

‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

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In the Royal Shakespeare Company television series *Playing Shakespeare*, the final episode presents the most important contribution towards an understanding of the speaking of dramatic verse on the late Victorian stage. Entitled ‘Poetry and Hidden Poetry: Three Kinds of Failure’, it examines the issue that moderator and Cambridge-educated Shakespearean director John Barton has consistently avoided throughout the previous eleven episodes, the subject of the term ‘poetry’ as applied to Shakespearean vocality. Despite his insistence on the structures and rhythms of verse, Barton’s anxiety over the visceral impact of words is palpable. Revealingly, the title and the segment dwell on ‘failure’, conceding the inability of the contemporary actor to do full justice to Shakespeare’s verse. Despite the complete thinking-out of a role, and an understanding of the mechanics of blank verse, he admits that the role never manifests itself with its full power on the stage despite the imagination it conjures from the page: ‘One can’t quite put one’s finger on what is wrong but there is a kind of textual, emotional and poetic thinning-out’.¹ He admits that, despite the intellectual realisation of a role, the playing of Shakespeare rarely builds into an overwhelming sensory experience.²

Actor Alan Howard interjects his own perceptions of that mystical moment when the alchemy of an actor’s efforts transcends the conception of the role:

I think that the other aspect of the actual *sounds*, the textures and the rhythms, invoke a word which perhaps we don’t understand so well today. The word is ‘apprehension’ as opposed to ‘comprehension’. Something we *sense*. I think that ‘apprehension’ to the Elizabethans was a very palpable thing. They were sensually highly aware of how rhythms, sound and texture could combine with comprehension to bring about something which goes beyond just the sense.³

Howard himself apprehends that the ‘sounds’ of words – the intricate textures which Hall and Barton subjugate to the structural rhythms of the text – combine with the cognitive realisation of the script to generate sensation alongside intellectual satisfaction, the Aristotelian requirements of catharsis and instruction. Barton admits to difficulty in comprehending this effect:

Although the line is quite naturalistic on the surface, it also has a poetic ring, uneasy, haunting and resonant, though it’s hard to define it in words. We may not understand but we apprehend it. What word to describe it? It reverberates, it haunts, it rings a bell [...] There’s a resonance which can’t be defined or pinned down.⁴

Barton tellingly uses sonic terms to describe this effect. One could easily interpolate the term ‘Victorian’ to refer to this ‘poetic’ ring, an indescribable production that resonates in the ears without overt meanings for our comprehension, a perceived authority of sound over sense.

This article seeks to recover some sense of cultural value in the voices of the last generation of Victorian performers. Although our evidence is limited to a handful of stage actors and poets, the vocality of late Victorian public speakers is a pivotal test for antithetical notions of vocal theatricality erected by directors, critics and actors between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between ‘sense’ and ‘sound’. By listening to contemporary comments and to the voices themselves, we can determine and re-evaluate the aspects of Victorian vocality that determined the emotional impact of those words upon their auditors and the validity of evaluations of actors such as Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry and their successors. Three dominant strands emerge from this close listening: the vocality of these late Victorian actors was not dominated by a sense of declamation but rather a personally negotiated sense of verisimilitude peculiar to each performer and suggested by their own personality; twentieth-century perceptions of propriety – particularly as indicated by the proliferation of Received Pronunciation – are not present in their vocal production; and their senses of projection and resonance emanated from an entirely different bodily centre than those of most contemporary performers.

I

A veneer of artificiality is applied to these earliest recordings, with commentators such as Barton apologising for a tradition of theatricality. Such an apology validates the verisimilitude of contemporary acting in classical roles as practiced by the RSC. This dismissal of ‘discarded’ theatrical techniques is perpetuated as dogma by both critics and practitioners. The most effective critique of overtly theatrical technique is the use of the descriptive term ‘declamatory’. ‘Declamation’, derived from the Latin word *declamare*, meaning ‘to shout outwards’, has referred historically to a particularly undesirable style of acting. The OED dates its first use to 1735, noting that Sterne refers to the practice in pejorative terms in *Tristram Shandy* (1759): ‘to speak aloud in an impassioned oratorical manner, with appeals to the emotions rather than the reason of the audience’. References

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

to ‘declamation’ evoke volubility and manipulative vocal structures that appeal to the unfettered emotional sonic content of words rather than the sense of their argument, an approach that is anathema to the contemporary speaking of Shakespeare as institutionalised by the RSC. Conflated with the idea of declamation is its codification in the tenets of elocution, a system of rules for speaking that connotes ideas of propriety, audibility and precision.

Elocution itself is often equated with its earlier manifestation in the eighteenth century, a school of thought that sought to dictate the sounds of the English language through prescribed phonetic standardisation, most clearly and forcefully articulated by Thomas Sheridan, Joshua Steele and John Walker.⁵ By the late nineteenth century that movement was institutionalised within the boundaries of the school system by the Education Act of 1870, which mandated that public education should establish standards of grammar and phonics – ‘the Queen’s English’, a term that Cambridge-educated scholar and cleric Henry Alford had recently suggested was the dialect ‘which the nation, in the secular unfolding of its will and habits, has agreed to speak and write’.⁶

This decision to standardise the sound and form of English was the culmination of centuries of thought about language and dialect in Britain. Linguist David Crystal notes: ‘As early as Caxton’s time, we find it routine to comment about English being “simple and rude”, whereas French would be described as “fayr” (in Caxton’s *Recuyell*, for example)’.⁷ In Chaucer’s lifetime, the word ‘coken-ay’ referred to ‘an inferior or worthless thing’, indicating that deviant dialects of English were already stigmatised.⁸ English speakers continue to be classified according to their vocal characteristics and tendencies. Current linguists still feel the need to demolish ‘the belief that the spirit of Merseyside is attributable to bad colds and blocked noses’.⁹ The ‘adenoidal’ quality of the regional voice will be significant when we listen more closely to the techniques deployed by Victorian actors.

In the Babel of early modern England, writers reinforced the growing ideology of the homogeneity of regional dialects, defined by their very location outside of the economic and social supremacy of the capital. Any sound not originating from the intellectual triangle around London and the East Midlands was uniformly described as ‘rustic’, ‘barbarous’, and ‘foreign’.¹⁰ The perception perpetuated ‘from the viewpoint of the capital and the court, [that] northern English was in many ways indistinguishable, in

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

social if not in formal linguistic terms, from the Western dialect'.¹¹ In fact, the Great Vowel Shift left some of these regions behind, as David Crystal suggests, and the post-vocalic [r], as well as the long vowels that shifted into diphthongs, never altered very much in the North and Scotland, making their vowels vocal remnants of pre-shift English.¹²

In this way, the condescension of standardised English speakers towards Northern speakers implies that those regional speakers are remnants of a 'less civilized' oral tradition, suggesting that the anxiety about 'golden throat' actors of early to mid-twentieth century Shakespearean performance is in fact an anxiety – and condescension – about the prominence of their oral skills, related to the upward social mobility of the profession at the time as much as the precision of their Received Pronunciation vowels. But those actors, and the directors who influenced their work, also rejected the Victorians as 'ham', producers of an incomprehensible and 'unrealistic' wall of sound. These perceptions are important, because the first generation of actors to be educated within a system transformed by the Education Act of 1870 were the performers who followed Irving and Terry, the same thespians who were drawn to the new drama initiated by Ibsen. This generation included Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Henry Ainley, Frank Benson and Johnston Forbes-Robertson. Tree and Benson are particularly noteworthy, because they established academies for actors – RADA and the Central School of Speech and Drama, respectively – that integrated the standardisation of a Received Pronunciation with the scientific knowledge of Elsie Fogarty, the first of a long line of dominant voice teachers. Actors such as Edwin Booth, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, however, spoke without the standards institutionalised by the educational establishment in what we now call Received Pronunciation.¹³

