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Liam Buckley April 15, 2018

A World at Play: Metatheatrics in *Hamlet*

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Abstract
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The world that Shakespeare lived in resembled a stage. In this thesis, I use the Shakespearean mantra "all the world is a stage" as a means to show that in the play *Hamlet,* Shakespeare puts the world of early modern England on the stage: its vibrant political, social, and economic scene becomes illuminated by characters acting out their roles, and audiences watching them perform them. I show how metatheatrics and self-reflexivity perpetuate a notion of a duel reality, and how we live in a world that is both theatrical and "real." This essay explores how Shakespeare makes powerful use of the physical layout of the Globe theatre, showing us how the theatre acts as a microcosm for the city of London. In *Hamlet*, all the characters have roles to fulfill, and an act to put on; they excessively preoccupy themselves with their appearance and costume, and observe each other in secrecy. Likewise, the "real" world of England functioned very similarly to the theatre*;* the court relied on a combination of observation and ostentatious performance, while the elite Elizabethans underwent what Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt theorized as a "self-fashioning" process. This essay argues that through the character of Hamlet, Shakespeare taps into this problem of self-fashioning – how we look versus how we feel. Using a New Historical lens, I show how the zeitgeist of the time (politics, social life, class, and early inklings of the Scientific Revolution) permeate *Hamlet.* I also readdress the age old question "is Hamlet mad or is he acting?" to show that Hamlet abides by acting standards of the time, as well as fits the symptoms of madness (as defined by early modern medicine practitioners). Thus, I dismiss the notion that we can separate these two spaces, madness and acting, to argue that we are all actors, and therefore, we are all a little bit mad too.

*Keywords*: metatheatre, metatheatrics, self-reflexivity, play-within-a-play, actors, acting, role playing, all the world is a stage, Hamlet, madness, distraction, Scientific Revolution, medicine, humours, costume, externality, internality, to be or not to be, Queen Elizabeth I, the Globe theatre, Stephen Greenblatt, self-fashioning, cosmetics, New Historicism, sixteenth century England, seventeenth century England, early modern period.

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**Table of Contents**

## Introduction

Perhaps the best way to understand *Hamlet* begins through the lens of a different Shakespeare play: *As You Like It.* Shakespeare wrote and produced *As You Like It* (1599-1600) around the same time of *Hamlet* (1599-1601), so it is fair for us to assume his ruminations would have spread across these two pieces of art. While one is a comedy and the other a tragedy, they both share a striking fascination with the world of the theatre. What does it mean to write a play? What does it mean to act in one? What does it mean to watch a performance? Shakespeare raises these questions overtly in *As You Like It,* but as we will see, *Hamlet* takes haunting steps to answer them. The result leaves us in an identity crisis, in a moment of existential insecurity, one that matches Hamlet's very own preoccupation that has left scholars, students, and everyday theatergoers puzzling for centuries: to be or not to be?

In the most famous monologue in As You Like It, Jacques, a young melancholic character who frets around the stage in similar fashion to Hamlet, clues us into a world of metatheatricality. He tells his optimistic and cheery counterpart Duke Senior that:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players.
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. (2.7.146-150)

Jacques follows his claim with evidence, giving an analogy of the seven different roles man plays in life; he tells us about "the infant," "the whining schoolboy," "the lover," the "soldier," the judge, the "lean and slippered" old man, then finally the almost unrecognizable person who lies on his death bed, "sans teeth, sans eyes sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.150, 152, 154, 156,

160, 165, 173). Many scholars have written about this analogy, focusing on the ways Shakespeare shows us how we are all actors. We all perform a role in our lives: we put on makeup, clothes, and costumes everyday; we grow older and change professions; when we look back at years past, we may marvel about how much we have changed. The person who we were a decade ago is not who we are today – their appearance and their character unfamiliar. Thus, throughout the course of a lifetime, we change our roles like actors changing parts between different shows. However, if all the world is indeed a *stage*, then Shakespeare implies something more profound: all the world is also an *audience*. This is an oftentimes neglected component to Jacques' speech. When we observe our friend grow up from a snobby teenage boy to a working father, we inherently partake in a theatrical act of observation, voyeurism, and inspection. We are all onlookers to someone else's performance. Through Jacques' metatheatrical reference, Shakespeare opens our eyes to a world that is not dichromatic; instead, we live in a nexus, as actors and observers, where we oftentimes do both at the same time. My essay will argue that in *Hamlet,* Shakespeare takes Jacques' metaphors and draws them out completely.

Given that Hamlet is perhaps Shakespeare's most self-reflexive character, he deserves to be in a play that is just as reflexive as his personality. In *Hamlet,* Shakespeare puts the world of early modern England on the stage: its vibrant political, social, and economic scene becomes illuminated by characters acting out their roles, and audiences watching them perform them. Moreover, the phrasing in that last sentence should deliberately confuse you: who is the audience? Who is the actor? Where do we draw the line? In *Hamlet,* it becomes blurred. Shakespeare shows us how seemingly mundane events in our everyday lives – the clothes we decide to wear, the actions we take, the emotions we hide from our peers, the politicians we respect – are actually engrained with dramaturgic principles. I define metatheatrics as any

moment where a stage performance becomes aware of itself, its audience, and the amphitheater that houses them. These moments can come up in any number of situations, such as characters speaking directly to the audience and subsequently acknowledging their existence, characters referencing the structural system of the body of the amphitheater, making an in-joke reference to cultural phenomena, and so on. To boil it down, metatheatrics allows the playwright to recognize and embrace the fiction of stage performance, but by doing so, also helps to dissolve the separation between stage and reality. Looking at *Hamlet*, we can categorize the use of self-reference into three parts: (1) the play-within-a-play; (2) the characters in the play oftentimes referencing the theatre and other "real life" cultural phenomena; and (3) all the characters, especially Hamlet, being actors in and of themselves. In my essay, I will explore the effects that these different scenarios have on the audience.

It all begins with the title: *Hamlet.* It signals to us that the play will of course be about Hamlet, a fictitious prince of Denmark. However, Hamlet also famously puts on an "antic disposition," i.e. playing the role of a madman, and thereby becoming an actor himself. He chooses to act the part of a madman, but finds that flipping the switch between acting and non-acting does not exist. Thus, *Hamlet* is a play about an actor playing an actor who loses himself in his role. But if everyone in the world is also an actor, Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet's predicament is one that we all share. When Elizabethan playgoers attended Shakespeare's plays, they oftentimes encountered the common device of a play-within-a-play, a sequence of *mise en abyme. Hamlet*, no less, features a play-within-a-play. All of a sudden, the actors on stage become onlookers too, sharing the same role as those in the audience. The audience would have noticed how the zeitgeist – the prevailing sentiment, mood, and character of the era – percolates through the Globe's walls and onto the stage. Shakespeare consciously shows us how the world

we think we know is actually a world embedded by dramaturgical principles. Perhaps the reason why *Hamlet* has become so engrained in our culture is because anyone who grapples with it feels like they could have been the ones themselves on the stage; they could have been at one time or another in the role of Hamlet, Ophelia, Polonius, or even Claudius. As the great critic Dr. Samuel Johnson said: Shakespeare's drama "is the mirror of life" (Frank and Wimsatt 303).

The context Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in is critical to our understanding of the text. In this essay, I will explore how Shakespeare's life, but more so the cultural phenomena around him help steer the play. Since Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism methodology arrived on the literary scene in the 1980s, scholars cannot ignore how the cultural context influences an artist's work. This literary theory shows us that an author's work is "a social product that is inextricably bound to the patchwork 'master-text' of the culture that produced it," but it is also a signifier as to what his or her culture was like (Parvini 91). Therefore, when we read *Hamlet*, we see it as both a product of the cultural times as well as evidence for how people thought. Perhaps one of the best examples as to *why* we should read a play in the context of when and how it was written is the example of Shakespeare's family history. Given that so much of *Hamlet* focuses on death and the relationship between a father and son, knowing that "Shakespeare himself lost his first and only son, Hamnet" in 1596, four years before he wrote *Hamlet* strikes us as an important parallel (Callaghan 233). For Shakespeare, the world of the stage was all too real. Unlike most of his playwright peers, Shakespeare never attended college. He did, however, have "modest means" to attend primary education, and learn to write (Callaghan 14). This tool, the ability to write, paid off for Shakespeare infinitely, as he became one of the world's most prolific playwrights. His plays and poems show a fascination with the power that writing bestows; not only did it provide him a means to live, but also a way

to escape the clamps of death and to live on through his words. In sonnet 55, we may recall that he brags how "Not marble, nor the guilded monument, / of Princes shall out-liue this powrefull rime" (1-2).[1] Likewise, in *Hamlet,* Hamlet's fear of death comes into direct contact with his yearning for craft.

