

Shakespeare's

DRAMATIC

Structures



ANTHONY BRENNAN

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Preface

I am concerned here with two of the ^[strategies] strategies which Shakespeare developed in structuring his plays to ensure their compelling effect on a theatre audience. The techniques have been noted and commented on by many scholars. I wish here to examine the variety of ways in which Shakespeare exploited basic techniques of structural design until, transformed by his ingenuity, they become as recognizable a part of his signature as the dense poetic texture produced by his clusters of imagery. Shakespeare's skills in structuring plays have, until recent years, been given only spasmodic and inconsistent attention in interpretations of his work. There have been decades even in this century when Shakespeare's connection with the theatre appeared to be a skeleton in the closet that polite family members discreetly ignored. I am grateful to the many renegades who resisted the idea, broached by the Chorus of *Henry V* and latched on to by so many scholars, that our muse of fire could be best appreciated only if we dispensed with the unworthy scaffold on which he brought forth the great objects of his invention. Among those who considered theatre as capable of more than inexplicable dumb shows and noise in revealing what Shakespeare is up to I value A. C. Bradley, R. G. Moulton, A. C. Sprague, N. Coghill, S. L. Bethell, W. J. Lawrence and H. T. Price. A host of critics have, in the last two decades, spent a great deal of time in trying to understand what pressures and traditions helped to influence the composition of Shakespeare's plays and how they are designed to achieve their impact in live performance. I have enjoyed the work of Bernard Beckerman, Muriel Bradbrook, Alan Dessen, Madeleine Doran, Alfred Harbage, Emrys Jones, Maynard Mack, Mark Rose, J. L. Styan, James Hirsch and the many others who help to define the precision of construction in the plays which must have provoked more variety of interpretations in performance than the rest of the world's drama put together.

The texts I have used in my analysis are the single editions of the Pelican Shakespeare. The Pelican texts, besides being generally available and convenient to handle for my purposes, also benefit from the consistent general editorship of Alfred Harbage whose recognition of the importance of construction in Shakespeare's plays is reflected in the clarity of the presentation of the texts.

It is still quite a common experience in meetings on Shakespeare which bring theatre people and literary scholars together to observe how quickly, out of mutual suspicion, icicles begin to form on the ceiling. These studies owe a debt of gratitude not only to the scholars listed above. My most extensive debt is to the countless actors and directors who have caught in a gesture, a grouping of characters, the articulation of the action within a scene, or the organization of a whole production the rhythm, the mood, the pace and all the elements of design that make the play work. I cannot sympathize with the critic who prefers to confine himself to the ideal productions he can work up in his own mind. That is merely to make do, like Hamlet, with the chameleon's dish and to 'eat the air, promise-cramm'd', or like Kate to be fed only 'with the very name of meat'. I owe a great deal of the pleasure I take in the varied dishes within and among Shakespeare's plays to the dedicated skills of theatre people who have served them up to me so frequently with new revelations of their savours. I am trying here to repay a little of that debt.

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Introduction

Works designed to be presented in live performance usually have a structural organization which allows them to capitalize on the fact that they have the audience's attention for a more or less continuous and limited period of time. Poets and novelists usually develop variety of material, tempo and mood but they are not under quite the same compelling force to provide them as playwrights are. A reader can choose to provide variety for himself by setting a book aside to engage in other activities and returning to it minutes or weeks later. A playgoer may, of course, choose to take a stroll in the lobby in mid-performance but he may miss some necessary question of the play which is then to be considered. If there is no plot development, tension or conflict which compels our interest in the fates of the characters the theatre may quickly be filled with fidgeting, coughing, snoring, or the shuffle of departing feet. The dramatist must know when and how often to build up to and away from climactic moments in his action. The framework on which the dramatist develops his work depends a good deal on strong aural and visual associations built in recognizable patterns. Human beings have, almost from birth, a remarkable capacity to enjoy the complexities of patterns, the repetition of the familiar, and the variations evolving from a familiar base. The comfort we gain from a reliance on the known can be seen in the child's tenacious insistence that his favourite stories be repeated in precise wording without editing and, if possible, with the exact intonation to which he is accustomed. *Avant garde* artists often fight against our reliance on familiar conventions, but the radical experiments they undertake to shake up or shock those with complacent expectations of predictable form and content are quite often absorbed into the mainstream of art as their innovations become familiar enough to give us pleasure in the recognition of pattern. Many formal symmetries and the various techniques which produce structural interconnections

can be recognized in the study of a playscript. Such pleasures, however, like the ones to be gained in reading a musical score, are only a preparation for the full apprehension of the strategies of composition which give us such various delights in an actual performance.