Neither did the poets of the nineteenth century speak in this institutionalised manner. Recordings of Tennyson and Browning expose heterogeneous approaches to the recitation of poetry. Tennyson's 1888 recordings of excerpts from *The Princess* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* reveal a preponderance of weight on the rhythm and structures of the verse. Tennyson makes some comments before reciting 'The Bugle Song' which, though difficult to decipher, reveal the quality of his 'colloquial' voice, as opposed to the measured tones of his recital. His 'poetic' vocality places heavy emphasis on the vowels, which quiver with *tremolo* and carry the weight of the vocalisation. They are not

Brian Willis, 'Rude am I in meh speech': Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

clipped, as they are in colloquial conversation or sometimes in RP, but sound out, lasting nearly a second in phonation. His voice rises in intonation, pitched firmly within his upper ranges. His rate of speech is 78 w.p.m., far slower than other recordings of the period. That pace is significantly accelerated in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* to 108 w.p.m. All of the previous signifiers are in play but, perhaps to reflect the charge itself in sonic terms, Tennyson pushes the pacing of his vocalisation. He reveals three different types of voice in these recordings, each paced to match his sense. We can intuit that he would agree with Yeats, who felt the need in a recording of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' to explicate his 'poetic' voice before recitation: 'strange if you are not used to it [...] it gave me a devil of a lot of a trouble to get into verse the poems that I am going to read. And that is why I will not read them as if they were prose.'¹⁴

Robert Browning's recording of 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' was recorded the year before his death at the age of 77. In the short excerpt that he recites, his pacing is an astonishing 145 w.p.m, and the excitement of the novelty of the recording technology is evident in his voice, as he apologises for his failing memory and leads a cheer for Edison's invention. These two excerpts challenge the argument that the rate of Victorian verse-speaking was tediously slow, an assertion that has held sway based on the notorious four-to-five hour running times of stage productions and the apparent aural evidence of the recordings made of Tennyson and Irving. I assert that the long running times can easily be accounted for by the massive changes of scenery and interruptions in narrative flow of the Victorian theatre. Contemporary drama rarely breaks for scene changes of more than a few seconds, accompanied by brief quotations of music.

The second piece of evidence for Victorian ponderousness can no longer be supported after the rate of speech has been calculated.¹⁵ If these poets, and the dominant actors of their age, actually speak the verse at an equivalent or faster rate of speech than their theatrical descendants, from where does the perception of protracted vocality emerge? I argue that this curious temporal effect is falsely presented to contemporary ears by the dominance of the vowels in their speech, those carriers of sonic signification that are significantly lengthened in these excerpts. Because the vowels bear the weight of phonation, with little or no breaks for silence and pausing, the speaker projects the image of length and depth to the verse without actually speaking the text at a slower rate. In fact, it is often the contemporary actor, with significant breaks for psychological and semantic

pauses, who lengthens and stretches verse speech with the insertion of hesitations and pauses. Conversely, the Victorians valued the propulsion of one thought into the next line of verse and did so while lengthening their vowels more than the contemporary actor of Shakespeare.

The high intonation of Tennyson and Browning raise a third vital issue regarding Victorian vocalicity that has not been sufficiently explored: the placement of the voice within the body itself. Contemporary vocal methodology derives from decades of research into the interdependent mechanisms that produce the human voice. In brief, most vocal instructors since the time of Elsie Fogerty and the establishment of the acting academies have instructed their pupils to ‘root down’ their voice, to use the diaphragm as the powering pump for the breath that resonates within the thoracic cavity. Consequently, and in concurrence with the establishment of RP as the primary ‘voice’ for the speaking of elevated roles in verse, and the employment of restrained vocalicity for radio, film and television, the actor strives to locate his voice within the upper thoracic cavity for maximum effect. This ‘chest voice’ supplies the male actor with rich baritone resonance, often noted as mellifluousness in more successful actors. The voice literally resides within the actor’s body and radiates outwards, rather than projecting powerfully into the space of a large auditorium with the piercing power of a trumpet.

II

The second half of the Victorian era was dominated by the changing nature and understanding of the human voice. The laryngoscope was invented in 1854 by an elocutionist and singing instructor, Manuel Garcia and for the first time the trachea, glottis and larynx were observed in the act of phonation. In 1857, inventors began to posit the possibility of recording sound and by 1877 Edison produced the first working model of the phonograph. Only the year before, Alexander Graham Bell had transmitted the human voice electronically for the first time with the telephone. The International Phonetic Alphabet was codified in 1886 and two years later the first sound recording preserved Handel in choral form at the Crystal Palace. The very same year, Tennyson and Browning were recorded, emphasising their importance as paradigms for the possibilities of the poetic speaking voice. Shakespearean verse was recorded by Edwin Booth just two years

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

later. Within a generation, science and technology had mapped the structures that produce the human voice within the body, and disembodied that voice into other structures: the disc of the phonograph and the receiver of the telephone. These disembodied recordings convey technique and locality, through accent, pitch, volume, pacing, tone and register, and most importantly through the use of the resonance centres. Through their careful scrutiny we can recover the structures of the voice.

Several elocution manuals of the period reinforce the importance for vocalicity of the resonance of the facial mask and the head. The tone supported by the pump of the diaphragm is ‘re-enforced in all the chambers of the head’, expanded and opened so that the speaker is ‘letting it issue a resonant, bell-like note with carrying power resonance alone can give, instead of the thin, dull, colorless sound which conveys no life’.¹⁶ This tone ‘should be flooding the whole face’, and to enable the cheeks and nose to vibrate with resonance, the speaker should ‘let the nostrils expand, feel the nasal cavity fill with sound; let it go up into the head and strike the forehead and the eye-sockets and the walls of all the cavities’.¹⁷ The sinuses, which must be ‘kept free and open’, are vital for this ‘head-resonance’, or ‘vibration of the resonance-chambers in the face’.¹⁸ Mills stated that ‘it is true that when one speaks or sings, the chest, windpipe, and larynx may be felt to vibrate, but the essential vibrations are *supra-glottic* – above the vocal bands [...] the *mouth cavity* and the *nasal chambers*’.¹⁹ Although nasal tones are still sometimes heard to imply the ‘rough’ qualities of the regional tongue, versatility is the requirement of the actor if he or she is to achieve proficiency over the use of the voice:

if he is to be master of his voice-production throughout, if he is to produce tones of every shade of quality, he must be able to shift that voice about in every quarter as occasion demands; in other words, *all the changes possible in the resonance-chambers must be at his command*.²⁰

Explorations of the sound of the human voice led to a fascination with its sonic capabilities: ‘the Human Voice is to be considered as a musical instrument – an organ [...] when we know the ‘stops’, it will discourse most eloquent music [...] the art that wins this music from the strings is Elocution’.²¹

In the late nineteenth century, this music would make apparent the emotion embedded within the script. In elocution manuals, little is made of the text; its authority is assumed and the work must be accomplished on the voice, rather than the voice working

on the text. The virtuosity of control over interdependent resonance-chambers within the body of the performer signifies certain emotional states to the audience: ‘Low Pitch is used in language serious, grave, sublime, grand, solemn, reverential, and vehement [...] High Pitch is used to express sentiment lively, joyous or impassioned. It is also characteristic of fear and grief’.²²

The singer’s training and techniques employed by many of these actors included the possibility of the use of vibrato, a sonic clue that has led to the impression that actors were singing the verse. This association has reinforced the idea that the early years of recorded sound, from 1890 to the early recordings of Gielgud, were dominated by actors concerned primarily with a beautiful voice, but vibrato has nothing to do with precision or a sense of ‘beauty’, rather with its opposite: the exposition of emotion in its raw and overwhelming state. Feeling is present underneath the surface of the refinement of rhetorical speech:

The lives of great orators show us that they have been men of strong and lofty emotions which they have been able more than all others to transfer into speech, to make tremble in the tone and gesture of the word, and hand, to make speak in the eye, and roll in passion and life through their whole bodies [...] their words vibrate with passion.²³

The singer’s placement of resonance allowed for the projection of the voice through a large auditorium, but it also required the occasional use of vibrato in order to project the sounds of the vowels – and the emotions embedded within their structures – into the ears of the auditor. The body was seen as literally vibrating with the passions of the text. These sounds are personified within the bodies of the three recorded Victorian Shakespeareans: Booth, Irving, and Terry.