While the scholarly field actually knows very little about Shakespeare himself, and much is up to speculation, what we do have a lot of information on is the time in which he lived. The early modern period is one of the most fascinating times in all of human history. It was the moment just before the capitalistic and democratic turn in the West, the time when monarchs still ruled, while rational and scientific thought just boiled beneath the surface. The Renaissance was well underway, but in Shakespeare's time, only the kernels of the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution were planted. The arts were greatly appreciated in London, but questions of whether they could coexist with scientific thought were beginning to uproot the establishment. As Europeans sent ships full of explorers eastward to conquer and colonialize the Americas, those at home began to formulate a sense of freedom for themselves. They were, in a sense, becoming more like Hamlet: self-aware, exceedingly conscious about the clothes they wore, the words they spoke, and the people they associated with, all in attempt to carefully manipulate social standing. The idea "you can be who you want to be" began here. Despite the changing times, everywhere Shakespeare looked, he must have felt at home. As described by the English writer and dramatist Thomas Dekker, who lived in the time of Shakespeare, London felt like a mad show:

> For at one time, in one and the same rank, yea, foot by foot and elbow by elbow, shall you see walking, the knight, the gull, the

[1] As found in Carl D. Atkins *Shakespeare's Sonnets: With Three Hundred Years of Commentary* on page 154.

> gallant, the upstart, the gentleman, the clown, the captain, the apple-squire [pimp], the lawyer, the usurer, the citizen, the bankrupt, the scholar, the beggar, the doctor, the idiot, the ruffian, the cheater, the puritan, the cut-throat, the high man, the low man, the true man, and the thief... (Falk 131).

In sixteenth and seventeenth century London, you were never far away from the theatre – all you had to do was pop your head out the window and see the faces on the street, the histrionics of an angry shopkeeper chasing down thieves, or take a deep breath of the rancid, plague-filled air and understand what Marcellus is talking about when he says "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Shakespeare's London was a joyous and robust sprawl that mixed characters of every sort. Nevertheless, Shakespeare must have felt the ground shifting beneath him, a steady grumbling that the world he lived in would be much different than the one his children would grow up in. Perhaps for this reason Shakespeare's *Hamlet* feels so pernicious; we enter the world of *Hamlet* and feel a sense of political maneuvering, of shifting familial relationships, and changing times. Shakespeare probably knew this all too well, as the life he lived "was very different from that of his father's childhood. The old Catholic religion had been swept away – in theory, at least – with the reforms begun by Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, and a new Church of England installed in its place" (Falk 119). Hamlet, too, lives in a world different from his father.

Shakespeare wrote in one of the most dynamic playgoing periods in human history, and the theatre became a cultural hot spot that he oftentimes self-reflexively referenced in his works. We have to remember that his peers were the likes of Christopher Marlow, Thomas Kyd,[2] Ben Jonson, and Thomas Heywood, and together through their rivalries, they created a widespread

[2] Many scholars believe that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reworks the Thomas Kyd play *The Spanish Tragedy*.

playgoing culture in London. According to Shakespearean scholar Marjorie Garber, despite the popularity of plays at the time, public playhouses were forced to the "outskirts of the city of London... because neither the city fathers nor certain religious elements in society wanted them inside" (Garber 23). People in power saw the theatre as a dangerous place, physically, culturally, and politically. For one, the overcrowding created an immediate risk of the spread of the bubonic plague. But politicians also saw it as politically "infectious," a risky space that could spread "new and dangerous" ideas (Garber 23). Last but not least, the "Puritans saw the onstage phenomenon of common men playing the parts of kings and princes as a kind of class-jumping, dangerous to social stability" (Garber 23). When boys played girls, the church saw it as a "sign of depravity, temptation, and sin" (Garber 24). Hence, playhouses like the Globe were moved across the river, so to access the theatres the poor had to cross the London bridge and the rich used the ferry (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 143). We should not be surprised then, given that audiences had to travel great distances to watch a play in the middle of nowhere, only to travel back to the sprawl of the city, that Shakespeare shares a preoccupation with the cadence of travel. Garber points out that in plays like a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is a "basic rhythm" of "civilization/wilderness/civilization," where the "middle worlds" act as "a place of transformation" (Garber 217). Shakespeare thus remolds his plays in the light of his audience's experience. His audience also had to travel from the city, to the wild theatrical world, and back to the city again. We see a variation of this in *Hamlet*, when the play-within-a-play, "Murder of Gonzago," splits the whole play of *Hamlet* into two. Like always, the space in the middle acts as the place of transformation. What this all tells us is that Shakespeare attuned himself to the theatrical culture of the time, and his plays oftentimes reflect the audience's experience itself.

In 1599, Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men – the company of players who performed Shakespeare's plays – built a theatre of their own, and decided to name it conspicuously the "Globe." Clearly, at first glance, we see that Shakespeare winks at us playgoing fans to tell us that his stage is our world. But Shakespeare does more than that; he comments on the zeitgeist of his time. In the essay "Englishing the Globe: Molyneux's Globes and Shakespeare's Theatrical Career," Shakespearean scholar Adam Max Cohen outlines how loaded the word "Globe" really was at the time. Cohen says that to some scholars, it references the "growing influence of Vitruvian architectural theory," which suggested that "the playing space was a theater of the world within which human history was enacted upon a stage representing the earth" (Cohen 963). To Cohen however, he adds that it could have been an allusion to the ever growing fascination with colonization, map making, and in general, the "English enthusiasm for actual globes, which increased after the manufacture of the first English globes by Emery Molyneux in 1592" (Cohen 964). In the early modern period, the world was shrinking, and nothing signified this consolidation of space better than the artistic manufacturing of a globe in and of itself. This idea that the world could be condensed, understood, spun around and toyed with, becomes symbolized when the Lord Chamberlain's Men named their theatre the "Globe."

While we can grasp *Hamlet* by just reading the text, we also have to keep in mind that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed. Shakespeare was a master at rewriting works from past playwrights, formulating many of his plays through Aristotelian models. While *Hamlet* follows the guides set in Aristotle's idea of the "tragedy" genre – an unhappy ending, a wholeness and unity in the plot, complexity of characters, *hamartia* (i.e. character flaw) etc. – it does deviate from the standard prescription. Shakespeare's characters are never so easily defined,

and his plays, despite their tragic endings, have high moments of comedy. As Aristotle defines it in *Poetics*, a tragedy acts as a presentation of *mimesis* in order to cause fear and pity in the audience, which will ultimately create catharsis. This idea of *mimesis* – a "rhythm, speech, and melody" (Aristotle 49) – roughly translates in English to "imitation." It helps us account for the crucial differences between the arts and philosophy: poetry acts as a mirror of reality, reflecting the world as it is. When we view the arts, we get to see how our world is. This is why in the *Preface to Shakespeare*, Dr. Samuel Johnson says that "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature" (Frank and Wimsatt 301). Today, we view Dr. Johnson as the eminent theoretical voice of his time;[3] writing over a century after Shakespeare, he argued that Shakespeare's work captures, mirrors, and *imitates* the general characteristics of mankind, rather than the particular idiosyncrasies. However, Johnson neglects the role of metatheatrics, how it foregrounds an artificial quality; a play cannot be a transparent window, a complete *imitation,* of reality if it addresses the fiction of its own work.

Everyone who has ever attended a play knows that they are watching a play. Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* and Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* are a means to understand the ways we have thought about theatre in the past. Yet I ultimately side with Andrew Gurr's idea on illusionism: while in today's day and age oftentimes the goal of media is to create a sense of realism, in Shakespeare's time, "stage illusion was a regressive feature" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 125). In his book *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London,* Renaissance and theatre scholar Andrew Gurr contextualizes how much audiences and playwrights alike would

[3] Living in the eighteenth century, Dr. Samuel Johnson was a man of many talents: he wrote poems and essays; he was a neoclassicist and a devout Protestant who delivered sermons; he was famous for his public critic of fiction novels; and perhaps most famously, he marshaled together every word in the English language and catalogued it in a dictionary, the first of its kind. Dr. Johnson also wrote extensively on Shakespeare (Kelleher "Samuel Johnson").

have resisted the temptation of the play seeming exactly "real." For one, audiences were tightly packed next to each other, crammed as "closely as possible to the speakers" on stage, while the actors on stage "set up a number of deliberately unrealistic features in their staging practices" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 125). Once the actors opened their mouths on stage, something went astray:

> Speaking in verse rather than prose, delivering your mind in soliloquy as a person in solitude yet speaking directly to the immediately accessible listeners at your feet, using boys to play women, allowing clowns to ad-lib with their hecklers, the very fact that three dimensional playing mean half the audience was visible on the other side of the players, these features of early theatre abounded with deliberate inhibitions against the easier kinds of illusionism. (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 125)

People were loud and smelly, the amphitheater was crowded, food and drink were served alongside the seductions of prostitutes; everything about attending a play told Elizabethans that the actions on stage are not real. In fact, plays were never intended to be realistic. Common belief held that illusionism in general – realism, magic and trickery – was the work of Satan himself (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 125). The whole idea behind the witch-hunts that dominated Shakespeare's era stemmed from identifying persons (especially women) who had a devil inside them acting like a ventriloquist i.e. pretending to be human. Hence, what we see is that "there are many reasons why such ostentatious theatricality became the normal attitude at this time, besides the difficultly of persuading people to ignore the elbows and the smells of their neighbors in the crowd" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 126).

