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Comparing Syntactic Strategies for Proximity and Distance in the Verse/Prose Comedies of Shakespeare and Jonson

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Introduction

One of the most effective ways of exploring subtly codified and varied representations of the past is through an appraisal of language and style, including the use of archaisms in Early Modern English dramatic writing. In this respect, studies of Shakespearean language have tended typically to concentrate on paradigmatic characteristics of his creative use of language at the expense of syntagmatic features. Thus, analysis of archaic elements in the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has been restricted mainly to lexical, morphological or phonological elements. Jonathan Culpeper has drawn attention to the often under-rated significance of syntax in Shakespearean texts, and suggested that more research is required in this area[1]. He also notes, like Stanley Hussey[2], how syntactic nuances in the Shakespeare text help to establish characterisation. However, such discussion is often restricted to instances where syntactic features relate to cognitive organisation of speech. Besides, Hussey's assertions on syntactic evolution in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were open to the critique that they were not based on quantitative evidence. This paucity of scholarly attention to Shakespeare's syntax is compounded by an even greater neglect of the syntactic choices of his playwriting contemporaries.

[1] Jonathan Culpeper, *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts*, Harlow, Longman, 2001, p. 202.

[2] Stanley Hussey, *The Literary Language of Shakespeare* [1982], London-New York, Longman, 1992 (2nd edition), p. 75.

Of all of Shakespeare's contemporaries the one with whom his name is most often linked is Ben Jonson. It is perhaps easy to overlook the fact that the year 2016 has been not only the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death, but also of Jonson's publication of his *Workes*, representing a watershed in the gradual transformation of dramatic entertainment into the status of literary artefact. 1616 was also the year in which Jonson was installed as in effect the country's first poet laureate by being awarded an annual pension from the Crown. It is highly plausible to assume that, without the precedent of Jonson's apparently hubristic and presumptuous exercise in self-promotion, the Heminges-Condell folio edition of Shakespeare's plays might never have seen the light of day. Despite the manifest differences in the style, setting and subject-matter of their work, particularly their comedies, Shakespeare and Jonson are the two dramatists whose work stands out among contemporaries of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods, a twenty-five year span commonly recognised as a time of profound cultural, political, and – not least – linguistic change in England. Deep interest in the connections between Shakespearean and Jonsonian theatrical practices is exemplified by older studies such as Gerald Eades Bentley's 1945 magnum opus *Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* and more recent ones, such as Bill Angus's *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson* (2016)[3]; the latter argues for a meta-referential preoccupation evident in the plots, characters and settings of both dramatists with the sociopolitical, pragmatic context in which their works were received and interpreted.

In our paper we will argue that the syntactic strategies of both Shakespeare and Jonson were conscious rather than arbitrary, and will relate these choices, by means of a harmonised literary-linguistic analysis, to the broader socio-political context. Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedies spanning the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period were investigated for the use or non-use of the Verb Second inversion feature with subject pronouns in declarative clauses – that is to say, where the grammatical subject pronoun inverts round the finite verb standing in second position, to be presented below. Following on from two previously published co-authored studies of syntax in

[3] Gerald Eades Bentley, S*hakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1945; Bill Angus, *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Shakespeare's serious verse drama and in that of his contemporaries[4], the present paper began with the hypothesis that the comedies, relying more on vernacular speech style, make less use of this salient feature of archaic syntax than the serious plays. It was then found that interesting differences distinguish Shakespeare's and Jonson's use of this syntactic trait in ways that we associate with their differing authorial stance in relation to contemporary reference.

In the first part of the study five early period Shakespeare comedies – mainly written in verse with limited prose speeches/scenes – were investigated to discover the ratio of archaic VS usage, as compared with the more contemporary vernacular Subject Pronoun-Verb order (henceforth SV or SProV). Our data research targeted the distribution of SProV to VSPro occurrences across the selected corpus of plays. The second part of the research, following the same methodology, involved a similar stylistic comparison between five middle-period prose/verse Shakespeare comedies and five prose/verse comedies by Jonson. A further rationale for selecting Jonson for the comparison with Shakespeare lies not just in the fact that both dramatists produced comedies consistently across a broad span of the period in question, but also that the major works of neither author are considered to be collaborative. Hence, stylistic consistency can be expected within and across the texts of each of the two dramatists, in contrast to the internal stylistic variations and idiosyncrasies to be found in the many plays of the period attributed to collaborative authorship.

