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Mimesis Suspended: What "Passeth Show" in Hamlet?

Hamlet's response to his mother's urging to "cast" his "nightly colour off" (I.2.68)[1] which "seems ... so particular" with him, turns into an anti-mimetic manifesto:

> Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not "seems".
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief
> That can denote me truly. These indeed "seem",
> For they are actions that a man might play;
> But I have that within which passeth show –
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
>
> (I.2.76-86)

After a detailed and overdetermined description of the actions of mourning (which "a man might play"), Hamlet underlines that he has something "within which passes show:" something that is authentic and credible exactly because it cannot be articulated by and in action. The contradiction is obvious: the hero of one of the most sophisticated theatrical plays distrusts theatricality.

This paper focuses on some contradictions of this sort regarding *mimesis* in *Hamlet* – both in relation to the Prince of Denmark and to the play as a whole. The topology of each subsection is determined by the varying perspectives of the course of the argument. First, I will show the complexity of roles that the Prince of Denmark is expected to put on at the beginning of the play and the mimetic interference of his "antic disposition" with this multitude of roles. In the second section, I argue that Hamlet's chosen "fool-role" undermines the integrity of his character and thrusts both Hamlet and the whole play into an impasse.

The third section discusses *The Mousetrap* scene and its anti-mimetic consequences. Here particular attention is paid to the function of dumb shows and the indistinguishability between observers and the observed, audiences and players, subjects and objects of *mimesis*. Continuing the concluding thoughts of the third section, the last (fourth) part deals with the mimetic problems of the theatrical representation of *Hamlet*.

The subsections of the paper are arranged in a way in which each section provides a critique of the previous one: the second provides a critique of the observations of the first and the third of those of the second. With the aid of a discussion of the predicament of theatrical representations, the fourth section offers a critique of and a supplement to all the previous parts of the paper.

I

While Hamlet's bitter advice "To a nunnery, go" (III.1.152) is still echoing in the auditorium, Ophelia draws exasperated conclusions about the young Prince's poor shape:

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
>
> (III.1.153-157)

Describing a mental state which lost all control – "is ... o'erthrown" – Ophelia's lines seem to be rather out of control themselves. The more revealing they seem concerning the young Prince, the more confusing they prove to be. While it is clear that Hamlet's mind is "o'erthrown," there remains the question of whether –

or why – Hamlet decided to "o'erthrow" it. After all, who "o'erthrows" Hamlet's "noble mind"?

Furthermore, the line "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" is also somewhat baffling. G. R. Hibbard, the editor of the Oxford Shakespeare edition of Hamlet, remarks that here, "Shakespeare lists the roles the prince was expected to fill, together with the prime attribute each role demanded, without bothering to preserve exactly the same order in the two parts of the list."[2] While Hibbard admits that he thinks Shakespeare did not "bother," other editors emphasize that "this misalignment does throw light on the fact that Hamlet's sword is his intellect and that he fights with his tongue."[3] Neither of the textual explanations finds it significant that these lines are uttered not by a character called Shakespeare but Ophelia.

Moreover, the irony of the phrase "Th'observed of all observers" also casts light upon the complex nature of *mimesis* in *Hamlet*. Based on the authority of the Oxford English Dictionary, Hibbard's annotation reveals that the expression means that Hamlet is the "object of every true courtier's respectful attention."[4] We do not know about too many "true courtiers" or their "respectful attention" in Elsinore but we certainly know that Claudius and Polonius are hiding behind the arras during the dialogue between Ophelia and Hamlet. More generally, it is true that almost every single character in the play "observes" – and interprets – Hamlet. So does Ophelia: she compares the perfect Renaissance knight of her dreams to "mad" Hamlet, and remarks in exasperation that the "noble mind is here o'erthrown!" Every character observes and interprets Hamlet; and vice versa, Hamlet also observes and interprets everybody he encounters.

Observation – or, engaging a more pedestrian expression, spying – is crucial in *Hamlet*; logically therefore, role-playing becomes central as well. As we can understand on the basis of Ophelia's picture of Hamlet, Hamlet is one of the most versatile role-players, that is actors, within the play. As Harry Levin remarks in his essay on Hamlet's "antic disposition," "Hamlet's complexity is compounded of many simples: the frustrated scholar, the unwilling courtier, the mourner who becomes a revenger, the lover whose imagination rages like that of

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[2] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987) p. 245.

