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Shakespeare and Narrative

EDITED BY

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SHAKESPEARE'S NARREMES

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In Shakespeare's plays the chief figures are often separated, usually at sea, and united again. In *Twelfth Night* it is Sebastian and Viola (brother and sister) who are separated by shipwreck; in *Pericles* it is Pericles and Marina (father and daughter); in *The Comedy of Errors* it is Aegeon and Aemilia (husband and wife). The separation-and-reunion pattern spans the play, the span varying from days to decades. Variations of the pattern occur in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado* and rather more marginally in *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and in *Richard II*, again more obviously in *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*. Such recurring patterns of action, place and time we call *narremes*.

Oddly enough, although the major playwrights of the following centuries hardly use the separation-and-reunion narreme, modern drama still flirts with it: at the end of Arnold Wesker's *Roots*, for instance, Beatie's friend fails to arrive: the reunion expected but not achieved characterizes the play; the old narreme, in other words, is present but reversed. Another example: at the conclusion of Peter Nichols' *Passion Play* James says to Eleanor: 'I think we can make a go of it, don't you?' and she answers, 'No'.[1] In the conscious rejection of a reunion of husband and wife, then, the old narreme lives on. To spin this thread a little further, we might conclude that according to the accepted narremes of our day, Shakespeare is rather outmoded: in a modernization of *Measure for Measure*, the Duke would not offer his hand in marriage to Isabella, in *The*

Winter's Tale the statue of Hermione would not come to life. The narremes of closure today are not those of Shakespeare's time. Some patterns seem merely conventional or arbitrary, others reflect systematic changes both of taste and the current sense of fitness and closure, yet others appear to be systematic, but elude explanation.

Narremes in prose and drama. The concept of the narreme was developed three decades ago by Eugene Dorfman,[2] who saw the narreme as a basic unit or quality of narration. His concept was expanded by Henri Wittmann,[3] but Shakespeare criticism has given it scant notice.[4] One reason is that narratologists concentrate on narrative prose and largely ignore drama, and thus have developed few tools that apply to it. After all, a basic narratological model has it that a story has four constituents: two dynamic ones, namely *report* and *speech*, and two static ones, *comment* and *description*.[5] But in drama one *shows* rather than *reports* (ignoring the occasional ex-

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[1] Peter Nichols, 'Passion Play', in *Landmarks of Modern British Drama; The Plays of the Seventies* (London, 1986), p. 442.

[2] Eugene Dorfman, *The Narreme in the Medieval Romance Epic: An Introduction to Narrative Structures* (Toronto, 1969).

[3] Henri Wittmann, 'Théorie des Narrèmes et Algorithmes Narratifs', *Poetics* 4 (1975), 19–28.

[4] Rawdon Wilson, *Shakespearian Narrative* (London, 1995), refers to but makes no particular use of the term (pp. 35ff., 52 and 261) and does not explain it.

[5] The model is that advanced in my *Narrative Modes* (Cambridge, 1982).

ception), and the work of *description* is carried by scene and costume, only marginally by the text ('This castle hath a pleasant seat'). As to *comment*, especially in the extended forms it can take in the novel, it is rarely the staple of the play, and can even be frowned on. If E. M. Forster was right to suggest that showing is better than telling, and if that applies to fiction, it applies to drama all the more. The narremes of modern prose, in other words, look to be marginal in a genre composed almost exclusively of *speech*.

A play has constituents of its own: the task of casting, the ball and chain of the set (largely irrelevant to the novelist), and the iron cage of an evening's performance time, although the actions presented can range from minutes to decades. Shakespeare can also play effectively with contradictory elements of time, as Brian Richardson has shown with reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[6] What we need now is a proper narratology of drama, for the narremes that critics of drama have discussed tend to be borrowed from the analysis of prose fiction, indeed; dialogue (the staple of drama, of course) has tended to be considered out of bounds, the assumption being that narration is largely a matter of inserted reports (like that of the ghost of Hamlet Senior or Othello's wooing of Desdemona), stories within stories.[7] But of course dialogue is also a form of narration: who would analyse a novel and ignore everything in quotation marks? So narratology ought to help us to analyse drama, but has done so very little. One reason is that the field is constantly in flux, so that a number of recent developments, such as chaos theory,[8] frame theory or Gricean maxims have yet to be properly applied to Shakespeare's texts. Then, too, narratology became popular only a few decades ago, and its tools require further honing. This applies to prose, and all the more to dramatic art.

