Abstract

Shakespeare's plays contain thirty-three occurrences of double comparison; these are adverbs or adjectives on which two methods of forming the comparative or superlative are in use at the same time. The adverbs are "adverbs of manner" and occur either unsupported by any extender to the comparison or extended by a *than*-clause. The attributive adjectives occur either unsupported by any extender to the comparison or extended by a *than*-clause, a partitive genitive, or a relative clause. The predicative adjectives are either subject complements extended by a *than*-clause or object complements. The substantive adjectives are used as appositives or vocatives. Since the constructions in which double comparatives and superlatives appear and the constructions utilized by modifiers not undergoing double comparison are identical, I conclude that the morphological difference between single and double comparison does not convey a difference in meaning. Double-comparison modifiers and single-comparison modifiers are allomorphs of the same morpheme, in free variation. Instead of being a matter of grammar, the use of these forms is evidence of Shakespeare's style. When he chooses to employ them—which is rare—he uses them to regularize the meter of a line, to heighten a dramatic moment, or to portray social variation.

"The Most Unkindest Cut of All"—Shakespeare's Use of Multiple Degrees of Adjective and Adverb Comparison

By Norma J. Engberg

When Shakespeare lived and wrote over 400 years ago, he didn't have the same ideal of correctness that we have. Shakespeare's plays contain thirty-three occurrences of double comparison, examples in which two methods of forming the comparative or superlative are used at the same time. Most frequently this is a combination of the inflectional affix {*-er*} for the comparative and {*-est*} for the superlative) and the periphrastic intensifier (*more* or *most*). This doubling was condemned by the prescriptive grammarians of the eighteenth century.

In searching Shakespeare's plays, I found twenty-three examples of the double comparative, with four appearing twice, and ten examples of the double superlative, with one appearing twice. When I counted the number of syllables in the base word of the comparatives, I found eighteen had two syllables, three had three syllables, but only two were monosyllables. Among the base words of the superlatives, six were two-syllable, two were three-syllable and two were monosyllables. Thus, approximately seventy-five percent were disyllabic.

I divided my thirty-three examples into groups. I wanted to see (1) whether there were constructions in which multiple comparison was habitual and (2) whether these constructions were the same as or different from those customary for modifiers not undergoing double comparison. If I knew the answers to these two questions, I would be able to decide (3) whether the morphological difference

between single and double comparison conveyed a difference in meaning. Then I could determine (4) whether Shakespeare's use of double comparison was a matter of grammar or of style.[1]

First, I checked to see if I had any adverbs lurking amongst my slips of paper since, after all, adverbs can undergo comparison just like adjectives do. Indeed, I found a few, five to be exact, and they were all adverbs of manner.

ADVERBS OF MANNER

In *King Lear*, Regan says, "My sister may receive it much more *worse*, / To have her gentleman abused, assaulted, / For following her affairs" (2.2.155–7).[2] Here, the infinitive phrase—*To have her gentleman abused, assaulted, for following her affairs*—functions as an appositive to the slot-filler *it*.[3] *More worse* modifies the verb *may receive*, and the intensifier *much* modifies the comparative adverb *more worse*. This adverb example sounds wrong to modern ears. This is the only one out of the five to lack a following *than*-introduced parallel clause to complete the comparison. For example, in *Othello* 5.2.109–110, Othello uses *than* to introduce a second clause when he says, "It is the very error of the moon. / She comes *more nearer* earth *than* she was wont and makes men mad." The comparative *more nearer* modifies the verb *comes*, and the *than*-clause is elliptical. Thus, the comparison, if it were fully expanded, would read, "She comes more nearer earth than she was wont [to come]." In *Hamlet*, Lord Polonius is instructing Reynaldo to spy for him: "Come you *more nearer* / *Than* your particular demands will touch it" (2.1.11–12). He is using the same double comparative *more nearer* to modify the same verb *come*; again the *than* introduces a second clause. In another example, King Henry IV in part two of the history named for him remarks to his heir, "though thou stand'st *more sure* than I could do" (4.5.203). As the king expands the parallel *than*-clause, he uses the auxiliary *do*, as we would, to avoid repeating the first clause's finite verb stand. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus explains, "Within my soul there doth conduce a fight / Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate / Divides *more wider* than the sky and earth" (5.2.147–9). The comparative adverb *more wider* modifies the verb *divides*. Repeating this verb would complete the elliptical *than*-clause.