[3] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. The Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988) p. 150.

[4] Hibbard p. 245.

the lunatic or the poet, and still others – not least, the witty fool."[5] Consciously or unconsciously, Hamlet acts out a great number of roles.

Role-playing becomes significant not only as counterreaction to "observation," the great "pastime" of Elsinore, but also as the result of various tasks imposed on the characters of the play. The most important organizing elements at the opening of the play are the instructions given by the dominant characters in which they charge the less powerful ones with various roles. The actors on the stage are commissioned to play *actors* in given situations. Hamlet's commission is to revenge his father's murder. His imposed role is that of the avenger. Hamlet must first decide whether to perform or not to perform his assigned role; as he chooses to perform it, he then must choose how. From one perspective, this choice seems to be the central issue of the play in which Hamlet is acting as well as in the play in which the actor who is performing Hamlet is playing. Compared to the commands issued by Claudius and Polonius, the Ghost's guidelines for the task are extremely unprofessional and slack:

> Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury and damnèd incest.
> But howsomever thou pursuest this act,
> Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
> And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
> To prick and sting her.
>
> (I.5.82-8)

As a stage manager, the Ghost fails to provide directions specific enough for Hamlet, who, on the basis of his performance in Act I, Scene 2, is a reluctant actor. In the "transforming" Scene 5, however, Hamlet is forced to acquire some form of acting in order to be able to fulfill his task. As a device to achieve his aim, as a role within a role, he opts for "feigned madness."

Hamlet decides "[t]o put an antic disposition on" (I.5.173), to "assume a wild fantastic manner of thought and behaviour."[6] The expression "antic disposition" is a prominent reflection of the double theatrical nature of the play, since, as C. T. Onions's *Glossary* elucidates, *antic* as an adjective means "Fantastic, grotesque, ludicrous," while as a noun it refers to a "Buffoon, burlesque

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[5] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959) p. 125.
[6] Hibbard p. 195.

performer, jester."[7] Hibbard's annotation adds that "the part Hamlet will go on to play in his dealing with his opponents will have much in common with that of the witty clown."[8] This aspect is emphasized by Harold Jenkins's remark that the word *antic* was "particularly used of an actor with a false head or grotesque mask."[9] From a wider perspective, therefore, Hamlet's roles truly include "the frustrated scholar, the unwilling courtier, the mourner..., the lover,"[10] etc., but from the particular point of view of the play-within-a-play, his part is that of the avenger who pretends to be a clown. The roles of scholar, courtier, mourner, and lover are the consequence of the opening situation of the drama, in which the bereaved Prince arrives at court. The role of the avenger results from the actions of the play. The part of the clown adds a third layer, since this is not an imposed task but the outcome of Hamlet's decision. Robert Weimann remarks in his essay, 'Mimesis in *Hamlet*,' that the feigned madness signifies not only "an *object* of representation," such as the roles of the scholar, courtier, lover, and even that of the avenger, "but also ... a (nonclassical) *mode* of representing."[11] The role of the clown is not a static characteristic but a dynamic device of action. Due to this kind of *mimesis*, Hamlet's character gains its multiplicity: Hamlet is a character who is played by an actor; this character is commissioned to play a revenger, a hero; the hero decides to play a madman, which is articulated primarily in his jesting with the members of the Danish court. The problem, however, is that the madman role overshadows Hamlet's other roles. In other words, due to Hamlet's feigned madness, his other roles "pass show."

II

The above described interpretation offers a relatively transparent system in which the drama's characters are moving and a somewhat complicated but seemingly trouble-free interpretation of the working of *mimesis* in relation to the Prince's

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[7] C. T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*, enl. and rev. Robert T. Eagleson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, rpt. 1991) pp. 8-9.

[8] Hibbard p. 195.

[9] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Harold Jenkins (1982, rpt. London: Routledge, 1993) p. 226.

[10] Levin p. 125.