Shakespeare often takes it for granted that we know, or think we know, the story he is going to tell us, and he exploits our memories for his own purposes. He also relies heavily on the active participation of our memories within the time-frame of a performance. Scholars have spent a great deal of time naturally enough on the complex structure of verbal echoes in the texts of Shakespeare's plays. By comparison the ways in which the plays use the capacities of our visual memory have received less attention. There are cues in lines of the text and in stage directions which are meant to supply, in the movement and grouping of characters, patterns for our eyes. But these are often perishable because a director can make much of them or ignore them in his individual production. Yet even when a director slashes speeches or scenes from his production there is usually, nowadays at least, enough of the rich, interconnected imagery and pattern of verbal echoes left to give the audience the sense of the organic continuity which is so highly wrought in Shakespeare. Some directors, afflicted with a suburban sensibility, seek to cabin, crib and confine the broad, generous, human rhythms of Shakespeare's plays by turning his work into a 'relevant', polemical commentary on contemporary issues or into a demonstration of current neuroses. With the inflection of the voice or with the aid of visual cues it is possible to impose any kind of eccentric or absurd interpretation on a Shakespeare play. The plays, however, like Proteus resist strenuously all attempts to wrestle them into a straitjacket.

A good director of a Shakespeare play is not trying to be a ventriloquist operating a dummy; he is happy enough to be the dummy himself, to let the play speak through his ability to catch and activate its rhythms. There are a multitude of factors involved in mounting a successful, modern production of a Shakespeare play. Huge sums of money spent on costumes, sets, lighting and properties are no guarantee of success. It remains true that a modest attempt by good amateur actors may strike us as a more successful realization of Shakespeare's intentions than the most ambitious, star-studded performance in one of the world's theatre meccas. Shakespeare had a very exact knowledge of how to make a play work on an audience which is why, quite often, in spite of poor acting, eccentric interpretation and clumsy direction some of the scenes in a production may still move an audience considerably. The plays are not foolproof, but there are so many things going on in a Shakespeare play

that it is difficult to knock the shine off all of them at the same time.

The greatest losses an audience must put up with in a production of a badly mangled or heavily cut text are not the missing poetic jewels, the 'ideas', or the absence of subtle grace notes in the characterization, but the structure and shape of the play which communicates itself in the extraordinary precision of its proportions. When a production succeeds in giving us a deeply satisfying experience it is not often the result of a single, bravura acting performance by a star. The plays may, to a degree, be 'star vehicles' but they are made for ensemble acting in very well balanced repertory companies. Success comes from the detailed attention we can sense has been given to each part of the play though we may not be able to describe all the effects. Good verse speaking is important but that music alone will not carry the play. A good production must catch the natural stride of the play as it unfolds in the two- to three-hour traffic of the stage. The director must transmit to the audience the precision and justness in the weighting and proportion within the various parts of the action. He must give us the sense of rightness in the momentum as the pattern of interrelated actions complete themselves. To achieve this all of the verbal echoes have to be used and the visual impact, in the physical movement and grouping of the characters, has to serve the detailed patterning which ties the various strands of plot together.

