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Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in *Hamlet**

CHARLES R. FORKER

I



RAPID glance at any concordance will reveal that Shakespeare, both for words and metaphors, drew abundantly from the language of the theater. Terms like *argument*, *prologue*, *stage*, *pageant*, *scene*, *player*, *act*, *actor*, *show*, *audience*, *rant*—these and their cousins which evoke dramatic connotations occur again and again throughout his plays in instances which range from very literal or technical significations to highly figurative and symbolic ones. This constant recourse to dramatic vocabulary suggests an analogy in Shakespeare's mind between life and the theater—an analogy which he himself makes explicit and which even the name of his own theater, the Globe, reinforces. Examples are not far to seek. Everyone will recall the famous references of Jaques (“All the world's a stage . . .”)¹ and Macbeth (“Life's but . . . a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage . . .”); and there are many others. Not infrequently the figure is associated with pain or death and the relation of man to the cosmos; hence, it becomes a natural focus for the idea of tragedy. The Duke in *As You Like It* speaks of the world as a “universal theatre” which “Presents more woeful pageants than the scene / Wherein we play . . .”; Lear with the penetration of madness bewails that “we are come / To this great stage of fools”; and Richard of Bordeaux, the actor-king, glances back over his life to find it as unreal and as temporary as a play—“a little scene, / To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks”.

That Shakespeare should have conceived of man as an actor, the world as a stage, and the universe as its backdrop is not extraordinary, for, apart from the fact that he himself played the triple role of actor, playwright, and part-owner of a theater, the metaphor was a Renaissance commonplace. The motto of the Globe, “*Totus mundus agit histrionem*”, is only the most succinct expression of an idea extended to greater length in Montaigne, in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, in Romei's *Courier's Academie*, and in the works of Shakespeare's fellow dramatists, as, for instance, the Induction to Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*.²

* Since this essay was accepted for publication, two other studies have appeared that in part anticipate my own conclusions: G. C. Thayer, “*Hamlet: Drama as Discovery and as Metaphor*”, *Studia Neophilologica*, XXVIII, 118-129; and Ann Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Cambridge, 1962). Miss Righter's valuable book treats the development of the actor-audience relationship from the beginnings of English drama and analyzes the significance of the play metaphor throughout Shakespeare's works.

¹ My citations throughout are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1936).

² The theatrical trope is ancient. E. R. Curtius in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London, 1953), pp. 138-144, traces its permutations from Plato to Hofmannsthal.

The intention of this essay is to analyze some of the elaborate ramifications of the theater symbol as it functions throughout *Hamlet*, to suggest that by re-examining the play with emphasis on the theme of acting, we may reach certain new perceptions about its dramatic architecture and see some of its central issues (Hamlet's delay, for instance, his disillusionment and madness, his intrigue with Claudius, his relation to his mother, his knowledge of himself) in fresh perspective. Before, however, we consider the one play of Shakespeare that embodies his most personal statements on the drama, let us make some further generalizations about the complexity of aesthetic response which theatrical imagery entails and the relation of this complexity to the idea and nature of tragedy.

S. L. Bethell³ points out that references to the theater in a public performance elicit a double or "multi-conscious" reaction from the audience. Suppose Humphrey Bogart (at the local cinema) corners his gangster with a loaded revolver and sneers that the bullets are real, not blanks "like in the movies". The chief effect of this remark is to establish verisimilitude. We are invited to compare what is happening on the screen with cruder versions of the same thing which we have seen before, and the implication is that we know a hawk from a hand-saw. But at the same time the remark distances the performance by reminding us that we are after all looking at a film and not at real life. The response is the same in Shakespeare, but its duality is more constant there, not only because the theatrical references are more frequent and the actors are people instead of pictures, but because the Elizabethans, lacking our naturalistic visual aids, had to rely much more than we are accustomed to do upon the symbolic suggestiveness of the spoken word. So, when Fabian comments in *Twelfth Night*, apropos of gulling Malvolio: "If this were play'd upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction", or when Cleopatra inveighs against her would-be captors with ". . . I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore", the audience responds to the situation on a dual plane of reality. They are aware of play-world and real world at once. The opposition between appearance and reality, between fiction and truth, is maintained; yet the appearance seems more real and the fiction more true.

In *Hamlet* this duality functions almost constantly, not only because there is so much reference to playing and to related aspects of the fictional world, both literally and figuratively, but because the center of the play itself is largely concerned with the arrival of the players at Elsinore and the "mouse-trap" that constitutes the climax or turning point of the plot.⁴ Since Hamlet as a dramatic character is manifestly interested in the aesthetics of drama and its analogy to his own emotional predicament ("What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba . . .?" [II. ii. 585]), the conflicts generated are teasingly complex. The theatrical references urge us to a sympathetic union with the characters, their actions and their feelings, and at the same time give them the objective reality of artifice through

³ *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (London, 1948), pp. 31-41.