The principal aim of the study is to analyse and evaluate stylistic effects and vernacular influences in the choice or avoidance of what was, by the Early Modern period, a syntactic archaism. Finding a measure of syntax closer to the vernacular is inevitably challenging in the absence of spoken data from this period. However, it was hypothesised that fewer examples of the Verb Second construction in Shakespeare's comedies would be found than in his earlier historical plays; we then investigated whether this is not only a function of stylistic idiosyncrasy or language change, but also of setting and context, and is intrinsic to

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[4] Richard Ingham and Michael Ingham, "Subject-Verb Inversion and Iambic Rhythm in Shakespeare's Dramatic Verse", in *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language*, eds Jonathan Culpeper and Mireille Ravassat, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 98-118; Richard Ingham and Michael Ingham, "Syntax and Subtext: Diachronic Variables, Displacement and Proximity in the Verse Dramas of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries", *Shakespeare*, 11:2 (2015), pp. 214-32, published online 23 July 2013.

the dramatist's evocation of spatial/temporal proximation or distancing of the particular play.

Our study was also prompted by the fact that there have been remarkably few studies of Shakespeare's syntax, and even fewer of that of his contemporaries. One notable exception is Jonathan Hope (1994), who used grammatical preferences as a means of investigating authorship of disputed plays[5]. John Houston (1988) noted the pertinence of syntactic strategies that disturb the "*ordo naturalis*" to connote "high style", contrasting it with "colloquial syntactic devices" of later plays[6]. Elsewhere, Sylvia Adamson (2001) discusses features of high style in her contribution to her co-edited study of Shakespeare's dramatic language[7]. Her essay focuses predominantly on lexical aspects of his language, rather than on syntactic variables, and contains only a passing reference to – and a single example of – syntactic considerations related to thematisation. For the most part, syntactic choices do not appear to have been sufficiently considered as a factor connoting high style; by the same token, syntactic preferences consistent with the less elevated, or even demotic, style that characterises comedy have yet to be investigated closely.

Our research is necessarily more narrowly focused than the abovementioned studies, looking at a less heterogeneous spread of source materials than Hope, with the aim of comparing works that are broadly similar in genre. Nevertheless, it is fortified by critical recognition that non-colloquial or non-quotidian syntax – at least in the work of Shakespeare – is stylistically marked, and would have been associated with consciously dated usage in the context of the popular, vernacular world of comedy. What is not known, though, is how far this characteristic applies to Shakespeare's contemporary, Jonson. Principally at issue in our interpretation of the empirical data is the way in which Shakespeare and Jonson, in their different ways, appear to have situated their works in space and time, and how this distancing effect is obtained by the use or avoidance of archaic syntax. In the following

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5 Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays*: *A Sociolinguistic Study*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

6 John P. Houston, *Shakespearean Sentences*: *A Study in Style and Syntax*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1988, p. 126.

7 Sylvia Adamson, "The Grand Style", in *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language: A Guide*, eds Sylvia Adamson, Lynette Hunter, Lynne Magnusson, Ann Thompson and Katie Wales, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2001, pp. 31-50.

sections we elaborate on the historical and theatrical context of Shakespeare's and Jonson's comedies, before presenting the data in tabular form in order to make our comparisons and interpret our findings.

The dramatic settings of Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy

Our earlier study in 2013[8] had found a greater tendency toward syntactic archaism in Shakespeare's serious plays as well as those of his contemporaries, supporting the view that these syntactic choices were designed to evoke temporal, and in some cases geographical, distance; in contrast, the serious verse dramas of the early Jacobean period tended to eschew archaic constructions, which we identified as a linguistic device connotative of more immediate reference to the context of contemporary England. That said, the contemporary implications were often thinly veiled by non-English place and time settings. Historical tragedies of this latter period, such as Jonson's Roman tragedy, *Sejanus* (1604), were perceived by powerful contemporaries of the dramatist as implying more topical than historical reference, causing the play to be proscribed.

Jonson's early satires had also courted controversy, and 1605, following the Gunpowder Plot, the author was called before the Privy Council to explain himself[9]. Commenting on aspects of *Volpone*, Gordon Campbell has noted how "the seditious elements to which he had contributed had landed Jonson in prison, but on this occasion he escaped censure by virtue of the ambiguity of his criticism"[10]. Presumably what saved Jonson from any repetition of his earlier brushes with the Master of the Revels, resulting in incarceration, was the play's distinctly Italianate setting and its bestiary of metaphorical personas. Subsequently, and unlike Shakespeare, whose comedies, tragedies and later romances eschewed an English setting altogether – whether historical or geographical – Jonson opted to set a number of his satirical comedies in contemporary London, including the revised version of

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8 Ingham and Ingham, "Syntax and Subtext".

9 See Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson,* Volpone *and the Gunpowder Plot*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

10 Gordon Campbell, "Introduction" to Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or The Fox*; *Epicene, or The Silent Woman; The Alchemist; Bartholomew Fair*, ed. Gordon Campbell, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. vii-xxi; p. xv.

Every Man in His Humour (1606?), *Epicene* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Both dramatists produced comedies that were, in part, festive, although in most Jonson comedies – even in the more overtly festive *Bartholomew Fair* – there is an overriding spirit of social satire.