Macrostructures and microstructures. Drama has a special structuredness, in part because of its comparative brevity, that offers opportunities to narreme-hunters. Indeed, we see countless attempts to define the governing macrostructures of Shakespeare's plays, although structuralism has fallen out of fashion. Summaries of Shakespeare's plays tend to assume that it is respectable to posit (or impose) an over-all pattern. For example: an aristocrat is disappointed in the behaviour of one or more members of the family and the court. He feels threatened, is forced to leave home and is exposed to victimization. He has, however, a loyal dependant, who accompanies him even in a final confrontation with his enemies. He cannot hinder a plot against him, and although he himself as well as the female closest to him dies a violent death, his enemies are finally exposed and killed. The hero is praised by a survivor and justice restored to the land. A successor to the throne brings the country back to normality and peace; thus family drama goes hand in hand with political drama.

Of course this is a summary of *Hamlet*. But others may say: 'Surely this is the story of *King Lear*!' Which is also correct. The two plays share a set of constituent narremes: configurations of character, plots, themes. Indeed, some

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[6] Brian Richardson, '"Time is out of joint": Narrative Models and the Temporality of the Drama', *Poetics Today*, 8 (1987), 299–309.

[7] See for instance N. Delius, 'Die epischen Elemente in Shakespeares Dramen', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 1877; Kurt Schlüter, *Shakespeares dramatische Erzählkunst* (Heidelberg, 1958); Joan Rees, *Shakespeare and the Story: Aspects of Creation* (London, 1978); W. T. Jewkes, '"To Tell My Story": The Function of Framed Narrative and Drama in *Hamlet*', in *Shakespearian Tragedy*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London, 1984), pp. 31–46; Catherine Bates, 'Weaving and Writing in Othello', *Shakespeare Survey 46*, (1994), pp. 51–60; Eduard Costigan, 'Aspects of Narrative in Some Plays by Shakespeare', *English Studies*, 77 (1996), 332–42; Barbara Hardy, *Shakespeare's Storytellers: Dramatic Narration* (London and Chester Springs, 1997).

[8] Although the author has made an attempt to apply chaos theory to a modest range of literary works and authors, including Shakespeare: 'The Nature/Culture Dyad and Chaos Theory' in *Das Natur/Kultur-Paradigma*, Festschrift Paul Goetsch (Tübingen, 1994), pp. 8–22.

of these also apply to *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*. No doubt narremes are in the eye of the beholder; alternative summaries might emphasize or attempt to eradicate the common narremes. Theodore Spencer's definition of the macrostructure that governs all of the history plays also sounds very like a narratological definition: 'An existing order is violated, the consequent conflict and turmoil are portrayed, and order is restored by the destruction of the force or forces that originally violated it.'[9] Having gone thus far, one wonders if this super-narreme does not apply to most of the tragedies – and some of the comedies too, except that there we often see the 'destruction of the force or forces' that attempt to block the happy ending, a rather foreign body of characters who display 'motiveless malignity', like the antagonist in a punch-and-judy play: Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, for example, or Don John in *Much Ado*, Caliban in *The Tempest*, perhaps Maria in *Twelfth Night*. In contrast to most dramatists now, Shakespeare prefers sets of characters in opposition, irrespective of the dramatic genre.

Patterns and solitaires. The repertoire of possible narremes might also be divided into repeated and thus comparable events – as opposed to singular narremes or microstructures. A checklist of these might include countless entries: *aberrant* or *abrasive* behaviour; *absurd* speech; *accusation*; *actantial* roles; *acrimonious* dialogue; *adultery*; *affectated* and *agitated* behaviour; *alcoholic excess*; *ambassadors* (treatment of); *ambiguity*, play with; *betrayal*; *blaming*; *character* types; *chivalry*; *coincidences*; *complicity* in crime; *confession*; *conflictual* behaviour; *corpus alienum* (such as comic interlude, dance, play within play, song, pageant, sword fight, wrestling match, etc.) In other words, we might scan the plays to take account of the 'infinite variety' but also forms of action and behaviour otherwise hardly noticed (for instance, the remarkable attachment of Aaron to his bastard child in *Titus Andronicus*). A *solitaire* like this, lacking an

analogy (although we might construct a parallel to the shepherd's adoption of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*), constitutes a one-off phenomenon: *interpretation* lacks its *-inter*. An apt image of the *solitaire* is the definition of a pier as 'a disappointed bridge' on the part of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus. Even as few as two examples of a phenomenon, like the bed-trick in *All's Well* and in *Measure for Measure*, give more rise to scholarly discussion than does the 'pier' of a *solitaire*. Often enough, however, once we hit on a seeming solitaire, we find parallels and analogies after all.