⁴ Properly speaking, the device of play-within-play adds another plane of reality, making the response a triple or (if the anagogical level is included) a quadruple one. Looked at in this way, the gradations of actuality resemble a Platonic ladder, for the play-within-play is an image of an image of an image. Real actors pretend to be actors entertaining an actor-audience, who, in turn, entertain a real audience, who are metaphorically actors on the world's stage and hence "walking shadows" of an ultimate cosmic reality, of which they are but dimly aware. In reverse, the movement can be graphed as follows: ULTIMATE REALITY—ACTUAL WORLD—PLAY WORLD—PLAY-WITHIN-PLAY-WORLD.

aesthetic distance. The world of the play becomes at once both more and less real than the actual world, and we are required to be aware of this relationship inside as well as outside the play.

The idea of theater therefore embodies one of the mysterious paradoxes of tragedy, the impingement of appearance and reality upon each other. This is the very problem that obsesses Hamlet throughout the play and that eventually destroys both guilty and innocent alike. What is real seems false and what is false seems real. Spiritual growth, Shakespeare seems to say, is an extended lesson in separating out the components of the riddle and in learning to recognize and cope with one in the "role" or "disguise" of the other. Hence the theater to Hamlet, to Shakespeare, and to the audience becomes a symbol for making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon. We see into ourselves, as it were, through a looking-glass. Thus the mirror image is connected in Hamlet's mind with acting and, by extension, with other forms of art which penetrate hypocrisy and pretense:

. . . the purpose of playing . . . is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III. ii. 21-25)

Later in the closet scene Hamlet verbally acts out his mother's crimes before her and teaches her by means of "counterfeit presentment" the difference between Hyperion and a satyr: "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (III. iv. 19-20). In Ophelia's description of Hamlet as "The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th' observ'd of all observers" (III. i. 161-162), the mirror and actor images coalesce as a symbol of truth reflected.

The very court of Denmark is like a stage upon which all the major characters except Horatio take parts, play roles, and practice to deceive. The irony is that Hamlet himself must adopt a pose in order to expose it in others. *All* the world's a stage. But for him pretense may entail revelation; Claudius "acts" only to conceal. Since, for Hamlet, the end of playing is to show virtue her own feature and scorn her own image, he not only sees through false appearances ("Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" [I. ii. 76]) but also feigns in order to objectify his inner feelings; he both uses and recognizes "honest artifice". He welcomes the players enthusiastically and approves their art. One piece in their repertory, part of which he has memorized, he chiefly loves because there is "no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation". It shows "an honest method, as wholesome as sweet" (II. ii. 461-463). His antic disposition, although a smoke screen to protect him from his enemies, is also a dramatic device which allows Hamlet to express to himself and to the audience the nagging pain and disgust which the world of seeming has thrust upon him. It is by acting himself that he penetrates the "acts" of Polonius, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of Gertrude, and even of the innocent Ophelia, upon whom her father has forced a role of duplicity.

The true appearances of things are revealed by phenomena from outside the world of Elsinore, by the Ghost who brings a vision of reality from the dead and by the players who bring another vision of truth from art. Thus the action

of the play inhabits three kingdoms, and Claudius, a false king, is hedged on both sides by images of truth—on one side by old Hamlet, the “royal Dane”, and on the other by a player-king.⁵ It is one of the significant ironies of the play that the player’s acting prompts Hamlet to action, that the action he chooses is a theatrical one, and that Claudius, himself perhaps the arch actor, is made to look upon his own deepest secret through the agency of drama. Thus, at one pole of the tragic magnet, the theater is the symbol of inner truth. Just as the player’s speech is true for Hamlet⁶ and *The Murder of Gonzago* all too true for Claudius, so *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is truth for us. There is a sense in which the characters there are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time (“The players cannot keep counsel; they’ll tell all” [III. ii. 151]) and we are guilty creatures sitting at a play.

But if the stage equals truth at its highest level, it also equals falsity at its lowest. Throughout Shakespeare’s other plays but especially in *Hamlet* “playing” is the stock metaphor for pretense and hypocrisy. The tragedy as a whole is a tissue of intrigue and counter-intrigue, a scaffold for “unnatural acts” and “purposes mistook”, all “put on by cunning and forc’d cause” (V. ii. 392-395). The idea of falsity is therefore closely allied to the mention of actors, particularly bad ones, and indeed most references to them throughout Shakespeare are pejorative.⁷ Actors all too often out-Herod Herod, strut and fret upon the stage, or tear a passion to tatters. They are false, not because they imitate humanity, but because they imitate it so abominably. They pervert the dramatic function by concealing inner reality under a crude show of outward affectation.

When the analogy of acting (in this complex of associations) is applied to character, it of course implies moral weakness or corruption. It is this thrust of the metaphor which points to Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and Osric as players on the world’s stage, bad actors (with all the ambiguity the word contains) because they conceal the truth either from themselves or from their fellows or both. Ophelia and Reynaldo are players with a difference, for they do not act as free agents like the others, but have been cast in their roles by Fortune. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occupy an ambiguous position between these extremes. Having no reason to suspect Claudius’ secret crimes or, later on, his design upon Hamlet’s life, they are obliged to carry out their sovereign’s orders. Nevertheless, there is an unsavory side to their behavior which makes them more than simple dupes. They are natural meddlers, and, as Hamlet says, “they did make love to this employment” (V. ii. 57). Hamlet himself is symbolically the most complex type of the actor and, therefore, a special case, for Shakespeare has gathered up into his character all the self-contradictions and subtle paradoxes which the symbol can express. Hamlet is caught in a maze of antinomies. He both chooses his “role” and has it forced upon him by fate. He must live in the divided worlds of good and evil, of fact and fiction, of actuality and feigning, of spectator and performer. His part requires of him both

⁵ I am indebted for some of the ideas in this essay to Mr. H. V. D. Dyson of Merton College, Oxford. See especially “The Emergence of Shakespeare’s Tragedy”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXVI (1950), 69-93.

