Mimesis in King Lear

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This paper analyzes the use of mimesis in King Lear at 2.01.64-77 and at 4.03.24-32. These two uses appear to differ from other memorable passages of mimesis in Shakespeare in that they are not used for humorous effect. In 2.01, the illegitimate son of Gloucester is trying to make it look as though his legitimate brother had plotted to kill their father in order to take his land. So Edmund, as part of his plot, claims to be mimicking something his brother Edgar has said. This is what he says:

When I dissuaded him from his intent,
And found him pight to do it, with curst speech
I threaten'd to discover him; he replied,
"Thou unpossessing bastard, dost thou think,
If I would stand against thee, would the reposal
Of any trust, virtue, or worth in thee
Make thy words faith'd? No. What I should deny
(As this I would, ay, though thou didst produce
My very character), I'ld turn it all
To thy suggestion, plot, and damned practice;
And thou must make a dullard of the world
If they not thought the profits of my death
Were very pregnant and potential spirits
To make thee seek it."

We set this passage as the final exam passage for class last semester and asked a number of questions; we then began to ask ourselves some questions we hadn't asked before. (One of the nice things about teaching is that you always learn as you teach.) We take a stylistic approach in which we try to make explicit for ourselves the implicit norms against which we judge the various speeches Shakespeare has given his characters. We naturally do that in real life situations or in reading literature, we try to decide what the norm is. This passage demanded that we notice norms for the use of mimesis.

Some critics use mimesis in general to refer to drama—drama as a representation of what happens in real life. That is not the sense of the word I'm using; I am concentrating on quoted material. There are a number of ways in which quoted material appears in Shakespeare. There are proverbs and bits and pieces of Latin thrown in; I'm not analyzing those, nor am I focusing on a single word or phrase used here and there. The mimesis that I'm interested in is a relatively extended segment that is attributed to a specific person. Note that Edmund's claiming here to be repeating Edgar's words. We're familiar with that in real life in what we might call mimicking or mocking another person: "And then, she said to me, 'Well . . .'" We use it standardly to make fun of someone. Why in this very serious passage in LR—in a passage integral to the plot and subplot—should mimesis be used? Is this a conventional way for Shakespeare to use mimesis? In our work with style we had been assuming that rhetorical figures can have a variety of effects; we would not suppose that a figure would consistently have one specific effect.
Some figures are linked with specific effect, for example, extreme uses of alliteration. In the mechanicals' play in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Pyramus is going to kill himself. He says,

With blade, with bloody blameful blade,
He bravely broach'd his boiling bloody breast.

That use of the b b bl bl br br b is comic; it's too much. So, we do tag some uses of specific figures as, say, comic. That means we recognize a norm. Think of the use of rhythm in a limerick. Would it be possible to write a serious verse with that rhythm? I've never seen one, though it might be a good exercise for a poet. Is mimesis used conventionally for comic effect? If so, is it hard to get any other effect using that figure? If it is generally used for comic effect, then what does it mean to use it in this passage, and also in 4.03?

Some of the most memorable passages of mimesis in Shakespeare do use mimesis for comic effect, as illustrated in ERR 2.01.59-72. In *The Comedy of Errors*, there are two masters who are twins separated at birth; two servants who are twins separated at birth; so each master twin has a servant twin. They happen to come together, and because they look so much alike they get mixed up with each other. Here's the account one of the servants gives. He was sent by his mistress to find his master and to bring him home for lunch, but he ran into the master's twin.

_E.Dro._ But sure he is stark mad:

When I desir'd him to come home to dinner,
He ask'd me for a thousand marks in gold:
"'Tis dinner-time," quoth I: "My gold!" quoth he.
"Your meat doth burn," quoth I: "My gold!" quoth he.
"Will you come?" quoth I: "My gold!" quoth he;
"Where is the thousand marks I gave thee, villain?"
"The pig," quoth I, "is burned": "My gold!" quoth he.
"My mistress, sir," quoth I: "Hang up thy mistress!
I know not thy mistress, out on thy mistress!"

_Luc._ Quoth who?
_E.Dro._ Quoth my master.

"I know," quoth he, "no house, no wife, no mistress."

This makes a nice piece of stage business for the actor to draw himself up and be himself and then be his master, acting out the interchange. It seems unlikely that Edmund would want to play Edgar's role broadly.

The second place mimesis is used for serious effect in LR is in 4.03.24-32. Any sensible person probably would say, "Well, this scene is found in the Quarto but not in the Folio version. So, we won't pay any attention to it. We will ignore it." However, the scene gives us information which is necessary for the plot. It lets us know how Cordelia found out what was going on and what her plans are in coming back into the kingdom. Kent, the loyal servant gone undercover meets a gentleman--presumably English--who has been to the French court, reported to Cordelia, and is bringing a report back. Kent asks how she received the news; the gentleman gives a flowery description of how she looked; Kent asks, "Made she no verbal question?"

Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of "father"
Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart;
Cried, "Sisters, sisters! Shame of ladies, sisters!
Kent! father! sisters! What, i' th' storm? i' th' night?
Let pity not be believ'd!" There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
And, clamor-moistened, then away she started
To deal with grief alone.

Now, we could imagine that if the gentleman gave any kind of falsetto tones to that "sisters, sisters, father, Kent," that it would reduce the passage to absurdity--I can't imagine that that would be done on the stage. The context is too serious for that.