Four of these examples, by coupling the comparative adverb with *than*, indicate that the adverbs are actually participating in a comparison. Single-comparison adverbs of manner, with or without *than*, are easy to find in Shakespeare.[4] Since I have answered my first two questions regarding them, I shall set the adverbs aside for now and proceed with the adjectives.

I have classified the adjective examples as *attributive*, *predicative*, or *substantive*. An *attributive* adjective is one that is part of the same noun phrase as the word it modifies. A *predicative* adjective is located in the predicate, hence is *not* part of the same noun phrase as the word it modifies; the verb employed with a predicative adjective is a linking verb, in the Shakespearean examples, always a form of "to be." A *substantive* adjective has nothing to modify within the clause where it is found; the reader must supply a noun, such as *man*, *woman*, or *thing*, based on the context.

ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES

I am going to begin with the minimum attributive adjective construction. In

Henry V, Fluellen, addressing Captain Macmorris, suggests they continue their conversation "when there is *more better* opportunity" (3.2.150–1). In this prose dialogue, Fluellen's double comparative may be a hypercorrection or an attempt to imitate the speech of his social betters; either way it sounds wordy and officious and helps to characterize the man. Prospero, in an aside in *The Tempest* referring to his own daughter, Miranda, threatens, "And his *more braver* daughter could control thee" (1.2.439). In a conversation between the Provost and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* 2.2.16–17, Angelo orders, "Dispose of her / To some *more fitter* place, and that with speed." King Lear remarks in 2.4.110–13, "I'll forbear; / And am fall'n out with my *more headier* will, / To take the indispos'd and sickly fit / For the sound man." Again, Angelo in *Measure for Measure* observes "These poor informal women are no more / But instruments of some *more mightier* member / that sets them on" (5.1.236–8). The duke of Venice says to Othello, "Opinion . . . throws a *more safer* / voice on you" (1.3.225–7). My last example of an unsupported double-comparative attributive adjective is from *Hamlet*: "It is a massy wheel . . . / To whose huge spokes ten thousand *lesser* things / Are mortis'd and adjoin'd" (3.3.17–20). *Less,* already the comparative of *little* formed by suppletion, is made double by adding the inflectional affix *–er.*[5]

In contrast to the preceding noun phrases which might just as well have omitted all degree of comparison because the sentences they were in were not constructed to provide any support, we find one example of an attributive adjective accompanied by a *than* effecting a comparison of two infinitive phrases, one explicit, the other one implied. King Lear, speaking of Cordelia, begs the King of France, "T' avert [his] liking a *more worthier* way *than* on a wretch whom nature is asham'd /Almost t' acknowledge hers" (1.1.214–16). If we fill in the missing infinitive phrase, the quote would read: "t' avert his liking a more worthier way than [to avert it] on a wretch."[6]

The next sub-group of double-comparison attributive adjectives illustrates something different from what I've already shown you. These add a partitive genitive to the mix. Imogen in *Cymbeline* observes, "Damn'd Pisanio / Hath with his forged letters . . . / From this *most bravest* vessel *of* the world / Struck the maintop!" (4.2.317-20). Here is our first example with a double superlative, *most bravest,* used attributively. Our understanding of the superlative is that it involves a choosing of one out of three or more items; here, the partitive genitive *of the world* indicates that the choosing is out of all the vessels possibly existing anywhere. In this sub-type belongs the emotion-laden quotation from *Julius Caesar* (3.2.188), which I have taken for the title of this paper. Anthony, in his memorialization of Caesar, describes Brutus's stabbing as "the *most unkindest* cut of all." The partitive genitive, *of all,* gives the range of items against which this one is to be compared: thus, this is the most unkindest cut of all *cuts.*[7] My third example is unusual because it involves a double comparative, not a double superlative: Octavius Caesar, in *Anthony and Cleopatra,* winds up his catalog of Cleopatra's allies by using the prepositional phrase: "With a *more larger* list of sceptres" (3.6.76). *More larger* modifies the noun *list,* and *list* is followed by the periphrastic genitive *of sceptres* to indicate that additional allies exist, whom Octavius is not planning to name.