⁶ For a full explication of the player’s speech and its symbolic relation to major themes in *Hamlet*, see Harry Levin, *Kenyon Review*, XII (1950), 273-296.

⁷ Ulysses describing Achilles as an actor (*Troilus and Cressida* I. iii. 151-158), Buckingham satirizing the “ham” (*Richard III*, III. v. 5-7), and Hamlet giving advice to the players (*Hamlet* III. ii. 2-3) are typical examples.

action and passivity, and he is constantly stepping out from behind his mask to serve as chorus to his own tragedy.

The figure of the actor in *Hamlet* may therefore be viewed as a symbolic focus for the idea of tragic conflict—man divided against himself, forced in his brief hour upon the stage to play conflicting roles and torn between the compulsion to act (*to do*) and the need to pretend and hence *not* to do. Man as actor must reconcile reason with passion, the beast with the angel, the will with the imagination, and his dignity with his wretchedness. And as tragedy, for the audience, represents the ordering of its own inner divisions, so “acting” for Hamlet is his way of objectifying the various modes of his own self-awareness. The theater audience can preserve a comforting detachment, for its involvement is purely imaginative. The spectators know that *Hamlet* is only a play. But Hamlet, the character, is not so sure, for the action in which he takes part is real from one point of view and unreal from another. Claudius’ relation to theatrical performance is something else again, for he is tented to the quick by it. At one point, he cannot maintain any detachment at all. The extent to which acting is real or illusory depends largely upon the position of the observer, and we, like Hamlet himself, are permitted to shift position in our imaginations and to look upon the fiction from both sides of that hypothetical curtain which divides the stage from the pit. Claudius does not have that privilege.

It will surely be apparent by this time that the various facets of the theater-life equivalence (particularly when it is dramatized upon a stage) constantly threaten to blur into one another. The blurring results, in part, from the critic’s method of abstracting meanings which Shakespeare embodies organically, and it should remind us that tragedy is a mystery to be shared rather than a problem to be solved.

To sum up, the symbol of the actor is important and implies (particularly in *Hamlet*) a good many meanings: metaphorically, he may stand for both true and false seeming and for doer and pretender; at times he may serve as audience to his own performance and to those of the other actors on the stage or as chorus to both. He may function both as the observer and the observed, playing in more than one sphere of reference at once. Lastly, he can symbolize tragedy itself—man as ephemeral, man as Fortune’s fool, man as self-aware, and man divided against self. If we keep these generalizations in mind, it should be possible to trace the dramatic structure of Shakespeare’s most popular play in terms of its theatrical symbolism and to see its progress (metaphorically as well as literally) as a series of “scenes” and “acts” in which the characters “play” to each other, combining and alternating between the roles of spectator and performer.

II

The overriding symbol of Elsinore as a stage upon which the people do not always recognize each other in their shifting roles is immediately hinted in the nervous first lines (spoken upon a “platform”) of the opening scene:

Ber. Who’s there?

Fran. Nay, answer me. Stand and *unfold* yourself.

Marcellus and Horatio enter presently, and it soon becomes apparent that they

are there to *watch* an appearance of some kind. This is, of course, the Ghost, which Horatio successively refers to throughout the course of the scene as “fantasy”, “image”, and “illusion”. Already at the very outset, we are shown a scene within a scene. The Ghost is a kind of show, and the other characters on the stage are its audience. This relationship immediately raises the mysterious appearance-reality question in our minds, for we do not know as yet what to make of the apparition. Horatio, who serves throughout the play as a medial figure between stage world and real world, a kind of *raisonneur* whose reactions we watch as a guide to our own, fills in the political background for us, and the scene ends with the decision to acquaint Hamlet with the supernatural phenomenon just witnessed.

The next episode, played, we discover, in the king’s *audience* chamber, gives us our first glimpse of the Danish court and its dominant figures. This, too, is a kind of performance, though it only emerges as such very gradually in the light of details which are added later. Claudius makes a formal speech from the throne, putting as fair a face as possible on his “o’er hasty marriage” and “our dear brother’s death”. In its extensive use of doublets the speech communicates a hint of duplicity. After the ambassadors are received and Laertes has been granted his suit, our attention turns to Hamlet, the solitary and silent auditor who refuses to be drawn into Denmark’s “act”, remaining on the periphery to comment bitterly on the difference between “seems” and “is”. When his mother remarks about the “nighted colour” of his mourning costume, he replies in a metaphor from the stage:

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. ii. 83-86)

Hamlet is not deceived by the “cheer and comfort” of the king’s eye nor persuaded by the queen’s plea that he “look like a friend on Denmark”. In the soliloquy that follows he acts as chorus, emphasizing to the audience the discrepancy he feels between fictional reality or absent truth and actual, present hypocrisy. He compares himself to Hercules, Gertrude to Niobe, the dead king to Hyperion, and Claudius to a satyr. His speech ends with the realization that he too must play a role, and we understand that “acting” represents inner conflict: “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (I. ii. 159). Now Horatio “delivers” the “marvel” of the apparition to Hamlet, which the prince receives excitedly in contrast to the words he has just heard from the king and queen. He will be a willing spectator to this appearance, and he enjoins Horatio to adopt his pose: “Give it an understanding but no tongue” (I. ii. 250). Thus Hamlet is already involved in a double role: he will be both “actor” and “audience” at once.