But it is obviously a difficult piece to have to handle. What tone do you give the repetition of syntactically unconnected nouns? How do you repeat the questions without getting a comic effect? Does the mimesis approach comedy in this scene and in 2.01? Does the use of a comic form give a comic effect that undercuts the seriousness of these scenes? What, if anything, would save these two uses of mimesis from being unintentionally comic?

Let's look a little bit closer at the mimesis. In the ERR passage there are many repetitive elements. In addition to the *quoth I, quoth he*, which provide identification tags for relatively short utterances as well as a punch line, there is the repetition of *mistress, my gold, The pig is burned* and variations of *the pig is burned or the meat is cold*. Perhaps the use of mimesis isn't necessarily comic, but the use of repetition within the mimesis can make it comic.

How much repetition is there in the mimesis in LR? In 2.01 there is relatively little word repetition; in fact, some of the words are relatively rare in Shakespeare. Unpossessing, reposal, and faith'd are all used once in Shakespeare. There is a pleonastic triad, ... of any trust, virtue, or worth in thee ... (69) and in l. 73, suggestion, plot and damned practice. The two triads are a repetition of syntactic pattern, and the pleonasm gives repetition of sense without word repetition. These create a balanced effect. He's giving Edgar a speech characterized by the use of rare words, balance, and pleonasm. The first sentence ends in the question, *Make thy words faith'd?* At that point he's probably reading Gloucester's reaction in the way that the servant could read his mistress's reaction at the end of each of those *quoth* tags. Notice how he used it there at the end, saying, *Out on thy mistress*. He stopped there waiting for her to say, *Quoth who?* Then he made his final point again with word and syntactic repetition. This is also Edmund's tactic. He stops, then answers the question, *No*. Of course, this is supposed to be his brother saying *No, you wouldn't be trusted*: *What I should deny/* (As this I would, ay, though thou didst produce/*My very character) ... He already has shown his father a letter that his brother is supposed to have written, and is making reference back to that letter which Edgar knows nothing about, because Edmund wrote it. He's piling one bit of bad evidence upon another, while accusing his brother. *I'd turn it all to thy suggestion, plot, and damned practice. And thou must make a dullard of the world/If they not thought the profits of my death/Were very pregnant and potential spirits/To make thee seek it.* Notice the alliterative triad in *profits, pregnant, potential* that gives a nice end. Why end this way? He has his brother saying to him, "Now only a stupid person would not believe that you have cause to do this." So what position does that put the father in? He'd listen to him. Certainly his father isn't stupid. His father's very quick to grasp the point of this and believes him. This is the second time Edmund has 'exposed' Edgar's plotting to his believing father.
One of the questions that some of our students were trying to explore was, Who does this really sound like? Is this the kind of language that Edmund himself would use? Is this the kind of language that his father, Gloucester, would use? Or is this the kind of language that Edgar would use? Because Edgar himself spends so much of the time in the play disguising himself linguistically, it is difficult to know where we have the 'real' Edgar. Edgar appears just for a short time with his brother Edmund; then he pretends to be a madman running about in rags; he pretends to be his father's servant, or a low class peasant; he then pretends, in the tournament scene, to be nobly born, speaking a full-blown language that has archaic, highly formal elements that would probably fit in rather nicely with the speech Edmund gave him here. So one of the difficulties in knowing how to get a norm for him would be finding out where his language really exists in the play.

This passage doesn't have enough repetition to appear patently absurd; but it would take a good deal more analysis to try to figure out whose style it is. In 4.03 there is a fair amount of repetition. *Once or twice she heav'd the name of 'father' Pantingly forth. Heaved and pantingly are problematical, as is the /f/ alliteration, and /r/ consonance in father and forth. 'Sisters, sisters! Shame of ladies, sisters!"* gives immediate repetition (epizeuxis) repetition at the beginning and the end of the line (epanadiplosis). "Kent! father! sisters!" More repetition (epanalepsis) of fathers, sisters. What, i' th' storm? i' th' night? contains phrasal anaphora. 'Let pity not be believ'd!', note the /b/ alliteration. He finishes his description of what she looked like in receiving the news.

Mimesis especially with strong repetitive elements is associated with the comic. These uses of mimesis in LR are potential problems that anyone producing or reading the play with students feels the need to work through, especially in the gentleman's speech where an absurd effect must be avoided. Or face up to it. If the mimesis is absurd, who's made to look absurd? Is it the gentleman, or does Cordelia appear absurd? Cordelia is frequently seen as a Christ figure or as a figure of purity or hope or Christian symbolism. Does this description of her, and the report of what she says do damage to the audience's view of what she's like? Does it make her look silly? Perhaps it is this problematical use of mimesis in 4.03 that inspires directors to cut this scene substantially or entirely. [I believe that this exaggerated amount does border on the silly; the comic form undercuts the view of Cordelia and of the gentleman.]

This is an outline of the problem; the point of interest is the ongoing adjustment of expectations of the norms within Shakespeare's plays. I have suggested that mimesis is a comic form, and that the comic effect is not desirable in LR 2.01 or 4.03. Further analysis will be required to address the question of the incongruous effect of using this comic form in two serious passages.
NOTES


2 I've been working with Arthur H. King to develop a method of teaching students to better understand Shakespeare’s language. The students were in his Shakespeare classes at BYU.

3 Other comic uses of mimesis include 1H4 2.04.99-112; 391-481 (this is not claimed to be a portrayal of a genuine conversation); MV 2.02.1-32 (Launcelot Gobbo with his conscience and the fiend); 2.08.15-22 (obvious ridicule of Shylock; followed by 38-45 which is serious).