In sharp contrast to Jonson, Shakespeare studiously avoided English locales for all of his comedies, excepting *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and in this case the play is safely distanced by being located in a whimsical 'Merrie England' merchant-class milieu. His other later comedies, from *As You Like It* to *Measure for Measure*, employ similarly fanciful anachronisms in setting and cultural incongruities in *dramatis personae* to those that worked so well in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What is distinctly human and believable about the characters that inhabit these comedies is expressed by their dramatic motivation and actions, signifying universal human characteristics and values, rather than by any attempt at accurate or specific geo-historical realism. Shakespeare tends to isolate his more Anglicised comic characters in such plays in a hermetic time-bubble of absurd pretentiousness or naïveté; thus, the later comedies are no different from the earlier ones in their lack of specificity. The later comedies, particularly *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, exhibit no sign of 'here and now' reference, but rather anticipate the late romances in their 'there and then' orientation. In this lack of reference, or, at most, extremely oblique reference, to current events and to English locales in his middle-period comedies and later romances, Shakespeare's work deviates little from the orientation of his early comedies.

Shakespeare's and Jonson's approaches to comedy

Shakespeare's recipe for comedy tends to follow John Lydgate's early fifteenth-century dictum that the comic form should invert the structure of tragedy in proceeding from potential crisis to happy resolution: "in his gynnyng […] a maner compleynyng / And afterward endeth in gladness" (*Troy Book*, II, 847-49)[11]. Laura Kendrick, citing Lydgate and

[11] John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, ed. Robert R. Edwards, Book II, available at http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/edwards-lydgate-troy-book-book-2 (last accessed December 2016).

the influence of classical Roman models of comedy in her 2014 essay on medieval comedy and its adaptations, finds a strong link between this narratively dictated notion of comedy and the works of Plautus and Terence[12]. Shakespearean comedy adopts such a time-honoured model of reversal of fortune for its protagonists, while, at the same time, exploiting to maximum effect the romantic plots and characterisation of the respective source texts from which his plays are adapted. Where Shakespeare departs somewhat from this formula, such variation on the celebratory ending model is considered worthy of metadramatic allusion: for example, in the conclusion of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the protagonist Berowne comments ruefully on the non-conformity of the play's suspended romantic resolution to the customary ending of comedy: "Our wooing doth not end like an old play / Jack hath not Jill; these ladies' courtesy / Might well have made our sport a comedy" (V.ii.947-49)[13]. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written shortly afterwards, "restores amends" (V.1.455) by guaranteeing the conventional ending whereby "Jack shall have Jill" (III.ii.490).

While Shakespeare's comedy certainly contained burlesque scenes, the dramatic focus was much more on plot and a fortunate *dénouement*, epitomising the concept that comedy should be the narrative inverse of tragedy. He seems to find little use for the late medieval theory of human personality being governed by five humours, or bodily fluids, which remained relatively unchallenged until William Harvey's discovery of blood circulation in 1628. Rather, Shakespeare's plays generally, including his comedies, reveal greater interest in the senses and the organs of speech, touch, sight, hearing and taste.

In contrast, Jonson's frequently meandering plots are not his major concern, but rather character types that are representative of ridiculous or exaggerated human behaviour; unlike Shakespeare, he reduces the significance of romantic elements and promotes the stage action as a mirror of contemporary society "where they shall see the time's deformity", as he asserts quite categorically in the Induction to *Every*

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[12] Laura Kendrick, "Medieval Vernacular Versions of Ancient Comedy: Geoffrey Chaucer, Eustache Deschamps, Vitalis of Blois and Plautus's *Amphitryon*", in *Ancient Comedy and Reception: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey Henderson*, ed. S. Douglas Olsen, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 377-96; p. 378.

[13] All quotations from Shakespeare refer to *The Oxford Shakespeare*, eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, Clarendon, 1986.

Man Out of His Humour[14]. Humours were principally for Jonson an established device, a peg on which he could hang his comedies satirising human foibles. As with the acutely observed but ill-fated *Sejanus*[15], the satirist palpably targets the vices and follies of what he famously characterised in his poem "An Expostulation with Inigo Jones" as "the money-get, mechanic age" (ll. 52-53), venting his spleen at what he saw as the philistinism of the nascent age of capitalism. The specifically latter-day London settings of his comedies lacked the alibi that his plays relate to a distant place or time, as was the case with *Sejanus*, and are therefore innocuous. Jonson's only means of evading accusations of calumny was therefore to employ the generic character types and names derived from stock character attributes common to both medieval English theatre and Italian *commedia dell'arte*.

