

GEORGE WHALLEY AND A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

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One of the benefits of studying or teaching Shakespeare, in addition to the endless fascination of the primary material, is the extraordinary quality of at least some of the secondary literature. Commentary grows at an alarming rate, and much of it is uneven to be sure, but a significant number of writers who were, or became, major authors in their own right honed their thinking in their attempts to come to grips with Shakespeare. In the English tradition figures such as Dr. Johnson or Samuel Taylor Coleridge come to mind. On the other side of this critical coin, there are also plenty of examples of writers who said nothing, or next to nothing, about Shakespeare but whose work, nevertheless, can be brought to bear on the plays and poems with some very interesting results. An example of this sort would be a critic such as Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas about dialogism or the nature and role of carnivalesque elements in literature have been applied to Shakespeare by others and have generated some illuminatingly new perspectives. You don't need to be a Shakespearean to influence the way others think about him. A further opportunity for a fresh perspective is available in the work of the Canadian scholar George Whalley, not least because of his extraordinary fusion of classical and romantic principles of literary criticism, a combination of approaches that often summon Johnson or Coleridge as their distinctive—and separate—representatives.

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Whalley was an eminent man of letters in Canada until his death in 1983. The website now dedicated to his work describes him as “a scholar, poet, naval officer and secret intelligence agent during World War II, CBC broadcaster, musician, biographer, and translator.”¹ He taught at Queen’s University for a matter of some thirty years (1950-80), but for my immediate purposes the most important things to note about his career are his lifelong interest in the poetry and criticism of Coleridge and his sustained engagement with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The former is manifest in his biography of Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson (1955) and in his editorial work on Coleridge’s *Marginalia* for the Princeton edition of Coleridge’s collected works (1980-2001). The latter issued in the posthumous publication of his edition of the *Poetics*, including translation and commentary (1997). Included in this publication is the remarkable essay called “The Aristotle-Coleridge Axis,”² which brings together in a seminal way the thinking of the two major figures usually understood to represent antithetical poles in the tradition of literary criticism. Though Coleridge is often cited as inaugurating an emphasis on character and psychology in Shakespeare’s plays, what this means, Whalley argues, is not that Coleridge snatches “the primacy of ‘plot’ out of Aristotle’s hands” in order to “reassign it to ‘character’; it is rather to complement and reinforce Aristotle’s position” (176).

Aristotle had seen that tragedy is action of a certain kind and figure; it is induced through a person (‘character’) acting out a certain configuration of events (‘plot’). As long as the action is significant *human* action, plot can no more be separated from character than initiative can be separated from

¹ <http://georgewhalley.algomau.ca/drupal6/>. This website, created by Michael DiSanto, offers a brief introduction to Whalley’s life and works as well as a link to a biographical essay by John Ferns.

² George Whalley, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 161-77.

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the tissue of knowing and not-knowing. What Coleridge has done is greatly to enrich the possibilities of tragic action by allowing for a greater intricacy of initiative, thereby allowing for a finer and more exquisite definition of moral trajectory; he has done nothing to detract from the integrity of the *drama*, the self-defining of the action as *tragic*. (176)

At the heart of this argument that Aristotle and Coleridge offer complementary approaches to an understanding of drama and tragedy is a claim about the fundamental congruence of what Coleridge calls “imagination” with what Aristotle calls “mimesis.” Imagination, on this view, performs a “realizing function, a dynamic state of wholeness accessible to all men, and overflowing into things-made [poems, plays] so that they have a life of their own, not being the image of the person who made them” (176). It is this sense of imagination as a realizing function helping to clarify the moral trajectory of tragic action that gives Whalley’s way of thinking about drama its extraordinary promise as a way of thinking about Shakespeare—even if Whalley didn’t much write directly about Shakespeare.