This is to say that significant narremes continue to be discovered. Shakespeare's penchant for elopements, for instance, deserves scrutiny – in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. This narreme carries on its back an ideologeme:[10] all of these elopements apparently have the approval of the playwright. Does this conclusion fit our concept of the Elizabethan world? Of a piece with this narreme are the marriages in which husband and wife-to-be hardly know one another. Yet this rarely seems to jeopardize their happiness: consider Proteus, Berowne, Bassanio, Orlando, Claudio, Orsino, Petruchio, and Cordelia's husband, the King of France. We might elevate the oddity of brief or non-courtship to the status of a narreme. It may be the very brevity of the plays in general that imposes it, although some of the plays encompass months if not years, even decades. Hand in hand with this narreme of strangers marrying goes the unnatural speed with which fathers reject their daughters: Leonato/Hero, Brabantio/Desdemona, Lear/Cordelia, Cymbeline/Imogen. One theory has it that in Shakespeare's time the average life span was by present standards relatively brief, so that we must expect to find a distance within

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9 Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (London, 1949), p. 72.
10 Cf. H. Bonheim, 'Ideologemes, Culturemes and other Emes', in *Studies in English and American Literature*, Festschrift Jerzy Strzetelski (Krakow, 1995), pp. 241–53.

the family, which from a contemporary perspective suggests a lack of emotional warmth.[11] But the argument is weak: we might just as well expect that a brief life span would make family attachments all the more precious, closer rather than distant. A narratological explanation of this narreme is perhaps more plausible: the five-act play favours a compression of events, not a depiction of lingering relationships, and some modern narremes, like the husband/mother-in-law conflict, had not been invented.

The microstructural narreme of the flashback also repays scrutiny. Often as not, flashbacks are dramatic 'cameos', stories within stories, like Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death, Clarence's dream in *Richard III,* or Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra: 'The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne. . .' (2.2.198). Interludes include dances, poems, inset plays (in *Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest),* the first two of these clearly functional. Endings also run according to pattern.

The critic who fails to see the pattern and interprets a dramatic element as a solitaire may be misled. An example: at the end of *Hamlet,* Fortinbras, who seems hardly to know Hamlet, praises him: 'For he was likely . . . / To have proved most royally' (5.2.351-2). An assessment of Fortinbras' judgement would go astray if the governing narreme here were not recognized: the *laudatio* on the dead protagonist, the curious convention being that the praise comes either from an enemy or a person who hardly knew the protagonist. Only a voice of authority makes plausible an end to conflict: there is Antony on Caesar: 'This was the noblest Roman of them all. . .' (5.5.67), Caesar on Antony and Cleopatra: 'No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous. . .' (5.2.353-4), Cassio on Othello: 'For he was great of heart . . .' (5.2.371), Alcibiades on Timon of Athens: 'Dead / Is noble Timon, of whose memory / Hereafter more.' (5.5.84–6) or Aufidius on Coriolanus: '. . . he shall have a noble memory' (5.6.154). One critic has noticed the oddness of the latter example,

taking it to be a solitaire, '. . . the epitaph [on Coriolanus] being pronounced by his murderer with a sudden and unconvincing volte-face'.[12] But Caesar also evidences such a volte-face; the parallel suggests the problem of finding someone among the dramatis personae with sufficient authority to lend the *laudatio* weight. To recognize the narreme is not to explain it, but a safety net that may protect the critic from unfounded speculation concerning a single case.

The stage death of the person who has spun the plot has a kind of parallel in the comeuppance of the plot-spinners in the comedies and romances, the machinations of which, however, are punished lightly if at all: Don Pedro in *Much Ado,* Maria in *Twelfth Night,* Leontes in *The Winter's Tale,* or Antonio, the usurper of Prospero's dukedom in *The Tempest.* Such patterns should remind us of Vladimir Propp's thesis that a tale consists of a standard set of functions in a standard sequence.[13] Like the fairy tale, Shakespeare's plays tend to move toward a conclusion which supports a repertoire of *ideologemes* and *culturemes*[14] as well as patterns of closure. The light or non-punishment of characters such as Don Pedro and Maria is one such, and also a gross injustice that goes with the comic genre: in the tragedies, by contrast, the injustice is that the innocent are punished as much as the guilty. As to the narreme that there be a closing *laudatio* and that it be spoken by a person of authority, perhaps this is meant to suggest the likelihood that strife will now give way to peace, that whoever had a position of honour in the state also had special qualities that justified this honour, that the dead person deserved to have his story told etc. But

[11] Marianne Novy, 'Shakespeare and Emotional Distance in the Elizabethan Family', *Theatre Journal,* 33 (1981), p. 24.
[12] Brian Vickers, *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (London, 1968), p. 403.
[13] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington, 1958).
[14] The term is that of Fernando Poyatos, *New Perspectives in Nonverbal Communication* (New York, 1983), p. 35.

here, again, we can identify a narreme, but fail to find a good explanation: we can surmise a dramatic but not a psychological or ideological function.