This he did effectively in his most famous satirical comedy, *Volpone*, safely set in the distanced location of Venice; nevertheless, in the play Jonson opts for a specifically contemporary time-setting, taking a sideswipe at the manners of contemporary England, as evidenced by his portrait of the preposterous English social climbers, Sir Politic Would-Be and his irritating wife Fine Lady Would-Be. Illustrative of Jonson's impulse to depict and satirise the manners of his London contemporaries was his decision to shift the setting of his breakthrough 1598 comedy *Every Man in His Humour* from Florence to London following its initial stage success. Some years earlier in the play's less popular and enduring sequel *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) – supposedly Italianate in setting – Jonson had included English place-names such as Harrow-on-the-Hill. At a central point of the play he even invites the audience to suppose the setting, somewhat incongruously, as "Paul's Walk" – the middle aisle of Old St Paul's Cathedral and a habitual site for London news and rumour-mongering.

There is a distinct quality of caricature about the targets of Jonson's satirical wit, which tends to be reinforced by speech mannerisms, including, in a number of cases, antiquated syntax assigned to characters such as the braggart Captain Bobadill in *Every Man in His Humour* and Justice Overdo in *Bartholomew Fair*; in the first case the use of archaic VS

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[14] Grex "At the second sounding", ll. 115-20, *Every Man Out of His Humour* [1599], ed. Helen Ostovich, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001.

[15] Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall* [1603], in *The Revels Plays*, ed. Philip Ayres, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990.

and a quasi-elevated register connote a bombastic personality, while in the latter it betokens an excessively fastidious and old-fashioned usage typical of the conceited and verbose Justice of the Peace.

> Bobadill:
> And this will I venture my poor gentleman-like carcass to perform – provided there be no treason practised upon us – by fair and discreet manhood, that is, civilly by the sword.
> (*Every Man in His Humour*, IV.vii.69-71)[16]

> Overdo:
> Thus must we do, that wake for the public good and thus hath the wise magistrate done in all ages.
> (*Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.9)
> This pig-woman do I know, and I will put her in for my second enormity.
> (*Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.69)

It is, of course, important to refrain from positing a conveniently oversimplified binary division between a domesticated and synchronic Jonson and a geographically remote and anachronistic Shakespeare with reference to the time settings and locations of their comedies. A number of Jonsonian comedies, including *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) and *Volpone*, are set abroad, while *Cynthia's Revels* (1601) takes place beyond any realistic spatio-temporal context. Equally, Shakespearean comedy, while being set literally in foreign places, consistently implies familiar domestic locales and recognisable English characters, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s mechanicals and *Much Ado About Nothing*'s inept constabulary to *As You Like It*'s Forest of Arden. This process involves what Lucy Munro has described as "strikingly anachronistic details" that have the effect of collapsing distinctions between past and present altogether[17]. However, unlike Shakespeare's anachronistic or unspecified time-frames, most of Jonson's comedies invoke a contemporaneous ethos, a feature on which their author laid particular stress.

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[16] Quotations from *Every Man in His Humour*, *Poetaster*, *Volpone*, *Epicene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, eds David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[17] Lucy Munro, "Shakespeare and the Uses of the Past: Critical Approaches and Current Debates", *Shakespeare*, 7:1 (2011), pp.102-25; p. 105.

In his Induction to the quintessentially presentist *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson exhorts the spectator "neither to look back to the sword-and-buckler age of Smithfield, but content himself with the present" (ll. 87-88). As with Shakespeare, it is not only his lexical choices – colloquialisms, technical terms, etc. – but also his syntactic ones that enhance such perceptions on the part of the audience.

Tempting as it may be to discern specifically coded references and find what we are looking for in every aspect of a play-text, we need to guard against over-interpretation of the social significance of theatre and theatricality of the period, as Thomas Postlewait has cautioned. Critiquing scholarly assumptions and received ideas about Early Modern plays – especially totalising accounts of the inferencing intentions of their metatheatricality – he argues that the conceit of *theatrum mundi* "could signify anything or nothing"[18]. He goes on to observe:

> In the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson, for example, the application of the concept serves the positive and negative implications of the moment, from play to play, and even from character to character […]. Like the playwrights, we engage the metalanguage of theatre itself to describe cultural activities, attitudes and beliefs.[19]

Postlewait calls for greater emphasis on "evidence, documentation, archival research and […] rational analysis"[20]. Studying language usage in Shakespeare's and Jonson's dramas by testing hypotheses empirically, as in the work of Hope, Hugh Craig and others who have investigated issues of dating and attribution, provides us with concrete stylistic data that can serve the goals of this more empirical, evidence-based approach. Thus, for example, the seminal work of Estonian academic Ants Oras on identifying pause patterns in the iambic pentameter of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has proved a fairly reliable indicator of the dating and attribution of plays according to their position in the verse line[21].

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[18] Thomas Postlewait, "Theatricality and Anti-Theatricality in Renaissance London", in *Theatricality*, eds Tracey C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 111.