A further implication of the claim that Coleridge allows for a “greater intimacy of initiative” and a “finer and more exquisite definition of moral trajectory” is that it brings to the fore the minute and concrete study of language. Coleridge, after all, is the inventor of practical criticism or what a later century came to call (in a rather belated way) the “new criticism” or the close reading of texts, and he honed his skills in this regard with his celebrated analysis of Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis” in the *Biographia Literaria*. But it is possible to get a quick view of the way Whalley aligns this Coleridgean emphasis with the Aristotelian emphasis on the integrity of action by noting the central

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premises that he brings to bear in his analysis of Jane Austen. Austen, he argues, is a poet in two senses:

(1) in her craftsmanship in language; and (2) in the conduct of the action within each novel. In the first sense, we need to consider fine-grained detail with an ear alert to the dynamics of language; in the second, we are concerned with the disposition of forces within the whole universe of a novel, particularly that mutual definition of plot and character the product of which Aristotle called *drama*, the thing done, or what I may elsewhere—to distinguish it from the ‘action’ that is sheer motion—also call ‘pure action’; the one sense discloses itself on a small scale, the other on a large scale. The evidence for each is of a particular kind, each different from the other. Yet both kinds or functions interact upon each other and can be seen to be poetic because both reside at the heart, or at the roots, of imaginative activity.³

The two functions here summon the energies of both Coleridge (on language and imagination) and Aristotle (on drama and action), but though the passage emphasizes the point that these functions “interact upon each other,” it is Aristotle’s focus on the mutual definition of plot and character that receives greater play in this opening statement. Yet even here the claims are highly compressed and rather puzzling. There is apparently a kind of action which is distinct from the kind that is sheer motion and which Whalley calls, variously, drama, pure action, or the “thing done.” What exactly *is* this thing—

³ “Jane Austen: Poet,” *Jane Austen’s Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: The MacMillan Press, 1976), 108-09. Subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. The essay was reprinted in George Whalley, *Studies in Literature and the Humanities: Innocence of Intent*, eds. Brian Crick and John Ferns (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985), 145-74.

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when it's *done*? And especially, what is it when it concerns the disposition of forces within the whole universe of the work?

In the *Poetics* Aristotle considers the matter of wholeness and of the disposition of forces that contribute to it under the heading of “unity of action.”⁴ But the applicability of this central principle to Shakespearean drama has over the years become entangled with some pervasive misperceptions about the Aristotelian provenance of other unities (of time and place) about which Aristotle, in fact, says next to nothing (they are mostly the invention of continental theorists in the 15th and 16th centuries), and one result of the entanglement is a general tendency to dismiss the relevance of Aristotelian thinking to Shakespeare period. The distinguished Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt is representative in this regard. In his general discussion of “Shakespearean Tragedy” in the newest edition of *The Norton Shakespeare* he argues that “the playwright’s great achievement as a whole does not comfortably fit the philosopher’s influential descriptive account.”⁵ Like many others, Greenblatt follows Samuel Johnson’s great dismantling of the doctrine of the unities, and like many others he supposes that in showing that neither the unity of time nor the unity of place is a regular feature of Shakespearean drama he has also, thereby, somehow disposed of the unity of action. Yet Aristotle’s central principle comes sneaking back into the argument in its later stages without any acknowledgment that it is his. “The death of the protagonists [in the tragedies,]” says Greenblatt, “all bear a significant relation to everything that has come before—that is, to their choices, their

⁴ This principle crops up repeatedly in the treatise, though the most explicit discussion is found in chapters 7 and 8. See especially pages 78-81 in Whalley’s translation, hereafter cited parenthetically as *Poetics*.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespearean Tragedy,” *the Norton Shakespeare, Second Edition: Tragedies* ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al* (New York: Norton, 2008), 104.