[11] Robert Weimann, 'Mimesis in *Hamlet*' in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (1985, rpt. London: Routledge, 1991) p. 278.

roles presented in the play. On the other hand, Hamlet's "antic disposition" also raises some serious problems concerning representation. His feigned madness undermines Hamlet's character and opens up vistas to the critique of *mimesis* itself. Hamlet's situation becomes impossible due to his fool-mask.

First, there is an obvious criticism of Hamlet's madness unfolding in Ophelia's disturbed lines quoted at the beginning of this paper. The "o'erthrown" "noble mind" prevents the Prince from performing his "actual" roles of the "courtier," "soldier," "scholar," etc. This criticism clearly echoes a Platonic reproach of role-playing. In *The Republic* Socrates emphasizes, "I think, too, that they must not get into the habit of making themselves resemble madmen, either in word or action. They must know madmen and bad men and women, but they must neither do nor imitate any of their actions."[12] This is a passage in *The Republic* offering an approach to *mimesis* which Jacques Derrida also discusses under the heading '*Mimesis, guilty or not guilty.*' Derrida remarks, "What is important for our purposes here is this 'internal' duplicity of the *mimeisthai* that Plato wants to cut in two, in order to separate good *mimesis* (which reproduces faithfully and truly yet is already threatened by the simple fact of its duplication) from bad, which must be contained like madness (396a) and (harmful) play (396e)."[13] Derrida's observation underlines two aspects through which Plato found the concept of *mimesis* problematic. The first aspect reveals an *ethical* criticism rejecting "bad" *mimesis* which represents negative and "harmful" human practices. The second aspect focuses on an internal flaw of the process of *mimesis* which is raised by the suspicious operation of "duplication." Both aspects are relevant to Hamlet's role determined by his "antic disposition."

Concerning the *ethical* side of Plato's criticism, it is evident that – for both an Elizabethan audience and Hamlet himself – the Prince's feigned madness raises obvious misgivings. In the Elizabethan theater, Hamlet's role of madness is "associated with the element of clowning, punning, and 'impertinency,' the tradition of topsy-turvydom and the 'mad' nonsensical Vice,"[14] as Weimann remarks. Moreover, the tracts in A. V. Judges's collection *The Elizabethan Underworld* suggest that Shakespeare's audience must have considered pretended

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[12] Plato, *The Republic*, transl. A.D. Lindsay (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1980) p. 78.

[13] Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session' in *Dissemination,* transl. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981) pp. 186-7.

[14] Weimann p. 278.

madness chiefly a device of criminals. Thomas Harman, for instance, describes them in his *Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1566):

> These abram-men be those that feign themselves to have been mad, and have been kept either in Bethlem or in some other prison a good time, and not one amongst twenty that ever came in prison for any such cause ... Some of these be merry and very pleasant; they will dance and sing. Some others be as cold and reasonable to talk withal. These beg money.[15]

The abram or abraham men were possibly named after the Abraham Ward of Bethlehem Hospital, and Judges notes that "there is reason to believe that most of these wandering mad folk were impostors."[16] After the enactment of *The Poor Law* in 1586, the strolling abraham men were obviously considered criminals not only in moral but in legal terms. Dekker in his tract 'O Per Se O' (1612) points out that "The abram cove is a lusty strong rogue," and they "are more terrible to women and children than the name of Raw-head and Bloody-bones, Robin Goodfellow, or any other hobgoblin."[17] Dekker's observation clearly echoes Ophelia's disturbed reaction to Hamlet's madness ("My lord, I do not know, / But truly I do fear it" [II.1.86-7]).

That Hamlet finds his role and situation debasing is demonstrated by the first line of his self-berating soliloquy at the end of Act II ("O what a rogue and peasant slave am I..." [II.2.544ff]), which sounds even more berating in the first quarto edition of *Hamlet* (1603): "... what a dunghill idiote slaue am I?" (E4ᵛ). Hamlet's derogatory comments, therefore, indicate that the role into which he is forced by his "antic disposition" is not acceptable to him. Hamlet's problem here is primarily connected to *what* he is imitating. But his misgivings about the role in which he finds himself and his increasingly less controlled actions in the course of the play lead to the second aspect of Plato's above quoted criticism of the concept *mimesis*: the flaw within the process of *mimesis* itself.