[19] Postlewait, p. 111.

[20] Postlewait, p. 122.

[21] Ants Oras, *Pause Patterns in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: An Experiment in Prosody*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1960.

The Verb Second construction and the use/avoidance of archaism

The VS structure may be seen as a relic of the inversion of subject and verb in Old and Middle English[22] after clause-initial adverbials and direct objects, a rule which continues to characterise present-day Germanic languages. It was a fairly common minority pattern in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century English[23], and seems to have typified a more literary register. Later in the Modern English period, most types of subject-verb inversion fell out of use except in archaising verse styles[24]. An English author writing in the mid-to-late sixteenth century, such as Holinshed, is likely to have perceived it as a stylistic option tending towards archaism. As Nevalainen has shown, even in the genre closest to the vernacular, that is private correspondence, VS order could still be found after adverbials such as 'thus', 'then', 'yet' and 'therefore' in the later sixteenth century[25]. However, it occurred in only 10% of possible contexts, and in the period 1603-1642 it stood at 7%. Throughout the lifetimes of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, VS after initial adverbials would have been no more than a marginal phenomenon in ordinary language use, having dropped out of the language as a productive syntactic rule in the late Middle English period, as evidenced by Haeberli's work[26] and other studies. Though common usage in Chaucer's day, by the last decade of the sixteenth century Verb Second had become obsolete.

Houston's 1988 study, *Shakespearean Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax*[27], found that VS order tended to decline in plays thought

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[22] In fact, inversion of a subject pronoun was not generally the rule in Old English and Early Middle English. It may plausibly be attributed to the influence of Anglo-Norman (see Eric Haeberli, "Investigating Anglo-Norman Influence on Late Middle English Syntax", in *The Anglo-Norman Language and Its Contexts*, ed. Richard Ingham, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, pp. 43-163).

[23] See Bjørg Baekken, *Word Order Patterns in Early Modern English*, Oslo, Novus Press, 1998; Bjørg Baekken, "Inversion in Early Modern English", *English Studies*, 81:5 (2000), pp. 393-421.

[24] Baekken, using the Helsinki corpus, shows that the terminal decline of inversion post-dates 1630 (Baekken, *Word Order Patterns*).

[25] Terttu Nevalainen, "Recycling Inversion: The Case of Initial Adverbs and Negation in Early Modern English", *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, 31 (1997), pp. 203-14.

[26] Eric Haeberli, "Inflectional Morphology and the Loss of Verb-Second in English", in *Syntactic Effects of Morphological Change*, ed. David Lightfoot, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 88-106.

[27] See also http://www.bardweb.net/grammar/01syntax.html for a brief summary of the implications of Houston's findings.

to have been written from the end of the 1590s onwards. However, whether this decline affected subject pronouns (VSpro) to the same extent as inversion with full nominal subjects was not shown. The same study also found increasing frequency of Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) patterns, i.e. inverting the now-conventional Verb-Direct Object order from approximately the same time-point. Therefore, Shakespeare cannot be said to have moved away from all types of inverted syntax in his later plays. Thus, VSPro could have remained constant as a stylistic option throughout Shakespeare's writing career. In fact it did not, falling sharply in his later works from 1604 onwards, but in the early and middle period serious dramas VSPro was chosen with single-syllable verbs at a frequency of close to 50% of the time.

In our 2013 study of serious verse drama (tragedies and history plays)[28] we argued that alternative choices made by a wide range of Early Modern English dramatists promoted the effects of either immediacy or distance, whether situating the play in a contemporary socio-political framework or else in a national-historical past. Late Elizabethan period syntax, including the use of Verb Second, in our corpus of history plays and tragedies, was shown to diverge sharply from the ordinary language of the time – as far as it can be recovered from less formal written material – whereas Jacobean dramatists chose to align their usage much more closely on it.

In the early Jacobean texts analysed, the match between syntactic choices in dramas and contemporary, domestic usage is a close one, subliminally reinforcing reference to contemporary life and events, we would argue. In the late Elizabethan plays studied, however, the mismatch with vernacular patterns of syntax failed to reflect such contemporary domestic associations. Although our study was limited to the syntactic variables analysed – the use or avoidance of Verb Second and the use or avoidance of auxiliary 'do' support in declarative sentences – it offered quantitative evidence to support the intuitive awareness that there are qualitative differences between the syntax of the respective plays. Our conclusion offered a logical explanation for this phenomenon. Our earlier 2011 study[29] was an empirical investigation of how Shakespeare handled the interplay of metre with syntactic variation in relation to the inversion of subject pronouns and verbs in declarative

[28] Ingham and Ingham, "Syntax and Subtext".

[29] Ingham and Ingham, "Subject-Verb Inversion".

contexts; this has remained a feature of our subsequent studies including the present one.

