



Shakespeare's Symmetries: The Mirrored Structure of Action in the Plays

James E. Ryan

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The organization of Shakespeare's plays has challenged, even baffled audiences and critics since the 17th century. *Cymbeline* has been dismissed as "incoherent." *Hamlet* "is of no clear shape." And *Antony and Cleopatra* "bewilders the mind."

These judgments result from an incomplete understanding of Shakespeare's constructive practice. It is not the narrative arc alone that organizes the plays but a complex structure of interwoven narrative and thematic actions. While the narrative varies from play to play, thematic actions are invariably created in mirroring pairs around the central scene: A-B-C-B-A.

This symmetrical pattern, which can be visualized as an arch with a focal keystone, is the foundation of all of Shakespeare's mature work, as shown through an analysis of the 26 plays in this book. This arch illuminates the structure of plays that have long been puzzling, demonstrating that they are thematically organized and rigorously crafted. It also reveals subtleties otherwise invisible.

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