The theme of acting is now echoed in the underplot. Laertes, about to depart for France, adopts the role of worldly-wise big brother and warns Ophelia not to take the appearance of Hamlet’s love for truth. Her best safety lies in fear (a euphemism for pretense), for “The chariest maid is prodigal enough/If she *unmask* her beauty to the moon” (I. iii. 36-37). Ophelia sees through his performance, however, and counters with her own distinction between the “un-

gracious" role of pastor and the "puff'd and reckless libertine" beneath it (I. iii. 47-49). Polonius now enters to give his son some fatherly advice in the same tone Laertes had used to his sister. The roles are reversed and actor-father now performs to auditor-son. His counsel is a lesson in cautious appearance: "Give thy thoughts no tongue,/Nor any unproportion'd thought his act" (I. iii. 59-60). His concluding words, "This above all—to thine own self be true" (I. iii. 78), ironically point up to the audience the contrast between "seems" and "is". After Laertes' departure, Polonius repeats his son's warning to Ophelia, and since Hamlet's vows are but "springes to catch woodcocks", he orders her to play a part unnatural to her and to refrain from conversation with the prince. Acting for Ophelia, as for Hamlet, symbolizes inner division. She, too, must hold her tongue.

In terms of the theatrical symbolism, the situation on stage at the Ghost's second appearance is the same as before, with the difference that Hamlet is now the principal spectator at a performance to which Horatio (in an earlier scene) had spoken the prologue. To the verbal part of the Ghost's revelation, he is the sole auditor. Although Hamlet is not quite certain intellectually of the Ghost's "honesty", the emotional effect both for him and for us is that of truth disclosed: "Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing/To what I shall *unfold*" (I. v. 5-6). And now the prince learns the extent to which Claudius had been feigning in the court scene—that "the whole ear of Denmark" has been "Rankly abus'd" (I. v. 36-38). The Ghost also refers to Gertrude's hypocrisy, calling her "my most seeming-virtuous queen" (I. v. 46). After the apocalyptic disclosure, Hamlet's answer to his father's words, "Remember me", is:

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In *this distracted globe*. (I. v. 96-97)

Thus Shakespeare, in a triple pun (one meaning of which is unfortunately lost in modern performance) gathers up several aspects of reality into a single phrase and allows the audience to respond multi-consciously. The "distracted globe" (literally "mind" or "head") represents Hamlet's inner world, his divided self, his microcosm, and by extension, it connects the real world, the macrocosm, with the theatrical world through the mention of the very theater in which the play was being performed. Hamlet's reaction to what the Ghost has told him underlines the crucial split between actor as true and false seeming. The Ghost himself plays the first role in this ambivalence and, by doing so, turns Hamlet's attention upon the false actor, the usurper who "may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I. v. 108). Hamlet is caught between the two illusions, that which reveals and that which conceals the truth. In order to reconcile the two symbolic worlds, for they are "out of joint", he must act in the true world by "acting" in the false one. The "antic disposition", then, is truly to be a double role. To Hamlet himself and to the real audience it will mean one thing; to the court audience at Denmark, it will signify quite another.

The opening of Act II takes us back to the underplot with Polonius sending Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris. His directions to the servant are truly a lesson in "seeming", and the speech may be regarded as a humorously ironic counterpart to Hamlet's later lesson to the players on how a "bait of falsehood" may take a "carp of truth" (II. i. 63). Ophelia enters to recount to her father

(now in the role of audience) the scene of Hamlet's distracted appearance to her in the guise of a madman. This instance of Hamlet's behavior is a scene (like the queen's description of Ophelia's death) which the audience sees at one remove from actuality through the speech of an actor as narrator. But it is clear from Ophelia's words that Hamlet has already assumed his dual role, for the sincerity of true feeling shows through the guise of affected madness. The tone of the speech also indicates that Ophelia is moved, though she does not understand what lies behind the "antic disposition". The prying Polonius is fooled by his daughter's recital, and Hamlet's performance conceals from him what it reveals to us.

In the next scene we are introduced to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attending upon the king and queen. The two carbon-copy courtiers are told of Hamlet's transformation, informed that neither the "exterior nor the inward man/Resembles that it was" (II. ii. 6-7), and assigned the job of spying on him, even as Reynaldo had been charged with a similar task in the preceding scene. Claudius, the actor who hides behind a mask of smiling, enlists two other actors who will attempt to "play upon" Hamlet; and we know that he too is wearing a mask. A chain of "playings" is thus set in motion in which the disguises on both sides will either succeed or fail depending on how much the opposing side knows.⁸ The theater audience, of course, may enter into these "playings" more and more omnisciently as the plot unfolds.