In these two earlier studies we focused particularly on strategies following an initial non-Subject constituent known as the Verb Second (V2) construction. In this syntactic context the use of Subject Pronoun-Verb (SVPro) word order was compared with Verb Second (VSPro), the Subject Pronoun-Verb pattern being considered as the default word order in ordinary late Elizabethan and Jacobean speech, e.g.:

(1) Yet you began rudely	*Twelfth Night* (I.v.203)
(2) From one vain course of study, he affects	*Every Man in His Humour* (I.i.8)

This pattern was found to be common, and, although the Verb Second inversion strategy remained a stylistic option, Subject Pronoun-Verb predominated especially in prose passages of dramas.

In contexts where this default word order was disrupted, the constituents that triggered Verb Second were most commonly Direct Objects or various types of Adverbials. Below are examples of each type featured in our previous studies:

Pre-placed Direct Object	
(3a) Five summers have I spent in farthest Greece	*The Comedy of Errors* (I.ii.133)
(3b) These will I beg to make me eunuchs of	*The Alchemist* (II.ii.68)
Adjunct of Place	
(4a) In no labyrinth can I safelier err	*Poetaster* (I.iii.47)
(4b) There have I made my promise	*Measure for Measure* (III.i.32)
Adjunct of Time	
(5a) And in the early morning will I send	*The Alchemist* (II.i.31)
(5b) Then slip I from her bum, down topples she	*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (II.i.53)
Adjunct of Manner	
(6a) […] and thus makes she her great P's	*Twelfth Night* (II.iv.81)
(6b) I like thy counsel; well hast thou advis'd it	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (I.iii.34)

Other Adjuncts

(7a) And for the cause of noise am I now a suitor to you — *Epicene* (V.iii.51-2)

(7b) And for her sake do I rear up her boy — *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (II.i.136)

The initial expression is frequently discourse-linked, e.g. "thus", "so", "here", "there", "now", "then", "this", referring deictically to dramatic contexts or to discourse-given entities. However, this is not a requirement; as in examples 3a and 6b, initial constituents may introduce discourse-new material ("five summers", "well"). In this regard Shakespeare's and his contemporaries' use of inversion can be compared with Verb Second in modern German, where initial constituents are often, but need not be, overtly discourse-linked.

Our results showed that although Shakespeare's usage of VS as opposed to SV declined markedly in his later playwriting career, the decline in the usage of VS by his Jacobean-era contemporaries was even more evident. The choice of VS in the earlier period by both Shakespeare and his contemporaries, particularly in history plays, appeared in our estimation to convey either a high style or a deliberately archaising effect. By the same token, much greater avoidance of Verb Second by Shakespeare's later contemporaries was seen as an indication that these tragedies connoted contemporary and local referentiality, even if not ostensibly set in early Jacobean London.

Verb Second usage and avoidance in comedy – methodology and results

Following on from the above-mentioned studies of the serious dramas of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods, we were keen to explore Shakespearean and Jonsonian perspectives on comedy in relation to linguistic devices of temporal and/or spatial distancing/proximation. One corollary of our previous studies was the expectation that comedies of both periods would favour more vernacular usage with regard to the VS construction. We anticipated that this would be especially the case with comedies set in contemporary London that are more typical of the Jacobean period than the Elizabethan. Analysing and comparing similar data on the comedies was

not within the compass of this earlier study, but our hypothesis was that we would gain significant insights from the results of a similar quantitative study.

According to this hypothesis, data for comedies – complementing those for tragedies and histories – as well as comparisons between the syntactic preferences of individual dramatists, would provide a fuller picture of the adoption or avoidance of archaism. Notwithstanding, the present study comparing these syntactic preferences in comedies by Shakespeare and Jonson is necessarily of a preliminary nature and limited scope. With more complete data, comparing comedies and tragedies of both periods across a wide range of dramatic authors, employing both verse and prose, it should be possible to arrive at more categorical and authoritative conclusions, than the relatively provisional ones to be offered below. As in the earlier studies, our methodology relied on hand and eye in our close readings of the fifteen plays selected, rather than on electronic data-gathering; no currently available electronic corpus made data-searching a practical possibility due to the lack of appropriate syntactic tagging in online texts, which precluded automatic recovery of V2 contexts.

In order to provide a fuller picture of Shakespeare's and Jonson's syntactic preferences across a range of their comedies, we opted to analyse all text in the plays studied, prose as well as verse. This strategy represented a departure from our earlier studies which had focused uniquely on verse text. Our current study also differentiated between Verb Second figures for main verbs and those for auxiliary verbs and verb 'to be', in order to provide a more nuanced picture of usage by the respective authors. By auxiliary verbs we referred to primary auxiliaries – 'be', 'do' and 'have' – and modal auxiliaries, only. In our previous studies the main verb/auxiliary verb distinction did not seem important for the research questions adopted.