Metatheatrics thus works in two directions: it proudly admits to the fiction of a play, but it also lures us into its realities. Once the playwright addresses the fiction of his work, we can enjoy the plays for what they suggest to us. In other words, Shakespeare knew his plays were never going to be seen as real, but through metatheatrics, he allows for the action of *mimesis* to take place. The whole device of the theatre is what makes it special: it is not merely an imitation on stage that represents the "generalities" of humankind, but rather a dynamic moving spectacle of its audience – the smelliness, the social aspect, the observation, the metatheatrics. The theatre consists of both the stage and its viewers.

The first chapter of my thesis starts off on a separate note. It discusses the differences among the First Quarto, Second Quarto, and First Folio publications of *Hamlet*; additionally, I also justify why I chose to use both the modern day Arden edition and the Folger edition. In the second chapter of my thesis, I propose that the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* puts the audience into a position of both actor and observer; in the "Murder of Gonzago" scene, stage actors join the audience in observation. This play-within-the-play solidifies the tone that in *Hamlet,* everyone observes and spies on everyone else, and thus consequently, everyone within the play is an audience member of some sorts. In chapter three, I further show that in *Hamlet's* Denmark, since everyone is an audience member, everyone must also be an actor – everyone has a role to play in the court. In chapter four, I argue that the dual roles of observation and performative displays in the Elizabethan political sphere functioned very similarly to the world of *Hamlet*. In chapter five, I compare how Hamlet's costume changes mimic the Renaissance "self-fashioning" process as a whole. Chapter six turns the spotlight to Hamlet: I will show how he is an actor, and abides by theatrical standards of the time. We oftentimes wonder whether or not Hamlet is

"mad" or is just acting; this chapter will explore one side to that question. In the last section, chapter seven, I present the intricate relationship between the medicalized notion of "madness" and the theatre. I use the context of the early stages of the Scientific Revolution to understand early modern thinking on madness. By the end of this chapter, we will see that Shakespeare was well aware of scientific findings of his time, and that he shows us the ways the theatre can be used as a space to learn about our world. Perhaps most importantly, this chapter will allow us to revisit the age old question "is Hamlet mad, or is he acting?" Hopefully, we will see that this question does not matter as the answer is ultimately unsolvable. What is important is the question itself.

Turning the world into a stage requires intricate processes. Through the use of metatheatrics and self-commentary, we should see that we share much in common with the actors on the stage, and they to us. The structure of the Globe theatre itself plays a role in this role reversal. Perhaps more importantly, we must learn that our lives outside the theatre are still *theatrical*; the way we grow older and change, the manner which we dress, the ostentatious acts of our politicians, how we deal with death and birth, new discoveries that we find – all are theatrical acts. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare does not outline every example of real-life theatricality for us to see; rather, he galvanizes our perception of a dual reality. When we finish watching or reading *Hamlet*, we should leave feeling like we've been given a new pair of goggles, a new lens, to see the world.

## Chapter 1: The Problem of the Texts

Now, before we can discuss the world at play in *Hamlet*, we have to have a firm grasp on the different editions of *Hamlet*. This not only means picking the right modern edition of *Hamlet* to analyze, but also going back in time to revisit the first three published versions of *Hamlet*: the First Quarto (1603), Second Quarto (1604), and the First Folio (1623). For my thesis, I decided to mainly cite from the Arden Shakespeare version of *Hamlet*, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. To many scholars, Arden is the pinnacle of the *Hamlet* editions; it is an edited and annotated text of the Second Quarto, as Thompson and Taylor treat the First Quarto (Q1), Second Quarto (Q2), and the First Folio (F1) as distinct entities. However, at a few points, I do set aside the Arden, and pick up Barbara A. Mowat's and Paul Werstine's well renown Folger edition. Mowat and Werstine take a much less rigid approach to editing *Hamlet* as compared to the Arden edition, as the Folger offers a hybrid reading with text from the "Second Quarto combined with as much of the First Folio" (Mowat and Werstine xlix). Unfortunately, as we will see, the Q2 falls short on some moments of meta-commentary, whereas the F1 has much more on this matter. Hence, my justification for my movement between Arden and Folger (and subsequently, between Q2 and F1) is underpinned by these extra moments of metatheatrics. I want to squeeze every drop out of *Hamlet* to show you how thick the self-reflexivity is.

What are the differences between Q1, Q2, and F1, and how do they affect our reading of *Hamlet*? Right off the bat, we see that "all three texts are interrelated: the folio version resembles Q1 more closely in some respects, Q2 more closely in others. Each has significant pieces of dialogue that exist in no other version" (Marcus 133). The first version of the play came about in 1603, and was named *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmark by William Shake-speare* (Mowat and Werstine xlvii). According to the Folger edition, "this version is little more

than half as long as the others," many of the characters' names are different, and the "action of the play also varies considerably" (Mowat and Werstine xlvii). For better or worse, most scholars claim this to be the "bad quarto." If we look at the famous "to be or not to be speech," as critic Leah S. Marcus has done, we can see why so many repudiate and ignore the Q1 when discussing *Hamlet*. In this version, Hamlet gears up for his great speech, stands alone, then says: "To be or not to be – ay, there's the point. / To die, to sleep – is that all? Ay, all" (1.7.115-116). Not the words we expected. In Marcus' mind, we hate this rendition because it is not the one we know; because the "to be or not to be" speech is "so deeply engrained in our cultural expectations," any deviation from the established text "is likely to be greeted as parody, and the audience on this theatrical occasion is no exception" (Marcus 133). Add on a slew of other "poorly" constructed speeches, and we feel no need to treat Q1 seriously. But luckily we have the Second Quarto, also known as the "good quarto," to save the day for us. While it shares the same title, it is a longer and cleaner version, known to be the one that Shakespeare "authorized" himself (Marcus 139). Then finally, we have the third version that was printed in the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, and titled *Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke.* The Folger clearly has affinity towards this title, as that is one they chose as their title. This version has around eighty-five lines not present in Q2, "but the Folio lacks about two hundred of the Second Quarto's lines" (Mowat and Werstine xlvii). We know that John Heminges, Henry Condell, and Shakespeare himself played a role in editing the F1 version (Thompson and Taylor 80). In today's landscape, many editors hotly contest which version(s) to use – Q2 versus F1, or a combination of the two – and they all have their own justifications for the matter. The fact that *Hamlet* has three versions to its name only adds to the complexity of the play, especially because "each includes a printed claim to be

by [Shakespeare]" (Thompson and Taylor 92). Therefore, the challenges of editing *Hamlet* only add to its mystique. It is as dynamic and dualistic as the Prince himself.

I do not want to position myself within this editorial debate (as I am not an editor); however, I do feel the need to note a few key differences that cause the F1 to stand out. According to Marcus:

> The folio version (the one to which we are accustomed in standard texts of the play) is greatly expanded, and forges, through its topical specificity, an explicit linkage between Shakespeare's company performing the play of Hamlet and the players of Elsinore. We get much more information about the children's companies, as well as much fuller analysis of the basis for their appeal. Hamlet's queries combine the Q1 and Q2 versions, but the rest of the conversation is unique to this version. (Marcus 175)

I mostly stick to the Arden edition (which edits Q2) because it likely came from "Shakespeare's own manuscript or from a scribe's copy of it" (Mowat and Werstine xlviii), however some lines do slip through the cracks; I want to be as close to Shakespeare's words as I possibly can. If I am to discuss metatheatrics, and because the Folio contains more lines on the topic, I feel it is imperative for me to take this jump into F1 if necessary. I am not alone in this boat; many others feel that given the uptick of "pronouncements about theatre," the F1 version "is the one that brings us closest to Shakespeare as we have traditionally liked to imagine him, and to a Shakespearean theater elegant and sophisticated enough to accord with our image of the author" (Marcus 176). For these reasons, I analyze some lines from the Folger edition (i.e. lines from F1) that are not included in Arden.