After Voltimand and Cornelius report the news of Norway's alliance to Denmark and Polonius with more "art" than "matter" has mistakenly diagnosed the cause of Hamlet's madness to the royal pair, the theatrical parallel is again apparent in the decision to "find/Where truth is hid" (II. ii. 158) through what amounts to another little play-within-the-play. In this production Polonius and the king will play audience "behind an arras" and Ophelia will act the ingenue in order to trap Hamlet into a confession of his true feelings.

Now Hamlet enters playing his role of madness, and the king and queen withdraw to let Polonius "board him". "Actor" confronts "actor", and Shakespeare, for the first time, fully exploits the tragicomic possibilities of Hamlet's dual role—Hamlet playing to himself and the audience and Hamlet playing to Polonius. Throughout this episode and the next (which substitutes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for Polonius in the symbolic pattern) the ironic disjunction between pretense and sincerity is stressed again and again as Hamlet penetrates the disguise of his opponent:

Pol. Honest, my lord?

Ham. Ay sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man pick'd out of ten thousand. (II. ii. 177-179)⁹

And Hamlet to the stage twins: ". . . there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour" (II. ii. 289-290).

A little later the players are announced to the prince. If man delights not

⁸ Hamlet, of course, has the distinct advantage in this contest of acting. He knows, or rather, strongly suspects Claudius' secret, but the king is kept guessing about Hamlet until the "mouse-trap" and even then, he is not sure *how much* his nephew knows.

⁹ Even Polonius can see a ray of truth through Hamlet's disguise, though the disguise itself deceives him: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (II. ii. 211-213).

him, they do, and it is at this point that Shakespeare begins to play explicitly upon the paradoxes of the theatrical process itself. Since the players' art for Hamlet symbolizes a kind of artifice which is at least potentially "good", being at once more true and more unreal than the "acting" of the court, the company serves as both contrast and parallel to the people who surround him. The actors have come to Elsinore by reason "of the late innovation" (the current popularity of the "little eyases"), and Hamlet can identify himself with them, because he too is suffering from a late innovation of a different sort.¹⁰ Also the reference to the war of the theaters may remind the Globe audience that they are witnessing symbolically another kind of theatrical warfare on the stage of Denmark. At any rate, Hamlet likes honest actors because feigning is their job (as it is now his own) and has for its object, ideally at least, the revelation of truth, so that, from one point of view, a bond of sympathy exists between him and them. But their profession also suggests to him the symbolic link between acting and the hypocrisy of the real world which so disgusts him, and he comments bitterly on this idea by drawing a parallel between the fickleness of the public's response to good and bad acting and the fickleness of Danish subjects to a good and bad king (II. ii. 378-382). In both cases, fashionable appearance rather than true worth is the criterion of value. Polonius, of course, though he is indeed an actor in the world of hypocrisy and likes to account himself a critic of the drama, sees no such fine distinctions, as he proves a little later by his reaction to the player's speech. For him theatrical art is just make-believe.

The players enter and Hamlet asks for a taste of their quality, specifying a particular speech which he loves from "Aeneas' tale to Dido". The significance of this speech and its content are, of course, integral to the theatrical symbolism of the play. Professor Levin has already given it such exhaustive analysis in the essay previously cited¹¹ that I should only be repeating him to discuss the matter at length. It is necessary to point out, nonetheless, that this episode constitutes another of our plays-within-the-play, with this difference—that the artifice here is quite literal as well as figurative in effect.¹² Hamlet begins to recite the speech and the players and Polonius serve as audience. After thirteen lines, Hamlet breaks off, directing the first player to continue, so that the audience-actor relationship is reversed on the stage. The fact that Hamlet himself gives part of the speech indicates how closely he identifies himself and his own situation with its content; for the lines dramatize for him, both through contrast and parallelism, the very feelings about which he is otherwise constrained to be silent—grief for his murdered father, his mother's lack of grief, his uncle's cruelty, and the pressing necessity for revenge. Not only does the speech make real to him "the very age and body of the time", revealing, as the Ghost had done, truth beneath the appearances of things; it also forces upon him the depressing realization that the player's speech was but a "dream of passion", a mere fiction, whereas his own motive for passion is horribly real. Art is seen,

¹⁰ It is very possible that Shakespeare reinforced the connection at this point by another actual allusion to the Globe theater, the emblem of which is traditionally thought to have been a figure of Hercules carrying the world on his shoulders: "*Ham.* Do the boys carry it away? *Ros.* Ay, that they do, my lord—Hercules and his load too" (II. ii. 376-377). If so, the effect would be to enhance audience participation in the symbolism.

¹¹ See note 6 above.

