

Hamlet's Mirrors

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WHEN theatre eradicates the psychological boundary between art and life and achieves the communion of actor and viewer, it persuades man to study experience in its mimetic mirror. A common religious bond knit Orestes, Oedipus, Antigone and their ancient witnesses. Modern dramatists assault complacent, insulated audiences, while the Elizabethan allegorical tradition produced an Everyman-protagonist whose experiences were personal yet typical, literal yet emblematic. Elizabethan spectators empathized with protagonists not despite but because of their elevated station, for distance and objectivity lent an aura of typicality to the protagonists' acts and discoveries. The union of character and viewer was accomplished principally through microcosmic or macrocosmic identification (avoid the fate of Faustus, who rejected ample opportunity to repent; perceive the common experience of betrayal and impatience for revenge implied by the "Chinese box" structure of *The Spanish Tragedy*).

Hamlet explores, in a singularly complex way, microcosmic and macrocosmic implications of "mirroring" — the communication, reception and reflection of situation, character and point of view — for Hamlet as the emblematic center of his world, for other characters as offsetting foils, and for the relation of character to onstage and offstage audience. The play's focus on Hamlet's interior world dictates that mirroring occur explicitly between characters, situations (*e.g.* the parallel situations of Hamlet and Laertes), scenes and speeches. Though at crucial moments the mirror of the play-world is turned to the audience-world, for the most part this relation is merely assumed. The

audience is drawn into Hamlet's view of the world, and sees through his eyes.

Perhaps the play's challenge to its witnesses can be focused by viewing Hamlet's anguished contemplations in the prism of Richard II, who grows introspective through suffering. In his solitude at Pomfret, at the end of his evolution to understanding, Richard identifies the cause of human discontent in "still-breeding thoughts," at war within man over ends and means, which goad the human actor/actor to "play . . . in one person many people,/And none contented" (V.v.31-32). Richard concludes that restlessness, uncertainty and dissatisfaction cease only at death:

Nor I nor any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
With being nothing. (39-41)

Man is the agent of his own dilemma, for mental conflict perplexes and breeds doubt. The mirrors which other men hold up to him, as Achilles observes in *Troilus and Cressida*, serve chiefly to intensify speculation and aggravate doubt,

For speculation turns not to itself,
Till it hath travell'd and is married there
Where it may see itself. (III.iii.109-11)

Throughout *Hamlet*, characters are vexed by the conflicting mental allurements which muddy speculation. Some, like Polonius, are unaware of the problem and take naive satisfaction in their judgements. For Hamlet, "The glass of fashion and the mould of form,/The observ'd of all observers," man's role as actor/actor is singularly perplexing:

He both chooses his "role" and has it forced on 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 action and passivity, and he is constantly stepping out from behind his mask to serve as chorus to his own tragedy.¹

The important fact here is that Hamlet's "divided worlds" are defined with painful clarity by his active mind. He

is haunted, for example, by questions of what will be and by the antithesis of what is and what seems. The relations of what is to what will be and what seems are implicit in the motif of acting, encompassed in the play by the Renaissance commonplace of world as stage, and man as actor in the world and actor on stage. The principal effects of the theatre metaphor are to reflect the complexity and ambivalence of human choice in the stage-world and to direct lessons learned by characters at their witnesses, drawing the audience into active psychological participation. Hamlet, for example, responds to the ghost's "remember me" with "Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat/In this distracted globe." As Charles Forker comments, this is a triple pun, on Hamlet's brain, the world and the theatre in which the play was played.² Later Hamlet refers explicitly to the theatre-world in which player and spectator are united, alluding the while to disposition and its influence on point of view (II.ii.309-315). In the wake of his tragedy, he undertakes to convey its exemplary significance to onstage and offstage witnesses:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
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.345-49)

Through this identification of player-audience with theatre-audience, the challenges of microcosm/stage and macrocosm/world — to act well, to perceive accurately and to re-think one's role constantly — are made one. The issues of Hamlet's tragedy become the world's concerns.

Hamlet's opening scene illustrates the play's complex mirroring. Bernardo challenges Francisco, but for answer hears an echoing charge: "Nay, answer me." He gives the watchword in which sentinels at Elsinore recognize their mirror-images, and is identified by Francisco. As Francisco retires, Bernardo asks him to hurry "The rivals of my watch" (I.i.12), "rivals" bearing the sense of opposed images or reflections. The ghost's appearance provokes

its amazed witnesses, a few moments later, to comment on the portentousness of this spirit-mirror ("apparition," "figure like the king," "fair and warlike form"), which Horatio is sure "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (69).

