A concentration and intensification of the speech of common life is necessary in drama as, to a lesser degree, in the novel. Even in the novel the artist's method of treating dialogue cannot be photographic. People must be made to express themselves more concisely and incisively, with less irrelevance and indefiniteness, above all more significantly than they ordinarily do in real life. This is necessary partly that their speech, which cannot be immediately illustrated by tone or gesture, may be clearly significant and partly that it may not be tedious. In drama this intensification of ordinary speech must needs be carried still further, because of the smaller canvas used and the absence of any explanatory notes. It is this idealization of dramatic dialogue that justifies or requires the use of an idealized form of speech, that is, of the musical speech, which is verse.

There are, however, many kinds of dialogue for the expression of which verse is radically unfit. Touch and go dialogue, full of quick turns, intimate, witty, playful, can be intensified in prose and would lose something and gain nothing in verse. Broadly comic dialogue is impossible in verse unless at least it be rhymed verse. Even tense dialogue, full of emotion, but in which the feeling is involved and tormented and the thought moves abruptly and in tangents, cannot gain, and probably loses, if expressed in verse. Only an elliptical, jerky, tortured verse, such as we sometimes find in Browning, could express it. But where feeling is exalted, or is at once passionate and simple, where thought and feeling flow freely and with dignity, the concentrated and heightened expression of it takes naturally the form of musical speech, or verse.

Whatever may be thought of the theory of the double use of verse and prose in drama thus briefly sketched, it appears to be the theory of Shakespeare. Whether or not he was conscious of such views we cannot say. But that he practically held such a view can be deduced from his practice in the plays of his maturity.

There is a preliminary consideration which must be clearly understood. It is obvious that there are many kinds of dialogue which might be rendered without practical loss either in verse or in prose. All conventional speech, all merely explanatory or descriptive speech, all speech that is mildly expostulatory or argumentative or admonitory, may be written equally well in prose or verse. If written in verse it gains in dignity what it loses in rapidity of movement, it gains in beauty what it loses in pure realism. It must always be remembered that verse is slower than prose. The concentration of prose is greater; verse is more wordy, and moreover must be read more slowly to bring out its music. The treatment of all neutral kinds of speech will depend on the convention accepted by the artist. If verse be regarded as the normal mode of dramatic utterance, verse will be used; otherwise he will use prose.

Shakespeare's practice was not, of course, the same all throughout his artistic life. At starting he accepted the convention that verse is the normal medium of dramatic speech, and that prose is only to be used for special reasons. To this convention he adhered to some extent; but as his powers matured he found more and more reasons for using prose. His use of prose and of verse becomes less and less mere conventional up to the time of Othello and Lear. In his early, experimental plays he uses prose only for broadly comic or burlesque effects. But in the plays of the second period the conventional use of verse is to a great extent abandoned. Approximately, in those plays, prose is the language of comedy, and verse of dialogue which is sentimental, passionate, or deliberately dignified. In Romeo and Juliet, already, there is less convention. The alternations of verse and prose are more rapid than in earlier plays, and more subtly motivated. Look at the conversation between the Nurse and Romeo in Act II. iv. They begin in prose, but as soon as Juliet is directly spoken of Romeo rises into verse and the Nurse follows him. Then as soon as the serious matter is settled both decline into prose. In Henry IV the use of verse is rather more conventional, but Hotspur's tendency to drop into prose is noticeable and significant. In The Merchant of Venice there is an admirable and striking instance of departure from convention in the use of prose by Shylock in the Tubal scene (III. i.). Shylock's grotesque passion over his daughter and ducats was not to be dignified by verse! But it is in the mature comedies of this period that Shakespeare's abandonment of conventional verse is most complete. The fact has not been sufficiently emphasized that Much Ado About Nothing is a prose comedy. In that play prose is used as the normal form of expression: verse is used only for special
reasons. There is, in fact, little verse in the play. It is used in the church scene (IV. i.) for the sake of dignity and passion; it is used to express the grief and anger of Leonato and Antonio; it is used, rather conventionally perhaps, in the last scene, and in the Hero and Ursula scene (III. i.), and in the ceremonial scene at Hero's monument (V. iii.). Otherwise it is used hardly at all, and where it occurs its use is significant. Look at the masked-ball scene (II. i.). It is all in prose except that Claudio, for a moment, grows sentimentally serious in verse. The fact that the Don John scenes are in prose strongly stamps the play as an essentially prose comedy.

Of the other comedies of this period As You Like It, pastoral poem as it is, appears to be based on prose rather than verse. In this play, as in Much Ado, it is the use of verse, not the use of prose, that is to be accounted for. In Twelfth Night the balance is perfect as between verse and prose, and the changes are almost always clearly motivated.

In his mature comedy Shakespeare showed a distinct preference for prose as the natural mode of expression in comedy. In these plays prose is the normal medium, and we shall come to wrong conclusions or to no conclusions if we attempt to explain his use of prose rather than his use of verse. But in the great tragedies that followed, the normal form of expression is verse. Prose is here used only for special reasons, and it is used with extraordinary artistic subtlety. To bring out all the subtleties involved in the use of prose in Hamlet, Othello, and Lear would take up far more space than we can afford. A close examination will show that in these plays Shakespeare worked very consistently, though not perhaps with absolute consistency, on the theory stated at the commencement of this section. Inconsistencies may perhaps be found in relation to passages of a neutral character, and there is apparent a tendency to give soliloquy a sometimes unnecessary dignity by the use of verse. But it will be found that in these plays the use of prose has almost invariably an artistic motive, and is rarely governed by mere convention and never by caprice.