**Syntax and Stichomythia in *Hamlet***

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**Syntax**: the arrangement and grammatical relationship of words, phrases, and clauses in sentences; the ordering of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. In this sense, syntax is an important element of an author's style. In the document on stichomythia, you will be looking at the syntax of a short dialogue between Hamlet and his mother Gertrude.

**Stichomythia in *Hamlet***

**Stichomythia**: a line-for-line, verbal fencing match between two principal characters, used to retort sharply to each other in lines that echo the opponent's words and figures of speech. Shakespeare often used stichomythia to show a conflict between two characters. The following is an example of stichomythia used in a scene between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude:

**Narrative frame for this passage**: Hamlet is gleeful because he has just caught Claudius in a trap with a pantomime in which the poisoning of the former king was presented. Gertrude is furious with Hamlet because he has upset Claudius. Watch to see how Shakespeare uses syntax in this passage to show the tension.

**Hamlet**: Now, mother, what's the matter?

**Queen**: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

**Hamlet**: Mother, you have my father much offended.

**Queen**: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

**Hamlet**: Go to, you question with a wicked tongue.

**Queen**: Why, how now, Hamlet?

**Hamlet**: What's the matter now?

**Queen**: Have you forgot me?

**Hamlet**: No, by the rood, not so!  
You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,  
And—would it were not so—you are my mother.

**Queen**: Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak.

**Hamlet**: Come, come, and sit you down, you shall not budge!  
You will not go till I set you up a glass  
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

**Analysis of syntax and use of stichomythia in this passage**:

1. The use of the **pun**, a play on words, is used by Hamlet when he speaks of matter meaning "what's wrong?" and also meaning "what is the content or essence of the problem?"
2. He uses a sarcastic repetition of certain lines, such as when Gertrude says Hamlet has offended his father, meaning Claudius, and when Hamlet says she has offended his father, he means Hamlet Sr., his original father.
3. The stichomythia of the passage is the back and forth retorts of Hamlet and Gertrude. The syntax of each line, or Hamlet’s mimicking his mother’s word order, creates the tension and meaning within this exchange.

**Language**

Also of importance when making meaning of Shakespeare’s words are the following:

1. **Unusual Word Arrangement**

Unusual word arrangement is a syntactical element employed for emphasis, as in the above passage between Gertrude and Hamlet. Shakespeare may place words out of the normal structure we would use today, to keep with his iambic pentameter rhythm or to emphasize a specific point.

**Hamlet**: Mother, you have my father much **offended**.

By placing the word “offended” at the end of the sentence instead of the word “father,” the emphasis is on the wrong that has been done.

1. **Omissions**

Understanding that Shakespeare omits letters within words, usually designated by an apostrophe, will help you to make meaning. Sometimes this is done to emphasize a point or to keep within the iambic pentameter structure. Sometimes omissions are part of the language of the day.

His Cannon **‘gainst** self-slaughter. O God, God.

With this example, clearly the word is "against," but to keep within 10 syllables in this line, the first syllable of the word against has to be dropped.

1. **Unusual Words**

These are words of Shakespeare’s day that do not carry the same meaning for us today.

**Francisco**:Nay, answer me. Stand and **unfold** yourself.

Unfold does no’t make sense to us in this sentence, based on language of our day, but in Shakespeare’s time unfold meant to disclose or make known.