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suffering, their whole way of experiencing the world.”⁶ Fate or destiny has a role, of course,

but the characters themselves cannot and do not live as if they had no agency at all. They suffer intensely from what Hamlet calls the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (3.1.60), but they are never merely victims. They always contribute to the catastrophe that befalls them, if only by setting in motion through some irreversible action an uncontrollable chain of events that brings devastation in its wake.⁷

The centrality of choice and agency, of a suffering the protagonists bring on themselves or to which they contribute materially, an action that is irreversible because governed by necessity or probability, and an uncontrollable chain of events or an overarching *praxis* that brings devastation—what are all of these if not fundamentally Aristotelian principles? The Philosopher’s “influential descriptive account” clearly does fit in ways that Greenblatt seems not realize, even as he gives his own descriptive account. This reliance on the principles without precisely seeing them for what they are displays a certain muddle or confusion that is not untypical of contemporary Shakespeare studies. The Shakespearean expert fails in his account both of Aristotle and of Shakespeare by failing to see the fit.

By contrast, Whalley, though he says nothing about Shakespeare, prepares the way for a more lucid understanding of the fit by emphasizing the insistent, repeated focus on the unity of action in the *Poetics*. Where Dr. Johnson clears the way for common readers by dismantling a rigid neo-classical doctrine of the unities, Whalley clears it

⁶ Greenblatt, 111.

⁷ Greenblatt, 112.

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further by exposing much of the so-called doctrine as pseudo-classical. The putative ‘unity of place’, he says, is not Aristotelian at all but the “contribution” of Castelvetro, the 15th-century Italian theorist. And the one point in the *Poetics* that offers “the only conceivable reference to the ‘unity of time’,” Whalley argues, has actually much more to do with comparing the relative concentration of tragedy with the looser structure of epic. The relevant Greek word in the *Poetics* is *mekos*, which can mean ‘length’ as well as ‘time’, and in context it refers not to the time it takes to read or perform a play but to “the time encompassed by the action”: “the right *mekos* of tragedy is whatever secures the tense concentration of action peculiar to tragedy” (*Poetics*, 65-6). By this account, then, there is only one unity that really counts and that is the unity of action, and by highlighting that more clearly in Aristotle, Whalley also prepares the way for a clearer view of its relevance to Shakespeare.

At this point, however, one might well imagine that I have shifted the focus from Whalley and Shakespeare to Aristotle and Shakespeare, and to a certain extent this is true. Though I use Whalley’s translation of and commentary on the *Poetics* in my Shakespeare class, I spend a good deal of time asking the students questions that come directly out of Aristotle. What choices are the characters making? What emotional effects do they elicit or respond to? Are their actions governed by probability and necessity? Is the action unified, and is anything purified, clarified, or purged at the end? But I want to bear down more specifically on a section of the *Poetics* which I understand in a conspicuously Whalleyan way. The passage comes at the end of Chapter 11, and, following a shrewd discussion of reversals and recognitions, it offers a short paragraph on *pathos*, the bedrock of tragedy. Here is Whalley’s translation:

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These then—*peripeteia* and recognition—are two elements of the [complex] plot; a third [element is] *pathos*. [...] A *pathos* is a murderous or cruel transaction, such as killings—[taken as] real—and atrocious pain and woundings and all that sort of thing. (*Poetics*, 91)

I won't take the occasion to compare Whalley's translation here with other contemporary translations, nor comment on many of the critical issues involved, except to say that Whalley's approach to translation is at its most Coleridgean in this particular paragraph.⁸

The part that interests me most at the moment is the definition of *pathos* as a transaction. Whalley comments on his reasons for this definition.

Pathos (from *paschein*, 'suffer') primarily means something 'suffered', something that happens to a person—the complement to something done. Yet Aristotle says that a *pathos* is a *praxis*, an 'act'. [...] The paradoxical term *pathos-as-praxis* seems to imply that the crucial event is to be seen both as suffered and as inflicted. Aristotle's choice of the word *praxis*—which he regularly uses elsewhere of the single overarching tragic action as distinct from the separate *pragmata* (events) of which the *praxis* is composed—suggests further that the *pathos* as an event is both pregnant and determinate, the beginning of a process. *Peripeteia* and 'recognition' heighten and concentrate emotional force: *pathos* is the key event / act that provides substantial foundation and focus for the *peripeteia* and

⁸ The Coleridgean element is conspicuous in the bit inserted in square brackets before the word "real"— "[taken as] real"—which summons what Whalley calls the realizing function of imagination. The Greek words here, *en toi phaneroi* ('in the visible sphere'), lie at the heart of Aristotle's dispute with Plato over whether the poet's representations can disclose important truths about universals or reality. Whalley's parenthetical insertion provides a hint about his much larger argument concerning the correspondence between imagination and mimesis.