It may seem obvious enough that a production must strive to reflect the emphases of the play but any experienced playgoer knows that one does not in practice have such an experience as frequently as one might wish. The explanation is not hard to find. For three hundred years and more actors and directors have been judged by their success or failure in coping with Shakespeare. They have undertaken every possible strategy in seeking to avoid failure – they have cut the plays, excised characters, axed whole plots, rewritten them, placed them in every conceivable historical setting, modernized them, marmorealized them, and tried to make them echo every quirky theory of human behaviour and social organization. Despite major surgery, transplants, amputations, and cosmetic modifications the body of the plays endures. Fortunately, because the plays have always attracted the greatest talents in the theatre, there have been triumphant productions and performances which have kept vividly alive the full impact of the plays. The plays are so indelibly marked that their nature cannot be completely stamped out. They have a quality which Olivia claimed for her face. ' 'Tis in grain, sir; 'twill endure wind and weather.' The meaning she is applying is 'dyed in grain' from a French usage *'en graine'* which means 'dyed scarlet or crimson,

fast dyed'. The word was used also as a predicate, 'indelible, ineradicable' from which the word 'ingrained' developed. It is this fixed, inward quality which Gertrude seemed to discover when she saw in her soul dyed with guilt 'Such black and grained spots/As will not leave their tinct'. The aspects of play structure I am concerned with in this study make another meaning of 'grain' relevant – 'the longitudinal arrangement of fibres or particles, in lines or veins more or less parallel along which the material is more easily cloven or cut than in any other direction, as in wood, producing often the effect of pattern' – a meaning which first appears in the mid-sixteenth century. In these studies I am trying to indicate the grain in the structure of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare developed a great variety of strategies to ensure coherence and organic unity in his plays. I have examined two of the strategies on which Shakespeare habitually relied in order to show the ingenious variety of ways in which he exploited them.

The first half of this book is devoted to an analysis of Shakespeare's uses of repetition, echo, pattern and variation within pattern in the organization of the events in his plots. At the simplest level the repetition of a gesture at key emotional climaxes of a play can illuminate an audience's understanding of the development of the action. It often happens that Shakespeare produces scenic structures with corresponding sequences of events between the same or similar characters at different points of the play. Besides the specifically recognizable scenic patterns there are also broader rhythms of action repeated and varied which reinforce our general sense of the action being worked out in two, three or four related movements.

The proscenium arch stage with its back drops, elaborate scenery and curtains leant itself readily to productions which broke up the action and emphasized changes from one locale to another. It was much easier to chop up and reassemble the plays and to regard Shakespeare as a writer of sprawling, cumbersome, imperfectly controlled plots marred by vulgar passages, as someone very much in need of 'improvement', as long as his plays were not performed on the kind of stage for which they were expressly written. As long as scenery was a significant, even dominant, part of the plays' effects then directors tended to think in terms of a visual variety which stemmed from a designer's portfolio rather than from the structure of the play itself. In the rediscovery of the bare, thrust stage, however, we have found out what remarkable precision there is in the structural rhythms of the plays. A mosaic of short scenes with varied actions flows swiftly on an unadorned stage and forces us to see much more readily how one plot acts as a comment on another, how the ending

of a scene with one set of characters can relate directly to the beginning of the next scene with another set of characters, how the progression in a sequence of events in the building-block segments of interaction in one scene are carefully reflected in a repeated sequence in a later scene. The continuous flow of action which is possible, even inescapable, on the thrust stage tightens up all the links of the plays. The play generates its energy not simply within each scene but in the cumulative effect of several scenes and in the relationships which it is possible to see between widely separated scenes. Without the distraction of scenery we can focus entirely on the characters unfolding their plots in the wooden arena. The thrust stage, though it denies plays many scenic effects, offers, relative to the proscenium arch stage, much greater opportunity of presenting variety in the movement and grouping of characters because of the way the audience is intimately involved in its three-dimensional effect.

Only a few modern directors have mastered the technique of producing Shakespeare's plays effectively on the thrust stage. One of the first lessons a director must learn in coping with such a stage is the danger of pursuing novelty for its own sake. In the limitations of the stage it is possible to spy out advantages. The director who tries to use the thrust stage with relentless ingenuity gives us productions which are eccentrically mannered. The directorial concepts get in the way of Shakespeare's work. Only when the thrust stage is used in a relaxed, unobtrusive manner does it become a perfectly transparent medium which allows us to see the patterns of the play's action. An audience is thus not fobbed off with a director's ideas but is given the genuine pleasure of observing the way that a Shakespeare play works. Shakespeare left no notes for directors and very few detailed stage directions, yet anyone who has ever directed one of his plays knows that the text is crammed with information about how to make it work. The progress of characters in time is embroidered in a pattern of contrasts and parallels, echoes and distortions. A large part of our understanding of the play arises from our awareness of interconnections in the sequence of events. A director's task is to facilitate as much as possible, by clarifying these links, the work which is demanded of an audience.

