Metatheatrical Experience in *Hamlet*

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Abstract: The article argues that one important aspect of Shakespeare's modernity is his manifest concern with the relevance and possibilities of his own art, as highlighted in the analysis of the metadramatic dimension of *Hamlet* and of the paradoxes at the core of the theatrical experience.
Keywords: *Shakespeare, Hamlet, metadrama, truth vs. illusion, spectator, spectre.*

The question of Shakespeare's modernity figures prominently in the whole history of his critical reception; practically all ages have regarded him as occupying a central place in their constellation of cultural and literary values and as being relevant to it. The ways in which modernity has been defined have varied and so has the understanding of the bard's participating in it. One key moment was the Romantic perception of Shakespeare as almost a contemporary – Coleridge, for instance, refers to him as 'our own Shakespeare' and sees him, through the lens of Romantic concerns, as the equivalent of Nature itself, with its inexhaustible 'genial powers' (to use Wordsworth's terms): 'a nature humanized' whose excellence derives from 'a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness' (quoted in Abrams, 1953, 225).

This 'self-conscious' nature of a creative understanding marks a new type of subjectivity, which Hegel suggested inaugurated modernity, with its emphasis placed on individual conscience. Although rather cursory, Hegel's discussion of Shakespeare in his *Aesthetics* has the merit, among other things, of re-defining the concept of tragedy for modernity. As Jennifer Ann Bates points out, in an extended study of the moral imagination in Shakespeare and the German philosopher,

> According to Hegel, *Hamlet* is an example of modern drama since the collision is not of universal forces but depends on character: What drive the modern tragic heroes to act is the 'subjectivity of their heart and mind and the privacy of their own character.' (Bates, 2010, 19)

As has been insistently argued (e.g. Kirsch, 1997; Grady, 2002; Hamlin, 2013), Shakespeare's representations of modern subjectivity in his tragedies are part of the same fund of ideas circulating in the Renaissance as those of Montaigne's *Essays*, whose direct influence on Shakespeare remains a disputed issue, but echoes of which are unmistakable in many of Shakespeare's plays. Montaigne's analysis of modern consciousness emphasized both modern man's tendency to self-scrutiny and introspection, and the skepticism and sense of relativity in the consideration of such matters as subjective identity, morals and

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ethics, knowledge, and power. The extraordinary dramatic force of Shakespeare's characters, as well as the modern structure of their subjectivity, comes to a great extent from their characteristic 'split' mind, whose heightened self-awareness brings about the sense of self-division, of the uncertainty of self-knowledge and of the relativity of truth.

Shakespeare's artistic self-consciousness, manifested in the metadramatic, metatheatrical dimension of many of his works, displays the same sense of relativity and skepticism. As with Cervantes, Shakespeare's double consciousness of an inspired creator and of a skeptical critic of his own means is part of a modern creative sensibility.

One of the earliest approaches of this self-reflexive side, found to be integral to the dramatic author's consciousness, is Lionel Abel's study *Metatheatre. A New View of the Dramatic Form* (1963), written at a time of intense debate about the rising postmodernist aesthetics and the attempts to trace the dividing line separating it from modernism. In his appraisal of Shakespeare from this perspective, Abel takes issue with previous interpretations of *Hamlet* (by A.C. Bradley, Freud, Eliot), which are based on a notion of character as an unproblematic representation of a human being, and proposes instead a metadramatic understanding of character itself: *Hamlet* is in its entirety, he argues, dominated by the idea of acting, scripting and staging:

> [T]here is hardly a scene in the whole work in which some character is not trying to dramatize another. Almost every important character acts at some moment like a playwright, employing a playwright's consciousness of drama to impose a certain posture or attitude on another. (Abel, 1963, 45–46)