The narreme of the threatened child, too (for instance Aaron's infant, Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, Banquo's Fleance and Macduff's children in *Macbeth*) presumably has the function of appealing to the audience for sympathy. Audiences are likely to sympathize with characters caught between conflicting loyalties (Desdemona in *Othello*, Octavia in *Antony and Cleopatra* or the Duke and Duchess of York in *Richard II*), a narreme native to classical Greek drama, now as good as extinct. Fighting to the death, though against the odds, is another narreme which Shakespeare favoured; he imposes it even on villains like Richard III and Macbeth. If villains could choose the genre in which to appear, it should be comedies, for there the rule pertains that justice will *not* be done.

Some of the narremes noted thus far are well-known patterns, and we call such a pattern a *locus communis* or *topos*. The *narreme* is a more encompassing term, including those patterns of event which to our knowledge have *not* been identified or explained. A narreme, then, might be thought of as a topos *in spe*.

Interestingness. We know approximately, however, what we are looking for: we search the texts for narrative elements which have 'interestingness'[15] – the quality of data that invites repeated attention. For example, the conflicts between some of the characters mentioned above adhere to a common pattern: unlike the situation of Aaron, they tend to have both a private and a political character. This doubling of function is itself a *narreme* and gains interestingness because it is obvious in usurpers like Macbeth and Claudius, perhaps less so in advisers and critical commentators: Kent in *King Lear*, Gonzalo in *The Tempest*, Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Menenius in *Coriolanus*. The very diversity of the fields to which a conflict pertains – psychological, ethical, poli-

tical, military, domestic – is also a peculiarly Shakespearian narreme: this diversity is evident in Shakespeare's plays, whereas we hardly find it in Restoration drama (Dryden is an exception) nor in major eighteenth or nineteenth-century plays, which tend to be unpolitical, until the advent of G. B. Shaw. Another victim of time is the revenge narreme, now practically extinct (although Ayckbourn has written an *The Revengers' Comedies*).

Such historical *culs de sac* suggest the value of an approach to Shakespeare via narremes. A narreme is 'interesting' not only because it puzzles us but because it functions as a 'search-engine': seeing a sequence of events in one play, we can search for it elsewhere and examine it in the sources, in the works of predecessors and successors. This is also what we do with the more familiar *topoi* and with genre distinctions like tragedy and comedy. The very idea of a tragedy–comedy–history triad suggests specific chains of events and reflects the common assumption that such categories, though questionable, may have explanatory value.

Of course we know how fuzzy such categories are: our editions of Shakespeare tend to ride roughshod over the *Tragedy* (not the *History* that it is called nowadays) of Richard III, the *History* of Othello and *All is True* (not *Henry VIII*), and when we come to Congreve or Sheridan, these categories no longer apply. There is surely more explanatory value in the micro-narremes of drama like confrontation and conciliation scenes, threats and placating gestures, cycles of conflict and unexpected compromise (as in the final scenes of *Cymbeline* and *Pericles)* than in supposed sub-genres.

The narreme, in other words, like the *topos*, is a heuristic tool. It allows us better to identify, contrast, compare. Its ahistoric nature should not bother us: there is no shame in imposing

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15 Suzanne Hidi and William Baird, 'Interestingness – A Neglected Variable in Discourse Processing', *Cognitive Science*, 10 (1986), 179–84.

narremes and ideologemes on Shakespeare in anachronistic fashion: after all, we see proto-Marxist elements in *King Lear* and Lacanian ones in *Hamlet*, we recognize in Shakespeare's *oeuvre* 'down-with-authority-plays' (*Coriolanus* and *The Winter's Tale*), usurpation plays (*Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest)*, and see that these plays share macro-narremes like transgression and punishment, guilt and absolution. For forensic purposes we can generate categories as we go along, giving each narreme a label, like 'usurpation play': labels have explanatory value and help identify and pin down the interestingness of phenomena, to see not only a tree but also the forest it grows in. Forster's battle-cry, 'Only connect' becomes 'Only compare!'

Thus, for instance, the pirate attack in *Hamlet* has little interest as a *solitaire* and might be seen as a foreign body in the tragedy. It gains interest when we consider the ubiquity of 'trouble on the high seas', from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Pericles* and *Twelfth Night* to *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, a list which includes some of the earliest but also latest of Shakespeare's plays. This narreme tends to be connected with other narremes: loss and recovery, exile and return, even when sea-crossings are only incidents which, as in *Hamlet, Othello, Lear* or *The Winter's Tale*, might be elided without serious damage.