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recognition. I have therefore rendered *praxis* here as a ‘transaction’ to indicate the *pathos*-action paradox and to preserve the processive potential of the word *praxis*. (*Poetics*, 90)

What this commentary brings out with peculiar force is the strangeness and strength of *pathos*, the combination of suffering *and* action, of something inflicted and yet withstood, and not merely withstood in a passive way but withstood with some kind of shaping power, some kind of agency, a supreme testimony to on-going life and vitality even in the midst of destruction and pain. Greenblatt, in the essay I cited earlier, pursuing his view of Aristotle and Shakespeare as being at odds with one another, argues that “For Shakespeare, the form of tragedy, the element central to the *Poetics*, is only a slender, fragile bark bobbing on a chaotic, destructive, and ecstatic sea of suffering.”⁹ By pitting Shakespeare and Aristotle against one another, this claim also pits suffering and tragic form against one another, and in doing so it offers a very impoverished view of tragic form and an incomprehensible view of suffering. By contrast, Whalley’s account shows *pathos* as an integral part of tragic form. The suffering has meaning precisely because, and to the extent that, it helps to shape the form, an inherent part of the process, the transaction. The *pathos* in being a *praxis* is to some extent a part of the form—and not separable from it in the way Greenblatt imagines.

What this means for the study of Shakespeare, of course, is a matter of far-reaching implication, extending not only to the tragedies but to other works too. The idea of a *pathos* that is a part of the form of drama applies to things as various as *The Rape of*

⁹ Greenblatt, 104.

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*Lucrece*¹⁰ or *Richard II* or even *Twelfth Night* as much as to *Hamlet*, *Othello* or *Lear*. But in order to illustrate the point and to indicate something of the reach of Whalley's way of thinking for the study of Shakespeare, I turn to *The Winter's Tale*. That this play is classified as a romance or more accurately as a tragic-comedy makes it an interesting parallel to the novels of Jane Austen that Whalley discusses in his essay on her. Whether he discusses the more romantic novels or—even more penetratingly—the shape of *Mansfield Park*, which he considers to be a tragedy with a prosperous outcome and fundamentally different in kind from her other fictions, his central perception concerns the nature of dramatic form.¹¹

To those of us who are in the habit of thinking of the 'action' in a novel or play or film as the overt (and preferably sensational) things that people do or have done to them, the internality of Aristotle's view of the nature and sources of tragedy will probably seem a bit esoteric. But Aristotle's view of dramatic action is all of a piece with his ethical view of the sources of human action. And Coleridge, in all his reflections upon moral and dramatic values, also insists upon the internality, the self-originating nature of action; we cannot without damage go behind the statement 'I act'; it is always an 'I' acting, decisively and irreversibly; restraint from action can therefore [also] be an act. He is acutely aware of the bond between action and passion, between doing and being done to, and of the

¹⁰ I explore the implications of Whalley's thought about this idea in my extended analysis of "Action Figures in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," *Renaissance and Reformation/ Renaissance et Reforme* 33.1 (Winter/Hiver 2010): 81-107.

¹¹ An interesting follow-up to Whalley's suggestive comments about the element of tragedy in Jane Austen is found in Sarah Emsley, "The Tragic Action of *Mansfield Park*," *Persuasions On-Line* 28, no.1 (Winter 2007). A revised version of this essay is scheduled to appear in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Mansfield Park*, eds. Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire (New York: The Modern Language Association, forthcoming).