According to Abel, all the characters in the play fall into two general categories: some, like Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, and the Ghost are 'fundamentally dramatists or would-be dramatists,' trying to 'script' for the others, to cast them in particular roles, while others, like Gertrude, Laertes, Ophelia, are essentially 'actors,' caught in the script of another (Abel, 1963, 49). Abel argues that the problems that critics have encountered with *Hamlet* stem from Shakespeare's failure to make the play a tragedy proper, which was in turn caused by his failure to 'collaborate' with his character (or, more precisely, the character's refusal to collaborate with its author – cf. 58). For Abel, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* envisages for the first time 'the problem of author versus character' (ibidem); by endowing Hamlet with a playwright's self-consciousness, he renders him 'free of his author's contrivances,' in a similar manner that Pirandello's six characters were detached from their author.

Abel's view of metatheatricality extends beyond the device of the play-within-the play, to embrace a form of consciousness which reflected the Baroque sensibility of Shakespeare's age – the increasing feeling of brevity and insubstantiality of life, of its illusory nature, which makes it analogous to a theatrical performance. For the age of the Baroque, the theatre was the privileged art – nothing could convey better the feeling of 'life as dream' or the deep paradoxes which inform all human endeavours and passions when confronted with finitude and uncertainty.

Burdened by the mission of revenge with which his father's ghost entrusted him and striving to reach certainty about the ghost's nature and the guilt of Claudius, Hamlet finds himself trapped in a 'script' in which he is unhappy to act. His reluctance has, we may argue, a double, ambiguous cause: a *metaphysical* one, manifest in his sense of human powerlessness in the face of a universe 'out of joint,' in which a familiar order is damaged irreparably by a heinous act of transgression, and (following Lionel Abel's suggestion) a *metadramatic* one, which refers to the feeling of his unappropriateness for the role – in a very literal sense, as

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the act of revenge itself, by the dramatic conventions of the Renaissance, was expected to be highly theatrical in its representation (cf. Wetmore, Jr., 2008, 13) – i.e. it was a public act, it had to have an audience, to be watched. In the same line of argument, also inspired by Abel's insights, the presence of the ghost, its mode of appearance on stage, establishes from the very start the metatheatrical dimension. Jacques Derrida, in his involved discussion of the fate of Marxism through the situation of the ghost in *Hamlet* (in *Spectres of Marx*), referred repeatedly to the theatrical nature of its apparition. The ghost's radical ontological indeterminacy, its 'occupying a place/non-place between presence and absence, appearance and disappearance' (Prendergast, 2005, 45), its hovering 'uncertainly between material embodiment and disembodiment' (ibidem) may be seen as emblematic of the condition of the theatre itself. The stage confronts us with 'ghosts' in a more extended sense: the 'things' we see on stage (the ghost is repeatedly referred to as 'the Thing', an index of its indeterminate nature) are like the 'unsubstantial pageant' that Prospero conjures for the celebration of Miranda and Ferdinand's betrothal – visible yet lacking the substance of reality, pure illusion (Horatio pleads with the ghost: 'Stay, illusion!'– I, i, 127).Metatheatricality is established in this very first scene of the play by the introduction of doubt and hesitation as to the nature of 'things' – it is not only that Hamlet and his friends metaphysically wonder about the origin of the ghost ('Hamlet: If it assume my noble father's person / I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace' – I. iii. 243-5), but this hesitation is also meant to remind of a theatrical convention which is violated: *Hamlet* is 'an anomaly in the world of English stage ghosts' in the sense that it is 'the first and only play in which the reality of the ghost is called into question' (Wetmore Jr., 2008a, 79).