Rarely do scholars ever cite from the Q1, and yet, it is the one that may have been performed during Shakespeare's time. This undoubtedly poses a problem for any scholar discussing metatheatrics: how can we ethically quote from either the Q2 and F1 if what was said on the stage came from Q1? This problem has been criminally ignored. Marcus speculates that both the Q2 and F1 were meant to be read, whereas the Q1 was meant to be performed on the stage. She sees that "the disparity in language between Q1 and Q2 can be explicated in terms of the contrast between predominantly oral and predominantly literate cultures" (Marcus 154). In her eyes, the real difference between Q1 and Q2 lies in the "precision of language," where the earlier version feels simpler and less refined, while the second version has "more vivid, precise, and amplified language," and is therefore "a version of the play more specifically geared toward readers" (Marcus 154). This makes sense for two reasons. First, in terms of production, it would be a lot easier for actors to memorize simple colloquial lines – especially given that many of them were either illiterate or semi-literate (Marcus 158). Secondly, for the audience, it is a lot easier to absorb the gravity of a performance if it feels more conversational, and less intricate. To demonstrate her point, Marcus gives a perfect example: even for us today, "people use language differently in oral situations than they do in writing" (Marcus 158). We either consciously or unconsciously avoid using "elaborate syntactic and semantic structures" and use "fewer abstract terms" when speaking aloud (Marcus 158). At the same time, when we sit down to write, we appreciate the opportunity to "shape discourse with much greater precision in order to achieve the same degree of intelligibility" (Marcus 158). What this tells us is that the *Hamlet* performed at the Globe may have been the *Hamlet* we all disdain and refuse to acknowledge. While this is only Marcus' contention, it nonetheless injects ambiguity into our reading of *Hamlet.*

Oddly, this has not stopped anyone from using the Q2 and F1 when discussing metatheatrics. Take for example Marjorie Garber and Andrew Gurr, two of the most respected Shakespearean scholars, who freely quote from F1. In 2.2 of F1, Rosencrantz tells Hamlet "there is, sir, an aerie of children, little / eyases" disrupting the theatre industry (2.2.362-363). Garber cites this quote as an example of how children troupes of the day took jobs from adult acting groups (Garber 26). However, the Q1 version reads much differently: Gilderstone[4] tells Hamlet "I'faith, my lord, novelty carries it away / For the principal public audience that came to them are / turned to private plays, and to the humour of children" (1.7.271-237). As for Q2, the line does not exist. In her book *Shakespeare After All,* Garber ignores the discrepancy among all the texts, as do most scholars. In the book *The Shakespearean Stage,* author Andrew Gurr takes it a step further by inadvertently making a clear connection between the F1 and the audience. Analyzing the same line as Garber, Gurr says that "these 'little eyases,' as [Richard] Burbage playing Hamlet called them a year or two later on the Globe stage, did not attract the hostility of the local gentry as did the adult players" (Gurr 64). In Gurr's view, the person who played Hamlet in real life (Richard Burbage) recites lines from the F1 in front of the Globe audience. But from what we have learned from Marcus' argument, Burbage should have been speaking the Q1 lines in 1603, right? Perhaps. Clearly, this maze can wear us down. As a result, the common method in the scholarly field, whether ethical or not, is to tune out these questions, and to just enjoy what we are presented with in the Q2 and F1. We treat these versions as the one's performed on the stage. Hence, when I switch to the F1 to add further metatheatrical commentary, I justify my movement because we all choose the lines that work best for our

[4] In Q1, Guildenstern's name is "Gilderstone."

arguments, and treat them as if actors of Shakespeare's time performed them on the stage. With some reservations, I follow the footsteps in front of me.

When choosing any modern edition of *Hamlet*, we must understand the plasticity of editing. For this reason, David Scott Kastan, a Shakespearean scholar and theorist, makes a barbed critique against New Historical readings of Shakespeare. In his opinion, "New Historicism has rarely paid much attention to the specific material and institutional conditions of the discursive exchanges it has explored" (Kastan 17). Only scarcely do New Historicists discuss "how a text actually enters and exists in the world" (Kastan 17). Hence, when I use the Arden edition of *Hamlet,* which prefers "to treat each text as an independent entity" (Thompson and Taylor 94), I must take into account the editor's biases. In our day and age, we will never be able to find Shakespeare's original words. Every edition has been washed through, "edited, mediated by agents other than the author, and intended for the convenience of its readers" (Kastan 84). Once we accept this reality, we can know "how much we have gained" (Kastan 83). In my thesis, I stick mostly with the Arden version because of its loyalty to a single reading of *Hamlet*, the Q2. However, a few times, I bend the rules – as most Shakespearean scholars do – by quoting from F1, only because I want to show you how Shakespeare put all the world on a stage.

## Chapter 2: The Play-Within-the-Play

The play-within-the-play is the heartbeat of *Hamlet.* In the midst of all the chaos in this rotten state of Demark, Hamlet decides to stage a play to find out the truth behind the Ghost's accusations. Moreover, Hamlet has his actors reenact a similar murder scene as the one described by the Ghost in Act 1; if Claudius had indeed committed the crime, then he should react adversely to reenacting his murder, but if not, he has unconsciously proven himself innocent. The play-within-the-play contains two interconnected performances – the short wordless "Dumb Show" that quickly summarizes the grander "Murder of Gonzago." Together, Hamlet names the whole piece *the Mousetrap*, a fitting title for a clever scheme. However, as with most things Shakespearean, the play serves more than one role: on a micro scale, we see that the play conveniently restages and repackages many of the motifs in *Hamlet's* – metatheatricality, death, betrayal, and familial relationship all become expounded through theatrical performance. But if we take a further step back, we can actually see that *the Mousetrap* looks and feels very much like an Elizabethan theatrical experience. As I will show, it was as if Shakespeare stuck his Globe theatre audience right in front of a mirror, forcing them to *watch* themselves attend their own play.

The staging of a seemingly insignificant "Dumb Show" actually gives scholars a window into a zeitgeist. Without a doubt, a summary (the "Dumb Show") of a summary (the "Murder of Gonzago") of a crime we already know the details to may feel gratuitous in modern eyes. However, what we have to remember the context of which Shakespeare lived in. *Hamlet* is a very complex play with many moving parts, and in 1601, the play's intricate plot would have likely presented challenges for its live audience. Especially given, as Andrew Gurr points out, theatre of the time had "special appeal as a leisure activity to the illiterate" and the uneducated

(Gurr, *Playing in Shakespeare's London*, 65). If we were to step foot into the pit and stand shoulder to should with the "groundlings," we have to assume some may have been confused at this point – some may have asked, *why is Hamlet staging this play again? What Happened to Hamlet's father?* To risk alienating a large portion of uneducated audience is to risk the purpose of this universally human play. Moreover, it seems that Shakespeare knows his audience well enough that he feels compelled to give them an abridged reenactment of Hamlet. We can break down the dumb show as follows:

> Enter [Players as] a king and a queen, the queen embracing him. She lies him down upon a bank of flowers... Anon come in a [a Player as] another, man takes off his crown, kisses it, pouts poison in the sleeper's ears and leaves him...The Queen returns, finds the king dead, and makes passionate action... The poisoner woos the queen with gifts. She seems harsh awhile but in the end accepts love. (3.2.128.5)

Shakespeare makes sure his audience fully understands the stakes; the show presents exactly what Hamlet accuses Claudius and Gertrude of. Shakespeare, however, was not unique or extraordinary in this method, as many classical plays of the time "used dumb-shows at the end of each act to summarise the plot of the act to follow" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 234). However, at the turn of the seventeenth century, it is well known that Shakespeare began to view them as "laughably archaic" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 234), an unnecessary yet necessary artistic burp. As we will see, Shakespeare takes full advantage of this double-edged sword, and uses one in *Hamlet* for satirical purposes.

Thus, the staging of the *Dumb Show* deliberately pokes fun at classical theatrical tradition, while also rounding out Hamlet's character. It is not a throw away joke, but a vital plot device. Shakespearean scholar Andrew Gurr calls it a "mistake" and a "lack of foresight" for Hamlet to "prematurely reveal the mousetrap" to King Claudius through a dumb show (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 4). The actors stage a pre-show in order to comfort the court audience – in other words, the stage audience. Needless to say, as I just showed, the "real" audience would have been aware of what a dumb show entails, and some may have been thankful for its synopsis. However, if we look at the context of which it is staged within the plot of *Hamlet*, the "Dumb Show" does raise a few eyebrows. Why would Hamlet risk his entire scheme to allow the diegetic audience to understand the "Murder of Gonzago," when his staged play is only meant for two people, the King and Queen? Why does Hamlet allow his actors to stage a mimed show, if he is indeed the director and in complete control of the play? Indeed, perhaps Hamlet has gone a little mad. Or perhaps, as I suggest, this moment is a metatheatrical hiccup, almost as if Shakespeare hits the pause button on the entire play. In the moments after its completion, Ophelia recognizes what she just saw: "belike this show imports the argument of the / play" (3.2.133-134). Her recognition triggers Hamlet to sneer, the actors do "tell all" (3.2.135). To make matters worse for Hamlet, after the "Dumb Show" concludes, another explanatory act ensues in form of a prologue. An actor comes on stage:

> For us, and for our tragedy,
>
> Here stooping to your clemency,
>
> We beg your hearing patiently. (3.2.142-144)

Hamlet has had enough with the excessive spoilers, and interrupts: "Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?" (3.2.145). He cannot stand to watch the natural unfolding of his play tarnished, and

for its effect to be undermined. Thus the pre-show routine works in two different directions. On the one hand, it summarizes the "argument" of the play for those in both the live audience and for those on the stage, giving them both clues into what to expect. On the other hand, it partially erodes the power of the "Murder of Gonzago," and leaves Hamlet in a temporary tailspin. He hopes that the King does not become squeamish, and luckily, it appears he doesn't – the King sticks around for the main act. Thus, the staging of the "Dumb Show" gives us clues into Shakespeare's sentiments towards the archaic practice. He recognizes both the issues and the necessities of staging dumb shows, and satirically plays with its effects.