III

When asked how he differed from his father Junius Brutus, Edwin Booth replied, ‘I think I’m a little quieter’.²⁴ The difference resided not only in the volume of his voice, but also in the rhythm and size of his transitions. Booth said of his colleague John McCullough in relation to their predecessors, Edwin Forrest and Junius Brutus Booth: ‘No, McCullough was less volcanic than his early model – so am I’.²⁵ As the *Traveller* reported in 1857, Edwin possessed

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

The charming and accurate modulations of voice, a very agreeable quality of tone, and his general average reading is quite up to the mark [...] he has cultivated the same peculiar nasal twang, which his father's admirers recognize in certain passages, almost like the voice of their idol from the dead. His gait and stage address are graceful, and his movement is like the rhythmical flow of his tones [...] for his cadences are delightful; however high he soars, his voice immediately drops again, and in good time. There is no ear-splitting violence. He has the magnetic, sympathising quality in his tones. They charm you, without telling you the secret of their charm.²⁶

Grace, rhythm and charm: all of these qualities are exemplified by the smoothness of Booth's speaking of the text, fulfilling an aesthetic judgment on the gentility of Shakespeare's text and the character of Hamlet as perceived in the mid-nineteenth century. The explosions of sound and seeming chaos of Edmund Kean are not styles that suit Booth or the tastes of his age. He, like all great actors of the period, hypnotised his audience through the rhythm and smoothness of his speaking.

The nasal twang is a familiar clue, revealing that facial and head-resonance was employed by Booth. E. C. Stedman wrote in 1866 that Booth would not do for Othello and Macbeth, because they were masculine roles that required the 'deep chest-utterance' that he lacked and because of his penchant for avoiding 'elocutionary climaxes'.²⁷ His restraint from operatic explosions or the 'rant' of declamation led to the criticism that he had 'degenerated into the unenergetic and so-called intellectual school'.²⁸ *The Times* felt that he 'keeps his upper lip too stiff, uses the lower lip and shows the under teeth almost exclusively, in a manner that produces excessive sibilance and gives him an air of "virulent ferocity"'.²⁹ This restriction of the upper lip reinforces the nasal resonance, and the movement of the jaw suggests the opening of the mouth into the singer's formation. Booth allied the speaker's technique with singer's methodology, as has been observed of the elocutionists of the time.

The use of multiple resonators is often associated with 'golden throat' Shakespeare, because it applies more range than the normal human voice does in colloquial speech. In contemporary speech, 'few of us employ more than one octave when we speak, mostly staying in the lower part of our total voice range'.³⁰ Use of this upper register, especially when alternated with the lower range with which we are accustomed, seems artificial, because our ears are not used to the large variance in range of sound. In a theatre, these modulations exceed even those of the trained professional news broadcaster.

Brian Willis, 'Rude am I in meh speech': Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

This may have been the case in Booth's day, as critic Nym Crinkle could disdainfully accuse him of producing an 'exquisitely modulated Tennysonian transcript of Shakespeare'.³¹ Yet, when he finally toured Britain, the poet himself heard Booth act and declared him 'most interesting, most touching and powerful [...] but not a bit like Lear'.³² This modulation could either overwhelm or underwhelm acting critics, depending on the extent to which they could suspend their aural disbelief, and whether they preferred the higher registers of elocution or the balance provided by chest utterance.

Opponents of the oncoming wave of 'realist' and 'symbolic' drama as represented by Ibsen could applaud Booth for his 'eloquent delivery [...] full, resonant, melodious, sustained'.³³ But this does not mean that Booth was antiquarian in his approach to Shakespeare. As Charles H. Shattuck's marvellous reconstruction of Booth's Hamlet demonstrates, the actor was not opposed to brief pauses in order to give special and thoughtful emphasis to the coining of his next word; these pauses are thought to have been contemporary signifiers of the spontaneity of thought. Booth used them for the same purpose, often before nouns, in order to invest the word with the verisimilitude of invention. He also empowered words with precision of articulation, although it is difficult to establish if this precision was deployed for audibility or for the demands of standardised English: 'Mr. Booth stresses his vowels [...] he says altar, as if it were spelled a-l-t-a-r – which it is – and he does not pronounce it – altur (like the rest of us)'.³⁴ As recommended in the period, Booth's vowels were full and rounded, bearing the weight of articulation and filling the air with their sound. Katherine Goodale remembers:

Any voice beside Edwin Booth's sounded rough or flat or thin or shouty. His seemed to range from molten note to thunderclap; from the faint echo of the swish of a flower to discords of passion. How it carried! People sitting way back told me they caught his lowest tone.³⁵

As a result, that voice was the finely tuned instrument that delivered the bulk of his emotional content; he believed 'it is *feeling* in a voice that tells the story'.³⁶ Using the projection of a singer, with the verbal values of the heightened language, Edwin's illusion was sustained by a balance between heightened tones and the structures and rhythms of colloquial speech: 'Booth's Hamlet is poetical; essentially lifelike, but life elaborated and thrown into rhythmical shape'.³⁷

Brian Willis, 'Rude am I in meh speech': Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

His voice attained its effects through elocutionary technique nonetheless, as can be seen through the rivalry with his ageing namesake, Edwin Forrest. An early biographer recalled that Forrest ‘was no polished actor, nor subtle. He was a great, rough figure [...] he plowed through [the lines], hoarse and vigorous’.³⁸ Indeed, Booth’s genealogical ties as a first-generation English-American flavoured the commentary upon his vocal style. Richard Lockridge reflects on the cultural perceptions of the difference between the two rivals:

In 1860, those who looked back were faithful to the great native American who shook the scenery with his voice. They smiled in pity at those who followed the sentimentality of a new hero. Those who turned to Booth were the younger: they found poetry there, and culture and no insistence upon the rough, wholesome virtues.³⁹

Booth’s acting was quieter than expected of a successful actor, defeating the entire notion of declamation. Indeed, an anecdote that intimates this effect reports that ‘when Miss Cushman’s *Lady Macbeth* was urging him on to murder he had struggled with an impish desire to interject: “Why don’t you kill him? You are a great deal bigger than I am”’.⁴⁰

Two auditors wrote eloquently of the effect that Booth’s quietly passionate delivery had on his audience. George William Curtis, in December 1863’s *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, wrote of Forrest in boisterous terms. The audience

delights in the representation, and shouts at it, and cries for more, and hastens and squeezes the next night to enjoy it all over again [...] we may call it the muscular school; the brawny art; the biceps aesthetics; the tragic calves; the bovine drama; rant, roar, and rigmarole; but what then? [...For Booth, everything is] strikingly different [...] The house was comfortably full, not crowded. The air of the audience was that of refined attention rather than of eager interest. Plainly it was a more cultivated and intellectual audience; and with Mr. Booth upon the stage you are not inclined to be witty about beef and calves. Pale, thin, intellectual, with long black hair and dark eyes, Shakespeare’s *Iago* was perhaps never more adequately represented to the eye.⁴¹