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correlation of action and passion in any one person. (“Jane Austen: Poet,”
114)

The “He” referred to in the last sentence is probably Aristotle (though the gist of the argument may assimilate Coleridge to it as well), and the correlation of action and passion here sounds very much of a piece with the discussion of *pathos* in the *Poetics*.

In *The Winter’s Tale* the central *pathos* involves the suffering inflicted on the female protagonist, Hermione, by her jealous husband Leontes. His jealous rage is as violent as it is sudden, and it results in his sending her to prison to await trial for treason and to face what he regards as an inevitable death sentence. Her imprisonment is the more stressful in that she is nearing the term of her pregnancy, but in facing prison she herself defines her *pathos* in ways that only Whalley’s principles can fully illuminate. She addresses her waiting gentlewomen:

Do not weep, good fools,
There is no cause. When you shall know your mistress
Has deserved prison, then abound in tears
As I come out. This action I now go on
Is for my better grace.¹²

(2.1.120-4)

The weeping ladies see her plight as a matter of suffering, pure and simple, but Hermione is unwilling to cast herself as simply a victim. For her the suffering is more than a matter of simple endurance; it has a purpose, her “better grace,” and while what exactly that

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Norton Shakespeare, Second Edition: Romances and Other Poems*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al* (New York: Norton, 2008). References are cited in the text by act, scene, and line number.

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could mean remains mysterious, she clearly sees herself, even or perhaps especially in the throes of her *pathos*, as “an ‘I’ acting, decisively and irreversibly.”

In external terms, her action is most visible and impressively heroic in her magnificent speeches of self-defense during her trial in Act 3, but that action comes to an abrupt conclusion when she faints—and supposedly dies—at the conclusion of the trial. And since she then effectively disappears for the rest of the play, until the very last scene, the way that her *pathos* participates in the overarching action of the play, its *praxis*, also remains deeply obscure. I won’t go on to offer a detailed discussion of the workings of the play,¹³ but in order to suggest the extraordinary illumination that Whalley’s formulation about *pathos-as-praxis* can cast on it, I return to the first of the critical principles he brings to bear on Jane Austen: “to consider fine-grained detail, with an ear alert to the dynamics of language.” In reading Shakespeare, as in reading Austen, it is important to see how the dynamics of language interact with the drama of the whole. “In this,” Whalley argues, “we are not considering simply a verbal locution or ‘figure of speech’ but a commanding process radical to poetry itself—the metaphorical process that secures and enriches the interaction not only of single words, but of elements within sentences, of sentences within paragraphs, and the collusive interaction of elements of much larger scale if they can be constructed with strong-enough identity” (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 117).

A good example of a dynamic language with fine-grained detail is to be found in *The Winter’s Tale* when the Old Shepherd celebrates the abilities of his long-deceased wife. Hermione’s trial now seems a thing of the distant past, and her lost daughter,

¹³ My seminar paper on “Reported Speech in *The Winter’s Tale*” for the Conference of the Shakespeare Association of America, Bellevue, Washington, April 8, 2011, offers a preliminary discussion of how the principles work in detail.

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Perdita, in ignorance of her origins, is being admonished to play her part as mistress of the sheep-shearing festival in Bohemia:

Fie, daughter, when my old wife lived, upon
This day she was both pantler, butler, cook,
Both dame and servant, welcomed all, served all,
Would sing her song and dance her turn, now here
At upper end o'th' table, now i'th' middle,
On his shoulder, and his, her face afire
With labour, and the thing she took to quench it
She would to each one sip. You are retired
As if you were a feasted one and not
The hostess of the meeting. [...]
Come, quench your blushes, and present yourself
That which you are, mistress o'th' feast.

(4.4.55-68)

The vitality of this passage is evident even when quoted out of context, the energy of the hostess reflected in the restless movement of rhythm and syntax. In it Shakespeare exhibits the same sort of “overarching poetic instinct” with which Whalley credits Jane Austen, “to be seen in her handling of detail, economically and vividly, so that actual things at times glow under her eye—a process I have called ‘naming’, which, in the perceiving as in the writing, turns upon the vitality of concreteness—what Henry James admirably called ‘solidity of specification’” (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 123).

