

# Complicating Prose and Verse Lineation through Digital Editions of Early Modern Drama

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## Module Overview

Many early modern literature courses alert students to distinctions between prose and verse, particularly when both forms occur in the same text. With this in mind, we propose a sequence of lessons, which might be integrated into a broader early modern literature course that uses digital tools to

- review the distinctions between prose and verse
- complicate the terms “prose” and “verse”
- teach how one develops an argumentative, interpretive thesis rooted in analysis of text structure
- situate texts in the context of material production

## Lesson Objectives

Students will review the distinctions between prose and verse in early modern plays through a close analysis of Christopher Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris*.

Students will examine the EMED’s preservation of the original playbook’s messy lineation in order to theorize the shifting use and function of prose and verse lines.

Student will analyze the role of early modern printers and contemporary editors in (re)lineating and thus remediating the text.

**Time:** Three 45-minute class periods.

### Materials:

- *The Folger’s A Digital Anthology Early Modern English Drama (EMED)*
  - *The Massacre at Paris*, Christopher Marlow
  - *The Puritan*, W.S. (later attributed to Thomas Middleton)
- *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays* (Penguin Classics edition)
- *The puritan; or, the widow of Watling-Street* (EEBO edition)

### Assessment Description:

- a. **Short essay:** Reflect on the textual authority of *Massacre* in the original print edition, reflected in the EMED edition as well. Why might we, or other editors, want to re-lineate a line when the original printing of the play maintains an unclear prose/verse lineation? Does the printer Edward Alde provide us with the “authoritative” version of how the text should be read? Does the Digital Anthology of Early Modern English Drama? How does editing or printing a text also require some form of interpretation? Your response should be one to two pages.

- b. **Short project:** Select thirty lines from *Massacre* and create a critical edition of the excerpt. Your notes should include how your edition maintains and diverges from the documentary edition and how your editorial decisions affect readings of the scene.

## Lesson Sequence

### Day One: Prose and Verse

1. Remind students what they may already know about the differences between a prose and a verse line. It may be helpful to provide a familiar example.
2. Review an example from Shakespeare. For example, the first twenty lines of Act 3, Scene 2 from *As You Like It* (though any scene with mixed verse and prose will do).

3.2

*Enter ORLANDO [holding a sheaf of papers].*

ORLANDO Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love.  
 And thou, thrice-crownèd queen of night, survey  
 With thy chaste eye from thy pale sphere above  
 Thy huntress' name, that my full life doth sway.  
 5 O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,  
 And in their barks my thoughts I'll character,  
 That every eye which in this forest looks  
 Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere.  
 Run, run, Orlando—carve on every tree  
 10 The fair, the chaste and unexpressive she! *Exit.*  
*Enter CORIN and CLOWN.*

CORIN And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touch-  
 stone?

CLOWN Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life;  
 but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In  
 15 respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that  
 it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the  
 fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court,  
 it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humor  
 well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against  
 20 my stomach. Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?

3. Explain to students how Orlando's speech is a perfect model for blank verse (it is, in fact, an embedded sonnet). Review the iambic pentameter by having students read aloud together and clapping on the stressed syllables.
4. Read aloud Touchstone's speech as a model for prose.
5. **Class discussion:** What are some possible theories about why characters speak in prose or verse? What is a testable hypothesis for what prose and verse might indicate?
  - a. Some possible answers could include: class differences, different language uses

(wooing scene vs. conversation), different affect (rational vs. passionate), idealism versus cynical commentary, scenes of everyday life versus a staple image of court culture.

- b. Display this list on the board as the activity progresses.
6. In small groups or in a homework assignment, students practice the skill of distinguishing prose from verse and theorizing their effects.
- a. Use an excerpt from *The Puritan* and ask students to read and discuss how the lineation in the 1607 edition might affect how readers think about the scene. Furthermore, what might the lineation of verse and prose in this scene indicate?
  - b. Background information: *The Puritan* (1607) is a city comedy about a recent widow and her two daughters, who are nearly swindled by sinister scholar. The following excerpt is from Act 1, Scene 1 and shows the Widow Lady Plus speaking with her brother-in-law, Sir Godfrey.

**THE PURITAIN WIDDOW.**

choyse enow Sister, — for what should wee doe with all our Knights I pray? but to marry riche widdowes, wealthy Cittizens widdowes; lusty faire—browd Ladies; go too, bee of good comfort I say leaue suobbing and weeping—yet my Brother was a kinde hearted man—I would not haue the Elfe see mee now? — come pluck vp a womans heart — here stands your Daughters, who be well estared, and at maturity will also bee enquir'd after with good husbands, so all these teares shall bee soone dyed vp and a better world then euer.—what? Woman? you must not weepe still? hee's dead hee's buried—yet I cannot chuse but weepe for him!

*Wid.* Marry againe! no! let me be buried quick then!  
And that same part of Quire whereon I tread  
To such intent, O may it be my graue;  
And that the Priest may wine his wedding prayers,  
Een with a breath, to haue all dust and ashes;  
Oh, out of a million of millions, I should nere finde such a husband; hee was vnmatchable.—vnmatchable? nothing was so hot, nor so decre for mee, I could not speake of that one thing that I had not, beside I had keyes of all, kept all, receiud all, had money in my purse, spent what I would, went abroad when I would, came home when I would, and did all what I would? Oh—my sweete husband; I shall neuer haue the like?

*Sir Godf.* Sister? nere say so; hee was an honest brother of mine, and so, and you may light vpon one as honest againe, or one, as honest againe may light vpon you, that's the properer phrase indeed?

*Wid.* Neuer? oh if you loue me vrge it not,  
Oh may I be the by-word of the world;  
The common talke at Table in the mouth  
Of euery Groome and Waiter, if e're more  
I entertaine the carnall suite of Man?

*Mol.* I must kneele downe for fashion too?

*Frank.* And I, whom neuer man as yet hath scalde  
Ee'n in this depth of generall sorrow, vowe

Neuer



7. Introduce students to Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* and then assign homework.
8. **Homework assignment:** Read the EMED edition of *Massacre*. For one scene, students highlight lines written in prose and underline lines written in verse. Students might place a squiggly line under lines with unclear prose/verse status.

### Day Two: Re-lineation

1. Split students into small groups. Ask them to compare their prose/verse mark-up and to discuss points where their mark-up diverges or moments that were difficult to determine.
2. Select three contentious passages to discuss as a class. Why might we mark these lines as prose? Why might we mark them as verse? A good problem moment to focus on might be Guise's speech (B1r-v).
3. Introduce the concept of editorial re-lineation. How would the students prefer to re-lineate the lines in order to distinguish between prose and verse? How might they re-lineate the lines to help a reader better understand the meaning of the passage?
4. Provide an example of the re-lineated passages from an edited version of the play (the Penguin Classics edition is a good example).
5. Extrapolate further from the close reading level to the play at large: How do their small re-lineation decisions alter the meaning of a particular passage? Would they affect their reading of the play as a whole?
6. *Who* are the actors contributing to the mediation of the play's verse or prose lines?
7. **Assignment:** Students choose one "problem" passage to re-lineate so that prose and verse lines are easily identifiable. Students write a one paragraph reflection on how their re-lineation clarifies the meaning of the passage.

### Day Three: Early modern printing

1. Introduce students to Early English Books Online (EEBO).
2. Have them find *Massacre* in the EEBO database and look for the images associated with the problem prose/verse passages identified by the class. What are the differences between their own re-lineations and those of the original text? What about those of the Penguin edition?
3. Assign assessment.