Analyzing Shakespeare's Action

Scene versus Sequence

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and

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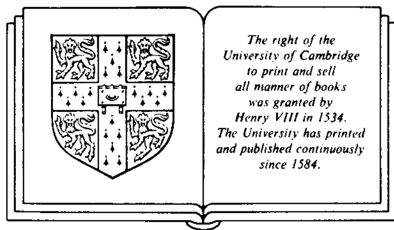

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1

Scene versus sequence in Shakespeare's plays

In the lexicon of dramatic terms the word *scene* has great authority. Yet, like many terms used with reference to Shakespeare's plays (*tragedy*, for example, or *action*), the term *scene* has never been anchored to a single, easily definable entity. Because the clearing of the stage normally signals a change of setting, people usually define the scene as a temporal/spatial unit. For Mark Rose, the scene is any unit set apart from other units by "a cleared stage indicating change of place or lapse of time," wherein "the action is plainly continuous."[1] But we also use the word *scene* to describe a unit of action in which tensions build toward a significant moment and then taper off. Distinctions between these two radically opposed senses of the word are generally ignored, so that *scene* is often assumed to mean both things simultaneously. Since the entities described remain as unlike as they ever were, this seemingly reliable term may distort what it is meant to clarify. It seems imperative therefore to examine our assumptions about the unit we too confidently call Shakespeare's *scene*.

The purpose of this inquiry is not to mount a tedious attack against the use of scene designations in Shakespeare's texts. Most of the conventional scene designations in Shakespeare represent divisions made in his essentially undivided text by editors from John Heminge and Henry Condell on, for whom the cleared stage is the crucial factor in distinguishing one unit from another. Still, the scene is not merely a creation of Shakespeare's editors. We all acknowledge that even though the actual scene designations are later insertions, both Elizabethan playwrights and the companies who staged their work envisioned plays as a series of "scenes." Shakespeare created such units and marked them out silently by emptying the stage of all characters – even though he lacked Jonson's interest in numbering the scenes in his text. Further, the numerical designations assigned to Shakespeare's scenes have valid uses – they indicate the boundary lines between individual units of time and/or place.

What this study does question is the widespread assumption that to analyze a *designated scene* is to analyze an *action*. Many people take it for

granted that as long as they stay within the confines of this unit called the scene, they are dealing with a single dramatic action which invariably progresses through stages of exposition, complication, climax, and dénouement. Any attempt to distinguish between the scene as a unit of place and the scene as a unit of action in Shakespeare's plays might strike them as odd, if not futile. The tendency to venerate the designated scene becomes less pronounced the closer one moves to the theater and actual production, yet even in performance theory there is no really thorough grasp of the principles that distinguish Shakespeare's units of place and time from his units of action. Once detected, however, the difference cuts deep.

Is the designated scene in Shakespeare *ever* a unit of action? Certainly. At times. Think of the scene printed as *Macbeth* 1.7 where Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband until he agrees to "bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" of murdering Duncan. Think of the scene designated in most texts as *Coriolanus* 3.2, where Volumnia chastises her too-absolute son for his refusal to humble himself before the Roman voters, until he finally submits to her wishes. Or the scene known generally as *Hamlet* 3.4, where another too-absolute son forces his mother to see her hasty remarriage in its full reality, as "an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty," "plucks the very soul" out of the marriage contract, and makes a mockery of "sweet religion." Each of these units of place is also a unit of action. In them the scene and the action run concurrently. But how often does this happen? Are the designated scenes always units of action?

Take another important scene in *Hamlet* – the formal scene in 1.2 in which the new king displays his efficiency by successfully processing three contrasting affairs, each related to one of the play's plots. Shakespeare's strategy of approaching Claudius's interview with Hamlet through a series of formal audiences of ever-increasing significance gives that final encounter between the two antagonists an impact it might otherwise not have had. Yet this scene (unit of action) which climaxes with the introduction of Hamlet concludes well before the scene (unit of place) does. We cannot really call the action 1.2, for it occupies only 159 of the 257 lines in the total scene. Shakespeare does not empty his stage after *every* action. Before ending 1.2, he writes another 98 lines, and these lines, too, constitute a complete unit of action: Hamlet receives Horatio, hears him describe the mysterious visitations of the Ghost, and determines to investigate the phenomenon. In this scene, then, there are two separate sequences, 1.2.1–159 and 1.2.160–257 – each sequence a full action, with its own introduction, development, climax, and conclusion.