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The drama of the Old Shepherd's wife consists in good measure in the way she is solidly "there" in all the specificity of poetic enactment Shakespeare gives her, her concreteness all the more remarkable in that she is not actually there. She is, in terms borrowed from Whalley's translation of Aristotle's paragraph on *pathos*, "[taken as] real." And this tension between imaginative and literal reality brings us to the heart of Shakespeare's purposes, the way his dynamic language interacts upon the drama of the whole. At one level the wife is being held up as a model hostess, praised for fulfilling to perfection the function that proved so fraught with difficulty in the conflict between Leontes and his wife, and so the passage clearly comments on the beginning of the *praxis*, offering something of a vindication of Hermione's actions. Even more important, however, is its connection with the end of the play. In Shakespeare's source (*Pandosto* by Robert Greene) the Old Shepherd's wife is, in fact, alive.¹⁴ The representation of her in the play as dead but brought back to vivid life in this moment appears to be a part of a pattern of what Whalley calls the "collisive" interaction of sentences and paragraphs with elements of much larger scale. The celebration of the old wife as hostess seems intended as a part of the *praxis* of the play, anticipating the conclusion, with its resurrection of Hermione, parallel now to the resurrection of the wife. A detailed analysis would show more thoroughly how that connection is worked out, but this single illustration is enough to show how needful is Whalley's kind of attention to the combinations of dynamic language and the drama of what he calls "pure action" to come to a fuller understanding of Shakespeare.

¹⁴ The character in Greene is called "Mopsa." A generous selection of relevant passages from *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* is included in the Oxford edition of *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 234-74.

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I said at the beginning that Whalley did not much write directly about Shakespeare, but that statement requires a slight modification. In the course of celebrating Jane Austen, he does invoke Shakespeare directly, and in a way that bears on some of the issues I have been considering. “If her ‘Shakespearean’ quality is to be taken as a specific indication,” he says,

we can give it more point by noticing what Coleridge found impressive about Shakespeare. He rejoiced as much as anybody else in the variety and life-likeness of Shakespeare’s characters, and marveled at the copiousness of his invention. But two things that struck him just as forcibly were these: that none of Shakespeare’s characters seemed in any way a projection of Shakespeare himself, and were not drawn naturalistically from the life; and that Shakespeare was never guilty of ‘ventriloquism’, of speaking deceptively through his characters in his own person. (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 112)

Some of this may seem wildly wrong-headed, since it is a common assumption among Shakespeare experts and common readers alike that many, if not all, Shakespeare’s characters *are* drawn naturalistically *from life*, and it is also a near-universal assumption among Shakespeare’s biographers that he *does* project himself through his characters, ventriloquizing his own person.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Whalley and Coleridge seem to me fundamentally right. The greatest of writers, such as Austen and Shakespeare, rise to a level of impersonality that is not to be explained (or explained away) as authorial self-projection. And if their characters are defined crucially by their autonomy or

¹⁵ The dubious assumptions underlying the desire to equate the author and his characters are impressively challenged by James Shapiro in *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

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independence and integrity, that is not simply because they are endowed with voices of their own (their own highly individuated speech patterns) but also because they live within what Whalley calls the “whole universe” of the literary work. As a crucial passage in the *Poetics* has it, the force of great artists is not merely in representing men and women, but in a mimesis of *action*—or as Whalley says, ‘pure action’. In this realm, neither authors nor actors are primarily interested in presenting, or ventriloquizing, their own characters; rather, “they embrace their characters for the sake of the actions they are to do” (*Poetics*, 73). If we are to grasp the nature of that special disposition of forces in the plays, it would be enormously helpful—in some of the ways I have suggested—to bring Whalley’s way of thinking to the study of Shakespeare.