From this second perspective it is particularly significant what Jean Baudrillard writes about *simulacra* in his essay, 'The Procession of Simulacra,'

> To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other

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[15] Thomas Harman, 'A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly called Vagabonds' in A.V. Judges, ed., *The Elizabethan Underworld* (London: George Routledge, 1930) 61-118, p. 83.

[16] See Judges pp. 494 and 497.

[17] Thomas Dekker, 'O Per Se O' in Judges 366-82, pp. 371-2.

an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary."[18]

Although the differences between Plato's above described concept of *mimesis* and Baudrillard's concept of *simulation* are numerous (problems of origin, the inferiority of a copy, etc.), Hamlet's "antic disposition" gathers common elements between the two. On the one hand, Plato's suspicion raised by the process of duplication in *mimesis* becomes reinforced by the case of Hamlet. The *process* of *mimesis* determines the *product* of *mimesis*: the imitator deteriorates by the process of imitating. On the other hand, Hamlet's madness – as a *simulacrum* – eliminates the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary."

It is clear enough, therefore, that this description of the mechanism of *mimesis* or *simulacrum* in Hamlet's madness relegates questions such as "Is Hamlet really mad?" or "Is Hamlet a madman *or* a fool?" as non-relevant questions. "Madness and non-madness," "reason and non-reason" are intertwined in Hamlet's character; they appear as two sides of the same phenomenon, those of Hamlet's Janus-faced "antic disposition."[19]

In the course of the play, Hamlet's madness gradually undermines his non-madness. The Prince is unable to overcome the chosen disguise of the "antic disposition;" he is not capable of "taking off the fool-mask." His protesting in the bedroom scene "It is not madness / That I have uttered" (III.4.132-33) does not sound convincing to his "internal" audience, Gertrude, who has not seen the Ghost, nor does it convince the "external" audience shocked by Hamlet's excessively harsh treatment of his mother. Hamlet's simulation, which has proven beneficial in the beginning, which has provided him "with the sought-for position

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994) p. 3.

[19] See also – for a different perspective but similar results – Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, transl. Richard Howard (1967, rpt. London: Tavistock, 1971) pp. ix-x.

of a *punctum indifferens* in the midst of action,"[20] which has vigorously survived after the play-within-the-play scene, becomes disadvantageous in the play's second half. The accidental slaughter of Polonius presents Hamlet's "true" or "real" role as an avenging hero in a devastatingly satirical manner.

The voyage to England, then, is the result of and the metaphor for the final futility of the actions determined by Hamlet's "antic disposition." The sea voyage on a kind of *Ship of Fools* (with passengers such as Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) serves as a metaphor for the failure of Hamlet and, more generally, for the impasse of the actions of the play. The journey is a final submissive act in a stalemate situation. Hamlet's antic disposition has overwhelmed not only his other roles such as courtier, lover, soldier, etc. but Hamlet himself. In other words, in Act IV even Hamlet as a character disappears or "passes show."

III

The previous section of this paper has argued that the mimetic mechanism behind Hamlet's "antic disposition" undermines Hamlet's character and – to a certain extent – the play itself. This following section, furthermore, examines how Hamlet's "antic disposition" also problematizes the classical concept of *mimesis*. Weimann suggests, "There is, in *Hamlet* as in at least some of the other tragedies and problem plays, a deeply disturbing gulf between what is represented and what is representing (i. e. the Shakespearean activity in the text plus the performative action on the stage)." Weimann's argument is that *mimesis* in *Hamlet* cannot be "formulated in (let alone reduced to) either a representational or a non-representational theory of dramatic language."[21] Hamlet's "antic disposition" is crucial from this point of view since it epitomizes the co-presence of, and the conflicts between, verbal and non-verbal discourses in the *mimesis* in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's feigned madness offers an ironical perspective on *mimesis*: a kind of *mimesis* of *mimesis* which obliterates classical interpretations of this concept.