Or take the Ghost's dramatic appearance in act 1, scene 5. Surely this is a *complete* action, building as it does from Hamlet's insistence that the Ghost speak to him to the Ghost's revelation of a murder. Yet once more the action ends (the Ghost vanishes at line 112), while the scene goes on: before Shakespeare clears the stage, he treats us to the cellarage "scene" (1.5.113–90). Again the scene has *two* well-crafted actions. Take the scenes Shakespeare wrote for Ophelia. Invariably one finds the Ophelia action complete in itself, yet paired with another. For example, Ophelia's "scene" with Polonius, where she reports Hamlet's visit, occupies only half a scene (2.1.71–117); it follows an independent action between Polonius and Reynaldo (2.1.1–71). Her "mad scene" occupies only half of 4.5; the other half concerns itself with Laertes, who bursts in on Claudius after her exit. When we take unit analysis seriously, Shakespeare's scenes and his units of action seem to slip apart. Apparently the designated scenes are not *always* units of action.

This disparity between scene and action is not unique to the scenes just touched on. So consistently do Shakespeare's scenes contain more than one unit of action that Mark Rose can posit a whole category of two-part scenes structured as "diptychs," along with a category of three-part scenes constructed in a "framing" or ABA pattern. So obvious is this segmenting process that James Hirsh in *The Structure of Shakespearean Scenes* can title certain chapters "Two-Part Scenes" and "Multipartite Scenes."[2] Though neither Rose nor Hirsh makes the observation, the parts these writers isolate are frequently separate actions.

Evidently Shakespeare's scenes are not always units of action. We cannot say that the two-part scene *is* a unit of action but must rather say "Such a scene *contains* units of action." We could even wish for a term that would differentiate more clearly between these actions and the scene as a whole: *sequences*, for example. "A single scene may contain more than one sequence."

Think now of the scene in which Falstaff becomes the incomparable character he is. This is truly a scene, in the sense that all 550 lines of it unfold in the Boar's Head Tavern at Eastcheap. Editors call this scene 2.4. Here Falstaff struts onto the stage issuing a proclamation: "A plague of all cowards, I say, and a vengeance too! marry and amen!" Throughout the scene he will repeat this proclamation, obviously intended to incriminate Prince Hal, who is only waiting to expose the true coward, Falstaff himself. Tension mounts until at last the Prince springs his trap. Nimble Jack, of course, triumphantly evades the inevitable – on "instinct."

Perfectly crafted as it is, the coward "scene" occurs in the middle of a scene – its textual designation would be 2.4.113–283, hardly equivalent to the full scene's 2.4.1–550. Moreover, this sequence has a counterpart

within the scene which has many admirers. For Derek Traversi, analyzing 2.4 in *An Approach to Shakespeare*, the scene has two key incidents, not one. First, "the Gadshill adventure, recently worked out in reality to Falstaff's discomfiture," and, second, "the incident to which the whole scene leads," in which both Hal and Falstaff "combine to enact in comic anticipation the crucial meeting between father and son" – the delightful play episode, 2.4.373–481.[3] Both incidents highlighted by Traversi qualify as sequences – complete actions nested within a longer scene.

Here again the scene breaks down into two major parts. However, Traversi's concentration on themes led him to focus only on the most obvious units. The two sequences described so far account for only 309 of the scene's 550 lines: what are we to make of the remaining 241 lines? In a more detailed analysis of this scene's structure than Traversi makes, Waldo McNeir noted that scene 4 resembles a miniature drama, in that it "has five 'acts' or movements, and an epilogue." For McNeir the scene breaks down as follows:

(1) The practical joke played by Hal and Poins on Francis, the drawer (1–106).
(2) The exposure of Falstaff's lies in his account of what happened at Gad's Hill (107–274).
(3) The first intrusion on the revelry when Sir John Bracy arrives with news from the court (275–364).
(4) The play-acting of Falstaff and Hal as they impersonate, in turn, the King and the Prince (365–464).
(5) The second intrusion on the revelry when the Sheriff and the watch arrive in pursuit of the Gad's Hill robbers (464–507).
(Epilogue) The inventory of Falstaff's pockets by Hal and Poins (508–31).[4]

There seems to us little reason to dispute this division. Any commentator (and presumably any director) who attempts to break the scene down into its component parts will propose almost identical unit boundaries. Both Mark Rose and Emrys Jones, for example, make observations that confirm McNeir's.