Hamlet's entire plan relies on observation. This connection, between the stage and the subsequent response of its viewers, actually gives us another angle into Elizabethan playgoing experience. As we know from the historical studies from Andrew Gurr and Marjorie Garber, attending a theatre meant more than just watching a play: it was a social field to maneuver through. Three socio-economic classes layered themselves within the amphitheater, creating distinct lines among them, and reproducing "quite precisely the Elizabethan social hierarchy" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 21). Inside the Globe theatre, the lowest layer belonged to the "yard standers" or as we refer to them now, the "groundlings" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 21). These playgoers stood next to the stage and paid just a single penny for entrance (Garber 26). In simpler terms, these people were poor and deeply entrenched in the lower class. In fact, in many ways, the very physicality of the theatre and its pit further perpetuates their entrapment and faceless mass; the pit was crowded, dirty, infectious, and physical. It was an interpersonal experience, one that forbid full immersion into the events on the stage. Yes, pay attention to the actors, but do not forget to watch out for the person beside you because "as in any crowd pickpockets and prostitutes were likely to be found" (Gurr, *The*

*Shakespearean Stage*, 276). Above the yard standers, in the upper galleries, likely sat the slightly richer persons, who paid more for seats. And yet above them and across the amphitheater, in the most luxurious seats, one could buy a spot in the "lords room" that hung high above the stage. Here, "the spectators could not see the stage actions so well, but they could be seen" (Garber 26). Garber seems to neglect the other half of the question: from the the lord's room, the best view would have been of the groundlings and of the upper galleries. With the stage protruding out into the audience, as the groundlings engulf it, and the rich overlooking from above, "the stage seems to be just another component to the audience itself" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 221). Thus, from the performance to the manner in which the theatre spaced its audience members, intrinsically built into the wood of the Globe was an element of watching: watching the play, watching the rich, watching the poor, watching the person next to you. Jane Millin says that Elizabethans saw this playgoing experience as an "opportunity" (Millin 176): An opportunity "to exert economic power in leisure," and perhaps more importantly, to "be seen" by others as a person who "[appreciates] significant cultural events" (Millin 176). The theatre jam packs London's social system into a single space, and as we all know, sometimes human beings prove more interesting, and (may I say) more *theatrical,* than the actors on stage. As Hamlet perfectly puts it: "For I mine eyes will rivet to his face" (3.2.81). The responses of our peers reveal so much about who they are.

With this in mind, we can see how Shakespeare comments on the observational culture through the *Mousetrap* sequence. Before the play, Hamlet pulls aside Horatio, his closest friend and trusted ally, to tell him about the purpose behind staging the "Murder of Gonzaga." Hamlet asks him for help:

> Observe my 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. (3.2.76-80)

Observing Claudius' reaction is key to Hamlet's endeavor. His sanity rests upon it. However, Hamlet and Horatio's scheme affects more than them: it brings us, the audience, into the fold. Peter Lake remarks:

> Not only is the *Murder of Gonzago* being watched by the court, not only are Hamlet and Horatio watching Claudius and the others watch that play in another play called *The Mousetrap*, the audience ('we') are watching Hamlet watch Claudius in *the Mousetrap* watching *The Murder of Gonzago*, in yet another play called *Hamlet*. (Lake 533)

Lake fails to mention however, that the physical staging of this scene would have further complicated the viewing experience. In *Hamlet*, the King sits on a balcony as he watches *the Mousetrap*. But as we know from historical studies on Shakespearean theatres, "the lords' room... would have been used for balcony scenes" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 181). Therefore, the audience in the lord's room would have sitting next to the king themselves, and consequently would have played a small role in the scene. To further perpetuate Lake's argument, we are watching Hamlet watch Claudius, but then also at the same time, we are watching the elite in the balconies react to the actors performing *the Mousetrap.* Make no

mistake, the facial reactions of our spectating peers must have entertained the rest of the amphitheater. Once again, Shakespeare throws his audiences into the play world.

Even more obvious, the roles between actors on stage and audience in the theatre become inverted when Hamlet calls the pit audience members "groundlings, / who for the most part are capable of nothing but / inexplicable dumb-show and noise" (3.2.10-12). In the context of the time, "groundlings" would have meant a "small fish with gaping mouths," the very same countenance that Hamlet "would have observed from his superior posture looking down on them" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 21). Any actor on stage inherently *observes* the immediate audience watching them, and Hamlet is no different. He, too, judges their expressions and reactions. Therefore, Hamlet is both an actor on stage and an audience member on stage; and in the crowd, we are both observers and actors of some sort. Even more fascinating, modern scholars now refer to yard standers as "groundlings," a term coined by Shakespeare through the character Hamlet (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 21). Today's language describing Elizabethan playgoing unconsciously reflects this element of back and forth observation.

*The Mousetrap* also draws the real audience into an active investigation alongside the characters themselves. When Hamlet tells Horatio to observe the King, he also implies for us the audience to partake in the same act. John Wall observes that *Hamlet* does this often: "we find ourselves provided by the play with a very specific role" that "parallels" the actors on the stage (Wall 15). Moreover, we – Hamlet, Horatio, and we the theatergoers – are all in this together. We all know the rules: "observe his looks" and "if 'a do blench / [we] know [the] course" (2.2.531, 532-533). Indeed, if our observations confirm our suspicion, then Hamlet can enact his revenge. Everything about the dialogue within *The Mousetrap* grabs us with two hands and

twists our head up to King Claudius. For this one scene, Shakespeare makes sure we are looking in the right spot: the whole play depends on it. As shown here, reactions to a play may be more important than the play itself.

In many ways, the entire unfolding of *Hamlet* works through a series of smaller observational moments and "nested audiences" (Garber 495), as many other seemingly play-within-a-play moments dot the plot. However, these moments are not "plays" in and of themselves, but rather permutations of the observational culture of the theatre. The result is existential: Shakespeare suggests the theatre penetrates our lives in unbounded, uncontrollable, and unaccountable ways. Marjorie Garber best discusses this trope:

> We watch the sentries watching the Ghost (I.I; 1.4). We watch Claudius and Polonius, the fathers, hidden behind a pastry curtain, watching Ophelia 'loosed' to Hamlet in the lobby (3.1). We watch Polonius, again concealed behind a tapestry, watching Hamlet talking to his mother in her closet (3.4). (Garber, 495)

The characters on the stage become spectators. But this also means we the audience also participate in the eavesdropping act; in effect, the middle man becomes us, and we become them. However, if observation is the spine of the play, then it is also a crooked and spurious one. We see the false verisimilitude of observation when Polonius and Claudius spy on Hamlet and Ophelia, and Hamlet tells Ophelia "your wantonness / ignorance... it hath / made me mad" (3.1.144-145). This is a curious choice of words for the prince. We know that Claudius and Polonius believe Hamlet's madness derives from his infatuation with Ophelia. So it appears Hamlet plays into their hands by revealing the root of his madness. But of course her "wantonness" and "ignorance" do not cause his madness. If characters live in a world where

everyone is watching, and everyone is being watched, then they run the risk of living in a world of audiences and actors. Lying, illusions, reality, deceptions, authenticity, chicanery, and trustworthiness blend together. How can anyone ever act naturally? Do we in the audience share the same fate? As much as we all want to rely on our eyes to understand the world, Shakespeare shows us that sometimes seeing is not believing. We see this more obviously when Hamlet argues with his mother, and the ghost of King Hamlet returns to the stage. Hamlet shouts to his mother upon seeing the Ghost: “On him, on him! Look you how pale he glares!” (3.4.121) But to Gertrude, she sees and hears “nothing” (3.4.129, 131). The discrepancy between their observations suggests that no two pairs of eyes see the world in the same way. Whenever we observe our surroundings, we run the risk misinterpretation. Theatricality is dangerous and subjective. It rots the world of Denmark.

## Chapter 3: “He that plays the king:” Role-Playing in *Hamlet*

As we have seen, *Hamlet* contains a play-within-a-play in *The Mousetrap*, and also numerous other smaller observational moments. But if we take a step back and observe the social and political interactions of the play, we see that actors, spies, and performers infiltrate the world of *Hamlet*. If everyone is an audience, and if everyone is aware that they are being watched, then everyone must also be an actor. Thus, the world we find in *Hamlet* functions in and of itself as a play. The play begins in Elsinore, the royal city of Denmark, and a Ghost wanders the castle grounds. Standing guard outside the castle, and afraid of mysterious sounds coming from the apparition, Bernardo begins the play with a question: “Who’s there?” No one answers. In fear or in resilience, Bernardo announces in the third line of the play: “long live the king!” (1.1.1, 3). This commonly used phrase, engrained into the fabric of Elizabethan society, and still understood today, contains two parts. What Bernardo omits is just as important as to what he says: “*the King is dead,* long live the king,” as the full saying goes. Audience members of the time would have been very familiar with this phrase and its meaning, as it denotes the cyclical rotation of monarchs in England: an old king has passed away, but in a snap, a new one must reign. The names of the Kings do not matter, only that the position lives on. Our suspicions come true when we learn that this Ghost is Hamlet’s father, once the king of England, who was cold-bloodedly murdered by his brother. Now, Claudius wears the same crown as the King before him. That is to say, the play of Denmark goes on with new actors replacing the old.