In the following scene, when Hamlet submits to his mother's plea that he remain at Elsinore, Claudius urges him to "Be as ourself in Denmark" (I.ii.122). This invitation to mirror the royal presence takes ironic significance from Hamlet's reflection that his uncle is "no more like my father/Than I to Hercules" (152-53). Such a pale shadow of royalty is not to be emulated by one who would "know not 'seems.'" Only later, in antic disposition, does Hamlet ironically adopt the manner of the seemer-king.

Polonius, another foil to Hamlet, has practiced seeming from his youth, when he "play'd once i' th' university." Yet as the play proves he deceives no one long. Cast by choice (though not by aptitude) as adviser and spectator, he stands aloof and speaks from what he conceives as Olympian distance. The ironic echoes in his exhortation to Laertes are evident to onstage and offstage audiences: his maxims, though trite, are reasonable, but Polonius lacks the discernment to act on them himself. Incapable of self-awareness, he fails life and life fails him. "This above all: to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day,/Thou canst not then be false to any man" (I.iii.78-80) argues that each man's truth presumes and is mirrored in others. Polonius' antitheses suggest not only how to live but how to act, but his performance demonstrates how far he is from conceiving their implications. From a theatrical perspective, Polonius is the failed actor. Having surrendered principle to ingratiating manner, self to role, and action to reaction, he is found out (in Gertrude's closet) onstage. Startled out of his chosen dramatic persona, he is banished for bad performance. His inability to act well because he sees incorrectly is confirmed by his admonition to Ophelia. He does not know himself,

but thinks to know Hamlet: "you have ta'en his tenders for true pay,/Which are not sterling" (99-106). The false judge (Hamlet calls him "old Jephthah") contributes by his judgement to Ophelia's suffering and eventual madness.

Soon after the opening scene the perspective shifts to Hamlet's contemplation of the bias which a man may suffer in public account for "some vicious mole of nature"; though the victim is not responsible for the blot, and can do nothing to alter it, his image may, in the world's mirror, "take corruption / From that particular fault" (I.iv.35-36). Coupled with Achilles' comment that speculation is prompted by what a man sees of himself in others, this meditation stresses the value of self-knowledge and discernment. It has ramifications for the necessity of knowing truth in order to live and act well, and is verified in the play by the many mistakings of one character by another.

Mistaking and the shifting perspectives which produce it are crucial to the ghost's message. The ghost restates Hamlet's mirror-contrast of the two kings, sorrowing that the "seeming-virtuous queen," deceived by Claudius' "wicked wit and gifts," was won

From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage . . . to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine! (I.v.48-52)

Gertrude spurned a love that was true as its vow, its own perfect image, to decline on Claudius. The ghost's inference is that Claudius' show, the "witchcraft" which blinded the queen, was as false as all else about him. Yet in Gertrude's imperfect mirror, it reflected greater worth than true love. The aftermath of this horrid testimony is Hamlet's oath to impress on "the table of my memory" the wiles of deceit: "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" (98-110). He plans to assume the image of Claudius' sham as an appropriate revenge: the seemer who deceived will be deceived through seeming.

Polonius' second advice-scene follows. As in his earlier charge, his basic premise is valid: "directions" are best found out by "indirections." The barrier to his own use of the method is, as in his inability to perceive truth, a lack of moderation. His tendency to overplay frustrates his attempts at "indirection." Even where he has accurate information, he is incapable of interpreting it. He cannot tell seeming from being, and his perceptions lead to false conclusions. More transparently than in his charge to Laertes, Polonius' direction of Reynaldo has theatrical implications. But his servant questions method and manner: is it wise to impose such blots on Laertes' character? Polonius insists that cautious insinuation will make all right (II.i.31-35), but the offstage and onstage audiences listen skeptically. Mirrored in Hamlet's recognition that "in the general censure" man's character may "take corruption / From a particular fault," Polonius' artlessness exposes his naive perception. Any hint of keenness is dispelled, as in his earliest scene, when Ophelia reports Hamlet's visit (the mirror of a mirror, a word-picture of antic dumb-show) and he takes wrong directions from Hamlet's indirections. He ironically hits his own fault of overreaching judgement in his final remarks:

It seems as proper to our age
 To cast beyond ourselves in our opinion
 As it is common for the younger sort
 To lack discretion. (114-17)

He has most need of this truth, but it serves only as an image of inadequacy to his audience.