The solitaire, as we have seen, is comparatively hard to interpret: what do we make of Hamlet's chance-medley killing of Polonius, his potential father-in-law? Is this an important action? True, it has functions in the plot: it gives Claudius an excuse to send Hamlet abroad and, if Claudius is to be trusted, causes Ophelia's madness. Shakespeare found it in the *Historiae Danicae*, but there the victim is neither named nor relevant except as an example of cunning and ruthlessness on the part of 'Amleth'.[16] More interesting criticism is produced from the focal areas of literary discourse which concentrate on recurring partials or 'fractals' (as they are called in chaos theory),[17] like

sources and analogues, encounters and actions, narrative techniques and configurations of character.

Narremes of time and character. Shakespeare not only had to convert his sources into dialogue but also to compact the events of years into a performance time of hours: in narratological terms, Shakespeare had to cut story time down to discourse time. Thus a scene which takes ten minutes to act out would also convey a scene which might in real life take ten minutes to unfold – at least in theory. When we trace such a scene back to its source, we see how Shakespeare blew up a mere detail into a full-fledged scene, or took the opposite direction, converting the panoramic time structures into an event occupying minutes on stage.

Between the scenes, on the other hand, we have broad gaps of time: from hours to days, years or decades, gaps which Shakespeare often leaves unspecified. Thus a reading time of ten minutes in Holinshed can catapult the *dramatis personae* through a year of events, whereas stage presentation demands that narrated and narrative time be more or less conflated and then divided up into parcels of action delimited by a grouping of the characters concerned. The year which Saxo Grammaticus has *Amleticus* spend on the way to and in Britain is as good as obliterated in the letter of ten sentences in which Hamlet tells Horatio of the pirate attack

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16 '[Amleth] mounted the straw and began to swing his body and jump again and again, wishing to try if aught lurked there in hiding. Feeling a lump beneath his feet, he drove his sword into the spot, and impaled him who lay hid. Then he dragged him from his concealment and slew him. Then, cutting his body into morsels, he seethed it in boiling water, and flung it through the mouth of an open sewer for the swine to eat, bestrewing the stinking mire with his hapless limbs.' Geoffrey Bullough, *The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* vol. 7, (London, 1994), p. 65.

17 This avenue is pursued in my paper, 'The Nature/Culture Dyad and Chaos Theory' in *Das Natur/Kultur Paradigma*, Festschrift Paul Goetsch (Tübingen, 1994), pp. 8–22.

and in the forty-line description of his rewriting Claudius' letter to the English king.

Turning chronicle into play-text, then, required a concept of scene lacking in most of the sources. For the chronicles (but also the verse sources such as those Shakespeare used for *Romeo and Juliet*) tend to panoramic, not scenic, narration. Macbeth's career after the murder of Duncan occupies seventeen years in Holinshed, of which Shakespeare took over a fraction, expanded into a playing time of three hours. In the terms of E. M. Forster,[18] the playwright has by and large to convert *panoramic* into *scenic* narration. In principle, the playwright effects a decompression of story time and a compression of presentation time.

Odd is the frequency with which the jumps between scenes are (or are not) signalled. For instance, the spectator may or may not recognize that when Hamlet comes across the grave-diggers, a month or even (as in the source) a year has elapsed since he had consigned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. Similar gaps occur in *King Lear*: we have hardly more than an hour's playing time between France's offer to marry Cordelia and Cordelia's return to England at the head of a French Army. In model theory, one might posit that the would-be dramatist's sources confront him with a bolus of intransigent materials which had to be translated into theatre: insignificant details had to be endowed with interest, plain narrative had to be converted into dialogue, mere hints developed into scenes. The epic surveys of chronicle must be hugely cut but also augmented so as to yield a more or less one-to-one relationship between narrative and narrated time (not that Shakespeare always manages this successfully; Richardson [cf. note 6] is most acute in tracing the multiple contradictions in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The largely unsegmented flow of events in the chronicles had to be encased anew in separate pillows (called scenes, then amalgamated into acts), between which the spectator is invited to imagine unspecified gaps of time, be it hours or decades, only occasionally invited to jump such gaps by a character called 'Time' or 'Gower'.

As to character, Shakespeare excised some and added others. Roderigo, for instance, was not part of Cinthio's story of Othello: Iago would be condemned to monologues and asides without Roderigo (Henry James called such a crutch of narrative a *ficelle*). Only some of the figures, as an assessment of Roderigo or Lodovico would show, had to be invested with character. One would think that Shakespeare was hampered rather than inspired by the crude *pastoso* depictions of persons in his sources, but in fact he fashioned vivid and memorable ones (the nurse in *Romeo* and Beatrice in *Much Ado*) from the merest hints, or developed new ones, like Lear's Fool. He turns a rusty handsaw into an army of hawks, converting an indeterminate set of participants into memorable characters, investing them with variety and 'presence'. But he also creates characters of remarkable inconsistency: Polonius is honoured at court for his sage advice but also the 'busy old fool', so that one must concur with Dr Johnson's diagnosis of Polonius, 'dotage encroaching upon wisdom'. But do we not find even greater contradictions in Lear, in Antony, in Leontes? As to Hamlet, he is a proper scholar, incapable of action, scrupulous about not killing Claudius (supposedly at his prayers), but then he kills Polonius without regret and proves absolutely ruthless about the corpse. At the end of the play he becomes a bloodthirsty and practised 'sworder'. Despite his ill treatment and abandonment of Ophelia in Act 3, Hamlet turns out in Act 5 to claim that 'Forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love' (5.1.266–7) equal his love of her, but then kills Ophelia's brother as well. On the other hand, perhaps modern fiction is sworn to a narreme of character consistency equally untenable, at odds with newspaper reports of men butchering wife and children because of an impending