However, for the purposes of the present study, our working hypothesis was that closeness to the vernacular or otherwise might be reflected if we separated auxiliary and main verb figures. This is because inversion continued (and still continues) to be the norm for interrogatives with auxiliaries, but not with main verbs, and this fact may have maintained inversion longer with auxiliaries in V2 contexts likewise. It should also be mentioned that, for the sake of consistency

with the above-mentioned 2013 study of Shakespeare's serious dramas, only one-syllable main verbs were used, for comparability with auxiliaries, which are monosyllabic. The five earlier-period Shakespeare plays analysed were *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The later-period plays analysed were *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

The results of the analyses thus conducted, for comedies from the earlier and middle periods of Shakespeare's writing career, respectively, are as shown in Tables One and Two. Verse and prose contexts are shown separately. Results for the two verb types are first shown separately and then amalgamated, so as to allow comparison with the results of Ingham and Ingham (2013)[30].

Table One
Shakespeare earlier-period comedies

Shakespeare MV	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	18	(22%)	63	(78%)	81
prose	2	(33%)	4	(67%)	6
Total	20		67		87
Shakespeare Aux	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	98	(48%)	107	(52%)	205
prose	13	(43%)	17	(57%)	30
Total	111		124		235
Shakespeare both verb contexts	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	116	(41%)	170	(59%)	286
prose	15	(42%)	21	(58%)	36

[30] Ingham and Ingham, "Syntax and Subtext".

Table Two
Shakespeare later-period comedies

Shakespeare MV	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	12	(18%)	53	(82%)	65
prose	7	(12%)	52	(88%)	59
Total	19		105		124
Shakespeare Aux	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	64	(49%)	67	(51%)	131
prose	39	(28%)	102	(72%)	141
Total	103		169		272
Shakespeare both verb contexts	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	76	(39%)	120	(61%)	196
prose	46	(23%)	154	(77%)	200

The corresponding data for the five Jonson plays analysed – *Every Man in His Humour*, *Poetaster*, *Epicene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* – is provided in Table Three below:

Table Three
Jonson comedies

Jonson MV	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	2	(6%)	33	(94%)	35
prose	1	(2%)	44	(98%)	45
Total	3	(4%)	77	(96%)	80
Jonson Aux	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	25	(33%)	52	(67%)	77
prose	30	(21%)	114	(79%)	144
Total	55	(25%)	166	(75%)	221
Jonson both verb contexts	**VS**		**SV**		**Total**
verse	27	(24%)	85	(76%)	112
prose	31	(16%)	158	(84%)	189

Analysis and discussion

On the basis of these data frequencies a number of observations can be made in relation to the research questions/hypotheses that we had established, prompted by the outcomes of our earlier studies.

In line with expectations, we see that:

a) Shakespeare opted for the Verb Second construction more frequently than Jonson
b) Shakespeare made less use of VSpro in verse in his comedies than in his serious plays
c) Shakespeare made far less use of VSpro in prose than in verse

We also drew one unanticipated conclusion from the data; namely:

d) Jonson used VSpro in prose almost as much as in verse

A very striking finding was that Shakespeare and Jonson both made far less use of VSPro with main verbs than with auxiliary verbs in V2 contexts. This reflected the fact that declarative sentence inversion in English survived in auxiliary contexts (for the most part with interrogatives), but became perceived as obsolete when deployed with main verbs.

To sum up with reference to Shakespeare, his use of VS with auxiliaries across the two periods (c. 1589-1604) hardly changed, an outcome in line with our findings for the serious verse dramas in our earlier studies. His use of VS with monosyllabic main verbs, however, ran at a much lower level in both periods than his inversion of auxiliaries, in line with the maintenance in Early Modern English of inversion with auxiliaries in interrogatives, and with the decline of inversion in interrogatives with main verbs, as mentioned.

The findings appear to support the conclusion that, compared with Jonson, Shakespeare was more conservative, making more use of VS across the board. In comparison with his verse – as expected, assuming prose to be closer to vernacular changes – he made much less use of VS in prose. Likewise, when compared with auxiliary contexts, monosyllabic main verb contexts in Shakespeare's comedies exhibit much less use of the VS construction. The Verb Second inversion option was by this period doubly archaic in a declarative context: first, because Verb Second was in any case archaic, and second, because the practice of

inverting main verbs was elsewhere losing ground to the *do*-support structure in Early Modern English interrogatives.

Compared with verse in his serious plays, verse in Shakespeare's comedies made less use of VS overall. When compared with Verb Second data for Shakespeare's serious plays, in which VS was deployed in nearly 40% of contexts, the lower count of 35% in the comedies is also noticeable. The relatively low figure of around 20% in main verb verse contexts also suggests that, despite showing greater predilection for the VS construction than his earlier and later contemporaries, Shakespeare was sensitive in his comedies to the more archaic status of VS with main verbs than with auxiliaries. Whether this was also the case in his serious plays, however, remains to be established.