The Mousetrap scene is central to the suspension of representational models of *mimesis*. First of all, it is crucial that a mise-en-scene is the chief device of Hamlet's plotting against Claudius: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the

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[20] William Willeford, *The Fool and His Sceptre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969) p. 196.
[21] Weimann pp. 277-78.

conscience of the King" (II.2.606-7). As no professional jester is employed in the court of Denmark, no clown appears in *The Murder of Gonzago*. David Wiles argues that "Hamlet casts himself as the fool of both 'The Mousetrap' and *Hamlet*."[22] Taking Wiles's suggestion into consideration, it is particularly interesting that Hamlet advises the First Player to "let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (III.2.38-9). His main point is that clowns should not improvise; they should closely follow their own part. The instruction becomes sharply ironical because Hamlet, as the clown of the play-within-the-play, as the clown of the second part of *Hamlet*, and even in his role of revenger, plays extempore. In other words, there is an abyss between what is *said* and what is *done*, between text and show.

The play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, begins with a dumb show. Since W.W. Greg's famous article 'Hamlet's Hallucination'[23] published in 1917, this dumb show has been one of the most frequently discussed and most puzzling passages of *Hamlet*. Few critics discuss, however, that the dumb show as such is a major organizing constituent of the whole play from the beginning, from the appearance of the Ghost. Ophelia's description of Hamlet's odd behaviour *represents* a dumb show and it also appears in other scenes such as the scene of the silently praying Claudius and the scene in which the Ghost reappears. It also becomes significant in the graveyard-scene, in which Yorick's mute skull prophesies the play's somber conclusion. The dumb show has the same function in the inner play as the play-within-the-play in the whole *Hamlet*. The dumb show--with its tautological element and with its different mimetic quality-- becomes the *supplement* of the unfolding stories represented by the voiced text of the play.

Beyond the dumb show of *The Murder of Gonzago*, another – an even more significant – dumb show gains dominance over the voiced text in *The Mousetrap* scene. The whole scene is a metaphor for the whole play and it contains two separate lines of the plot: behind the surface entertainment of staging *The Murder of Gonzago*, there is the grim hidden line of the trap for Claudius. The entertainment and the trap are two different series of events in *The Mousetrap* scene, and Hamlet is the chief organizer of both of them. As he turns himself into a commentator, his dramatic point of view merges with the audience of *Hamlet*.

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[22] David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987) p. 57.

[23] W.W. Greg, 'Hamlet's Hallucination' *Modern Language Review* 12 no. 4 (October 1917)

When the audience's attention is focused on the play-within-the-play (the line of entertainment), Hamlet makes us conscious that the reaction of the audience-within-the-play (the line of the trap, the "meta-entertainment") is equally – if not even more – important. In other words, the dumb show (Claudius's reaction to the trap) appears parallel to, or even more dominant than, the voiced text (*The Murder of Gonzago*).

This dumb show is a "mimicry imitating nothing" as it is discussed in Derrida's 'Double Session.' This is the event in which we are "faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference." This event of the referentless reference, or of the copy of nothing, shifts from the simulacrum of classical mimesis to something different and this shift is marked by a "barely perceptible veil," a medium of undecidability and in-between-ness: a membrane that Derrida names the "hymen."[24] This in-between-ness evoked by the series of dumb-shows in *Hamlet* questions the applicability of classical or representational concepts of *mimesis*.

But there are further implications of *The Mousetrap* scene. Hamlet – with the aid of his mask offered by his feigned madness – gains control over various layers of discourse within the play. The play-within-the-play is Hamlet's complex and concealed trap for Claudius. Hamlet's threat is concentrated around another liminal in-between phenomenon: a secret.[25] Hamlet finds out Claudius's secret (that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father) but – once he succeeds – he thus also discloses his to Claudius (that he knows that Claudius murdered his father). The exchange between the Prince and the King can be best grasped through a distinction between *mutual knowledge* and *shared knowledge*: "Mutual knowledge, as opposed to *shared knowledge*, is that knowledge which speaker and addressee have in common and which they both know they possess. Shared knowledge is simply knowledge shared by speaker and addressee without explicitly knowing that they share it."[26] The most significant consequence of *The Mousetrap* scene is that it turns shared knowledge into mutual. The revelation is, therefore, quite manifold, following the rules of logical permutation. Consequently, we can argue

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[24] Derrida, 'The Double Session' pp. 206-16.

[25] "[N]othing is more virginal and at the same time more purloined and penetrated, already in and of itself, than a secret." Derrida, 'The Double Session' p. 259.