¹² Kittredge notes in his edition that the exaggerated style of the speech itself is quite necessary to preserve the distinction between the two fictional levels of art and art-within-art.

then, as having both more and less reality than life itself, and our relation to *Hamlet* is precisely analogous to Hamlet's relation to the player. Hence the speech provides Hamlet with a cue for action. Stepping once more out of his role as actor (by convention of the soliloquy), Hamlet clarifies the meaning of the player's speech to the audience and tells them that the play's the thing wherein a player-king will catch the conscience of a real king. But even as he moves towards action, he is encircled by more doubts:

The spirit that I have seen
 May be a devil; and the devil hath power
 T' assume a pleasing shape. . . . (II. ii. 626-628)

The Ghost, too, may be a kind of "actor". We are caught up in paradox within paradox. As commentator, Hamlet stands upon a stage in London; as tragic protagonist, standing upon a stage in Denmark, he wrestles with three worlds of seeming, and looks backward to the Ghost as he looks forward to the play.

In the third act, which contains the play's crisis and *recognition*, the theatrical stratagems, up to now so carefully rehearsed, are brought to the test of actual performance. Mask confronts mask under conditions of intensified psychological pressure; thus "acting" turns to action, and the faces behind the masks are made (partially, at least) to disclose themselves to each other. After Claudius, with ironic satisfaction, receives from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the news of Hamlet's interest in the players, the first bout of the "mighty opposites" follows immediately as Polonius and the king withdraw behind the arras to observe Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia. Polonius gives a last stage-direction to his daughter:

Read on this book,
 That *show* of such an exercise may *colour*
 Your loneliness. (III. i. 44-46)

Even as he does so, Polonius' recognition of duplicity provides Claudius with a flash of insight into his true self which prepares us for his breakdown later. Characteristically, the first proof of the king's guilt comes in the form of the aside, the usual device (along with the soliloquy) which Shakespeare employs to make it clear that the actor has temporarily dropped his *persona*: "O, 'tis too true!/How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" (III. i. 49-50).

Already the disclosures are beginning. Hamlet's soliloquy intervenes before Polonius' prearranged "act", and the prince (again as commentator) states in more fundamental terms than before the deeply rooted conflicts of being and not being, of appearance and reality. The "nunnery scene" itself reveals to Claudius that "love" is not the cause of Hamlet's madness; his suspicions about the nature of Hamlet's attitude towards him are strengthened, and he therefore determines to send his nephew to England, since "Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go" (III. i. 196). To Ophelia, who takes the "antic disposition" for genuine lunacy, the scene is also a revelation, though a very partial one. It turns her eyes upon herself, showing her the hopelessness of her love. For the audience in the pit, it portends her eventual collapse. What is pretense for Hamlet will be all too real for her. After the "show" is over, Polonius comes out from behind the arras. But he would pry yet deeper into dangerous secrets, and now he plans what is to be his last theatrical venture—the closet scene.

Hamlet's advice to the players underscores the difference between good and bad acting and states the principle (which we are about to see operating in *The Murder of Gonzago*) of theater as the reflection of inner truth. All the while, Hamlet, like the player he advises, is learning to "Suit the action to the word . . ." (III. ii. 19). Before the play scene, however, Hamlet has his brief interview with Horatio, who exists outside the world of hypocrisy and symbolizes the kind of human relationship where truth resides divorced from "acting". Now the "mouse-trap" itself begins—the crux of theatrical symbolism in which the two great opponents face each other, each playing the dual role of actor and audience. The relationship is very complex. Claudius, himself, is actor to Hamlet and the others of the court audience, but he is also spectator to the actors of the "mouse-trap". Hamlet is also pretending; he wears his "antic" mask to Claudius and the others, but at the same time he is carefully observing the players' performance and that of Claudius which the play-within-the-play will presumably affect. Audience watches audience. The observed are the observers and the observers are the observed. Meanwhile the theater audience is identifying itself with all these points of view at once. At the crucial moment, Claudius cracks under the strain, revealing his guilt. Ironically he calls for light, as he tries desperately to retreat into his world of moral darkness. This constitutes the major disclosure of the act, and Hamlet has triumphed in a way, for he now *knows* what he had only *suspected* before. But he has also exposed himself, for Claudius is beginning to see through Hamlet's mask too. The player-king has ironically stated the truth of the situation for both segments of the stage audience: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/That our devices still are overthrown . . ." (III. ii. 221-222). Hamlet's strategy is defensive—to draw the enemy into his own territory—but after he has done so, pretense alone will no longer suffice. On both sides of the conflict, there is now the necessity *to do*.

The remainder of the third act is devoted to a few lesser skirmishes and Claudius' soliloquy, which manifests his own tragic inner division as a self-aware actor. Hamlet again (more explicitly this time) exposes the hypocrisy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by showing them that to play upon him "is as easy as lying" (III. ii. 372), and Polonius, who follows their appearance on the stage, is made the unconscious victim of his own "seeming" through the comic dialogue on camels, weasels, and whales (III. ii. 394-399). Thus the appearance-reality theme is stated throughout the tragedy in almost all of the character relationships and strands of plot, extending in an emotional spectrum which includes a great variety of "serious" and comic colors. Hamlet ends the scene as chorus, stating his willingness to obey the Ghost and analyzing his function as "actor" in the approaching encounter with the queen: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none./My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites . . ." (III. ii. 414-415).