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[18] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927).

bankruptcy; and we find among commanders of concentration camps loving husbands and doting fathers. Perhaps our present-day assumption that character is consistent has even less plausibility than do the inconsistencies of Polonius and Hamlet.

Conventions of space. Some of the conventions of space-jumping in Shakespeare are as odd as those pertaining to time and character, and tend to be intimately connected with them. In *Othello*, for instance, Desdemona waits in Cyprus for her husband to arrive from Venice, afraid that he has been caught up in a 'high-wrought flood' (2.1.2). It is left to the literally-minded audience to assume that Othello's ship was delayed by a storm.[19] The scene on shore has several functions. First it affords the comic relief of the bawdy banter of Desdemona and Iago. Second, Desdemona reveals her affection for Othello by worrying about him. As is well known, the time-scheme of the play is as quirky as in *Hamlet*, in *Lear* or in *Antony and Cleopatra*. We must grant Othello reason to think that Desdemona might have been untrue to him, just as Hamlet has reason to believe that Ophelia is a tool of the court and the entertainment with which Hermione provides Polixenes makes it not quite preposterous that Leontes should accuse her of infidelity. The supposed affair of Hero in *Much Ado* is shored up by a similar substructure of situation and event. The narremes which all these situations have in common is that a woman's honour is compromised but then vindicated. A further narreme in this scene is its echo of the European ur-romance, the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus. This work opens onto a similar scene on a seashore: a girl, Chariclea, worries about the fate of Theagenes, her lover. A variant of this narreme was used earlier on in *As You Like It* and much later again in the opening scene of *The Tempest* – there it is Miranda that fears for the safety of the voyagers. A corollary to the separation of lovers or family members is naturally the reunion, as in Pericles' meeting Marina at the end of *Pericles* or Egeon's with Emilia in *The*

Comedy of Errors. The happy arrival by sea, then, is a macro-narreme, a resolution-and-lover's-reunion sequence of ancient lineage. Behind the lovers there is often as not a family, so we might posit the relevant narreme (in parallel to Chekhov saying if a gun is hanging on the wall in the first act, someone has to shoot with it before the play is over): if Shakespeare shows us a family, its members will soon be separated. A majority of Shakespeare's plays, certainly the comedies, are constructed on variants of this narreme, which falls into disuse in the eighteenth century. Some form of 'family gathering,' whether happy, as in *The Winter's Tale*, or in the form of a sequence of deaths, as in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, characterizes all ten tragedies and some of the histories as well, such as *King John*, *Henry VI* and *Richard II*. Shakespeare seems to have favoured 'family values', for his plot structures enforce the relevant cultureme to a degree to which English drama was not to return before the Victorian period.

Narremes as recurring partials. We can call the family separations and reunions in Shakespeare *narremes* or employ a term from linguistics: the 'recurring partial'. This is a textual element that appears repeatedly, like the English suffixes *-ed* and *-ing*. Linguists argue that recurring partials repay study: grasp the essential design of one and you have a ready-made category for the next one that presents itself. By contrast, linguists profess little interest in the phenomena of rhetoric, which are judged to be *exceptions* to or even *contraventions* of standard usage, and thus of little interest. Poets and critics may want to

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[19] Graham Bradshaw's article ('Obeying the Time in Othello: The Myth and the Mess it Made' in *English Studies*, 73 (1992), 211–28) argues that the problem has been imposed on the play by overly zealous dissectors of the text and poses no problem in performance, but his reading supersedes neither T. G. Nelson and Charles Haines, 'Othello's Unconsummated Marriage' in *Essays in Criticism*, 33 (1983), 1–18, nor Karl P. Wentersdorf, 'The Time Problem in Othello: A Reconsideration' in *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West* (1985), 63–77.

collect rhetorical figures and memorize them, but no systematic knowledge will be gained: these figures are remarkable exactly because of their singularity; narremes deserve attention because of their recurrence.

