Rhetorical Devices

Intertwined with syntax, rhetoric exerts another powerful influence on Elizabethan writing. Rhetoric in its original sense means "the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively." While I won't be getting into some of the more obscure terms (is there anyone who isn't frightened by a mouthful of syllables like "paraprosdokian"?), a healthy understanding of poetry's debt to rhetoric is in order. Below is a table of some of the more common devices employed for emphasis in Shakespeare:

Alliteration: repetition of the same initial consonant sound throughout a line of verse

Example: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought...." (Sonnet XXX)

Anadiplosis: the repetition of a word that ends one clause at the beginning of the next

"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,

And every tale condemns me for a villain."1 (Richard III, V, iii)

Anaphora: repetition of a word or phrase as the beginning of successive clauses

"Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!" (King John, II, i)

Antithesis: juxtaposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction

"Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more." (Julius Caesar, III, ii)

Asyndeton: omission of conjunctions between coordinate phrases, clauses, or words

"Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,

Shrunk to this little measure?" (Julius Caesar, III, i)

Chiasmus: two corresponding pairs arranged in a parallel inverse order

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Macbeth, I, i)

Diacope: repetition broken up by one or more intervening words

"Put out the light, and then put out the light." (Othello, V, ii)

Epanalepsis: repetition at the end of a clause of the word that occurred at the beginning of the clause

"Blood hath bought blood, and blows have answer'd blows." (King John, II, i)

Epistrophe: repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive clauses2

"I'll have my bond!

Speak not against my bond!

I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond." (Merchant of Venice, III, iii)

Polysyndeton: the repetition of conjunctions in a series of coordinate words, phrases, or clauses

"If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I'll not endure it." (Othello, III, iii)