It is as if his English ancestry entitles Booth to reign as a refined and intellectual Shakespearean, juxtaposed to the quintessentially American coarseness and brawn of Forrest. Charles Clarke, the observer whose notes form the basis for Shattuck’s reconstruction of Booth’s *Hamlet*, referred to his voice as entitling such qualities: ‘it is English with the pure Saxon accents’.⁴² This refinement contained the power of the

portrayal within the vocality of Booth, but with the deception that he was submerged within the role itself. ‘To be or not to be’ was a seminal moment for Clarke:

‘I forgot all about the man then,’ Clarke exclaims; ‘for the time I see right through his flesh and overlook his mind. He speaks – oh wonderful! It is not declamation. It is not recitation. It is the deep thought running right out at the lips, *finding a vocal liberty*. *The power of it is not in the voice* – though the voice is as apt as it could be – but in the spirit of the man Hamlet that shows itself behind. Every word gives me a shake, and then goes through me like a lance’.⁴³

Like contemporary acting, Booth’s power originates in the transparency of the role, a state where his body, including his voice, discloses the personification of the part. As a London critic would approvingly notice, ‘his voice has the quality of sympathy, and there were tears in it’.⁴⁴

Shattuck comments that Booth’s pace was ‘slow, deliberative’.⁴⁵ The recording contradicts this assessment, achieving a pace of 138.75 w.p.m., setting it firmly in the median of contemporary colloquial speech and more importantly, *quicker* than most of the actors I have studied in the last two decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Booth seems slower because of his more rounded tones and deeper voice. The words themselves are elongated but contain fewer pauses so that the sound production is sustained; the text is actually spoken fairly rapidly and depends more on pitch and intonation for meaning. The audience is therefore not allowed much time to read their own meanings into the subtext; the space is closed between the words, encasing the meaning of the text within the vibrating air. The sounds *are* the text, manipulated by his voice to signify his sense and feeling, primarily through the dominance of the length of the vowels.

The Othello speech is lyrical and narrative and does not afford an opportunity to hear Booth in his sparse moments of heated passion, but it does reveal his unexpectedly relaxed style (click here to listen to this recording: duration 3:33).⁴⁷ His shortened long ‘e’ is notable, a flattening of a sharp and tinny long vowel that darkens his overall tone considerably. Booth changes the sound of ‘soft’ to ‘seft’ in order to accelerate the rhythm to reach ‘phrase of peace’. These shortened, flattened vowels, ‘my’ and ‘soft’ transformed into ‘meh’ and ‘seft’, are characteristic of the period. What is most important to note is that they do not reflect the fashion of RP. They resemble regional vowels more than the RP of the mid-twentieth century, made infamous by radio and television.

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

The pacing of the recording is even and steady; Booth never seems to make massive leaps forward or slow to a dirge. His voice remains within a one octave range and continues to rise and fall as if the actor were going through musical scales. He begins the speech at the bottom of the staff, reaching an octave peak on ‘noble’ – again a long vowel ‘o’ – and then descends to ‘masters’. His ‘no more’ is played in the bass register and plucked like two violin *sforzandi*, emphasising his dismissal of the abduction charges. Words of particular interest are leaned on and highlighted; the darkness of drugs, charms and conjuration are counterbalanced by the brightness of the ‘mighty magic’ he conjures, with the hint of a smile in his voice. On several occasions, Booth leans on moments of assonance and alliteration, recognising and encouraging the aural quality of those poetic devices. Rhythm, repetition and an ordered pattern are Booth’s highest concerns, whereas words that alter that sound are shortened and the phrases of particular poetic quality are lengthened. The pace is also affected by his choice to end several poetic lines on an upswing of pitch, retaining interest past the enjambment and into the following line, making the pace hurtle forward with intonation.

Much of the meaning is conveyed through a variety of pitch that colours the words or phrases. These techniques retain the lyrical qualities of Othello’s speech while giving it a mesmeric rhythm that sounds more contemporary than one would expect. The only pause is placed before his declaration that his story is done, breaking the illusion of Othello’s story to focus on Desdemona’s reaction to his aural conjuration. Where a contemporary actor may choose to place more pauses in the story to reflect a seeming spontaneity and the discontinuity of thought, Booth facilitates the literary quality of the speech, hypnotizing our ears through continual utterance of the text, indicating there is magic in the web of it.

The quality of Booth seems to represent the spirit of the age, according to Ellen Terry. She was born into an acting family, apprenticed to play child’s roles in the Shakespearean repertory against Charles Kean. The power of speech was an important value in this theatrical family. For Terry, her two primary influences were patriarchal: Charles Kean ‘was a beautiful elocutionist [and] it was to his elocution that father owed his engagement with Macready’.⁴⁸ She once described a boy madrigal in France as having the ideal tonal quality: ‘pure, effortless and clear’.⁴⁹ Kean embodied this quality:

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

His voice was also of a wonderful quality – soft and low, yet distinct and clear as a bell. When he played Richard II, the magical charm of this organ was alone enough to keep the house spell-bound [...] Yet others only remember [he] always spoke as if he had a cold in his head.⁵⁰

Jeffrey Richards remarks that this adenoidal centring was in Irving's mind as well; the junior actor Chance Newton recalled that Irving 'used to give me sundry imitations of Charles Kean's evidently "code id the dose" method of delivery'.⁵¹ Clearly, head resonance was deployed in the period and perhaps Charles Kean's nasal timbre was too pronounced even for some of his contemporaries. Terry remembers only the effectiveness of the organ, while others, including Irving, were aware of its characteristic overdependence on nasal resonance. According to Ellen Terry's standards, beautiful elocution is 'clear articulation', effortless projection 'to the back of the gallery', with due attention paid to the separation and space required to produce the emotional sounds embedded in their utterance.⁵² She was taught to 'vary the pace', and to reach emotional climax by emphasizing the right words and speaking with velocity and passion to compensate for their length and space.⁵³

Terry detailed some of her training with Charles Kean's company in her autobiography. She recalls that 'Mrs. Kean taught me to draw my breath in through my nose and begin a laugh [...] I can hear her now lecturing the ladies of the company on their vowels. "A, E, I, O, U [...] are five distinct vowels, so don't mix them up altogether"'.⁵⁴ This focus on clarity and precision of expression could easily be mistaken for the advent of Received Pronunciation in the theatre, but Terry herself dispels this notion:

Pronunciation should be simple and unaffected, but not always fashioned rigidly according to a dictionary standard. No less an authority than Cicero points out that pronunciation must vary widely according to the emotions to be expressed; that it may be broken or cut with a varying or direct sound, and that it serves for the actor the purpose of colour to the painter, from which to draw variations. Take the simplest illustration. The formal pronunciation of A-h is 'Ah,' of O-h, 'Oh,' but you cannot stereotype the expression of emotion like this. These exclamations are words of one syllable, but the speaker who is sounding the gamut of human feeling will not be restricted in his pronunciation by dictionary rule. It is said of Edmund Kean that he never spoke such ejaculations, but always sighed or groaned them. Fancy an actor saying:

'My Desdemona! Oh! oh! oh!'

Words are intended to express feelings and ideas, not to bind them in rigid fetters; the accents of pleasure are different from the accents of pain, and if a feeling is more accurately expressed in nature by a variation of sound not provided by the laws of pronunciation, then such imperfect laws must be disregarded and nature vindicated!

The expression of the text should not be constricted by the bounds of grammatical laws, and the actor is the agent for delivery of the aural signifiers of emotion embedded within it. If the actor feels that the delivery of those signifiers is hindered by their expression in precise pronunciation, then the actor can bend the rules of grammar to enhance the sonic content of the text.