If narremes occur repeatedly in the plays this must be because Shakespeare found them attractive. We profit from examining them because we frequently locate in them central issues and motifs, as in Shakespeare's more or less unstageable passages showing adventures at sea or on shore. But the genuinely unstageable action in the sources is also a potential narreme, for Shakespeare had to excise or replace it, or try to make do with it after all. In Cinthio's version of *Othello*, the Moor pulls the ceiling down on his wife,[20] a method which Shakespeare's Globe would hardly allow. Iago's attack on Cassio involves problems of staging as well. Cassio's leg is cut off, and Shakespeare retains Cassio's 'My leg is cut in two' (5.1.73) – hardly possible on stage. Indeed, later that evening, Cassio comes on stage again: he is needed to explain that the handkerchief with the strawberry mark was found in his chamber and also to accept the rule of Cyprus at Lodovico's hands. Some modern editors show their awareness of the problem of the missing leg by adding a note: Cassio is to be carried in on a chair. But perhaps Shakespeare had no such help in mind, assuming the amnesia of the audience in the matter of a missing leg. Remarkable is the gratuitous violence in Shakespeare generally, a hallmark not only of his work: much of Jacobean drama is tainted, if we may dare such a subjective judgement, by it – another Elizabethan/Jacobean cultureme?

The pirate attack during Hamlet's voyage to England will serve as a further instance of a narreme, one particular to the stage, although only reported, not staged. The piracy- and shipwreck-narremes were derived from the so-called 'separation romances', and were indeed elements essential to the Greek romance from the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus on. Hamlet could surely have exchanged the letter of Claudius to

the British king without such an addition. Scenes on board ship, like pulling down ceilings, tend to cause expense and are from a utilitarian point of view expendable. But the narreme of the sea voyage is repeatedly used not only in the ten plays which Shakespeare based on Elizabethan works of narrative prose, and we must admit that theatre versions often manage to stage storm and shipwreck in impressive ways.

The event as narreme. A narrower concept of the narreme focuses on what Lotman called an *Ereignis* ('event') in a narrative.[21] This is not an occurrence like a shipwreck or a duel but the psychologically essential turning point in a series of actions, the crossing of a 'semantic boundary'. It need not be staged at all: for instance, it may consist of a decision, a crossing from innocence to experience or ignorance to knowledge. In *Othello* the first event in Lotman's sense is Othello falling in love with Desdemona. But this does not 'happen' on stage. The next 'event' is the revelation of the animus which Iago bears against Othello – again, not an 'event' in common parlance. Next there is Othello's entrance and the words, 'Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust 'em', which convey his self-confidence, his sovereign nature, the respect he commands. But he *does* nothing. The next event is the realization on the part of Brabanzio that he has lost his daughter to Othello. In the Lotmanesque sense, by contrast, Iago's cutting off Cassio's leg is no event: a director could excise the passage. It only confirms what we know about Iago's ruthlessness.

Lotmanesque 'events' are potential narremes, usually fabricated by audiences and readers.

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[20] In Cinthio's version (Bullough, *Sources*, vol. 7, p. 250f), 'Disdemona' is struck several times by the Ensign (whom Shakespeare calls Iago) until she is dead, and then, 'placing her in the bed, and breaking her skull, he and the Moor made the ceiling fall as they had previously planned . . .'

[21] Juri M. Lotman, *Die Struktur Literarischer Texte* (Munich, 1972), p. 232.

Thus we might assign them to reader response theory as much as to the analysis of a dramatic plot. What speaks for Lotman's concept of the *event* is the agreement of the commentators as to what 'happens' in the plays. The action of *King Lear* is triggered off by Lear's terrible mistake in 'reading' Cordelia's 'Nothing'. Yet the text itself refers to it only slantingly – in Kent's 'What wouldst thou do, old man?' (1.1.146), and in Regan's judgement, 'He hath ever but slenderly known himself' (1.1.292–3) By definition, the narreme is a recurring phenomenon: here the concept of the event is expanded to include focal points of a psychological or moral kind which are not to be seen on stage but on which audiences and readers are nevertheless likely to agree.

In contrast to the narreme of the shipwreck, then, a marginal element in some of the plays, the 'event' in Lotman's sense is an essential narreme of the play; indeed, the concept allows a fresh look at what happens in any and all of Shakespeare's plays. The first event in *Lear* might then be signalled by Lear's question, 'Are you our daughter?' (1.4.201) and later on his line, quite out of context, emerging as it were out of some subterranean level of consciousness, 'I did her wrong.' (1.5.25). The overt action in this scene is comparatively trivial.