Rose analyzes the tavern scene to support his point in *Shakespearean Design* that "small individually designed units are combined like atoms in the formation of a molecule" and discovers the same five units. For him, "the contrasted Francis and Falstaff panels complete the first major movement" of the scene, a kind of "diptych," while the second half of the scene is designed on the ABA principle, "the two messengers framing the centerpiece," wherein Falstaff and Hal take the role of the King by turns. Shakespeare ends the scene with "a brief coda to sum up the position to

which the preceding action has brought us" (pp. 49–59). In a chapter on Shakespeare as "scenic poet," Emrys Jones arrives at essentially the same conclusions. For him, the scene's "short dialogue-units" include Hal's teasing of Francis, Falstaff's boasting of his prowess at Gadshill and subsequent exposure, Falstaff's exit to meet the "nobleman of the court" and his return to announce the rebellions, Falstaff and Hal's rehearsal of the coming interview with the King, and Hal's final interview with the Sheriff.[5]

The obvious similarities between Jones's "dialogue-units," Rose's "panels," and McNeir's "movements" all point to one striking fact: though we still have only one scene, we now have *five* actions – or five *sequences*. The tavern scene is hardly unique in this regard. All three commentators consider it but one of many "multipartite" scenes.

As soon as the tavern scene is compared with the coward sequence, a radical difference in structure stands out. Whatever unity there is in this five-sequence scene is not achieved primarily through a rising action. The five individual sequences do not, taken together, progress toward a climax. Nothing at the end of the scene rivals in impact the force of the coward sequence, an impact Shakespeare placed as early in the scene as possible. As many critics have demonstrated, unity among these segments is achieved not through the unity of action but through patterns of design, through an elaborate system of thematic echoes, parallels, and inversions. Often in such long scenes there is no perceptible rising action but rather a series of seemingly independent actions or sequences. What is the action of the tavern scene? Hard to say. What is the action of the coward sequence? That is obvious.

If this crucial difference is acknowledged we can learn much about Shakespeare's action by identifying individual sequences. What can be said about these units nested within Shakespeare's extended scenes? What are the characteristics of the sequence? It will take the whole of this book to respond adequately to that question. But one thing can be made clear now. While the scene is not always a unit of action, the sequence is. The sequence is always an action, propelled in a discernible direction by the desires, goals, and objectives of its characters. That action, once introduced, advances toward a climax, then enters a stage of decrescence that brings it rapidly to a conclusion. Because the sequence is structured upon a single dramatic question, it almost invariably communicates a sense of completeness, despite the pulsing energies it shapes and organizes. This is a point that deserves emphasis: each sequence in these long scenes has a dramatic structure that is recognizably an action.

Let us study the relationship between the scene and the sequence from

another vantage point, that of the very short scene. Many of Shakespeare's scenes run for a scant fifteen to twenty lines. Such scenes are hardly complete actions, nor do they, like the multipartite scenes, contain an action. It often takes several of these short scenes to complete a sequence. The penultimate sequence of *Macbeth*, for example, embraces three scenes.

In this sequence, Shakespeare develops an action in which Macduff kills Macbeth. This climactic confrontation functions as an action, because it has the basic criterion for all sequences, a strongly focused dramatic question. Ever since the witches had predicted that no man born of woman could harm him, Macbeth has considered himself invulnerable. Yet Macduff has sworn to slay this bloody tyrant. Macbeth, as Malcolm predicts, is "ripe for shaking." Will he fall? Can Macduff kill him? Is this second of the witches' prophecies merely fiendish equivocation, or will it prove true? Some such question hovers in the air when in act 5, scene 6, the enemy army arrives at Dunsinane. The drama inherent in that question had better be played out on stage, for toward its resolution most of the play's final act has been driving.