This flexibility of pronunciation is exemplified by the sounding of ‘meh’ for ‘my’ by actors of the period.⁵⁵ Terry, in all of my searches on the subject, is the only practitioner to explain the alteration of the sound and its function in Victorian theatricality. Despite our perceptions, the vocality of Victorian actors was less precise and ‘proper’ than their sounds lead us to believe. Ellen Terry explained how those interpolations functioned in the actor’s repertoire:

As for the ejaculations, the interjections and grunts with which Henry [Irving] interlarded the text, they often helped to reveal the meaning of Shakespeare to his audience [...] I never contracted ‘my’ without good reason [...] I saw that the ‘my’s’ sounded ridiculous, and abbreviated the first two ones into ‘me’s’.

The shortening and darkening of that bright ‘my’ into ‘meh’ was an aesthetic choice that enhanced the rhythm of dramatic speech, and helped point to words of particular meaning for the speaker. It is also important to note that the sound of ‘meh’ corresponds in no way with the sounds of Received Pronunciation.

Perhaps the most illustrative instance of the power of ‘meh’ comes from linguist David Crystal and his experiments at the Globe with Early Modern English dialects. Crystal claims that the schwa was widespread in early modern England, and its effect may be felt as late as the early twentieth century:

In this style, such words as *my* and *thy* would have been pronounced [mɪ] and [θɪ] – an effect which is sometimes seen in modern English writing when we see such spellings as *me mother* or *thi dad* [...] When Romeo says ‘It is my lady. O, it is my love!’ (2.2.10), it sounds like ‘me lady’ and ‘me love’, and we must be careful not to read in any association of uneducated speech at this point. Such cultural assumptions were nineteenth-century developments.⁵⁶

This pronunciation may have been acceptable to a late-nineteenth century audience as an indicator of ‘older’, ‘Shakespearean’ English, or it may merely have been accepted as the sound of colloquialism. Certainly, Ellen Terry feels that she must explain or apologise for its usage by 1908, but it was not the prescribed English of the classroom. Shakespeare and RP were incongruous to these audiences. The propriety of ‘my’ sounded ridiculous to Lyceum actors next to the rhythmic syncopation of ‘meh’, so the verisimilitude of the latter was expected of its prominent actors.

Despite her training in all of the tools of classical and melodramatic speaking, Terry’s ideology of versification was not rigid, nor did it advocate space and slowness over pace and intensity. Her mentor Tom Taylor attacked an actress for monotony and stiffness, lack of vitality and plasticity, with her Rosalind ‘all minute-guns and *minauderies* [...] a foot between every word, and the intensity of the emphasis entirely destroying all the spontaneity and flow of spirits which alone excuse and explain’.⁵⁷ Staccato, slow and pondering declamation was not considered good acting. The playwright Charles Reade advised her to slow her pace but only ‘done moderately, of course [...] I do not expect or desire to make a melodramatic actress of you, but still I think you capable of any effect, provided *it is not sustained too long*’.⁵⁸ Reade also emphasized pace with a particular stress on rhetorical flourish: ‘Climax is reached not only by rush but by increasing pace [...] study to speak these lines with great volubility and fire, and settle the exact syllable to run at’.⁵⁹

These approaches are evident in the surviving recordings of Terry. Her pace is breezy and conversational, but when she hits an emotional peak, as in the potion speech of Juliet, her voice lengthens the long vowels in her head tones, exercising vibrato in those moments to indicate the trembling of the nerves that, in this instance, indicate fear (click here to listen to this recording: duration 3:57).⁶⁰ In other examples, such as ‘The quality of mercy is not strained’, her tone is remarkably contemporary to our ears, indicating that this speech was not set in parentheses as a set-piece, but delivered by Terry as part of the dramatic action (click here to listen to this recording: duration 2:34).⁶¹ Even more important is Terry’s opinion on the multiplicity of options available to an actor with the necessary background for the stage:

Nowadays acting is less scientific (except in the matter of voice-production) than it was when I was receiving hints, cautions, and advice from my two

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

dramatist friends, Charles Reade and Tom Taylor; and the leading principles to which they attached importance have come to be regarded as old-fashioned and superfluous. This attitude is comparatively harmless in the interpretation of those modern plays in which parts are made to fit the actors and personality is everything. But those who have been led to believe that they can make their own rules find their mistake when they come to tackle Shakespeare or any of the standard dramatists in which the actors have to fit themselves to the parts. Then, if ever, technique is avenged!⁶²

With Shakespeare, text dictates the rules of vocal interpretation, and an actor can only stray from those rules so far before the verse is disrupted. Henry Irving, however, broke many of these rules on his way to the Lyceum stage.

IV

John Brodribb was born with a stammer. It also appears that he suffered from catarrh. These two maladies surely affected his speech all of his life: the physiological problem forcing him to adopt a personal style, and the psychological effects of the stammer problematising precision of speech. In adopting his stage name, he discarded the surname that indicted his West Country origins: Broad-rib, a name that could stand for the power of breath control that it seems Irving never truly mastered. He took elocution classes to control his stammer and eventually was tutored by Samuel Phelps. Edwin Booth's first visit to England in 1861 also influenced his vocal work, and he began tackling major roles.

He was initially attacked on all fronts as ridiculous and unacceptable, with a lack of physical strength apparent in his vocalisation and strange gait. His Hamlet was initially so unrecognisably progressive that silence greeted his portrayal until the third act, with the pyrotechnics of the nunnery scene breaking down the fourth wall he had built into the earlier portions of the play. He chose to deliver the soliloquies not to the audience but as if thinking aloud, and this clearly stunned his first auditors. He began to integrate such innovations as pausing for spontaneity before the word 'peacock' in recognition of the fan in his hand.⁶³ Although there were complaints that he could not be heard, Clement Scott remarked: 'He is not acting; he is not splitting the ears of the groundlings; he is an artist concealing his art; he is talking to himself; he is thinking aloud'.⁶⁴ More conservative critics complained that he 'turned verse into prose', and that the soliloquies were full of 'interjected pauses and natural stresses' which disrupted the pacing of his speeches so that

Brian Willis, 'Rude am I in meh speech': Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

‘his longer passages are without the music of sustained elocution’.⁶⁵ His performance began to deconstruct the poetry of the text, breaking into the colloquial patterns of everyday speech with its hesitations and interjections. It is particularly important to note that ‘natural stresses’ were used, an indication that Irving was striving for colloquial speech and sense.

Irving’s voice was often criticised, and it is through the vivid recollections of his idiosyncrasies and his faults that we can negotiate an understanding of what it must have been like to hear him speak in the Lyceum. Henry Arthur Jones elaborated on the placement of his voice in detail:

The words were sparingly ejaculated from the roof of the mouth and the base of the nose through narrowed teeth and lips, in a hard, thin, supercaustic tone, as bloodless and dry as the caked grey pumice. The open vowels were instinctively avoided and clipped down in his own private way; many of the o’s and broad a’s became almost i’s and e’s; not a word came from the throat or chest, much less from the heart; every syllable in the short sentences were precise, calculated, barbed, and reached its mark. This method of utterance could not, of course, be used to convey frank, generous utterance, or to deal wholeheartedly with any subject. But it was tremendously effective, searching, withering, forbidding, exclusive, dominating, unanswerable. It was like a jet of carbolic acid.⁶⁶

He constricts his vocal passage with ‘narrowed teeth and lips’, speaking with a hard tone that flattens the stronger vowel sounds, but Irving also seems to be closing off his body to expression, interiorising himself. His voice is a mask: ‘withering, forbidding, exclusive, dominating, unanswerable’. These images all refute the idea of ‘beauty’ and ‘poetry’ in the voice of the leading male actor of the late Victorian stage. His vocal problems were legendary, as Lena Ashwell relates:

He had a high, thin voice, and when he needed depth of tone to express the seething passion that was in him he had no quality of sound to carry the message to his audience. So he prolonged the vowel sounds in a peculiar and sometimes irritating way.