[26] Clara Calvo, *Power Relations and Fool-Master Discourse in Shakespeare*. (Nottingham: Dept. of English Studies, Univ. of Nottingham, 1991) (Monographs in Systemic Linguistics) pp. 96-7.

that the following pairs of presuppositions hold at the end of the play-within-the-play:

a) Claudius knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius; Hamlet knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius.

b) Claudius knows that Hamlet knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius; Hamlet knows that Claudius knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius.

c) Claudius knows that Hamlet knows that Claudius knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius; Hamlet knows that Claudius knows that Hamlet knows that Hamlet can threaten Claudius, etc.

If the "purpose of playing" is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (III.2.22), the purpose of the play-within-the-play, the epitome of *Hamlet*, is to hold a mirror up to Claudius. Hamlet, "The glass of fashion" (III.1.156), as Ophelia calls him, creates an endless series of reflections. What is important here from the point of view of *mimesis* is the aggressivity with which these reflections cut through the veil of representation which has been presented in the play before. The in-between "hymen" of Hamlet's crazy fool-role and of Claudius's apparently legitimate king-role are penetrated by the rays of these reflections and for a moment the revenger-Hamlet faces the usurper-Claudius. This event puts the rest of the play up to the very last scene into a kind of "parenthesis:" the rest of the play as a whole serves as a kind of *hymen* or *supplement* between this moment of the play and the very last scene.

This endless series of reflections appears through a diverse system of "observation" and role-playing. In this complex system, an audience changes into actors and the actors into an audience. Beyond the contradictions and suspensions of classical models of *mimesis* and the heterogeneity of verbal and non-verbal representation, the interchangeability of audience and actors – observers and the observed – makes the distinction between the subject and object of *mimesis* problematic within the play-world of *Hamlet*. In other words, representational *mimesis* breaks down in the play-world of *Hamlet*: it also "passes show."

But this blurred indistinguishability – or more fashionably the "différance" – between the subject and object of *mimesis* also exists between the "real" world of the audience and the play-world of a *Hamlet*-production. There is nothing outside *Hamlet*: the last section of this paper is evoked by this statement.

IV

According to the Platonic model, the dramatic representation of *Hamlet* is further removed from the level of ideas than the written play-text and thus inferior to both. The highly canonized text of the play functions as the site of an author-God conjured by the theatrical productions of Shakespeare's play. Any production based – even if frequently somewhat arbitrarily – on the Shakespearean text serves as a representative performance text of the "original." Although their forms of reflections and representations are variable to infinity, the theatrical productions still function as representations of the written text. The frequently endorsed desire to be "loyal to Shakespeare" reveals the theater-producers' submission to this Platonic model of *mimesis*.

The possibility of this loyalty to the author, however, is questionable on several accounts. Terence Hawkes, for instance, opens his essay 'Telmah' with the observations that *Hamlet* both opens and ends with dumb shows. As we have seen previously, dumb shows represent a *hymen* or *supplement* of representation which works against a Platonic perception of *mimesis*. Moreover--after drawing several parallels between the beginning and the end of the play – Hawkes also observes that it is in fact extremely difficult to determine when and how *Hamlet* actually begins and ends: "In our society in which *Hamlet* finds itself embedded in the ideology in a variety of roles, the play has, for complex social and historical reasons, always already begun." And when does it end? After the last words uttered on the stage, after the cannon fires, after the curtain calls, or after we have left the theater?

Hawkes, furthermore, senses an "opposing current" against the "straight, purposive, linear motion forward through the play." "Reinforcing its recursive mode," he refers to the play as *"Telmah:" "Hamlet* backwards." His chief argument is that "looking backwards, revision, or re-interpretation, the running of events over again out of their time-sequence, ranks, in effect, as a fundamental aspect of *Hamlet*."[27] All of the characters revise and reinterpret the events in the play; they are the first audience, the primary critics of Hamlet's acting. This primary audience – similarly to the secondary audience, that is, to us – constantly re-observe, re-create, and re-invent the Prince. On the other hand, the fact that *Hamlet* is always already begun opens the way to Hamlet to re-observe, re-create,

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[27] Terence Hawkes, 'Telmah' in *That Shakespeherian Rag* (London: Methuen, 1986) pp. 94, 96.

and re-invent his primary audience as well as his secondary audience – that is, us – as well.