Sparring with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Denmark as prison, Hamlet theorizes that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.245-57). His thesis recalls Richard II's — the mind, its own world, makes man king or beggar, prisoner or free agent — or King Lear, psychologically reborn, conceiving joy and freedom in a prison cell: "Come, let's away to prison; / We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage" (V.iii.8-9). The idea is enlarged in Hamlet's debate on substance and

shadow (260-71), extended in his theatrical reflections on the world and man (306-22), and cemented by the implicit linking of man and the arriving players. If "Man delights not me," since actors are the shadows of man and their art the mirror of his action, it follows to Rosencrantz that the players will receive "lenten entertainment" from Hamlet. But these shadows in which the prince was "wont to take delight" (341-42) still excite his pleasure where man cannot. Horrid revelation has persuaded him that "our monarchs and outstretch'd heroes" are "beggars' shadows" (269-71), but that "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time" (549-50) cast accurate outlines in their enactments and may be employed to "find directions out." These associations are cemented by his soliloquy where, speculating on verisimilitude, he turns the First Player's mirror of Aeneas on himself (586-88). In the same way the players, mirroring "something like the murder of my father" (624), will turn their glass on Claudius, force the mask from his face, and make him play true.

While Hamlet anticipates success, having taken his audience into account, Polonius, who does not sufficiently know his audience, rehearses with absurd confidence his playlet to unmask Hamlet. His coaching of Ophelia inadvertently tilts the mask of Claudius, Denmark's chief seemer, whose anguished reflection, in an aside, reveals his inner torment (III.i.50-54). In his dialogue with Ophelia, Hamlet echoes the king's remark as Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop behind the one-way mirror of the arras: "the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness" (111-14). Such echoes strengthen, in the minds of the playgoers, a sense of character antithesis. As Hamlet is "The glass of fashion and the mould of form" (161), a man whose inner and outer natures have until now been one, Claudius is a man whose deeds have long been colored and masked by words. Yet each can, in a moment of candid appraisal, mirror the other's senti-

ments. After Hamlet's withdrawal, Polonius, whose playlet has uncovered nothing of Hamlet's true purpose, is flushed with success: "You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said; / We heard it all" (187-88). Assured that to hear is to understand, Polonius further overreaches his wit by proposing that Gertrude question her son where he is placed "in the ear / Of all their conference" (192-93). This proves his last, worst casting.

Hamlet's much-discussed instruction of the players is summarized in his proposition that the end of acting is "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.24-25). It has not been remarked that this comment applies to living as well as to acting, and that his application of the principle of moderation links Hamlet's advice to Polonius' advice to Laertes, underscoring their connection as advisers. Yet Hamlet proceeds according to his judgement and is, insofar as man can be, a successful actor; Polonius ignores his maxims and proves a bad actor, consistently overreaching. Since man can only "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature," Hamlet is incapable of complete accord with things as they are. Like "any man that but man is" he is doomed to partial failure, his curiosity, caution and speculation doomed to incomplete satisfaction. The paradox at the heart of the play, underscored by Hamlet's instruction of the players, is that man can never accurately mirror what is since he can never fully know what is. Hamlet is cast, as each man is, in a role too demanding for his potential as actor/actor. The point is demonstrated when he voices his soul's election of Horatio:

blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. (73-76)

This judgement may be prompted by "thoughts of things divine," but is undercut by his earlier assertion that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (I.v.166-67): Horatio is not

the ideal man Hamlet at times takes him to be. As the judge has limitations, so do those he judges.

There follow proofs of this implication that all men perceive and reflect imperfectly. In the first (III.ii.97-103), Hamlet plays on Claudius' "How fares our cousin Hamlet?", answering that he eats the air. Claudius accepts the challenge, responding that he has "nothing with this answer" to feed his ear (the implication is carried by the "ear"- "air" homophones): Hamlet's words are not his "fare." The prince observes that they are no longer his either, for they have issued from his mouth. He then turns to rally Polonius, who "did enact Julius Caesar. I was kill'd i' th' Capitol; Brutus kill'd me" (108-09). Hamlet's riposte exposes Polonius' child-like naivete, but also grimly foreshadows the moment when he will dispatch the old counselor. *The Mousetrap* ensues. After its dumb-show, Hamlet assures Ophelia that her curiosity will be satisfied: "The players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all" (151-52). They can, we reflect, only tell the "all" which Hamlet knows or assumes; their play-act vision is a mirror of their writer/director's. Though Hamlet assures the uneasy king that the players "poison in jest" (244), he confidently expects their mock-poisoning to sicken Claudius in earnest. In the aftermath of the interrupted play, Hamlet taxes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for presuming to "play upon" him though they will not presume to play upon the recorder: "Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me!" (360-88). In turn, he plays upon Polonius (393-99), inducing the old flatterer to mirror his fantasies. In all of these confrontations, Hamlet exhibits virtuosity and breadth of insight into himself and others. But he defines his limits as well. The skillful actor/actor perceives a great deal, but not all.