Irving coped with his shortcomings in the only way that he knew, by using the section of his body that could cope with expression without failing him: his head. Shaw, always eager to attack Irving, noticed that his ‘peculiar nasal method of securing resonance obliged him to pronounce our English diphthongs as vowels’, that is, in a perceptibly regional manner.⁶⁷ His various difficulties caused Irving to speak in constricted ways,

forcing his body and voice to work against each other at the expense of grace in both. This vocal anxiety was reflected in the sound of his voice. Eden Phillpotts recalls:

I have heard Salvini, Forbes-Robertson, Booth, the American, and many another famed for resonance and mellow purity of diction and intonation; but they were as singing birds to the bodeful and pregnant ring of intellect in Irving's staccato, raven croak. Elocution, after all, is the art of making your words and meaning absolutely clear, and he never failed to do that.⁶⁸

Unlike Booth and his predecessors, Irving did not sustain auditory space with continual intonation; rather he halted and stopped with sounds, limping much like his infamous gait, the resonance of his utterances reverberating off of the walls of the theatre in the spaces that Irving left between the words. Irving did not rely on pure sensation for his effect, but combined the sensory impact of elocution with the intellectual scalpel of rhythm and pause. Importantly, Phillpotts praises Irving exactly for his lack of refined technique.

The 'raven's croak' could indicate lack of breath support and damaging strain in his throat. This would support several comments by his critics and peers. Ellen Terry admitted that when Irving was carried away in passionate passages, he could forget to keep his voice under control and damage it:

He screamed and ranted and raved – lost his voice, was slow where he should have been swift, incoherent where he should have been strong. I could not bear to see him [as Othello]. It was painful to me. Yet night after night he achieved in the speech to the Senate one of the most superb and beautiful bits of acting of his life. It was *wonderful*. He spoke the speech, beaming on Desdemona all the time.⁶⁹

Irving could tear a passion to tatters but, more importantly, this detail reveals that despite Gordon Craig's insistence that Irving was always in precise control of his acting at all times, there were moments when Irving could lose control of his voice and sound unrefined.

Despite these moments, his audience often grumbled about inaudibility. No less a patron than Queen Victoria noted that 'his elocution is not very distinct, especially when he gets excited'.⁷⁰ *The Times* criticised his performance in *The Cup* as 'unintelligible to the larger part of the audience', and the *Weekly Dispatch* felt that 'many of the lines [...] were lost in consequence of the faulty enunciation of the actor'.⁷¹ Much of this can be attributed to Irving's flattening of vowel sounds, which would stifle them from carrying in the auditorium. The centring of resonance within his head would not help his audibility if

he was flattening his vowels and keeping his mouth closed and tense. But I would argue that these perceptions are more likely a misunderstanding of what Irving was attempting with his voice; certainly he would not have been considered the actor of his time if no one understood what he was saying.

Irving was always a nervous actor on first nights, and as we have seen, excitability affected the way he spoke the lines. Waiting in the wings to open *Lear*, Irving was inspired to try something new vocally with the part. It was not received well and a patron called out for him to speak up, which was when he realised that his experiment was a failure and he altered accordingly. The press jumped on his deviation, sardonically noting ‘our leading actor murmurs, grunts and groans, but never speaks’.⁷² Whether Irving was attempting the faint voice of an older man, we do not know, but what we can determine is that he was clearly departing from tradition, both consciously and unconsciously.

From Gordon Craig’s description, we know that Irving had a style that strayed from perceptions of ‘perfect’ English-speaking:

It was brought against Irving that he could not speak our English tongue. This accusation went on for some twenty years or so, after which folk gave it up, despairing of teaching Irving how English should be spoken.

Irving, never deaf to criticism, tried to speak as neatly, as nicely as any sucking dove; but, when he grew a little excited, as is customary with great actors, he would return to his old way of utterance.

He would say ‘*Gud*’ for ‘*God*’; ‘*Cut-thrut dog*’ for ‘*cut-throat dog*’ (*Shylock*); ‘*Tack the rup from mey nek*’ for ‘*Take the rope from my neck*’ (*Mathias* in *The Bells*); ‘*Ritz*’ for ‘*Rich*’ (*Mathias*) [...] The effect of the *ritz* instead of *rich* was this [...instead of mundane reality] we were horribly thrilled, as at the ominous sound of the serpent about to strike, and we were aware that a duet between the regular throb of the bells and this voice was being sung...Yet again, in *Macbeth*, the passage, ‘*To trammel up the consequence*’ became in his mouth ‘*tram-mele up-p the cunsequence*,’ a sharp division of the two *m*’s, a brief stop after the first, second, and the fourth words.

[...]

For *good*, Irving said *god*—*sight* was *seyt*—*stood* was *stod*—*smote* became *smot*—*hand* was often *hond* or *hend*.

In short, his tendency was to enrich the sounds of words—to make them expressive rather than refined—what the unskilful in England take to be refined.⁷³

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

Craig asserts, very tellingly, that Irving rebelled, whether consciously or not, against polished speech. This rejection of the received sound of the capital is an embracement of an older tradition, of swift, highly placed vocalicity with percussive, resonant consonants and flattened, instead of rounded, vowels. This voice spoke with relative speed and with disregard for propriety, a voice rebelling against, and revelling in, the success of the stage.

His pronunciations necessarily force the consonants to bear more of the weight of the words, to make those percussive purveyors of sense more violent and rhythmic, and to make the vowels sound like they do in colloquial conversation. The consonants also vibrate more in his resonators than vowels would. Vowels must resonate in the larger spaces of the chest and mouth to reach depth; the thrill Craig describes when ‘rich’ becomes ‘ritz’ originates from the resonance of ‘z’ in the cheekbones and nose. It is more direct and projected there, whereas ‘ch’ is trapped and cut off by the mouth. He shortens vowels to reach percussive sounds like ‘d’, ‘t’, ‘p’, and the vibrations of ‘n’. In every instance that Craig remembers, Irving spoke with concern for the more expressive sounds of the words, emphasising the plosives and continuant consonants, with an eye towards their sense, but also with a keen idea of his strength and limitations. Irving knew where his voice was strongest, and placed his sounds there.

As Craig so passionately argues, he spoke with a mind towards oral tradition, the ‘old English speech, and Irving brought back to us something of the ripe old sounds, and damme if we didn’t object’.⁷⁴ Laurence Irving explained how his grandfather specifically gave his actors the freedom to speak as they were accustomed, anything but adopting an ‘educated’ accent:

‘War’ he pronounced as it was spelt, to rhyme with ‘far’. Though he could not and did not attempt to impose his dialect on others, no actor in his company was allowed to use the long ‘a’ – it was forbidden to rhyme grass with farce [...] rightly or wrongly, he strove to make words convey not only an idea but an emotion. Those who criticized his methods were those to whom a visit to the theatre was an intellectual exercise rather than an emotional experience.⁷⁵

Irving was also heightening the emotional content by approaching it from a populist angle. By the time of the mid-twentieth century, Shakespeare’s main characters could be spoken only with Received Pronunciation. Craig is asserting that Irving retained regional traces of an older tradition in his vocalicity, an expressive theatricalism that eschewed propriety for an older oral tradition.

V

The first disembodied playback of his recorded voice triggered in Irving an existential remark: ‘My God! Is that my voice?’⁷⁶ The two existing recordings of Irving performing Shakespeare are surprising: the fragment of Richard III clocks in at a ponderous 98.53 w.p.m., much slower than his American counterpart Edwin Booth (click here to listen to this recording: duration 2:37).⁷⁷ The Wolsey speech, meanwhile, is timed at 130.36 w.p.m., or close to Booth’s pace, and some doubt has been cast on its veracity (click here to listen to this recording: duration 2:12).⁷⁸ Perhaps Irving was more comfortable with the technology by the time this piece was recorded, but his Wolsey sounds breezy and light compared to his Richard III, almost as if he had mixed up his temperaments: Richard’s tone is tragic and Wolsey’s conversational.