What I've just been illustrating were clauses containing one double comparative or superlative adjective, used attributively. We can also find examples in which several superlative attributive adjectives cluster around the same noun and one of these is doubled. In the next example from *Henry IV, Part 2*, these adjectives are unsupported by any extender to the comparison. Henry asks, "Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose / To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude, / And in the *calmest* and *most stillest* night, / With all appliances and means to boot, / Deny it to a king?" (3.1.26–30). Both the single superlative *calmest* and the double superlative *most stillest* modify *night*. It is up to the audience to compare this night, which they are observing on stage, to nights they have experienced personally. A partitive genitive, however, supports the comparison when Cassius in *Julius Caesar* asserts "Brutus shall lead, and we will grace his heels / With the *most boldest* and *best* hearts of Rome" (3.1.120–21). Within the prepositional phrase, both the double superlative, *most boldest,* and a single superlative, *best,* modify *hearts*. The fact that both are completed by the partitive genitive, *of Rome,* implies that the judgment regarding *most boldest* and *best* is a selection made from all the hearts of Rome.

The next three examples in this sub-group utilize a relative clause, instead of a partitive genitive, to support the comparisons, and in two of them the modifiers are separated by other sentence elements. Edgar in *King Lear* plans: "I will preserve myself; and am bethought / To take the *basest* and *most poorest* shape/ That ever penury, in contempt of man, / Brought near to beast" (2.3.6–9). The relative clause, "that ever penury brought near to beast," expresses the possible breadth of degradation from which Edgar can choose. Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* says, "It hath been the *longest* night / that e'er I watch'd, and the *most heaviest*" (4.2.140–1). This, of course, is an emphatic word order, leaving it up to the hearer to associate *night* with *most heaviest* as well as with *longest*. The relative clause, "that e'er I watch'd," describes the quantity—all the other nights on which she stayed awake to watch—from which this one night is selected as being most troublesome. Similar is the comment of the First Lord about Cloten in *Cymbeline,* "Your lordship is the *most patient* man in loss, the *most coldest* that ever turn'd up ace" (2.3.1–3). Cloten is a gambler: he is calm about losing, but he is a killer if he is winning. The adjectival prepositional phrase, *in loss,* and the relative clause, *that ever turned up ace,* pinpoint the differing contexts. This is the first time that we've seen a relative clause used to extend and support a comparison, but what is noteworthy about these particular examples is that the meaning of the relative clause is similar to that of a partitive genitive.[8]

PREDICATIVE ADJECTIVES

Now we are ready to look at predicative adjectives. Four of the examples are similar, so I have combined them in the following chart:

Speaker	Quote in Original Form	Modernizing Re-arrangement
Cordelia in *King Lear,* 1.1.79–80	"Since I am sure my love's / *More richer than* my tongue."	"My love is more richer than my tongue [is rich]."

Norfolk in *Henry VIII*, 1.1.146–7	"There is no English soul / *More stronger* to direct you *than* yourself."	"No English soul is more stronger to direct you than yourself [is strong]."
Clown in *All's Well that Ends Well*, 4.5.42	"His fisnomy is *more hotter* in France *than* there."	"His physiognomy is more hotter in France than [it is hot] there."
Prospero in *The Tempest*, 1.2.19–20	"Nor that I am *more better* / *than* Prospero."	"I am more better than Prospero [is good]."

In each of these four examples, an elliptical *than*-dependent clause supports the comparison set up by the double comparative.