But look at scene 6. We quote it in full:

> MALCOLM Now near enough; your leafy screens throw down,
> And show like those your are. You, worthy uncle,
> Shall with my cousin, your right noble son,
> Lead our first battle. Worthy Macduff and we
> Shall take upon's what else remains to do,
> According to our order.
> SIWARD Fare you well.
> Do we but find the tyrant's power tonight,
> Let us be beaten, if we cannot fight.
> MACDUFF Make all our trumpets speak, give them all breath,
> Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death.
> *Exeunt, Alarums continued.*
> (5.6.1–10)

After ten lines Shakespeare clears the stage. Does this scene *contain* an action? Or is it *itself* an action? No. The scene tells us where we are. Its clamorous trumpets summon Macbeth to battle. But that in itself is not an action. The unit merely introduces an action.

What about scene 7? It seems to intensify – in three stages – the action begun in scene 6. First, Macbeth fights Young Siward, gaining from the victory a still greater faith in his invincibility. The stage empties. Then Macduff dashes on in search of Macbeth: here before us stands the primary threat to Macbeth's invincibility. But Shakespeare delays the

meeting – Macduff goes off. Malcolm and Old Siward, entering "with Drum and Colors," now pass into the castle. These three segments of scene 7 increase the tension by bringing Macbeth and Macduff closer together while simultaneously delaying their encounter. However, scene 7 is not an action in itself. And when it ends, the action which began in scene 6 still has not climaxed.

Scenes 6 and 7 – two whole scenes – have merely prepared us for the main event of the sequence; the action reaches its apex in scene 8. Here Macduff and Macbeth finally meet and here Macbeth discovers the full perfidy of the witches' prophecies: Macduff was not born in the normal manner but was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped." Ultimately, the tyrant is slain. Only when scenes 6, 7 and 8 are combined do we have a complete action.[6]

Shakespeare has turned upside down the procedure he used to build the tavern scene. There the scene was constructed of sequences. Here he has constructed a sequence out of scenes. Each of these short scenes constitutes only a fragment of the sequential action. Obviously, when we turn from Shakespeare's extended scenes to his very brief ones, the rift between the scene and the unit of action widens still further.

There are many instances in the canon when an action embraces two or more scenes: *Othello* 2.2 and 2.3, where in 2.2 the Herald has a "scene" of his own to introduce the revels that in 2.3 will undo Cassio, for example, or *Coriolanus* 5.4 and 5.5, where Volumnia is expected back in Rome throughout 5.4 and arrives in climactic triumph in 5.5. Multi-scene sequences occur almost naturally if the action focuses on a battle, as in the *Macbeth* example cited above – for instance, both the battle of Actium in *Antony and Cleopatra* (sequence 3.7.1 to 3.10.36) and the skirmish near Alexandria in the same play (sequence 4.10.1 to 4.13.10) span four scenes. Any director staging these actions would ignore the scene breaks, knowing that Shakespeare felt no embarrassment about clearing the stage in the middle of an action.

Throughout this book, then, *sequence* will be our term for that unit of action in which Shakespeare raises a single dramatic question and answers it. Direction in the sequence comes from the thrust toward some climactic resolution of the pending question, and the action moves consecutively through stages of exposition and complication toward the climax, following which Shakespeare normally provides a brief summary or conclusion. Though the sequence is structured upon the conventional "dramatic curve," it may or may not run concurrently with a designated scene.

Three things should be apparent from this survey of the relationship

between the scene and the sequence. First, though both scene and sequence exist as units, both must be discovered through careful observation of the characteristics of each unit type, for in many of Shakespeare's plays published prior to the First Folio, neither the scene nor the sequence was marked out. Second, the rules for finding each type are quite different. The scene is a unit of place, and its boundaries are determined primarily by the silence (or space) found at each end. Its beginnings and endings are punctuated by the clearing of the stage. The sequence, in contrast, is a unit of action, and its boundaries are determined by the rising and falling rhythms of that action: the sequence, not the scene, is the unit that contains the dramatic structure. Third, the relationship between scene and sequence is fairly complicated. Scenes come in a variety of sizes. Generally speaking, the shorter scene, containing only a few isolated lines, functions as a component of the sequence and thus must be linked to other scenes to form a dramatic action; the middle-sized scene, with its more fully developed action, often runs concurrently with the sequence; and the longer scene tends to act as a container holding several sequences together. Because of these complexities, any analysis of a "scene" must differentiate between units of time and place (the scene) and units of action (the sequence). Each unit type serves a different function within the drama.

