

**SAA seminar: Shakespeare and the Philosophy of Action
Vancouver, April 2015
Facilitator: Andrew Escobedo**

PARTICIPANT ABSTRACTS

Sarah Beckwith, "Losing the Name of Action: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, and Speech as Action"

"To know my deed 'twere best not know myself." Shakespeare's *Macbeth* shows us, with luminous, ruthless precision, a mind resisting its own responsible agency. In the dagger he sees before him, summoning him "the way that (he) was going", Macbeth turns his projected deed of regicidal murder into a compulsion of the will extrinsic to his being and doing. This paper takes Shakespeare's Scottish play as a case history to explore what is at stake in this trajectory, a trajectory thoroughly bound up with a story about the modern will and its energies and directions. It charts Macbeth's renaming of his action as a deadening of conscience, a deadening to the love of others.

This paper then takes up questions of action in relation to the erring conscience, and in relation to theatre as the privileged means of exploring action in this historical period. In thinking about the specific focus on the medium of action in theatre I hope to be able to say something about the contribution that Shakespearean tragedy makes to an exploration of action.

James Berg, "Action as the Reading of Intention: the Case of *Hamlet*"

This essay explores intention and action in *Hamlet*, with implications for other early modern plays, especially tragedies. Current understandings of intention as represented by analytical philosophers tend to locate intention in an subject or individual agent. Indeed, the connection between action and intention is arguably what *establishes* a person both as agent and as subject. But as represented in *Hamlet*, intention cannot be located within single human being. All action in *Hamlet* reveals that intention does not belong to the perpetrator, but rather the perpetrator to intention.

Thus, the persons in this play come across as *character* in the true sense of the word: though they are sentient, they are instruments of meaning, signifying entities that, in taking action, work with other signifying entities to articulate larger intention external to themselves. As a revenge play, *Hamlet* demonstrates the externality of intention obtrusively. Revenge, as a plotted act of passion, obtrusively requires intentionality yet the apparent abandonment of intentionality—even madness. In the universe of *Hamlet*, the perpetrator *partakes* of intention: Hamlet partakes of the larger intention articulated by the ghost, Laertes of the larger intention articulated by Claudius. Such representation of intention strikingly resembles the responses of Continental philosophers and social theorists (e.g. Foucault, Giddens, Bourdieu) to theories of intention in the Anglo-American tradition. But it is obviously much older: it is a Shakespearean perspective, obtrusive, perhaps, as an antithesis to the early modern legal need to locate responsibility within individual agents. It derives from long-established theological, literary, and theatrical traditions involving Providential outcomes and their figural meanings.

How, then, can human subjectivity and agency find expression in Shakespearean action? My argument is that they occur through the activity of *reading*, where reading is broadly defined as the interpretation of intention. Such reading is not just deciphering words on a page; it is struggling to decipher things in the world, and it occurs not only verbally but also *as action itself*. Revenge, suicide, murder, swordplay: in *Hamlet*, these are all particular ways of reading larger intention, and it is in such reading, rather than in intention itself, that the subjectivity effects so often associated with that play occur.

Sara Coodin, "Report me and my cause aright': *Hamlet*'s Philosophy of Action"

Act 5 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is filled with episodes whose moral seriousness threatens to devolve into farce. From graveside wrestling-matches to botched poisonings to a protagonist who utters the words "I die" and then keeps on talking, this material is -- and has subsequently become -- the stuff of high melodrama. My paper for our SAA seminar on Shakespeare and the philosophy of action takes its cue from Hamlet's final imperative to Horatio to "report me and my cause aright", an imperative that rings with meta-theatrical insight into his own story's malleability and its subjection to those who would perform it well, or badly. How

does Hamlet, who appears so resolute in the face of death in act five, understand the connection between his own intentions and the actions that will realize them, which will be performed by others? In what ways does Hamlet imagine the act of transmitting his intentions and the process of extending influence succeeding? Something I'd like to consider in this paper is an insight that Hamlet struggles with over the course of the play: the centrality of affect, which he bemoans early on as a source of weakness, but which he eventually recognizes as vital to the transmission of his moral identity and the moral tone of his story across time and space. I'm still very much in the exploratory stage with this paper, but I've been thinking about Aristotle's account of the moral life in Books I-III of the *Ethics*, and the cohesive function attributed to virtue, that also seems importantly bound up with feeling.