We next witness Claudius trying to pray, and echoing Richard II's argument that inner turmoil frustrates action by checking intent:

Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will.
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
 And like a man to double business bound
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. (III.iii.38-43)

Desire to pray is frustrated by the desire to keep the possessions for which he acted guiltily. On the other hand, the lash of conscience no longer allows him pleasure of his ill-gotten gains. His agitation is amplified by thoughts of heaven (57-64): there seeming cannot "shove by justice." There the "gilded hand" is seen, and compelled to give evidence against itself. Though capable of this vision, Claudius is unable to follow his "inclination" and check his disordered will. Yet Hamlet, finding his uncle in the attitude of prayer, takes appearance for fact in his inner mirror and passes on.

In the meantime, the closet interview has been blocked out by its director / audience, who plans to observe through the looking-glass of the arras: "I'll silence me even here" (III.iv.4). His comment ironically foreshadows his ultimate silence when he violates his passive role. Hamlet comes to his mother intent to "set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (19-20). Since the audience is aware that her "inmost part" is hollow self-deception, her alarm ("What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?") is more than a reaction to his overwrought manner. It expresses her fear that he will force her to look within herself and discover her inner emptiness and death. Her cry for help is echoed by their mirror / audience, and Hamlet strikes through the looking-glass, killing the overreacher who, this final time, has spoken "more than is set down" for him. Responding to a cue not his, audience becomes actor and is banished from the stage for his error. Hamlet appends a sardonic directorial postscript: "I took thee for thy better" (32).

The reflector / witness dispatched, Hamlet sets up his glass for Gertrude; it shadows forth, as had his first soliloquy, the qualitative difference of the brother-kings,

obvious even in presumably flattering "counterfeit presentment" (53-65). He cannot grasp how a contrast so shocking in his eyes can fail to strike his mother:

Have you eyes?
 Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
 And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes? (65-67)

Gertrude's dulled sense awakes to a fearful clarity which prompts self-loathing:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
 Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
 And there I see such black and grained spots
 As will not leave their tinct. (88-91)

Cautioned by the ghost, Hamlet halts his cruel ministry and turns his inner vision on his schoolfellows. For them there will be no instructive prodding since, as he later tells Horatio, "they did make love to this employment" (V.ii.57). The keen actor looks forward to a duel with these seeming-wits, confident of victory: "O, 'tis most sweet, / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (202-10). The test will allow him to turn their transparent devices upon these obvious seemers. Polonius, whose obvious seeming has brought death, is forced in death to mirror the virtues, proper to a counselor, which he failed to reflect in life (213-15).

Increasingly threatened by Hamlet's presence, Claudius is frustrated: in the mirror of "the distracted multitude, / Who like not in their judgement, but their eyes," Hamlet shows too well (IV.iii.4-5). Claudius has not taxed the prince with his crimes, he later tells Laertes, because Gertrude "Lives almost by his looks" (IV.vii.12) and because of

the great love the general gender bear him;
 Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
 Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone,
 Convert his gyves to graces; so that my arrows,
 Too slightly timb'red for so loud a wind,
 Would have reverted to my bow again,
 And not where I had aim'd them. (18-24)

This recognition is the reverse-image of Hamlet's that "for some vicious mole of nature" man may "in the general

censure take corruption.” Actions which offend the nervous monarch are graces in the eyes of the many; Hamlet’s popular image threatens to turn accusation back on the accuser.

In its final movement, the drama most fully exploits mirroring. In the graveyard where Hamlet has speculated on the end to which all men come, he and Horatio witness Ophelia’s funeral procession, cast as audience to the act. As Polonius earlier had been, Hamlet is provoked to violate his part; he brushes forward to speak and justify his love. All that Laertes may do or propose as a test of love, Hamlet vows to mirror more vividly (V.i.297-307). In his better mind he regrets his rashness, aware that Laertes’ love and anguish are as deep and real as his: “by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his” (V.ii.75-78).