Up to now directors and scholars alike have operated on intuition in discerning the boundaries of Shakespeare's units of action. The situation is clearer in the theater, where the exigencies of rehearsal and production require that plays be broken down into smaller segments and the actor's effectiveness depends upon his awareness not only of the play's rhythms but of the character's objectives. Since certain unit boundaries are determined by the fulfillment of some objective, the theatrical practice of dividing the play into "motivational units"[7] is bound to result in a deeper awareness of Shakespeare's habit of writing in sequences. Yet while most textbooks advise student directors "to divide the script into the smallest meaningful sections," the process is somewhat arbitrary,[8] and a clarifying discussion of specific unit types should prove helpful.

Scholars too depend on intuition in analyzing Shakespeare's action. The units are sensed and our commentaries reflect this – witness the widespread references to the "waves and troughs" of Shakespeare's action or the inevitable selectivity through which we focus on certain familiar segments. Intuitively we recognize Shakespeare's units. We even coin convenient tags for them – the cellarage scene, the nunnery scene, the recorder scene – as if they were of the same "kind" as the designated scene. Yet so unaware are we of their significance as actions that the very

terminology that reveals the correctness of our intuitions can draw criticism. Scholars so wholeheartedly maintain that "Shakespeare's actual unit of construction was what we would call the scene" – and only the scene – that they can still deem it "a somewhat inappropriate mental 'set'" to approach the plays through such units as the "recorder scene" in *Hamlet* or the "porter scene" in *Macbeth*, because "none of these episodes is, properly speaking, a scene."[9] Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition of the importance of the unit we have called the sequence, as well as an obvious groping for terms that will enable us to discuss Shakespeare's action with a conscious understanding of how that action is constructed.

The immediate goal of this study is to define the nature of the sequence and its relationship to Shakespeare's other units, those units smaller and larger than the sequence. Our first step will be to offer a method for isolating sequences in the printed text. Sequence boundaries are not easily discernible because Shakespeare dovetails these units; one sequence normally flows into or overlaps the next and it is often difficult to say where the earlier sequence ends and the subsequent one begins, until one develops an eye for the playwright's mortises and tenons. Because the ability to delimit a sequence is a needed skill in this process of unit analysis, we shall begin with it. In our initial chapters we isolate the sequence by examining its parts. Later we look at sequences themselves and then at the way Shakespeare combines his sequences into larger units.

Ultimately, of course, understanding the sequence is only a means to an end, which is to experience the emotional rhythms of the play more fully. By giving the reader exacting insights into the playwriting techniques through which Shakespeare paces and weights, combines and orchestrates his sequences, unit analysis provides a solid basis for the many meticulous judgments required of performers who are attempting to translate these rhythms onto the stage. For the viewer, it creates an awareness of the differences between story and action, thereby increasing sensitivity to and aesthetic appreciation of the play's emotional peaks and valleys and opening the way to a deeper experience of the constantly alternating tensions. What is at stake here is the full realization of a play's dramatic rhythms in any given performance.

Speculating upon the approaches to Shakespeare that will dominate the next decade, Robert Hapgood writes that "already Shakespeare is regarded as more a 'man of the theater' than in the recent past, a trend which seems likely to continue," but that more is necessary. Hapgood "would also like to see our sense of his authorial presence redefined,

neither as an Author (in the nineteenth-century sense) nor an Absence (whose creative function is dispersed in all directions) but as a playwright, working within a collaborative team with players and playgoers. This might lead to a larger and looser, less thematic, feeling for what is unifying in Shakespeare's art."[10] Perhaps this book will help to fill that need.