Lars Engle, "Rarer Action in *The Tempest* and Montaigne"

The representation of human action in Montaigne and Shakespeare might seem the nightmare from which analytic philosophy is trying to awake. The analytic philosophy of action I have so far read explores the complexity of finding adequate descriptions of apparently simple acts, often involving one agent doing something in an otherwise well-described physical, mental, and neurological surround. In drama, one can rarely fix any of these variables. Would Donald Davidson even consider it appropriate to try to tell us exactly what Master Froth did to Mistress Elbow after she went in to the Bunch of Grapes to satisfy her craving for stewed prunes in *Measure for Measure*, or to parse the gravedigger's assertion that the three branches of an act are "to act, to do, and to perform"?

Some believe that Montaigne's essays figure among the sources of Shakespeare's rich and confusing treatment of interior mental life in the second half of his career. Would Elizabeth Anscombe feel encouraged to attempt a precise delineation of intentions by Montaigne's account the way he himself, and most human beings who are not the younger Cato, act in "Of the Inconstancie of our Actions": "Our ordinary manner is to follow the inclination of our appetite, this way and that way; on the left, and on the right hand; upward and downe-ward, according as the winde of occasions doth transport us: we never thinke on what we would have, but at the instant we would have it : and change as that beast that takes the colour of the place wherein it is laid. What we even now purposed, we alter by and by, and presently returne to our former biase: all is but changing, motion, and inconstancy." (*Essays* 2.1 Florio 293)

As Davidson points out in "Locating Literary Language," which acknowledges some of the difficulties facing our seminar in its attempt to bring together analytic philosophy of action with Shakespeare, My schematic account of the intention with which an action is performed is no positive help for someone who wants to construct an interesting psychology of action. The imagination might be caught, however, at the point where it becomes appropriate to identify, to give propositional content to, the various beliefs, desires, motives and attitudes that cause an intentional action, and by causing it, determine in turn its appropriate descriptions. (*Literary Theory after Davidson* 297)

My paper will try to do this with respect to *The Tempest*, a play in which the influence of Montaigne is manifest. While Shakespeareans often treat *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as plays in which Shakespeare focuses intently on paradoxes involving intention, cause, action, and meaning, *The Tempest*, I'll suggest, offers both a searching critique of human aspirations with respect to action, and a brilliant set of definitional puzzles about how properly to describe actions that we see being, as we loosely put it, enacted. Both the critique and the puzzles owe a good deal to Montaigne's example. In discussing Montaigne's influence, I'll begin with the two essays Shakespeare quotes in *The Tempest*, "Of Cruelty" and "Of the Cannibals," but will also draw on Montaigne's critique of the possibility of definite descriptions in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* and his reflections on his own actions and intentions in "Of Experience."

Erin Kelly, "Dramatic Mimesis and the Stoic Philosophy of Action in *Othello*"

Burt States describes a conundrum of mimesis: defined as the "imitation of action," it implies a bias whereby the thing represented precedes the act of representation, but in fact theatrical representation of action also is action itself. There's something problematic, that is, about how we distinguish imitation from the thing itself. In a similar vein, King James in *Basilikon Doron* complains about those who imitate "true constancy," and warns against "that stoic insensible stupidity wherewith many in our days, pressing to win honour in imitating that ancient sect, by their inconstant behavior in their own lives belie their profession."