When a production on a thrust stage yields full satisfaction to an audience it can produce an impact which is akin to the revelation when years of encrusted grime are removed from a great Venetian painting of the dazzling chromaticism of its original colours. We can rely on verbal echoes and clusters of imagery to make many connections which enrich our awareness of the complex texture of the play. Repetition and extension, patterns incorporating change are the endlessly varying forms

of so many of the rhetorical figures in which Renaissance writers took delight. Such devices operate on a grand scale in dramatic structures and must be reflected in the rhythm and pace of performance if the audience is to have the full advantage of Shakespeare's care in structuring his plays.

The strategy which I examine in the second half of this study is also concerned with Shakespeare's judicious sense of proportion and balance in the various actions of his plays. Any good dramatist knows that too great a variety of action may satisfy the audience's need for spectacle at the cost of any coherence in the plot or any engagement in the development of the characters. Too limited a variety in the action may produce over-extended sterile debate. In the vast ranges of Elizabethan drama we can observe every kind of failure to achieve a workable balance. Even if we suppose that the original audience may have had a greater appetite for spectacle and for debate than an audience today we know that the writers who were most valued and rewarded were those who, through judicious variety of action, multiplicity within a unified design, could compel the audience to attend to the interwoven fates of many characters. The Elizabethans habitually attended plays with large casts of characters drawn from a broad range of societal classes, organized into several plots, frequently covering events in an extended period of time in widely separated locales. The problem for the dramatists was not how to introduce variety but how to get control of it to produce a coherently focused experience. Shakespeare's pre-eminence in poetic skill and gifts of characterization have never been in question. Only in the present century have we come to appreciate his skills in the techniques of structuring a multi-faceted drama which determinedly ignores the classical unities.

One almost invariably has the sense that Shakespeare knows precisely how long to run a scene, when to change from one piece of action to another, how much to weight each relationship, which characters to use, like Iago, to oppress the audience by their omnipresence, which characters to keep from the audience, which characters to keep apart from each other on the stage, which action to show us, which action to give merely in report. We know that the proportions achieved within a play among the various actions are the result of careful consideration. The weighting of relationships is often significantly altered from those available in the sources. Sometimes, as in *King Lear*, the structure is almost entirely novel because the material for the two plots is taken from two hitherto totally unrelated stories. In presenting us with this variety Shakespeare does not merely submit to the time limitation of drama in his awareness

that the more we see of one relationship the less we can see of another; he makes it work to his advantage. Stories harnessed together can amplify their effect on an audience in ways that they might not achieve separately. Human understanding works by recognizing pattern and contrast. Lear's problems and his responses to them are the stuff of epic saga, but we can define them and relate to them more effectively in their parallels with and radical contrast to the experience of Gloucester.

In the infinite variety of his skills Shakespeare has Cleopatra's ability to make hungry where most he satisfies. He does not achieve this, however, by supplying only caviar to the general. There are certain characters who delight us so much with their wit and imagination that we might like to think we could rest forever in their company. After a moment's reflection, however, we realize that our enjoyment is achieved by a complex method. The wit is a jewel the more dazzling when our access to him is limited, the more sharply defined and savoured by contrast with the dullness or outright stupidity of others. Shakespeare scarcely ever, save for a deliberate purpose, allows his characters to suffer from that problem which so many modern politicians and media stars have to cope with – 'overexposure'. We have a sense that matters have been so nicely judged that even his most attractive characters would have less impact if they had been given greater scope to charm us. We can agree that caviar is good in itself, but it is perhaps the better in that we cannot have it every day and because it is not boiled cabbage.