The rest of my examples of double comparatives used predicatively omit the verb *to be* although it is implied in the context. The King of France in *Henry V* encourages his men by saying: "Up, princes! And, with spirit of honour edged, / *More sharper than* your swords, hie to the field" (3.5.38–9). I have hypothesized a relative clause with the word *honour* as its antecedent in order to complete the ellipsis: "Hie to the field with spirit of honour edged [which is] more sharper than your swords." My next examples are completed by *than*-dependent clauses and contain interesting repetitions of key terms. Don Andriano's note, which Boyet reads in *Love's Labour's Lost* is especially replete: "By heaven, that thou art fair, is most infallible; / true, that thou art beauteous; truth itself, that / thou art lovely. *More fairer* than fair, beautiful / than beauteous, truer than truth itself, have / commiseration on thy heroical vassal!" (4.1.6064).The key terms *fair, beautiful/beauteous,* its variant *lovely,* and *true/truth* are repeated with poetic generosity. The man is obviously intending flattery. The part we are interested in, *more fairer than fair,* is elliptical but the missing pieces are easily borrowed from the preceding clause, forming "thou art more fairer than fair [is fair]." Another example illustrating repetition of key terms is found in Kent's speech to Lear:

> Repose you there; while I to this hard house—
> (*More harder* than the stones whereof 'tis raised,
> Which even but now, demanding after you,
> Denied me to come in) return, and force
> Their scanted courtesy (*King Lear* 3.2.63–7).

The key term is the adjective *hard,* appearing both in the positive and the comparative. To clarify the predicative adjective construction, we may hypothesize an appropriate verb and a subject relative pronoun: "while I [go] to this hard house—which is more harder than the stones [are hard]."[9]

I conclude my discussion of double comparison adjectives used predicatively with examples illustrating the second way that an adjective may be used predicatively. In *Hamlet* I find, "Your wisdom should show itself *more richer* to signify this to his doctor" (3.2.316–7). Reconstructing the ellipsis, I get, "Your wisdom should show itself [to be] more richer. . . ." Here *more richer* is an object complement, not

a subject complement. The infinitive is not required for understanding, but it is often supplied, even in current English. Similarly, Timon of Athens, in the play named for him, says to himself, "Timon will to the woods, where he shall find / Th' unkindest beast *more kinder* than mankind" (4.1.356). Here we have repetition of the key term *kind*—in both object and object complement—and an incompletely developed *than*-comparison. The clauses could be rewritten: "he shall find the unkindest beast [to be] more kinder than mankind [is kind]."

SUBSTANTIVE ADJECTIVES

We are now ready to look at the last three examples. Here we shall see the double superlative used substantively. The first quotation contains two double superlatives: the king of France says to Lear:

> This is most strange,
> That she that even but now was your best object,
> The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
> *Most best, most dearest,* should in this trice of time
> Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle
> So many folds of favour (1.1.216–21).

The two double superlatives are items three and four in a series of noun appositives to the predicate noun, *your best object.* Neither adjective package has a noun to modify; both are used substantively.[10] In a note from Hamlet to Ophelia, Polonius reads aloud, "O dear Ophelia . . . I have not art to reckon my groans; but that I love thee best, O *most best,* believe it" (2.2.121–22). *O dear Ophelia* is the noun of direct address, a vocative. In the clause preceding the double superlative, *best* is the object complement. However, for the phrase that we're interested in, *O most best,* the presence of the *O* indicates that this phrase also is a vocative. Since no noun appear within that phrase for *most best* to modify, this double superlative is classified as substantive.[11]

I do not think that it is an accident that double superlatives appear substantively as appositives in lists of praise-terms and as vocatives. I dipped back into several play texts just briefly to bring you a sampling of how Shakespeare uses single superlatives to show respect.

Play Reference	Title (Noun of Direct Address)
King Lear, 4.2.25	My most dear Gloucester!
Othello, 1.3.76	Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors.

It makes sense that once such titles were addressed to eminent individuals, they would also come to be used in speaking directly, without the obvious noun, to the person—or to speak about him or her in the form of appositives. Further, although double-comparison adjectives do not occur in the environments which in this paper are associated with attributive-adjectives-plus-noun-phrases, Shakespeare did use single-comparison substantive adjectives to fill such noun slots, as this example with partitive genitive illustrates: "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash" (*King Lear,* 1.1.298–9). Shakespeare lived when functional shift was first becoming

possible in English; this is the beginning of the process—which current English takes for granted—that turns an adjective into a noun.