Stoic constancy provides an interesting test case for Sates' ideas about the ties between imitation and action. Can Stoic constancy ever be anything other than what it seems? Is imitating something necessarily inferior to the real thing? Is the difference between action and representation one of intention? In fact, Stoics seem to abjure the implicit hierarchy that mimesis posits between intention and action by aiming to merge inner state and outward behavior. Depictions of Stoics on the Renaissance stage, however, emphasize the difficulty of distinguishing between true constancy and inconstant pretenders masquerading as the virtuous. The problem is not only the hermeneutic difficulty of knowing other minds; it is also a matter of the indistinguishability of action and imitation. I want to explore this issue particularly in the context of Othello's closing speech, wherein his suicide is simultaneously a narrative describing his earlier execution of a Turk. It is a death in the vein of Stoic noble suicides, and yet it simultaneously calls into question the viability of Stoic virtue.

Amir Khan, "Between Agency and Prophecy, How Free is Macbeth?"

In what way is Macbeth constrained, or *forced* to act? That is, what can we, as readers, reasonably expect of Macbeth by virtue of being given a prophecy that necessitates not that he acts per se, but that he, at the very least, serves as King of Scotland?

Or contrarily, *is* it a matter of conventional necessity that Macbeth *acts* to realize the witches' prophecy—as though the only course of action open to him is to behave precisely as he does, realising the prophecy as "self-fulfilling"?

But the witches do not prophesy a *means*. They prophesy an *end*. So is it within our purview to imagine a different means to that end, say, a version of Macbeth who chooses *not* to act? Can we read Macbeth as a passive rather than an active character? What are we to make of these lines for example: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/Without my stir" (1.3.142-43)? In what way, that is, can we talk about Macbeth's *agency*? If he is destined to play out a prophecy given us (and him) apriori, we cannot say he is free. But conversely, if we are to imagine a Macbeth who does not act, who sits on his laurels and waits for the prophecy to materialize, we are also imagining a Macbeth who is unfree, waiting for the fates to act upon him, rather than taking action to realize whatever it is the fates have in store for him. But in both scenarios, Macbeth is victimized. Is there *any* way to conceive of Macbeth's freedom in the strongest sense? I plan to make the case, using the above noted lines as a departure point, *for* Macbeth's freedom, hence his agency—despite the seeming (conventional) constraints of Macbeth's existence in a (fictional) world with a prophecy in it.

Robert S. Knapp, "A Villain on Necessity: Edmund's Failure to Do Some Good"

This essay has two points of departure, one rather antiquated, the other quite recent. The first is Bradley's remark that the characters in *King Lear* (with the possible exception of Lear himself) all fall short considered as "psychological studies," so that the play as a whole stages "a conflict not so much of particular persons as of the powers of good and evil in the world." The second is our colleague Amir Khan's useful strategy of counterfactual analysis. Khan asks how our experience of *Hamlet* would be affected were we not to hear Claudius' confession; I ask how our experience of *King Lear* would change were Edmund (like Iago) to keep his own counsel.

I try to understand why Edmund is moved to intend some good despite of his own nature, and why he fails to realize that intention. I examine the structure of reasons and causes at work in this moment of the play, looking both at what might be driving Edmund considered as a person and at what dramatic effects follow from Shakespeare's raising these questions. For the counterfactual side of this inquiry, I glance at *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and at Tate's *The History of King Lear*, both of which treat the functional equivalent of this scene quite differently. Willfully adapting Michael Thompson's analytic neo-Aristotelianism, I conclude that Edmund's effort to reverse his order and Shakespeare's making us witness the attempt and its failure should ultimately be understood as the expression of form. Edmund attempts to move from one form of life to another—call it from evil to good—but fails; his failure is both dispositionally plausible (change cannot happen so quickly) and aesthetically necessary.

Ross Knecht, "Action and Rule in Wittgenstein and Sidney"

This paper will draw some parallels between Wittgenstein's account of actions and rules and Sidney's conception of poetry as the meeting point of the particular and the general. For Wittgenstein, intentional action has a normative character, for in order to ascribe intention or purpose to an action we rely upon a framework of rules to establish how a person should act in pursuit of a particular goal. These rules, however, are not the *a priori* principles of the Kantian tradition: they are instead contingent and conventional standards embodied in everyday actions. We thus arrive at something of a paradox: actions are guided by rules, but rules themselves are conventionalized actions. This leads Wittgenstein to contend that meaningful action is necessarily situated in what he called the "stream of life": a cascading sequence of historical practices, each taking place within an existing framework of rules, yet also altering that framework by establishing new precedents and standards for action.

