage talk and real talk.

What makes the mouthpieces of the theater public so laughable, then, is not simply the issue of plagiarism or authorship, particularly at a historical moment when commonplacing literary works was a matter of course. Rather, the issue is that stage talk entails such a surplus of skill through such a density of form that it can no longer be taken as talk at all – at least, it can no longer be taken as talk when it is taken off the stage where it thrives. The relation between theatrical talk and the theatrical public thus

entails a reversal of the “parasitism” that for Austin ensues when speech-acts are put on stage; stage talk is a style that enjoys a rousing felicity only when it is uttered on the stage, while the extra-theatrical world of the theater public becomes the setting that is “parasitic” and etiolated, incapable of accommodating a form of talk that works elsewhere.

Noting that “broadcasters seem to be schooled to realize our cultural stereotypes about speech production, namely, that ordinarily it will be without influences,” Goffman observes that “these professional obligations, once established, seem to generate their own underlying norms for hearers as well as speakers, so that faults we would have to be trained linguistically to hear in ordinary talk can be glaringly evident to the untrained ear when encountered in broadcast talk.”⁷³ The point is worth citing because it illustrates how competence does not so much eliminate error as generate new standards and conceptions of error. So far as stage talk is concerned, this means that the skill of reducing noise thus produces a new noise altogether, which is the very abundance of form that defines stage talk in the first place. Ornamentation, modifier, heavy iambic rhythms, multiplying rhetorical figures, accumulative syntax – indeed the very adjectival mode upon which Tamburlaine’s style is founded – reduce conversational noise, but only by constituting their own form of interference. Style is what purifies talk by paradoxically getting in its way. It is, after all, impossible to deny that there is a persistent stiffness to stage talk, a leaden immobility that betrays an overreliance on the formal properties that comprise it, as though the poetic function of speech had been transmuted into a principle of mechanical automation.

And yet the sheer stress that stage talk places on the poetic function is also what makes it into more than a style, but a category for understanding other styles. As subsequent chapters of this book are about to show, the stiffness and artificiality of stage talk is but an amplification of that self-reflexive manipulation of form that characterizes any style – that makes any style, indeed, *into* a style—albeit in subtler or more flexible ways than stage talk admits. It is through such cultivation of form that any style metapragmatically coordinates relations of proximity or distance, intimacy or remove, warmth or aggression, between *me* and *you*. Style is the noise that makes such relations possible, but it is a noise that people do not always want to hear.

This is why the story that critics have tended to tell of the early modern stage is one of playwrights, actors, and audiences casting off the slough of

⁷³ Goffman, “Radio Talk,” in *Forms of Talk*, 240.

stiff, artificial language in favor of more naturalistic modes of expression. That growing desire for naturalistic expression is itself a product of – if also a reaction against – the artificiality of theater, which always stands at a distance from real life. In this respect, we can understand stage talk as establishing the very conditions that make it irrelevant: Once the aestheticizing distance between spectacle and spectator had been firmly enough established that it could be taken for granted, then other, more naturalistic forms of talk could be cultivated. And yet it would be a mistake to propose that stage talk vanishes entirely, particularly when criteria of naturalism seem only minimally at work in so spectacularly artificial a passage as this one:

To be, or not to be – that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them; to die, to sleep –
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished – to die: to sleep;
 To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
 Must give us pause: there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long a life.
 For who could bear the whips and scorns of time,
 Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office and the spurns
 That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin.

(3.1.55–75)⁷⁴

The differences between this speech and those of *Tamburlaine* are easy enough to note. Where *Tamburlaine* sought to overlay syntax onto meter, Hamlet works to pull them apart, the end of clauses and phrases only rarely coinciding with the end of any line. And where *Tamburlaine's* fluency came in no small part from the hypnotic regularity of his verse, Hamlet's is marked by feminine line-endings, mid-line caesuras, pyrrhics,

⁷⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 3.1.55–75.

and spondees that serve at times to quicken the verse, other times to slow it, but in all cases to trouble any metrical regularity. And yet Hamlet is no less skilled than his predecessor in cleansing his speech of noise, hitch, or inflexion. In the multiplying doublets (“slings and arrows,” “heartache” and “shocks,” “whips and scorns”), in the metrical variation, and in the enumeration of one misery after another, we encounter not so much the absence of skill as a new standard of it – a standard of variety rather than regularity of form. To note the way Hamlet’s speech works to fulfill this standard is to observe how stage talk continues to serve as an aesthetic principle for the many other styles of talk that get codified for the stage, all of which work to replace the noise of ordinary talk with a density of form. Between the language of the early modern stage and the language of ordinary speech, a palpable gap persists.

So far as early modern England’s theater public is concerned, this means that the circulation of language between play world and real world is endlessly fraught, because the fantasy of publicness engendered by the stage can never really be fulfilled off it. Refusing through its conspicuous mastery of form to be lassoed into ordinary conversation, stage talk lays the foundation for a social imaginary that is defined by the failure of members to achieve the skill that inspires their imitation. The style that makes the early modern theater, that is, also makes it into an aspiration that can never quite be achieved. And yet this is also to say that the theater fashions in its image a public in which talk can become a mode of sociability that refuses sociability, in the sense that stage talk’s aestheticizing production of distance – so prone to failure when taken off stage – affords speakers and spectators the opportunity to dwell in the discontinuity between their language and the occasion of its utterance, in the momentary suspension of sociability for the pleasures of form for its own sake. In this respect, the theater public is theatrical not simply because it thrives on stage talk, or because it connects strangers to the playhouse, but because, in Ellen MacKay’s words, “theater refuses [any] kind of clear and consequential meaning.”⁷⁵ That refusal is the essence of a style that spectators wished to imitate for the very reason that they could not.

⁷⁵ Ellen Mackay, *Persecution, Plague, Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 196.