In Claudius' long and self-searching soliloquy (III. iii. 36-72), we see that the enforced hypocrisy which is destroying Hamlet is also destroying the king. He, too, is caught between the irreconcilable claims of this world and the next. Pretense will only do for this life: ". . . 'tis not so above./There is no shuffling; there the *action* lies/In his true nature. . . ." But he has chosen his role, and he must act it out to the world, however transparent it may be to heaven. Hamlet enters and faces the problem of whether or not to kill him now. As Claudius

struggles vainly to reconcile earthly sin with his consciousness of heavenly judgment, Hamlet struggles to reconcile passion with reason. Deciding for the latter, he moves on to his mother's closet and another "staged" episode, which, like the play-within-the-play, will result in a disclosure of truth.

Polonius has again set up the "scene", and he is ready (once more from behind the arras) to watch Gertrude play her assigned part. Hamlet's entrance, however, suddenly reverses the whole proceeding, and he plays an unexpectedly active performance to them. Polonius cries out in surprise. The wily actor dies ironically as audience to his own play, and the queen has her eyes turned upon her inner self, even as Claudius had been similarly tormented by the "mouse-trap". When the Ghost appears in this scene, Gertrude does not see it, continuing to think of Hamlet's madness as real. Thus the queen, too, is involved in the illusion-reality dilemma, and this may be Shakespeare's way of dramatizing the fact that she is so used to corrupt appearances that she still cannot recognize the truth when it is present.¹³ Hamlet must teach her *dramatically* the difference between true and false illusion by means of the two portraits. The final irony is that Gertrude, when she is made to realize the truth about herself, must immediately reassume her mask. To be sure, she will now "act" for the sake of virtue. But the pretense must go on, and for Claudius she will have to wear the same costume. Gertrude, too (like both Hamlet and Claudius), must continue to live upon the world's stage.

Act IV combines play-acting with real acting. Gertrude relates the events of the closet encounter to Claudius in her new role. Claudius sends Hamlet to England, arranging for a little tragedy there with an actual victim as protagonist, but Hamlet unexpectedly changes the ending and returns to Elsinore. Fortinbras' army moves against Poland, and the innocent go to their deaths "for a fantasy and trick of fame" (IV. iv. 61). The feigned madness of Hamlet produces real madness in Ophelia, and her sad performance seems to the queen "prologue to some great amiss" (IV. v. 18). Laertes returns, prepared in his rage to act openly, but is wooed to the king's side by a masterfully controlled bit of "seeming" and then involved in the plan for another dramatic production (the fencing match) in which the actor is to show himself his "father's son *in deed/ More than in words*" (IV. vii. 126-127). Claudius emphasizes the necessity to play the part well:

If this should fail,
And that our drift look through our bad performance,
'Twere better not assay'd. (IV. vii. 151-153)

The act ends with Gertrude reciting to the stage audience an elegy on Ophelia's death in which artifice and sincerity are one.

In the last act of the play, all the paradoxes of appearance and reality merge and are mysteriously resolved in death. This final harmony is ironically fore-

¹³ To achieve this symbolic effect in modern production, the actor who plays the Ghost should actually appear upon the stage. The audience knows by this time that he is neither a figment of Hamlet's imagination nor a "goblin damned" but a reality—and so does Hamlet himself. To represent the prince as having some kind of special X-ray vision violates the whole intention of the scene, for if the audience does not share the spectacle, they are put most awkwardly in the position of sharing the queen's moral blindness. The multi-consciousness must be able to operate freely.

shadowed in the graveyard where Hamlet looks upon the skull of Yorick and the court buries Ophelia. In the end, all appearances come to dust; the actors on the world's stage must have exits as well as entrances, and let them paint an inch thick, to this favor they must come. The joking of the clowns gives a tragi-comic emphasis to the contrast between the hypocrisies of life and the realities of death. By a fantastic paradox, Death, the leveler, makes a bid to social appearances and distinctions: ". . . the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christen" (V. i. 28-30). Hamlet's relation to the grave-digger (the one who remains) is at first that of audience and later, when he engages him in conversation, that of actor, for the clown does not identify him. There is a grim irony on the other side too, since Hamlet does not know that the grave before him is to be Ophelia's. The theater audience, again, sees the relationship from both points of view at once. Then Hamlet (in his remarks to Horatio and the address to the skull) performs the choric function, generalizing on death in terms of the dead—Yorick, Caesar, and Alexander (V. i. 202-239).

As the funeral procession enters, Hamlet and Horatio withdraw, playing unseen audience to the ceremony in which the others take parts. Laertes usurps the stage and vents his grief with the passionate diction and exaggerated gesture of the "deep tragedian". Hamlet reacts to the performance as if a bad actor were tearing a passion to tatters, and the reaction in turn impells him to outdo the "actor" in a dramatization of his own grief—to express theatrically the passion that circumstance has heretofore compelled him to repress: "Nay, an thou'lt mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou" (V. i. 306-307). The leaping into the grave is symbolic too, for the histrionics point forward to a final "scene" from which neither actor will emerge alive. The king's words are more prophetic than he knows: "This grave shall have a living monument. / An hour of quiet shortly shall we see . . ." (V. i. 320-321).