According to Giorgio Agamben, Wittgenstein "call[s] into question the very dichotomy of rule and life, universal and particular, necessity and liberty, through which we are used to comprehending ethics." The conflation of action and rule, of the general and the particular, is anticipated in Sidney's poetic theory, which I will address in the second part of the paper. Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* argues that poetry is unique in harmonizing the descriptive and the normative. Treading a path between the philosopher's "bare rule" and the historian's commitment to "the particular truth of things," the poet "coupleth the generall notion with the particuler example," representing historical actions in such a way that they take on the character of rules. I hope to suggest that this harmony implies an immanent and historically-situated understanding of human action analogous to that of Wittgenstein.

Andrew Moore, "Non-Consensual Marriage in *Measure for Measure*"

Shakespearean comedies conclude with marriages. These marriages have deep metaphorical roots. Comedies end in marriages for the same reason that Jupiter and Juno are paired in the Greco-Roman tradition: because the subjugation of individual will to the good of the whole is the basic structure of both marital love and political community. *Measure for Measure* concludes with a famously ambiguous engagement. The Duke Vicentio declares his love; the would-be nun Isabella says nothing. The absence of spoken consent is provocative and problematic; for the marriage that should mark the restoration of social order instead appears tyrannical – "Give me your hand and say you will be mine" (5.1.496). Shakespeare wrote as theological bases for government were giving way to contractual conceptions – popular will replacing divine will. That consent is withheld at the end of the play (by Isabella? by Shakespeare?) points to the play's preoccupation with government by consent.

Robert B. Pierce, "Decision and Action in *The Merchant of Venice*"

In Aristotelian terms a tragedy (or epic) can be seen as an imitation of a single action, but, especially in Shakespeare's complex and somewhat diffuse plays, one can also look at individual actions within the play. If an action is defined as an event in which human decision plays an important role, how does Shakespeare portray the processes by which decision creates actions in his plays? As a dramatist he is naturally interested in looking at such actions as they emerge from decision. In several plays in the late 1590s and early 1600s, he gives special attention to characters making key decisions, but just earlier he has created a sort of fantasia of decision-making in *The Merchant of Venice*. I shall study several of these decision processes using what might be called three analytical language games—causal (considering a character's motivation), teleological (seeking the character's reasons for the choice), and characterological (showing how the action chosen expresses the individual character structure). Though *The Merchant of Venice* is full of interesting decisions, three of them are central to the plot: Portia's decision to submit to the test of the three caskets, Bassanio's choice of the lead casket, and Shylock's decision to demand the pound of flesh from Antonio. The three modes of analysis should yield a variety of insights into Shakespeare's ways of thinking about decision and action.

Tracey Sedinger, "For they know not what they do: *Richard II* and the problem of political agency"

My paper topic is prompted by a series of questions that I have always had when reading *Richard II*, and one that was re-invigorated by Rory Kinnear and Ben Wishaw's performances in *The Hollow Crown* (2012). In Shakespeare's play, did Richard depose himself or was he deposed? Was Bolingbroke the agent of that deposition, or was he the instrument of larger historical forces? Is the deposition an event or an action?

What kind of agency is at issue in the play, and how does that agency define (or is defined by) the political field?

My questions are in part generated by a comparison of the play with Sir John Hayward's *The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry IV*, which gives a very different portrait of agency. Hayward's *Life* is diagnostic, insofar as the responsibility for deposition and war is placed squarely on Richard's shoulders. Contrary to the rhetorical strategies deployed during rebellion as described by Mervyn James, Hayward does not displace agency from the king to his evil councilors, who are clearly his instruments. In addition, "the people" (depicted as a somewhat inchoate and irrational force) become the primary agent of the deposition, with Bolingbroke their passive – and therefore virtuous – instrument. In focusing more intently on the oppositional relationship between Richard and Bolingbroke, Shakespeare bars this recourse to the people, but also renders the individual actions of both characters more difficult to interpret and evaluate in relation to both political-theological and republican ideologies.