His pitch changes are exaggerated, his vowels are not flattened, and the four instances of ‘my’ are long ‘i’ sounds. The ‘ahhhh’ moaning at the end of the recording is rushed and perfunctory, contrary to his insistence on how such exclamations should be performed. The contrast with the Richard excerpt is so pronounced that it makes me doubt that it is the same performer. It is easy to speculate on why the Wolsey speech could have been so markedly different: ease with the phonograph, his mood, a changing style of speaking, or a rush to complete the speech before the cylinder ran out. Regardless of its authenticity, there are too many elements of the recording that do not match what we have heard about Irving to call it a fair representation of his style. The lengthened ‘my’ seems like the mistake of a latter-day imitator unaware of Irving’s methodology. I must concur with Richard Bebb that this recording is unlikely to be Irving, for none of the characteristics, especially tempo and idiosyncratic pronunciation, match what we know of him.⁷⁹

But in Richard, all of the elements match criticism of his voice and we can verify its provenance. He opens with a long ‘o’ in ‘now’ to call attention to the beginning of speech in the play. His rhythm is regular for the most part, but his vowels, although exaggerated to our ears, have the ease and flatness of colloquial speech. They reflect regional approaches to vowels, the sounds that most distinguish those accents to our ears. At moments he gives guttural utterance, perhaps signifying hatred and villainy. Such

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

growling in the throat, that raven croak, could also have been adopted by Irving to clear his catarrh. If so, it would be another instance of his utilising his defects to his advantage.

He drops to near *sotto voce* with the image of the lute and then pauses, preparing the audience for his pronouncement of antagonism. His ‘I’ sets him alone against the pageantry, while his staccato ‘ma-je-steh’ is a mannered vocal effect used effectively by physical actors such as Olivier. It may also be another instance of the flattening of long ‘i’. He breathes after ‘cheated (*) of feature’, perhaps to let that first word sink into the ears, or maybe indicating his lack of breath control. And then, he combines the guttural and staccato to emphasise the mocking of the dogs, adding an interpolated laugh after his turn to ‘why’. Agonisingly, the recording ends where one senses Irving is about to let the vocal pyrotechnics carry us to the end of the speech but within this small excerpt we can hear the idiosyncrasies that his supporters and detractors noticed about his interpretations. The more conservative commentators were startled by his style, which is more colloquial than previously believed, while others were enthralled by his magnetism. Irving’s voice, perceived as a regionally generalised *mélange* of dialects, was curious to the Victorians as ‘other’, just as his gait and strange interpretations marked him as unique.

The late Victorians did not present a unified front of lingual culture, as was perhaps previously believed. The different approaches of Booth, Terry, and Irving contain evidence of the speaking of elevated verse before RP and, despite the prescriptions of the Education Act of 1870, localising signifiers were widespread. Television and radio have contributed to the idea that RP is spoken by people of culture or importance, but at the time of its proliferation, precision was indeed a problem:

A 1996 study looked for glottal stops in early recordings of a number of people, such as actress Ellen Terry [...] They were found to be widespread, with some speakers using glottal stops in nearly 80 per cent of all locations where such an effect would be possible [...] And the important point to note is that they are all upper-class speakers, speaking in formal contexts, and using an accent which these days many people would describe as ‘refined’.

We know that accents are established early on in life. Most people have their accent fixed by their teens, and in the days when geographical mobility was limited, this accent would probably stay throughout their lives. So, if Ellen Terry was using glottal stops in the 1910s she was almost certainly using them in the 1860s. Moreover, although these sounds are not especially common in her dramatic renderings, the fact that they were there at all suggests that they would be even more common in her everyday speech. And the fact that upper-

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

class and well-educated speakers used glottal stops suggests that they must have been even more widespread in the speech of other classes too.⁸⁰

It is not realistic to suggest that locality can be eliminated from the voice, and absolute precision instituted where it rarely exists. ‘Upper-class’ speech one-hundred years ago sounded significantly different than it did in the 1950s or the 1990s, containing fashionable nuances, such as the glottal stop, that we understand as signifying locality in a contemporary speaker. Despite notions of the fixed qualities of accent, those aspects shift from generation to generation.

VI

The approach of the late Victorian period differed to that of the early twentieth century. Performers such as Tree, Benson, and Waller injected more pausing and vibrato into their speech. Unfortunately, the recordings of Tree and Ainley, examples of which are reproduced in the *Playing Shakespeare* series, have been deployed as evidence of an ‘outdated’ or ‘hammy’ style of acting, a tradition that hangs over the English actor as a pejorative example of sound’s hegemony over sense (click here to listen to a recording of Tree as Falstaff: duration 2.32).⁸¹ Although contemporary actors sometimes use some of the very same techniques, these actors have, for the most part, been marginalised by the homogenising pressures of the RSC brand name and the standardising drives of dramatic schools.⁸² The advent of the BBC has proliferated, and even globalised, English classical acting within the framework of Received Pronunciation and a restrained vocal style. The Victorians were unaware of such considerations, and might very well have reacted with the same incredulity at ‘our’ actors, as we often do at hearing Victorian vocality. It is as if we are on opposite ends of Bell’s first telephone, skeptical of the verity of voice on the other end of the transmission.

Perhaps the very reason that those recordings of the late Victorians sound foreign to our ears (and to the ears of critics and practitioners such as John Barton) is the very fact that their sounds originate from outside the confines of Cambridge, London and Oxford. Certainly, Craig and Terry felt the need to defend their masters’ voices, but those voices reflected more atavistic sounds than twentieth century ears are accustomed to hearing. Propelled by an entirely different resonance centre, the Victorians found a methodology

Brian Willis, ‘Rude am I in meh speech’: Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

that powered the voice through the space of a large auditorium and conveyed the sense of emotionality their auditors expected in the verse. This vocality presented Shakespeare's text as a primal force, unrefined in its expression. We could never accuse them of 'failure' to embody the script, of a 'textual, emotional and poetic thinning-out'.

Attending an 1880 performance of *Othello* at the Lyceum with Booth or Irving performing the title role, one could hear the Moor say 'rude am I in meh speech' and feel the visceral impact of that roughness in the textures of the words. Victorian actors *were* rude in their speech, perhaps in ways that the contemporary auditor finds difficult to accept. The words themselves conveyed sound and sense in their utterance, unlike those of the contemporary actor, whose silence is sometimes louder than his words. The vocality of Victorian actors was unabashedly theatrical, rude, and confrontational in an era when the façade of such emotions was constrained, placid and still. Their sound was fully embodied, and we can hear its various modulations if we know how to listen for its meanings.

Endnotes:

¹ John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1986 [1984]), p. 194.

² Of course, this idea represents an early nineteenth-century critical conception of Shakespeare's hegemony on the printed page negotiated through the interaction of the reader's imagination over the failure of the stage to manifest that power, as most eminently stated by Charles Lamb.

³ Barton, p. 195.

⁴ Barton, p. 196, p. 197.

⁵ See Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (London: Strahan, 1762), Joshua Steele, *Prosodia Rationalis: An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols* (London: Bowyer and Nichols, 1775) and John Walker, *Elements of Elocution* (Yorkshire: Menston Press, 1781).

⁶ In Tony Crowley, ed. *Proper English?: Readings in Language, History and Cultural Identity* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 174.

⁷ David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 287.

⁸ Robert McCrum, William Cran, Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton, 1986), p. 272.