So what do I make of this? Let me begin by answering the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper. Are there constructions in which multiple comparisons were habitual? Answer: "Yes." Are these constructions the same as or different from those customary for modifiers not undergoing double comparison? Answer: "The same." Double comparatives and superlatives were used the same way as single comparatives and superlatives were used and, for that matter, still are used. This answers my third question by suggesting that the morphological difference between single and double comparison does not convey a difference in meaning. Double-comparison modifiers and single-comparison modifiers are allomorphs of the same morpheme, in free variation.[12] Thus, I conclude that the use of these forms is evidence of Shakespeare's style—not of his grammar or the grammaticality of his day. Why might he choose multiple comparison? To regularize the meter of a line, to heighten a dramatic moment or to portray social variation—these are all possible reasons which my investigation has suggested.

Notes

1. In dealing with materials written before the strictures of the prescriptive grammarians were enforced, and because there are no living native speakers to demonstrate the earlier stages of English, linguists assume that any meaningful existing construction is grammatical. Style, then, is defined as conscious choice among the grammatically acceptable alternatives. For example, the word order of a single Old English independent clause could be S + V + O, V + S + O, V + O + S, S + O + V, O +S + V or O + V + S. All six possibilities exist in Old English manuscripts, thus are grammatically acceptable; all six convey the same meaning. Thus, a writer's choosing to use one particular order out of the six is a conscious exercise of his style.

2. All citations of play texts are from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare,* ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1936).

3. Removing the slot-filler reveals the grammatical structure of the clause: "My sister may receive to have her gentleman abused, assaulted, much more worse." This sounds awkward, but performing a passive transformation confirms that the infinitive phrase is the direct object of *may receive*: "To have her gentleman abused, assaulted, may be received by my sister much more worse."

4. Single-comparison adverb without *than:* Thou *better* know'st / The offices of nature, bonds of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude" (*King Lear* 2.4. 180–2). Single-comparison adverb with *than:* "You should . . . be led / by some discretion that discerns your state / *better than* you yourself"(*King Lear* 2. 4.150–152).

5. Single-comparison adjective used attributively without *than:* "Madam, with much ado / Your sister is the *better* soldier." (*King Lear* 4.5.3–4). Although purists since the eighteenth century have condemned the use of a comparative adjective without a follow-up *than* clause stating against what the comparison is being made, this construction is as common in speech today as it was in Shakespeare's time.

6. Single-comparison adjective used attributively with *than:* "Methinks . . . thou

speak'st / In *better* phrase and matter *than* thou didst" (*King Lear* 4.6.7–8).

7. Single-superlative adjective functioning attributively with partitive genitive: "*Most fair* return *of* greetings and desires" (*Hamlet* 2.2.60).

8. Single-comparison attributive adjective extended by a relative clause: "I'll bring him the best 'parel that I have." (*King Lear* 4.1.49). Again the meaning of the relative clause is similar to that of the partitive genitive.

9. Single-comparison adjective used predicatively extended by a *than* clause: "I am *better than* thou art now" (*King Lear* 1.4.212–13).

10. Single-comparison substantive adjective used as an appositive: "The Duke be here to-night? The better! best!" (*King Lear* 2.1.15–16). The superlative *best* is in apposition to the comparative *better* in Edmund's exclamation.

11. Single-comparison substantive adjective used vocatively: "O horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!" (*Hamlet* 1.5.80)

12. Plautus, a Latin playwright whose influence on Shakespeare is widely acknowledged, is cited by historians of the Romance languages as a writer who incorporated constructions from Vulgar Latin (the Latin spoken by the common people). One of these is analytic comparison; where the aristocratic (what we call Classical) dialect inflected for the comparative, Plautus used *magis* plus the positive. Plautus also used double comparison, adding to the force of the inflected comparative with *magis*. Examples are *magis modum in majorem* (*Amphitruo,* 1.1.145), *magis majores nugae* (*Menaechmi,* Prologue.55), *contentiores mage erunt* (*Poenuis,* 2.15), and *magis est dulcius* (*Stichus,* 5.4.22). In Latin, too, these double comparatives are classifiable—along with single comparatives—as allomorphs of the same morpheme, in free variation. Shakespeare's departures from standard English may have been influenced not only by the speech patterns he heard around him, but also by what he saw in his Latin mentor.

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