In the light of Lotman's view, we might question the view that Shakespeare's words, not his 'events', constitute the essential ingredient of his genius. We have the fact that Verdi's *Otello* dispenses with every syllable of the original text, and might be seen as a travesty of the original, yet continues to captivate audiences all over the world. As John Russell Brown put it recently, the plays 'survive without the advantage of his verbal brilliance when translated into many other languages'.[22] Indeed, the opera dispenses not only with Shakespeare's text but also with much of the action of the play. Presumably it continues to grip us because the narremes encapsulated in the Lotmanesque 'events' are successfully translated into the opera. As Brown puts it, 'seeing his plays performed in other languages than English is to realize how much of their vitality and viability is due to popular showmanship and an imaginative use of the physical elements of the actors' performances . . .'[23] An alternative hypothesis might have it that Shakespeare's words are gone, but not his narremes, especially those patterns of experience and insight which constitute the 'viability' of the plays.

At this point we can explain more exactly what a *narreme* is in relation to our analysis of Shakespeare's narrative. It is a *type* of event in a text, and belongs to a category of phenomena which we can better understand by comparing and contrasting a number of examples. The idea that we have to do with a collection of similar phenomena can inspire us to organize or reorganize our perception of the work and of our considered responses to it. This is a process to which the solitaire does not readily lend itself: for the standards to be applied have to be drawn from nonliterary fields, such as psychology, sociology, history, and so on, as well as our own life experience. But the latter probably fails to include sword fights, piracy on the high seas, oracles and such mortal family feuds as those between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Thus the relevant standards of comparison cannot be derived from literature but only from those elements in the drama that can or perhaps must be captured in the opera version. The event survives translation into a foreign tongue and into genres of which Shakespeare knew nothing, like the children's tales which Charles and Mary Lamb based on Shakespeare.

The success of the Lambs' retelling of Shakespeare's plots is presumably (since the language and imagery are largely their own and the plots are much simplified), also due to the narremes retained. One of the narremes which the Lambs generally rescue is the over-all structure which

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22 John Russell Brown, 'Shakespeare's International Currency', *Shakespeare Survey 51* (1998), p. 193.
23 Brown, 'Shakespeare's International Currency', p. 195.

contemporary criticism has identified as being that of the tale *per se*, identified by Vladimir Propp,[24] sometimes encapsulated as the narreme called the 'lack-and-its-liquidation' narreme, said to be basic to the folk tale. The same claim can be made for the model of the French narratologist Claude Bremond,[25] who offers us a very simple pattern of events which we can also claim to be a narreme, and one that applies to some of Shakespeare's works: a folktale consists often as not of a cycle of movements across four poles, from *stasis* to *degradation* to *deficiency* and back through *amelioration* to stasis once more (see figure).

←←←	Satisfactory	←←←
↓	state	↑
Procedure of		Procedure of
degradation		amelioration
↓	State of	↑
→→→	deficiency	→→→
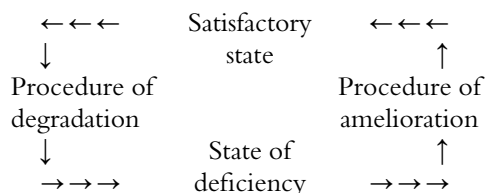
The Winter's Tale will serve to illustrate this model. We begin with a pleasant scene at the court of Leontes. This image of harmony clouds over as Leontes' suspicion of Hermione's infidelity grows. Here the 'event' is the change of Leontes' attitude to his wife and then in paranoid succession to his son Mamillius, his friend Polixenes and his adviser Camillo. A series of tragic events follows: the deaths of Mamillius and Hermione, the flight of Polixenes and Camillo. Here the cycle stops at the 'deficiency' way-stage. The second cycle is completed. The sheep-shearing feast shows a pleasant scene of social life and a seemingly stable society, which then moves via an accusation scene toward disintegration. Finally, the two kings are reconciled, their children reunited, and Hermione turns out to be alive after all.

The play, in other words, follows a version of the Bremond cycle, moving from stasis to deterioration and then to amelioration and stasis again. Each section is punctuated by some kind of revelation: in the first cycle it is truth brought in by an oracle, in the second cycle it is the 'fardel' that proves Perdita to be Leontes' daughter. Thus we have a double narreme consisting of two interlocked Bremond-like patterns of character and event.

The structural narremes of *Othello* or of *Troilus and Cressida* can be similarly charted, except that 'chaos is come again' in the finale of each. Other plays, such as *Measure for Measure* and *Cymbeline*, are more complex, so that the Bremond model can help elucidate sections of the work, not the over-all pattern. For the *aficionado* of plot structures, however, this is no great drawback: if a narreme helps us better to grasp minor patterns between the greater ones, it is illuminating. For the student of Shakespeare seeking to identify and sort out characters, themes, motivations, or patterns of time and action, the Bremond model, like that of Propp, helps to make the concept of the narreme a useful tool.

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[24] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington, 1958).
[25] Claude Bremond, 'Morphology of the French Folktale', *Semiotica*, 2 (1970), 247–76.