



Skenè Studies II • 10
Shakespeare 3 • Serpieri Lectures 3

Claudia Olk
Drama and Poetry in
Beckett and Shakespeare



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CLAUDIA OLK
**Drama and Poetry in Beckett and
Shakespeare¹**

¹ It was a great honour to be invited to deliver the 2025 Serpieri Lecture. I should like to express my deep gratitude to Silvia Bigliuzzi, Rosy Colombo, Cristiano Ragni and their colleagues for their exceptional hospitality and support.

Samuel Beckett's and William Shakespeare's works explore and further develop established forms and genres. Their poems often appear as miniature dramas, and, at many instances, their plays introduce other art forms and media into the dramatic plot. Poems and songs in particular can add a dimension of artifice to a play, they can contract, alter, or enhance the atmosphere of any given scene. The singing of a song or the recital of a poem momentarily halts the interactive dynamics of the action on stage and grants the audience a sense of distance to it, often summarising what has happened before, capturing and intensifying the emotional depth of a scene, or reflecting on the performance itself. In his first play, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1553), William Shakespeare inserts the song "Who is Silvia?" the last stanza of which reads:

Then to Silvia let us sing
That Silvia is excelling
She excels each mortal thing
Upon the dull earth dwelling.
To her let us garlands bring.
(4.2.37-51)

Shakespeare's Silvia, daughter of the Duke of Milan is "too fair, too true, too holy" (5), a poetic model of perfection that also provides insights into the imaginative character of notions of gender. In addition to its praise of Silvia's excellence, which rises above anything mortal and earthly, the song also exhibits the poetic power of words that create and encapsulate this idea of perfection and thereby instantiate the imaginative transgression of their materiality. Franz Schubert, whom Beckett admired (Olk 2023, 191), in 1826 famously based his song: "An Silvia" (Op., 106-4) on this passage. Similar to Shakespeare's speaker Schubert's singer asks "Was ist Silvia?", in other words: what is it precisely that constitutes Silvia's beauty and goodness that goes beyond words and yet it is created by them.

Beckett's and Shakespeare's dramatic works frequently use poetry and take on a poetic quality themselves, and their poetry also has a performative dimension. In this lecture, I would like to look at some salient connections and transitions between genres and explore, in a somewhat Paterian sense, the ways in which poetry aspires to the condition of drama and drama to the condition of poetry. I will be concerned with how each medium reflects on itself, its potential and its boundaries that arise from these intersections, and how drama and poetry create their own conditions of possibility and thereby generate a poetics that evolves from the limitations of theatrical, material and verbal means.

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