What Hawkes offers us here is a different model of *mimesis*. In his argument he depicts a multifaceted mimetic practice taking place between audiences and players, observers and the observed. The borderline between these groups is usually blurred: the subjects and objects of *mimesis* are simultaneously merged. While questioning the significance of a Platonic (even classical) system of *mimesis*, Hawkes provides a political mimetic model. Instead of advocating "loyalty to Shakespeare," he argues that mutual ideological, political, and cultural representations occur – evoked by any performance of *Hamlet*: a cultural (educational, ideological, political) "reality" surfaces by and around *Hamlet*-productions.

Hawkes' reading of *Hamlet* is a popular rescue-effort of *mimesis* prevalent in (new) historicist and cultural materialist readings. In his book *Anti-mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock*, Tom Cohen describes these readings as a "movement back to representationalism." Cohen finds that "It at times seems that the (re)turn into *representationalism* has involved a larger form of cultural hegemony, an aesthetic regime based on a certain trope, mimesis, that, when identified with 'the political,' displays an often suspect complicity (and even ahistoricity) of its own." What Cohen offers instead – following French theoreticians of mimesis from Lacoue-Labarthe through Derrida – is a return to "the materiality of language as such" and a focus on "an *anti-mimetic politics* in post-humanist reading." The title of his book *Anti-mimesis* "is not meant to be heard simply as a classic rejection or opposition to mimesis (with the classic of Auerbach echoing in the background), but rather to raise the prospect of other models of mimesis – and in particular, of addressing active forms of mimesis without models or copies."[28] What Cohen does not address, however, is the question whether an anti-representationalist reading is possible at all in the case of theatrical performances.

The obvious answer to the lack of a discussion of this question is that theatrical performances – independently from their producers' intention – are always entangled in the closure of representation. Discussing Artaud's 'Theater of Cruelty,' Derrida draws the following conclusions about theater "as the original repetition of difference,"

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[28] Tom Cohen, *Anti-mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994) pp. 2-3, 8.

Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its *playing* space. This movement is the movement of the world as play...

To think the closure of repetition is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in the deferral. To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity. And it is to think why it is *fatal* that, in its closure, representation continues.[29]

Theater is the site of the infinite closure of a kind of *mimesis*; it cannot escape the necessity of representation. But what gets represented in a *Hamlet*-production? Hawkes argues that it is not the Shakespearean text but an ideological, political, and cultural reality surrounding the performance that is put into play around a theatrical production of *Hamlet*. Tom Cohen warns against this regime of the representation of "the political."

Baudrillard, furthermore, claims that we live in a post-theatrical age: "Of the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."[30] Accordingly, a *Hamlet*-production is the representation of the impossible: entangled in the necessity of representation on the one hand, and representing something non-presentable on the other. A theatrical production of *Hamlet* and the theatrical representation of the Prince of Denmark are both embedded in the paradox of this necessity and impossibility.

So, after all, what "passes show" in *Hamlet*? On the one hand, very little: the play is interpreted, played, read, made sense of, day by day, and its gaps and lacunae are bridged by meaning-providing narratives. On the other hand, too much: from the point of view of mimesis, the play faces a double impasse. In the written script, Hamlet's "antique disposition" and the play's various non-representational or non-discursive elements cause a mimetic havoc; in the theatrical production, the general predicament of dramatic representation forces the play into the closure – or straitjacket – of physical appearance.

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[29] Jacques Derrida, 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 250.
[30] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: semiotext(e), 1983) p. 38

Offering an insightful theoretical reflection, a sensitive and ironic perception of this predicament is articulated in Heiner Mueller's *Hamletmachine*: "THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET: I'm not Hamlet. I don't take part any more. My thoughts suck the blood out of the images. My drama doesn't happen anymore. Behind me the set is put up. By people who aren't interested in my drama, for people to whom it means nothing. I'm not interested in it anymore either. I won't play along anymore."[31] Or as Hamlet puts it: "But I have that within which passeth show." Both are disillusioned and reluctant actors but they are acting nonetheless.

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[31] Heiner Mueller, *Hamletmachine* in *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and transl. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984) 49-58, p. 56.