Earlier he has told Horatio of Claudius’ treachery. His discovery of the fatal commission and forgery of a mirror-copy to turn the device on its perpetrator and his agents illustrate the value of caution and subtlety to defeat seeming. Hamlet’s forgery succeeds because he knows the show-script of court underlings, eschewed by “statists,” and because he uses his father’s signet, “the model of that Danish seal” used by Claudius. The impression of the ring, emblematic of his forgery, assures “The changeling never known” (49-53). Thus does Hamlet dissemble “to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petar,” to “delve one yard below their mines, / And blow them at the moon” (III.iv. 206-09). His action is an ironic acceptance of Claudius’ earlier invitation to “Be as ourself in Denmark”: his perception enables him to seize the opportune moment to play the king. Now he plots to turn his revealing mirror on the “king of shreds and patches”:

Does it not, thinks ’t thee, stand me now upon —
 He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
 Popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes,
 Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
 And with such cozenage — is’t not perfect conscience,
 To quit him with this arm. (V.ii.63-68)

There follows Hamlet's conversation with Osric, in which the "water-fly" testifies that Laertes is what he seems. Using language which parodies Osric's manner, Hamlet agrees that Laertes' "semblable is his mirror" (110-25). His apology to Laertes mirrors his earlier admission to Horatio: he wronged a true man when not himself, and thus wronged his true self (237-55). In the duel they are to play, he promises recompense: "in mine ignorance / Your skill shall, like a star i' th' darkest night, / Stick fiery off indeed" (266-68). This generous statement is ambivalent since he has expressed his confidence, mingled with a hint of suspicion, to Horatio (220-23). Claudius orders a salute of their contest in the macrocosm, mirror-waves of sound which forecast the mirror-waves of sense which Hamlet's tragedy will send through time and space to illustrate the vexing uncertainty of human action (286-88). In support of this symbolic analogy Laertes is "as a woodcock to mine own springe . . . justly killed with mine own treachery" (317-18), a mirror-statement of his father's false judgement that Hamlet's vows of love are "springes to catch woodcocks" (I.iii.115). "The foul practice" having "turned itself on" him, Laertes turns it back on its originator and stage-manager (328-31).

The final mirror-image is vignette, a dumb-show exhibited by Hamlet's spokesman, Horatio. In a sense, the command to Horatio ("Absent thee from felicity a while / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story.") brings the play full-circle, for it began with Bernardo's request to Horatio to "Sit down a while, / And let us once again assail your ears, / That are so fortified against our story, / What we two nights have seen" (I.i.30-33). Hamlet's story too will be retold to ears fortified against it, unready to receive its exemplary mirroring of the uncertainty of life and the unpredictable consequences of even the best-considered and plotted acts:

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 judgements, casual slaughters,
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
 And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads: all this can I
 Truly deliver. (V.ii.388-97)

Horatio's address summons all men, onstage and off, whenever and wherever the play is seen, to witness. Some, like Osric, have "only got the tune of the time and outward habit of the encounter" (V.ii.198-99). Others, like Polonius, believe themselves "of wisdom and of reach" (II.i.64), but are ensnared and silenced in the fullness of their confidence. Still others, like Claudius, perceive the dimension of challenge but rely on schemes, only to be caught themselves. A few, like Hamlet, arrive at stoic resolve: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all" (V.ii.231-34). All experience the violent and unnatural, the casual and accidental, the inevitable but unforeseen. The play reflects the futility of plots and the absurdity of self-confidence: the schemer differs from his less clever fellow only in the degree of his mistaking. In the mirrors which others hold up to our speculative vision, we see imperfectly. Hence to know is impossible, to act always wisely and well equally impossible. The readiness is all.

NOTES

¹Charles R. Forker, "Shakespeare's Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in *Hamlet*," *ShQ*, 14 (1963), 218-19. For other discussions of the theatrical element see C. G. Thayer, "Hamlet: Drama as Discovery and as Metaphor," *Studia Neophilologica*, 28 (1956), 118-29; Anne Richter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962); Roy W. Battenhouse, "The Significance of Hamlet's Advice to the Players," in *The Drama of the Renaissance: Essays for Leicester Bradner*, ed. E. M. Blistein (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 3 ff.

²Forker, p. 221.