But before characters even have a chance to register the death of their leaders, a new one steps in their place, takes their title, and the show goes on. In the onset of the play, Horatio remarks how a “whisper” still surrounds King Hamlet (1.1.79). He tells Marcellus that “our last king” fought against Sweden, yet a few moments later, Horatio refers to him as “our King”

(1.1.79, 90). While subtle and seemingly insignificant, Horatio does refer to the king in two different manners – the key word being the use and the omission of “last.” When Bernardo sees the Ghost of King Hamlet for the first time, he speaks in a paradox: “in the same figure, like the King that’s dead” (1.1.40). It appears that rhetoric surrounding the monarchy oftentimes comes into conflict with the current state of the King, as some characters fail to draw a distinction between the past and the present. The revolving door of the court moves quickly and callously.

It is only fitting then that King Hamlet comes back to his old kingdom as an “apparition,” neither living nor dead, sometimes forgotten and unseen, but in other times, magically reappearing in present verbiage. In 1935, classical Shakespearean scholar John Dover Wilson calls the ghost “the instrument which sets [the play] in motion" (Wilson 55). While his words still ring true today, we can view it in a different light. We see the Ghost as an emblem from theatricality, a symbol for the hopeless attempts to define boundaries, only to fall somewhere in the middle: past/present, living/dead, old king/new king, madness/sanity, stage/audience. New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt pin points how we should understand the Ghost of King Hamlet: as a derivation of sixteenth century understanding of Purgatory. It is not a coincidence that the Ghost comes from purgatory, a waiting space between heaven and hell. Greenblatt goes as far as to say “that ghosts, real or imagined, are good theater – indeed, that they are good for thinking about theater’s capacity to fashion realities, to call realities into question...” (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 200). As Hamlet’s father’s dilemma is that he is stuck in purgatory until “the foul crimes” of Claudius “are burnt and purged away,” Hamlet’s whole dilemma stems from his struggle to move on from the past (1.5.12, 13). The fact that Hamlet’s father has been “two months dead – nay, not so much, not two” yet everyone seems to have moved on flabbergasts him (1.2.138). He cries out, “Heaven and earth, / Must I

remember?” – no one seems to (1.2.142-143). King Claudius, on the other hand, appears to have no issues saying goodbye:

> Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death
> The memory be green, and that it us befitted
> To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
> To be contracted in one brow of woe,
> Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
> That we with wisest sorrow think on him
> Together with remembrance of ourselves. (1.2.1-7)

The old King is dead, but long live the new one. Yet, while Claudius embraces his new role as the king, when alone, he still calls his state “wretched” and his heart “black” (3.3.67). As much as we see characters moving on with their new roles, some continue to live with the painful memories of the past. In a world of theatre, nothing is ever so defined.

The truncation of a monarchy causes a complete reconfiguration of court actors and their roles. As soon as the play begins, Shakespeare introduces us to a complete overhaul of familial relationships and court positions. After the death of the past monarch, King Claudius must come to terms with his new status, and that is exactly what he does in his first lines of the play. He grounds his words around his new role; he declares that his advisors’ “better wisdoms” have convinced him to marry “our sometime sister” (1.2.15, 8). Gertrude, before the Queen to King Hamlet, now becomes the Queen to King Claudius. Her role from sister-in-law transforms to wife. In the words of Hamlet, he now has an “uncle-father and aunt-mother” (2.2.313). We should note however, that that realignment would have struck a cord in the Elizabethan audience all too familiar with their monarchy engaging in marriage hopping; moreover, Henry VIII

“sought to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had been married to his older brother, Prince Arthur, in 1501” (Garber 481). As for King Claudius, no longer is he the brother-in-law, but instead the husband to Gertrude, effectively replacing the role of his brother King Hamlet. It becomes “clear that he is acting a part, the part of a bereaved brother and loving father” (Garber 495). Where does all this leave Hamlet? Well, Claudius keeps with the play’s logic, and affirms “my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (1.2.64) When Hamlet predictably resists this treatment, Claudius persists:

> But you must know your father lost a father,
> That father lost lost [sic] his, and the survivor bound
> In filial obligation for some term
> To do obsequious sorrow. (1.2.89-92)
>
> We pray you throw to earth
> This unprevailing woe, and think of us
> As of a father. (1.2.106-108)

In the same way Kings cycle through, so do fathers. Shakespeare reminds us that in this world, no role is permanently ours to keep. Claudius’ words not only echo Jacques’ in *As You Like It,* but further perpetuate his point: in a world of a stage, players “have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts” (*As You Like It,* 2.7.148-149). If we follow both Claudius and Jacques’ argument, then we see that our life cycles are inherently theatric, where death leaves a new role to be filled and a position to be played. We cannot blame a man for changing roles then, for “'tis a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature” for leaving one open in the first place (1.2.101-102). An actor only borrows, never owns,

his spot. Shakespeare uses every opportunity to remind us of the parallels between life, the court, and the theater.

Advisors and assistants to the king also play their role as “actors.” Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern find that they can jump through the ranks if they act obsequiously to the King. In the case of Polonius, he has the penchant to give advice; however, because he plays two roles in *Hamlet* – one as a father, and the other as a hand to the King – he subsequently gives two different kinds of advice. These two sides of him oftentimes come into conflict with one another, for example when he tells his son, “this above all: to thine own self be true... though canst not then be false to any man” (1.3.77, 79). His advice to Laertes feels heartfelt and profound to us. In fact, we the audience may even take it home with us after the play, and highlight it as a moment of brightness for a villainous buffoon. But do not rush over the implications of his words: be true to *yourself* and no one else, your role in life is to do what is best for yourself. Marvin Rosenberg calls Polonius’ role as a father “the sweet one,” but do not overlook that “spying is his game” (Rosenberg 260, 259). Moreover, “Polonius is dangerous. His objective to begin with is to sustain the establishment, and make it work for himself and his family” (Rosenberg 259). He spies on Hamlet for the King. He spies on his daughter for the King. One glance at his obsequious language when speaking to the King and Queen reveals so much about his character.

> Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
>
> That he’s mad, 'tis true: 'tis true 'tis pity,
>
> And pity 'tis 'tis [sic] true: a foolish figure!
>
> But farewell it, for I will use no art.
>
> Mad let us grant him then, and now remains
>
> That we find out the cause of this effect –

> Or rather say the cause of this defect,
>
> For this effect defective comes by cause.
>
> Thus it remains, and the remainder thus. Perpend.
>
> I have a daughter – have while she is mine –
>
> Who in her duty and obedience, mark,
>
> Hath given me this: now gather and surmise. (2.2.96-107)

First of all, why does Hamlet’s madness matter so much to Polonius? Clearly, Polonius does not care about Ophelia’s sentiments towards Hamlet, as he forces her to hand him the love letters under the guise of “duty and obedience.” We know that Polonius treats her like an object, forbidding her to engage in sexual activities yet proposing to “loose [his] daughter” onto Hamlet to confirm his madness. His hypocrisy suggests that Hamlet is not so far off to call him a “fishmonger,” a euphemism for a procurer. No, Polonius only cares to discover the root of Hamlet’s madness because Claudius cares to prove himself “faithful and honorable” to the Crown – or should I say, to whoever holds the power; Polonius “was there when the new king was chosen” (Rosenberg 259). As Shakespearean scholar Catharine Stimpson argues, his role even changes from the way the audience interprets him: “for some, he may be a total buffoon; for others, he is a statesman. For some, he is a sexually prurient father who may have incestuous longings for his daughter; for others, he is decent and good enough to inspire the love of both his children” (Stimpson 99). Thus, Polonius plays multiple roles at the same time, and depending on the context, his role changes.

Polonius is an actor in *Hamlet* but he has also been an actor in other spaces. Before *The Mousetrap* scene, Hamlet asks Polonius if he has ever acted in a play before, to which Polonius calls himself a “good actor” who “did enact Julius Caesar... I was killed i’th’ / Capitol” (3.2.97,

99-100). Marjorie Garber catches the reference: in Shakespeare’s company, “the same actors were used... over and over again;” consequently, the actor “who played Polonius here alludes slyly to his role” as Julius Caesar that he played in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Garber 25). The meta-joke would have landed well in the audience, but actually tells us much about Polonius’ character. Polonius has always had a longing for power, having been a King in a past performance, but now Shakespeare cynically casts him as a pawn to the King. But unbeknownst to Polonius, his death in *Julius Caesar* foreshadows his death in *Hamlet*, where both characters die from stab wounds, “presumably by the same actor” (Garber 25). It should surprise no one that Polonius’ final words reek of histrionics: he announces, “O, I am slain!” (3.4.22). He entered *Hamlet’s* stage as an actor playing an actor, and leaves one too.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also find their niches at the foot of the new King by changing their old roles. Once longtime friends of Hamlet, “neighbored to his youth and havior,” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern adapt their roles when Claudius calls upon them to “gather” and “glean” information on Hamlet (2.2.12, 15, 16). They feel no shame in their reversal: “put your dread pleasures more into command / than to entreaty” Rosencrantz says to his King (2.2.28-29). Never far behind, Guilderstern reiterates “[we] give up ourselves in the full bent” of the knee (2.2.30). What loyalty these two “excellent good friends” have towards Hamlet (2.2.219)! Like the actors they are, they flip their roles from childhood friend of Hamlet to foe to get in with the good graces with the King.