These findings support our view that Shakespeare's verse and prose dramas are syntactically more conservative than those of his contemporaries, such as Jonson. Given that Shakespeare's comedies are set in foreign places in non-specific time periods, and his histories are set in temporally remote contexts, archaic syntax features can serve to connote the desired distancing effect. By contrast, Jonson's comedies – *Volpone* apart, which we opted to omit from our data-count, since it is set in Venice – are increasingly set in a contemporary and highly familiar London. In addition, the more even distribution of prose and verse in Verb Second contexts in Jonsonian comedy can be interpreted as a stylistic device, reflecting the dramatist's characterisation techniques. The verse speech of some of his more outlandish or satirised characters incorporates a significant number of Verb Second instances; this has the effect of stylistically marking these characters' speech habits and suggesting pretension, bombast, mannered speech, and so on, since the 'high style' feature is incongruous when used by characters of a lower social class. Shakespeare, on the other hand, moves away from syntactic archaism in the verse patterns of his comic plays, presumably because elevated speech is less important as a stylistic marker in romantic comedy than in the status- and power-conscious world associated with the history plays.

In Shakespeare comedies, therefore, everything – location, time setting, characterisation, etc. – appears designed to make the audience experience this sense of displacement on the literal level, while simultaneously developing empathy with their ingenious characters and situations. This distanced setting, frequently in Catholic countries such as Italy, Spain and France, highlights the fact that these plays do

not directly relate to contemporary England. References to, and inclusion of, priests and monks in the plots, as well as allusions to Catholic imagery and oaths such as "by the mass", "by our lady", etc. equally serve to achieve this distancing effect. By contrast, Jonson's characters utter profanities that are much less attributable to a specifically Catholic cultural and religious background, e.g. "s'lid", "s'blood", "s'death", etc. His excoriating satire on – among others – Puritans, not only brought him popular success in the playhouses, but also assured his lasting reputation as a writer of comedies. Had he exposed himself to further controversy by incorporating Catholic references in the language and settings of his work, it would surely have incurred even greater censure.

Simon Trussler has observed in his emphasis on Jonson's comedies and his notion of "humour" that: "Jonson […] is a more 'modern' writer of comedy than Shakespeare"[31], even if his concept of humour is not really the same as a modern understanding of the word. Trussler's observation that "the metropolis itself becomes almost a character in the day-to-day affairs of day-to-day urban life" is also insightful[32]. The same cannot be said of the milieu of Shakespearean comedy, which often emphasises the urban/rural dichotomy without being set in any recognisably specific contemporary city. In his prologue to *Every Man in His Humour* Jonson rejects the contrived machinery and stage conventions of historical drama – as exemplified for his fellow dramatist by Shakespeare's recently successful histories – in favour of:

> […] deeds and language such as men do use:
> And persons such as Comedy would choose,
> When she would show an Image of the times,
> And sport with human follies, not with crimes.
> (*Every Man in His Humour*, Prologue, ll. 21-24)

Conclusion

As Stanley Wells has pointed out: "He [Shakespeare] remained essentially a romantic dramatist, setting virtually all his plays (except

[31] Simon Trussler, "Preface" to Methuen RSC Edition of *Every Man in His Humour*, London, Methuen, 1986, pp. 9-22; p. 13.

[32] Trussler, p. 13.

the English histories) in far-off places and in distant times, never, like Dekker, Jonson and Middleton, depicting the society around him, only rarely adopting the satirical stance that characterised the work of many playwrights of the Jacobean generation"[33]. We propose that the use or avoidance of the Verb Second syntactic device forms part of the differing tone and style of the dramatic writing of Shakespeare and Jonson. The findings of our empirical quantitative study reinforce the perceptions of most critics – whether adopting literary or linguistic perspectives – and suggest that syntactic choices in verse and prose intersect with individual authorial preference in a period of rapid social and linguistic change.

As a corollary of this observation, we would argue that usage or avoidance of syntactic archaism can also inform dramatic factors, such as genre, style and place and time setting, and can yield valuable insights into the different world-views and aims of the respective dramatists. Our paper has attempted to demonstrate one linguistic way in which Jonson opted to convey "an image of the times", i.e. his own age and environs, while Shakespeare's festive and romantic comedy was more distant, semi-utopian even. So, in referring to his contemporary as a writer who was "not of an age but for all time"[34], Jonson's encomium can be seen as partly self-referential and sub-consciously comparative, thereby inviting a perspective to be taken along the lines of the one we have investigated linguistically in this study.

[33] Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare & Co.*, London, Penguin, 2006, p. 231.

[34] Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr William Shakespeare", dedicatory verses to Shakespeare First Folio, 1623.