In order to test the 'reality' of the ghost, Hamlet's friends endeavour, to no avail, to make it speak. Marcellus urges Horatio to address it: 'Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio!'(I. i. 42). The belief that underlies this naïve exhortation is that an intellectual, whose rationally exercised mind is a guarantee of deeper knowledge, is better prepared to deal with things metaphysical, or at least ambiguous and indeterminate. Derrida glosses over this episode, showing the absurdity of this belief, which he calls 'the complex of Marcellus':

> There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ('to be or not to be,' in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. (Derrida, 1994, 12)

In a metatheatrical frame, this inaugural episode suggests that the distinction between the real and the unreal is not something that we, as spectators, are required or expected, or desire, to make. Just as Hamlet was intent on disregarding the metaphysical nature of the ghost and engage with it in the hope of reaching some truth, so the spectator entering the theatre hall casts aside the intellectual inclination of keeping a clear line between the real and the unreal, welcoming perplexity and undecidability as an alternative way to truth. This disposition comes from a kind of 'negative capability,' and is best described by Coleridge's formula 'willing suspension of disbelief.' The theatrical experience requires a kind of 'poetic faith' which does not mean the abandonment of rational thought, only its temporary voluntary suspension and the adoption of a more creative mode of perception.

Speculating on the nature of the 'spectre', Derrida concludes that it's also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an

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imaginary screen where there is nothing to see' (Derrida, 1994, 125).When Hamlet refuses to hear Horatio's arguments against following the ghost alone and breaks loose violently from his friends' hold, Horatio remarks: 'He waxes desperate with imagination' (I, v, 87). What Horatio fears is that the sight of the ghost might deprive Hamlet of the 'sovereignty of reason' and 'draw [him] into madness' (I, v, 73). For Horatio, imagination is a destabilizing power, but for Hamlet it is a necessary faculty, an indispensable instrument in the process of understanding, even if he is wary about the possible misjudgment that it may lead to. When Hamlet plans the 'Mousetrap,' he asks Horatio to assist him in watching Claudius's reaction to the theatrical 'mirror' that he intended to place before his conscience, in order to avoid error:

> I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
> Even with the very comment of thy soul
> Observe mine uncle: if his occulted guilt
> Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
> It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
> And my imaginations are as foul
> As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note;
> For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
> And after we will both our judgments join
> In censure of his seeming.
>
> (III, ii, 83–91)

The previous lines in Hamlet's address to Horatio justify his affection for his friend by his admiration for the latter's perfect inner balance: Horatio is commended as a man who could take 'fortune's buffets and rewards' 'with equal thanks' and in whom Hamlet can find that rare just proportion between 'judgement' and 'blood,' between reason and passion. The young prince is aware that, in watching Claudius, his imagination may mislead him – that he might, in the words of Theseus from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, behave like a madman and see 'more devils than vast hell can hold' (V, i, 9). The amplifying power of the imagination is felt as a danger to understanding, and Horatio has already appeared in the play as the cautious, skeptical 'spectator,' one who questions the reality of the spectre and trusts only what his own eyes can see, deciding on what is real and what not:

> *Marcellus*: Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
> And will not let belief take hold of him
> Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us.
> Therefore I have entreated him along,
> With us to watch the minutes of this night,
> That, if again this apparition come,
> He may approve our eyes and speak to it.
>
> (I, i, 23–29)

Hamlet and Horatio represent two types of spectators, two modes of theatrical reception, each of them privileging one faculty over the other: in Hamlet, the passion of grief intensifies his imagination, even to the point of madness (his feigned madness is still a working of his imagination, which enables him to play with his own sense of identity), while in Horatio the first impulse is that of rational disbelief, even if the 'dreaded sight' will eventually disturb him 'with fear and wonder'(I, i, 44).