The play ends the same way it begins: with the crowning of a new king, and the theatrical role-playing cycle continues. Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, arrives in Denmark to a scene of a massacre: Claudius, Hamlet, Laertes, and Gertrude all dead. With no one left to rule, and with a claim to the land, Fortinbras reclaims the throne of Denmark. The only surviving member of the

massacre is Horatio, who tells Fortinbras to put the slain bodies “high on a stage to be placed to the view, / and let [me] speak to th’ yet unknowing world / How these things came about” (5.2.362-364). Notice here how Horatio asks for a “stage” to be used in displaying to the world the *truth* about the events that just occurred. Fortinbras respects Horatio’s wishes, and responds to his own coronation in similar fashion to Claudius:

> Let us haste to hear it
>
> And call the noblest to the audience.
>
> For me, with *sorrow* I embrace my fortune.
>
> (5.2.370-372, emphasis added)

Once again, a new king presents a public display of grief and “sorrow” for the death of past royalty. If we compare the language of Claudius to that of Fortinbras upon their coronations, we can see that their words are indistinguishable – the roles, lines, and sentiments are the same, but only the actor playing it changes. It is only with “wisest sorrow,” “obsequious sorrow” (1.2.6, 92) and a heavy heart that Claudius described that a king can then “embrace” their new fortune, and claim his “rights of memory to this kingdom” (5.2.373). Indeed, Shakespeare evokes the phrase again: the old king is dead, long live the new one.

Not coincidently, Horatio describes his new court as an “audience.” On the surface, this language seemingly contradicts everything Shakespeare had set up throughout the play, where we see royal court members as a type of actor. However, as we know, Shakespeare insists time and time again that the line between playing and observing does not exist; thus members of Fortinbras’ court can be both actors and audience at the same time. Further yet, even as a foreign ruler, Fortinbras still embeds his language with theatrical reference. Shakespeare then suggests that dramaturgy does not confine itself merely to Denmark, but also to the space of Norway, and

likely, to the space beyond that. Every land is theatrical; everything is meta; everything extends outwards while also reflecting onto itself. Nothing is confined. All the world is a stage. By the play’s end, Fortinbras further preserves this argument.

We can also view the ending of *Hamlet* as a restaging of the Elizabethan political climate. Shakespeare scholar Stuart M. Kurland argues that between 1599 and 1601 the British faced the daunting “prospect of Elizabeth's death and the anticipation of her successor” (Kurland 280). What scared the audience the most? Like Fortinbras storming in from a foreign land, the successor to Elizabeth may not come from England, but from Scotland. Globe theatre audience members would have been aware of James VI’s political movement to claim the throne, how he “had been actively cultivating support” in England and around Europe, and that he “might be tempted to assert his rights by force” (Kurland 283). The threat of violence, usurpation, and the changing of the guard always felt real to the audience. With this in mind, we can safely say that Shakespeare replicates the political climate of his time, where both worlds perennially leave the door open for a new player to take the role of the king. Nothing is stable. As Kurland argues and I maintain, "as 'twere / the mirror up to Nature" (3.2.21-22). Thus Shakespeare places our world upon the stage in two different ways. On the one hand, we see it within the text, in dialogue, and in meta-references. But on the other hand, we see it in the grander plotlines. The audience involves themselves in the pernicious threats on stage, but then also realize that these threats pertain to their own lives. Sometimes, when we look into a mirror we see things we may not want to see. Mirrors put us at risk of observing our own insecurities.

## Chapter 4: Restaging the Elizabethan Political Climate

As I have shown, the world of *Hamlet* is a world inhabited by actors and role players. However, the stage is not the only place that belongs to them. Garber says that all Elizabethans "had lived, and were living, in a world rich in theatrically" (Garber 22). Many other modern scholars suggest that the royal governing court of the time induced elements of performance, where to inspire power means to put on a display: to dress a certain way, to act a certain way. To be in the court then meant to participate in dramaturgy. With this in mind, I suggest that *Hamlet* restages Queen Elizabeth's monarchy, and plays up to the general performative nature of the royal court.

As Shakespeare shows us in *The Mousetrap* sequence, observation ties together a theatrical experience; likewise, in the royal court, surveillance, watching, seeing and being seen are paramount. In the book *Spectatorship at the Elizabethan Court*, Susanne Scholz devotes her entire argument to this matter, that "analysis of courtly performance" gives rise to terms like "surveillance, observation, attention, witnessing, rapture, presence, and vibrancy" (Scholz and Dornhofer 2-3). Her thesis can be broken down as follows: the early modern period in the court "took place in a highly theatrical environment; that it was about performance, self-display, and successful engagement of the monarch's attention by making oneself into an object of... visual interest" (Scholz and Dornhofer 2-3). The culture of surveillance, she argues, works from top down, from the Queen's eyes to the rest of the field:

> To be seen by the queen, to be acknowledged as a player in the courtly arena, was tantamount to existing at all. The Elizabethan court, like that of any monarch reigning by personal rule, regulated

> status on the basis of spatial protocols prescribing degrees of distance or proximity to the queen's body. (Scholz and Dornhofer 1)

Scholz also shows us how international relationships and diplomacy between monarchies relied on observations:

> The court emerges as a complex visual field in which images of the monarch, visual relations between sovereign and courtiers and the spatial arrangements in which these exchanges take place interact with each other. Every description of courtly interaction carries with it some hint of the awareness of being seen while walking, talking, parading one's clothes, dancing or fencing; there is always an element of the theatrical in the courtly self, a dimension of performing for an audience of spectators. (Scholz and Dornhofer 2)

Like audience members in the globe, relationships between *social classes* depended on observation: the lower classes would observe the upper class, and the upper class would observe the lower. Whether or not we are kings or queens, aristocrats or servants, or Hamlet and Horatio on the stage, we are all observational creatures: to understand one another means to watch one another. Queen Elizabeth even declared in a speech to Parliament in 1586, nearly 15 years before Shakespeare completed *Hamlet*, that "princes were set on stages for all the world to observe" (Scholz and Dornhofer 2). It appears Shakespeare took note.

How do we formulate our impressions of someone? Oftentimes by observing our peers and judging them by what they wear, what they own, and how they present themselves. Whenever we set foot into a public sphere, we express our personality through our outward

appearance, whether or not we agree with the perceptions. The royal court of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century functioned no differently. Many scholars have written extensively about Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe, how she would put on a public performance, so to speak, in order to convey power, sophistication, and awe. Her attire, accessories, makeup, and hair conveyed a message about how she wanted to be received. British clothing historian Janet Arnold connects the significance of Elizabeth's wardrobe to her public perception: using a vast collection of ornamented attires, Elizabeth impressed foreign visitors and empowered her people. At different points in her life she adopted different styles of clothing. During the first half of her reign, she preferred "black and white" which gave "dramatic emphasis to the rich jewels she wore" (Arnold 2); but as she aged, she transitioned to more "elaborate clothes" that would create "an impression of wealth and majesty" (Arnold 2). German writer Lupold Van Wedel, traveling in the time of Queen Elizabeth, described the entertaining experience of seeing her: '"before the queen marched her body guard... they bore guilt halberds and wore red coats trimmed with black velvet"' (Arnold 6). He continues: behind them, walked the Queen dressed '"in black because she is in mourning'" (Arnold 6). Her demeanor was '"gracious and gentle and so was her speech"' (Arnold 6). It is as if she put on a show for all the world to see: she let her observers know her mood, her sentiments, her sophistication. We can go so far to say that she resembled a walking play, with the Queen as the lead, and the bodyguards as supporting roles. However, as much as costumes can define who we are, they can also be used to manipulate those perceptions. The Queen's embroiders spent hours making "a gentlewoman... ready," as "samples were presented to Elizabeth, from which she could make her choice" (Arnold 112). As Scottish Ambassador Sir James Melville remarked during his time with the Queen: '"The Queen said she had cloth[e]s of every sort, which everyday thereafter, so long as I was there, she changed"'

(Arnold 112). Thus, Elizabeth could change who she was by changing her costume and performance. Because her extensive wardrobe needed more than one closet, she stored much of her clothes in "a Wardrobe of Robes," a store near the Blackfriars theatre (Arnold Xiii). Figuratively speaking then, between the playhouses and the Queen's ostentatious showing-off, much of the city of London swirled around spaces of costume.