This last highlights the larger context in which this essay will be located. I am interested in tracing how the increasing interest in Tacitus at the turn of the century forced early modern writers to re-evaluate the varieties of action possible – especially actions with political intentions and/or consequences – now that Tacitean "cynicism" had called into question the virtues associated with the *vita activa* associated with Ciceronian humanism.

Andrew Sisson, "The Winking of Authority': Action, Accident, and Politics in *King John*"

I'm interested in what it means for *King John*'s political plot to center on a death that appears at once the realization of an intention (and so like an action) and yet an accident (and so like a mere event). My concern is less immediately with the philosophical problem of whether and how such a thing makes sense (on what concept of "intention?", etc.) than with asking why, in the context of the play's larger thematic interest in political legitimacy and sovereign authority, Shakespeare should have chosen to foreground an event that is problematic in just such a way.

I'll frame this issue by taking up two recent accounts that treat the peculiar circumstances of Arthur's death—his initial persuasion of Hubert, his subsequent fall on the rocks—as somehow indicative of the play's general approach to the topic of sovereignty. For Ken Jackson, Arthur is the paradigmatic object for a conception of political authority defined by a sovereign agent's capacity to kill. For Joseph Campana, by contrast, Arthur functions as a solvent of the whole category of agency, and indeed of sovereignty itself as a structure connecting intentions to futurity. Each account thus emphasizes one aspect of the event at the expense of the other: Jackson makes Arthur's death look equivalent to the outcome of an action causally determined by the sovereign's will; Campana makes the connection between that death and any particular act of willing look essentially adventitious.

What this impasse points to, I think, is a premise that prominently features in the recent critical literature on sovereignty, but may interestingly fail when applied to *King John*, namely that the character of a structure of political obligation may be assessed primarily in terms of particular, representative actions. Indeed, I want to suggest that one of *King John*'s major themes is the under-determination of such structures by the actions that nominally define them. This will, I hope, help us see whole what Shakespeare is up to when he makes England's crisis of sovereignty turn upon an event that is neither exactly an action nor exactly distinguishable from one.

Richard van Oort, "Shakespeare's Last Big Man"

Why does Coriolanus abandon his desire to burn Rome in 5.3? Why are the women (Volumnia, Virgilia, Valeria) successful in persuading Coriolanus while the men (Cominius, Menenius) are not? Is this another instance of Coriolanus bending to the will of his mother? But if this is the case, can we really regard the play as a tragedy? Tragedy requires us to identify with the protagonist and with the ethical dilemmas he faces. Is this possible with a hero who is so totally beholden to someone else? Coriolanus is not given to moral introspection (he has, for example, few soliloquies), and this has led some to regard him as an essentially ironic or even comic figure. Is he? Does Coriolanus undergo a genuine moral or spiritual crisis? Can we identify with him? Is our experience of him in 5.3 cathartic or ironic?

Larry Weiss, "The Branches of an Act: Hamlet Explains his Inaction"

This paper considers that Hamlet's soliloquy "How all occasions" contains a passage which answers the age-old question of why he deferred killing Claudius. That passage is two and a half lines consisting entirely of monosyllabic words which are both preceded and followed by pauses, thus highlighting the importance of the lines. In that passage Hamlet tells us that he, like us, doesn't understand why he hasn't fulfilled his promise to the ghost to do away with Claudius, as all the elements which determine action are present – motive, intention, ability and absence of hindrance. Applying the conventions of the soliloquy, I conclude that we should reject the theories that Hamlet's inaction was due to a nagging uncertainty about the authority of the ghost or the morality of honoring his mandate, or a functional inability to perform the necessary action. I conclude that Hamlet's "will," *i.e.*, his desire and intention to kill Claudius, while sincere, is paralyzed by his dread that the execution will result in his own death and damnation, as he tells us elsewhere.

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