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- ⁹ McCrum et al., p. 15.
- ¹⁰ Alexander Gil, *Logonomica Anglica* (1619), quoted in Paula Blank, 'The Babel of Renaissance English', in Lynda Mugglestone, ed., *The Oxford History of English* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 215.
- ¹¹ Blank, p. 219.
- ¹² See Crystal, p. 252, for a discussion of this schism in vowel sounds.
- ¹³ Received Pronunciation will henceforth be referred to by the abbreviation RP.
- ¹⁴ All poets' vocal excerpts taken from Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby eds., *Poetry Speaks: Expanded* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2007).
- ¹⁵ I hear no evidence, nor have heard any argument, to suggest that these recordings may be altered in tempo. Although contemporary recordings are sometimes altered in playback speed, it does not necessarily follow that these first recordings were altered by Thomas Edison or Colonel Gouraud, his agent in Britain.
- ¹⁶ Katherine Jewell Everts, *The Speaking Voice*, (New York: Harper, 1908), p. 5; p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Everts, p. 29.
- ¹⁸ Frank Townsend Southwick, *Elocution and Action* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1897), p. 43.
- ¹⁹ Wesley Mills, *Voice Production in Singing and Speaking Based on Scientific Principles* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1913), p. 142.
- ²⁰ Mills, p. 215.
- ²¹ Frank H. Fenno, *The Science and Art of Elocution* (New York: Hinds, Noble, and Eldredge, 1878), p. 19.
- ²² Fenno, p. 29.
- ²³ David J. Smithson, *Elocution and the Dramatic Art*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1889), p. 30.
- ²⁴ Otis Skinner, *The Last Tragedian* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), p. 8.
- ²⁵ Katherine Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1931), p. 233.
- ²⁶ Charles H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 13.
- ²⁷ Shattuck, p. 63.
- ²⁸ Shattuck, p. 41.
- ²⁹ Shattuck, p. 90.
- ³⁰ D.B. Fry, *The Physics of Speech* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), cited by Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 26.
- ³¹ Shattuck, p.15.
- ³² William Winter, *The Life and Art of Edwin Booth* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), p. 109.
- ³³ Winter, pp. 191-192.
- ³⁴ Nat Goodwin in Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth*, (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1931), p. 75.
- ³⁵ Goodale, p. 117.
- ³⁶ Goodale, p. 116.
- ³⁷ Shattuck, p. 99.

³⁸ Richard Lockridge, *Darling of Misfortune: Edwin Booth, 1833-1893* (New York: The Century, 1932), p. 70.

³⁹ Lockridge, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Lockridge, p. 96.

⁴¹ L. Terry Oggel, *Edwin Booth: A Bio-Bibliography*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1992), p. 18.

⁴² Shattuck, p. 222.

⁴³ Shattuck, p. 187. My italics.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 8 November 1880, cited in Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 127.

⁴⁵ Shattuck, xxiv.

⁴⁶ See Karpf, *The Human Voice*, p. 42. She states that ‘the average tempo of an adult American or British adult is 120 to 150 words per minute’. If we assume that humans speak faster today because of our hurrying and instantaneous world, then Booth’s pace might have produced a startling effect, *unless* it were not as unusual as we assume. In stage recordings accessed at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon and the British Library Sound Archive, contemporary actors were sampled for tempo. Antony Sher’s performance of ‘Now is the winter of our discontent’ averaged 113.5 wpm, Kenneth Branagh spoke his soliloquy ‘Upon the king’ at 119 wpm, Mark Rylance’s 1989 Hamlet performed ‘To be or not to be’ at 76.6 wpm, and Simon Russell Beale’s ‘To be or not to be’ clocked an average of 81.36 wpm. All are significantly slower than Booth, with the extra spatial verbal quantities provided *in-between* the words, rather than within the vowels themselves.

⁴⁷ Edwin Booth, *Othello Act I Scene III*, (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).

⁴⁸ Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1908), p. 8.

⁴⁹ Terry, p. 82.

⁵⁰ Terry, pp. 10-11.

⁵¹ Quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and his World* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), p. 69.

⁵² Terry p. 12, p. 19, also see p. 18 for Mrs. Kean’s emphasis on the separation of vowels.

⁵³ Terry, p. 94.

⁵⁴ Terry, p. 18.

⁵⁵ I have used the spelling of ‘meh’ to indicate this phenomenon, although other commentators have spelled it ‘my’, ‘me’, or used a contraction, such as ‘m’boy’. The actual sounding of the word does not indicate the long vowel ‘i’ or ‘e’, nor is it as shortly pronounced as the contraction. ‘Meh’, in my ears, indicates the flattening of the vowel sound phonated by actors of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, consistent with the schwa.

⁵⁶ David Crystal, *Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 63.

⁵⁷ Terry, p. 118.

⁵⁸ Terry, p. 95.

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- ⁵⁹ Terry, p. 95.
- ⁶⁰ Ellen Terry, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV Scene III (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).
- ⁶¹ Ellen Terry, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV Scene I (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).
- ⁶² Terry, pp. 96-97.
- ⁶³ Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 247.
- ⁶⁴ Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 107.
- ⁶⁵ Alan Hughes, *Henry Irving, Shakespearean* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), p. 78.
- ⁶⁶ Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 318.
- ⁶⁷ Richards, p. 313.
- ⁶⁸ H.A. Saintsbury and Cecil Palmer, eds., *We Saw Him Act* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1939), p. 84.
- ⁶⁹ Terry, pp. 206-207.
- ⁷⁰ Richards, p. 74.
- ⁷¹ Richards, p. 207.
- ⁷² Richards, p. 137.
- ⁷³ Edward Gordon Craig, *Henry Irving* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930), pp. 62-63.
- ⁷⁴ Gordon Craig, p. 65.
- ⁷⁵ Laurence Irving, p. 298. Of course, 'war' is on display in this recording.
- ⁷⁶ Michael Kilgarriff, 'Henry Irving and the Phonograph: Bennett Maxwell', <<http://www.theirvingsociety.org.uk/phono.htm>> [accessed 22 April 2009], para. 10 of 15.
- ⁷⁷ Henry Irving, *Richard III*, Act I Scene I (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).
- ⁷⁸ Henry Irving, *Henry VIII*, Act III Scene II (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).
- ⁷⁹ Again, see Kilgarriff. Bennett Maxwell, long-time BBC radio producer, determined that the recording is Irving, but without any specific documentation for its provenance. Archivist Richard Bebb determined otherwise because of the internal evidence of the speech. Given the uncertain origins of the recording, and despite our earnest hope for more evidence of Irving speaking Shakespeare, we must not assume that it is indeed his voice, especially when his style was noted to have been much impersonated. Until we can verify its authenticity, we can not rely on it as evidence of his vocal proclivities, especially when the 'meh' is so conspicuously absent on four occasions, the sole exception to this rule of vocality in all of the existing Victorian recordings.
- ⁸⁰ Crystal, p. 417. {?} is the IPA signifier for the glottal stop, an intriguing questioning of the nature of the sound produced by the 'popping' in the throat, approximating the sound of a 'gulp'.
- ⁸¹ Herbert Beerbohm Tree, *Henry IV Part I*, Act V Scene I (Naxos Audiobooks, NA220012, 2000).
- ⁸² Specifically, Ian McKellen's voice retains hints of his Lancashire background in his vowel production. More recently, I would point to Greg Hicks as an example of a more stylised acting style that probably resembles Irving more than we can recognise, down to his peculiarly theatrical movement and his distinctive

vocal style that retains tremolo and vibrato within the structures of the verse. Yet, surprisingly, very little published criticism dwells on his idiosyncratic, accomplished voice.

Brian Willis, 'Rude am I in meh speech': Vocality and Victorian Shakespeare

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