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In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a brief soliloquy by Helena on the nature of love opposes two modes of 'seeing': 'Love looks not with the eye, but with the mind' (I, i, 234) – an insight developed in the last act by Theseus in his famous equation between the lover, the madman and the poet, who are 'of imagination all compact' (V, i, 8). 'Looking with the eye,' in Helena's speech, stands for realism, for lucidity, for seeing things as they are; 'looking with the mind' represents the imaginative amplification and transfiguration of reality by emotion, creative inspiration, or unreason. In the theatrical experience, both modes of perception – the rationality of the 'eye' and the irrationality of the imagination (the 'mind') are at work. The 'theatrical contract' involves the simultaneous operation of a *principle of lucidity*, which instructs us to disbelieve the fabrications on the stage and to remain aware of the artificiality of our experience, and of a mechanism of *self-blinding* which allows us to immerse ourselves in the fictional universe of the dramatic representation. The experience of a spectator rests upon the deconstruction of the clear-cut opposition between rational detachment and imaginative abandonment – in the words of Dr. Johnson, 'the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that theplayers are only players' (Johnson, 2001), even as they embrace the illusion. This contract makes it possible for aestheticized emotion to be more compelling than in real circumstances. Hamlet wonders, in Act II, ii, how the actor impersonating Hecuba could express grief with such conviction, giving his fictionalized emotion an intensity that makes Hamlet's own real torment seem 'dull.'

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all his visage wann'd,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
> For Hecuba!
>
> (II, ii, 585–92)

Suggestively, this dramatic experience alters Hamlet's consciousness, showing him, as in a mirror, the idleness of the philosopher's talk ('unpacking' his heart 'with words'), and becoming a 'cue' for action. It is in fact metatheatrical 'action,' as Hamlet decides to set up the 'Mousetrap', the 'thing' in which he plans to 'catch the conscience of the king' (II, ii, 641-2). The play-within-the-play represents the very centre of *Hamlet*, a scene in which the protagonist fills in, in a structure of mise-en-abyme, all possible roles in the dramatic situation: he is the director and the script-writer, but he is also playing his role of a madman, teasing Ophelia, while occupying an ambiguous spectator's position, since he watches not only his own play, but also the reactions of Claudius, who, in turn, fulfills a double posture: that of spectator and of unwitting 'actor,' the object of Hamlet and Horatio's careful examination.

The moment of the Mousetrap is the overt metatheatrical analogue of the ghost scene from the beginning. When Hamlet arranges for it to be performed before the fratricide king, he relies on the *spectral power* of the theatre of conjuring repressed, secret emotions, which would reveal a hidden truth. Those emotions, harbingers of a dark truth, are 'revenants' coming back from a buried past, just as the old king Hamlet's apparition comes to haunt the living. The eyes of Hamlet, 'riveted' on Claudius's face, like the silent watching of Horatio, 'approve' these spectral emotions, turning the play from a piece of

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courtly entertainment into an instrument of metaphysical investigation, ripping through the layers of concealment to reach a long-sought truth. When the safe distance between stage and audience is abolished by the complicated relations between the involved 'actors', Claudius experiences a moment of imbalance and ends up by identifying with the fictional situation and thus acknowledging his guilt.

Taken by surprise by his own emotions and by the unexpected effect of the performance on his conscience, Claudius cries for light. The obscurity of the theatre hall, like the night in which specters take their shape and bring confusion and uncertainty, is a trap indeed for Claudius, who needs light in order to recompose himself, to regain rational control over his emotions. The theatre hall had become a stage for his conscience, on which the inconsequential 'airy nothing' of a fictional story – like the ghost, which is 'as the air, invulnerable,' – as Marcellus says (I, i, 145) – materializes into the unbearable sense of guilt.

Asking for light to dispel the mysterious effect of the performance, which had placed a mirror – as Hamlet saw the function of the theatre to consist in – before his corrupt nature, Claudius acknowledges not only his own guilt, but also, implicitly, the power of the theatre to conjure up the truth from the obscure recesses of conscience, and therefore to function as an instrument of knowledge.

Shakespeare's general concern with the principles of his dramatic art, with its materials, its conventions and forms, its social relevance – a concern also to be found in the Sonnets –, as well as the wide variety of metadramatic strategies employed to communicate his vision by organically embedding his critical consciousness in the artistic fabric of his work, is an integral and an important aspect of his modernity.

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