The following episode discovers Hamlet narrating his sea adventure to Horatio by means of theatrical imagery:

Being thus benetted round with villanies,
Or I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play. (V. ii. 29-31)

The metaphor summarizes Hamlet's tragic predicament and indicates his progress through the drama—the symbolic advance from thought to action which we have noted. In the soliloquy which concludes Act II, Hamlet had said, we remember: "About, *my brain!* Hum, I have heard / That guilty creatures, sitting at a play, / Have . . . Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaim'd their malfactions . . ." (II. ii. 616-620). Preparing for the "mouse-trap", Hamlet had been concerned with "playing" in the aesthetic sense and its symbolic relation to his own spiritual conflict. Now, he is caught in a play which he did not begin. He finds himself upon a real stage where the symbols are turning to facts and the actors are making their exits one by one. Polonius and Ophelia have already made theirs, and now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "go to 't".

Hamlet now expresses regret to Horatio for having forgotten himself to Laertes, for ". . . by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his"

(V. ii. 77-78). Both are faced with the problem of avenging a murdered father. As the Pyrrhus speech and the *Murder of Gonzago* had shown the observers their inner selves, so now Hamlet learns to adjust himself to Fortune's role by an increase in imaginative sympathy for the roles of others. This growth is conveyed by his cheerful reception of Laertes' challenge, brought to him by Osric (who ironically says of Laertes that "his semblable is his mirror", V. ii. 123), and by his recognition that "to know a man well were to know himself" (V. ii. 145). This is the quietness of mind which allows him to observe that "the readiness is all" (V. ii. 234).

The final episode of the play takes the form of another "show", a sports event in which the stage audience, as well as the performers, unite ironically in the same last "act"¹⁴ which is death. It is noteworthy that the fencing match begins with an attempted reconciliation and that Hamlet, in his speech to Laertes, speaks both truth and falsehood at once. In his apology, Hamlet lies about the cause of his outburst and pleads his madness, for he must continue to "act" so long as the revenge remains unaccomplished. But he also speaks from his heart, for he bears Laertes no enmity. Sincere emotion radiates through the *persona*. Here, then, the actor is seen explicitly as symbol of the man divided against himself, the man who would play one role but is forced by fate to play another. Moreover Hamlet's "disclaiming from a purpos'd evil" reminds us again of the theatrical terms in which the final spectacle is to be witnessed by his reference to "this audience" (V. ii. 251-252). "Audience" here refers to the court, but, by extension, of course, to the theater audience as well.

As the performers "prepare to play", Claudius (now in the double role of actor and audience) announces a ceremonial accompaniment to the bout. He will drink to Hamlet, and the kettles, trumpets, and cannon will echo each other in a chain of cosmic reverberations. Ironically, these are to be a death knell rather than a proclamation of victory, and they therefore point ahead to the final words of the play, "Go, bid the soldiers shoot." The fencing match proceeds, but not according to plan, for "acting" is no protection from the mysterious operations of chance. What begins as "entertainment" ends in a spectacle of death. The illusion becomes reality suddenly and in violence. Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup before Claudius can properly warn her; that he does not snatch it from her hands shows us not only his steel nerves but that he, like Hamlet, must play out his role to the end. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the unbated rapier (as prearranged by the royal stage-manager), but the foils are mistakenly exchanged, and the actor-son, like his actor-father, is justly killed by his own treachery. The masks drop off, and for the first time in the play the characters confront each other without disguise. Laertes lays bare the stratagem; Hamlet immediately carries out his revenge upon the king and exchanges forgiveness with his informant. Shakespeare tells us what our emotional reaction to this holocaust should be by the dramatic terminology in which Hamlet's dying speech is couched, for we are now at one with the stage audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,

¹⁴ J. V. Cunningham in *Woe or Wonder* (Denver, 1951), pp. 18-19, points out that the word *act* often has the special significance of "chance" or "fortune" in contexts of tragic catastrophe. The theatrical connotation, however, is present too.

Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you—
But let it be. (V. ii. 345-349)

Even in death, Hamlet is eager to speak—to “tell all” like a player, to uncover the truth for those that remain. And so he deputizes Horatio, whom he wears in his heart of hearts, as official epilogue for the drama:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain,
To *tell my story*. (V. ii. 357-360)

When Fortinbras and the ambassadors enter as audience to the tragic spectacle, Horatio fulfills Hamlet's urgent wish. As Cunningham has noticed (p. 33), it is almost as if Horatio were speaking the *prologue* to the play we have already witnessed:

. . . give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view;
And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver. (V. ii. 388-397)

Fortinbras answers:

Let us haste to hear it,
And call the noblest to the audience. (V. ii. 397-398)

The play ends as it had begun—in terms of the theatrical symbol: “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the *stage* . . .” (V. ii. 407). An actor-audience beholds an actor-spectacle upon a scaffold. Through death, the conflicting worlds of “seeming” and “being” coincide; Hamlet and the Ghost are strangely united as we become one with the living actors on the stage. Distinctions are intentionally blurred in the tragic mystery of art. As we are drawn emotionally into this union, we gain a deepened awareness that we, too, are actors playing roles and that our world is a theater. We know that

. . . the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest* IV. i. 153-158)