The studies in the second half of this book are devoted to the variety of techniques employed by Shakespeare in structuring the character relationships which the audience experiences. The relative weighting of the relationships is one of the key factors in regulating the audience's responses to the story and Shakespeare's skill is to be understood not only from the characters he brings together on stage but in the way in which he separates characters and limits our experience of them together. The care and deliberation in handling the relationships can be illuminated often by the way that Shakespeare modifies, cuts, or amplifies the relationships available in the sources. The techniques which I am analysing here were often developed to solve problems which were posed by the material in the sources. None of the sources which Shakespeare used was the work of a great writer. The material in the romances, the chronicles, the hack plays, the prose and verse narratives has not been subjected to the rigour of a great artistic imagination, nor in most cases has it been shaped by the practical demands of dramatic performance in a limited time period. Shakespeare's skill lies not simply in his ingenuity and economy in solving problems which the writer of the narrative

source did not need or care to consider. The very grain of Shakespeare's work is created in the way he develops consistent strategies to deal with dramatic problems and incorporates them in a coherent structural design for the whole play.

I have attempted in these studies to employ a little of the skills which I value so much in Shakespeare. I have tried not to place play after play on a slab and carve open the anatomy of each one to demonstrate structural devices as repeated formulas. I have been numbed by many studies which make of all the delectable cuts in Shakespeare neat heaps of ground round. Shakespeare did not write according to formulas. It is his flexible and protean application of basic devices which has engaged my attention. So I have tried, like Shakespeare, to avoid supplying my reader with an over-frequent confrontation with precisely the same use of the strategies in each play. I have tried to maintain variety by working from the small-scale to the full-scale deployment of structural strategies, by dealing at times with a pair of scenes or one relationship and at other times with a whole play or a complete network of interactions. A hack writer churns out material according to mechanical formulas which the audience readily recognizes. A great dramatist very frequently uses his craft to conceal the ways he is achieving his effect upon us. There is a grain in Shakespeare's work but it is not an abstract technique which we can codify in specifications in a play-writing manual. Grain, used in the sense of indelible dye or to mean the veins and fibres which reveal structural organization, helps to differentiate the quality of the materials where it appears. We can understand the grain in Shakespeare's work only by responding to the variety of the material in which we find it. The material is the individual play and it is the story and its needs which determines the grain.

To a large extent man rose to pre-eminence on the globe because of his ability to cut into and discover the grain of things, to define the principles of order in the structure of the organic and inorganic world. Creative artists enjoy their ability to construct a coherent order for their work. One of the pleasures we gain in responding to their work comes from our ability to discover the structure which organizes it. Because man has been able to uncover the secret structures of the material world he has been able to develop tools to exploit and dominate it. He endangers himself and others when he fails to respect the nature of the material and its place in a complex environment. Works of art, especially those which require live performance, are vulnerable to abuse by those who cut and snip without any concentrated inquiry into the structure which they are carving.

My analyses, for the most part, follow the unfolding sequence of a play's events because the success of the strategies depends not only on what events Shakespeare chooses to dramatize for the audience but on the order in which he decides to let us experience them. He worked out these strategies to have an effect not on readers of his plays but on people watching and listening to his plays. The echoes and back references, and weighting of interactions, the scenic connections, the placing of major, formal, public scenes, the visual patterns are calculated to have their effect in a two- to three-hour time span. It is of crucial importance that we try to consider the ways that the plays work from the point of view of the 'naive' audience, for those eager patrons of the Globe who had had no access to a printed version before they experienced them on stage. We must define the problems that Shakespeare copes with and remember that his solutions are calculated for the swiftly unfolding sequence of interactions in live performance. I have tried to indicate how Shakespeare's strategies can be understood in terms of brief incidents or whole structures, how they are shaped or exploited according to specific needs in an individual story. It becomes clear how Shakespeare by manipulating the sequence of events produces echoes, surprises and ironies which emerge in the calculated patterns and judiciously weighed proportions of the play. I am trying to indicate some of the wealth of material Shakespeare provides for a director to make the plays work on an audience. In essence I hope to give some sense of why it is important to go with rather than against the grain in Shakespeare.

Part One