But obviously Queen Elizabeth was not the only ruler to use dress and accessories as a means to consolidate power; she took this posturing from her father, Henry VIII. In the mid sixteenth century, Henry's "taste for lavish dress, ceremonial banquets, pageantry, masque, and festivity astonished his contemporaries and profoundly affected their conception of power" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 28). His wardrobe, the "jewels, feathers, yards of rich clothes," and "the staggering opulence, the attention to detail, the sheer energy invested by participants and observers alike" contributed to a theatricalization of the court (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 28-29). Thus, through the clothes and jewels they adorned and decorated themselves with, Kings and Queens could show their sophistication and power to the world. They could display themselves with great calculation and control. The Renaissance royal court *knew* how spectacle and ostentatious public appearances affected not only their individual perceptions, but also the perception of the country as a whole. In the time of Shakespeare, the royal court performed a role; and the people watched. Accordingly, in the play *Hamlet*, when Hamlet stages a play with actors acting as the King, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz that "he that plays the king shall be welcome – his / majesty shall have tribute on me" (2.2.285-286). This line holds weight both within the context on the stage, as well as in the public eye – the power of a King, whether on the Globe theatre's stage or on the world stage, relies on dramaturgy.

Without a doubt, Shakespeare was attuned to the performative aspect of the royal court, and he spends much time in *Hamlet* playing with costumes and how they relate to performance and perceptions. Shakespeare implicitly comments on the theatricality of the royal court, its costume and performance, by giving Hamlet three distinct wardrobes: the dark and gloomy attire, the disheveled madman, and the "traveler's sea gown" (Garber 477). Needless to say, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude wear costumes "splendid in silks and fits, his head crowned, the very emblem of conspicuous consumption" (Garber 477). Like Queen Elizabeth, when Hamlet changes costumes, he conveys different information to his peers, but he represents his own mood. In the early onset of the play, we learn his wardrobe resembles a "nightly colour," and an "inky cloak" (1.2.68, 77). To most of the characters in the play, this means the "clouds still hang" on him, that he still "[Seeks] for [his] noble father in the dust" (1.2.66, 71). Standing side by side to the royalty adorning sparkling jewels and medals, luscious colors, military badges, and crowns, Hamlet looks like a coal smudge on a dazzling outfit. In short, he does not look like royalty. But sometimes clothing can be deceiving. Hamlet tells Gertrude that "Nor customary suits of solemn black" can "denote [him] truly" (1.2.78, 83). To Hamlet, attire only scratches the surface of true emotions; what we wear does not reveal who we are. Hamlet complicates his case by laying the groundwork for what is to come: even before he puts on his famous "antic disposition," he already shows a sense of artistry in playing a part, and understands the perceptions that arise from one's clothing.

Hamlet knows his costume plays a role in his public perception, so he decides to play with it. To avenge his father, he puts on an "antic disposition" and plays the role of a madman, and to act the role of a madman means he needs to dress the part. Ophelia recalls to her father:

> My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
>
> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
>
> No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
>
> Ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle,
>
> Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
>
> And with a look so piteous in purport
>
> As if he had been loosed out of hell
>
> To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.74-81)

Untidy, messy, smelly, accessories in the wrong places, awkward gait, skin as white as a ghost as sent from hell: once again this is not the look of a prince. Well, some of the pieces seem to be there – the stockings, a white shirt – but the manner in which Hamlet assembles them are bothersome. What can be more insane than having the garments of royalty, but the taste of a peasant? When Ophelia tells her father of the matter, Polonius easily ascertains that Hamlet has gone mad. At this point in the play, the narrative begins to take shape by means of another dichotomy: "exteriority" versus "interiority," appearing mad versus being mad. Hamlet dresses like a madman even though he has told us before that how he dresses has no correlation as to how he feels.

Later, when Hamlet arrives at the graveyard, the Gravedigger has no idea he is in the presence of a Prince, likely because of the clothing Hamlet wears. Arriving fresh from his adventures out at sea, Hamlet wears a "sea-gown scarfed about" him (5.2.13). Had he been wearing jewels, riches, a crown, and other princely attire, the Gravedigger surely would have been more selective with his words. Instead, he tells Hamlet that "every fool" knows that day "King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras" was also the day "young Hamlet was born, he that is mad

and sent into England" (5.1.138, 136, 139). In a self-referential wink to the audience, the Gravedigger claims the English will not see Hamlet as mad, however, because "there the / men are as mad as he" (5.1.145-146). We may rush to link the Gravedigger to the "fool" that he speaks of, for he unknowingly speaks to Hamlet about Hamlet. But, the irony reverts back in on itself; the Gravedigger is not a buffoon, but only a callous realist. He calls things how he sees them. His gallows humor perfectly exemplifies his cold rationality:

> Hamlet: What man dost thou dig it for?
>
> Gravedigger: For no man, sir.
>
> Hamlet: What woman, then?
>
> Gravedigger: For none, neither.
>
> Hamlet: Who is to be buried in't?
>
> Gravedigger: One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her
>
> soul, she's dead. (5.1.122-127)

Although the body may appear to be a woman, it is not, because it is dead. Because Hamlet does not dress like a Prince, he therefore must not be one. But of course Hamlet is a Prince. Thus, Shakespeare sees this tension between "externality" and "internality," performance and reality, who we are versus how we appear, as a problem of costumes. Consequently, then, it is also a problem of theatre.

## Chapter 5: "Self-Fashioning" and a Theoretical Lens

Through Hamlet's three attires, Shakespeare also taps into Renaissance understandings of fashioning and public perception, and the burgeoning upper-class norms of the time. In 1980, Stephen Greenblatt famously defined the Renaissance era as a time of "self-fashioning," where "there appears to be an increased self consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 2). The idea of fashioning one's self had obviously long been in existence, but at the turn of the sixteenth century, a new idea began to sweep throughout Europe: we can recreate ourselves, formulate a "distinctive personality," and a "consistent mode of perceiving and behaving" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 2). To achieve this, Europeans ran to the nearest shop and bought glamorous clothes; they educated themselves for "self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 9). But complete creative autonomy in formulating the self is only an illusion; we are products of a "cultural system" that guides our actions (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* 3). In the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, '"a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions"' governs our behavior (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 3). We may act out against society, but always within the boundary of its rules. To Greenblatt, changing the way we look and act in public is always a dangerous balancing act for "any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 9). If we look at *Hamlet* in the light of Greenblatt's thesis, we can see that the character of Hamlet also embarks on the process of self-fashioning – he changes who he is through the clothes he wears and the act he puts on. When he wears all black, he is viewed as melodramatic; when he speaks to Ophelia wearing a disjointed outfit, he gives the impression of outlandish insanity; when he speaks in sailor's gown

to the Gravedigger, Hamlet is all of a sudden a curious wanderer. He is the product of a court obsessed with role playing, a country built on observing and spying, and a mushrooming sense of mobility in identity construction. Because he plays the role of three different people throughout the course of the play, as we will soon see, his inner personality becomes lost in between. Moreover, Shakespeare *fashions* Hamlet in the same manner that his audience members would have been fashioning themselves, and the world of the stage once again intersects with reality.

Contrary to how many in the audience would have felt at the time, by the play’s end, Hamlet feels that self-fashioning never changes much in our lives. Hamlet picks up a skull that lies in the graveyard, and learns that it was once Yorick, the King’s jester. His speech that follows still haunts us today: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him... a fellow of infinite jest,” Hamlet pronounces in despair (5.1.174-175). Despite the joker’s boundless wit, his “gibes,” “gambols,” “songs,” “merriment,” Yorick’s fate lies in the ground under a pile of dirt (5.1.179, 180). What does this tell Hamlet? That a man who spent his entire life making people laugh now rests “chapfallen,” without a jaw, and unable to smile (5.1.182). At first, the irony crushes him, but then it strangely makes him smile. When Hamlet addresses the skull, he gives it “a mission, a message to carry, in which the skull will announce its own inevitable truth, which also interprets Hamlet's” (Gross 280). Hamlet asks the skull to go “my lady's / table, and tell her, let, her paint an inch thick, to this / favour she must come. Make her laugh at that” (5.1.182-184). To Shakespearean scholar Kenneth Gross, Hamlet’s encounter with the skull forces him, once again, to “confront the truth of human death” (Gross 281). However, to slightly pivot from Gross’s interpretation, I argue that the skull teaches Hamlet more about England’s ridiculousness and vanity than about death in and of itself. In the book, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama,* Farah Karim-Cooper shows us that narcissism spread like a virus in

Shakespeare's London. Powerful persons needed to stay beautiful, and for the Queen Elizabeth I, that meant making a "deliberate attempt... to hide behind a mask" of makeup in order to appear youthful and elegant even while she aged (Karim-Cooper 177). However, makeup can only do so much, and "the decaying body of the ageing Queen Elizabeth I haunted many playwrights" of the time (Karim-Cooper 177). Karim-Cooper calls this cycle the "the art of deception," a cosmetic problem that magnifies the "tension between appearance and reality" (Karim-Cooper 177). Because Elizabethans held their monarchs to un-human standards, in turn, the monarchs perpetuate a poisonous culture of self-absorption and conceit. Clearly, Shakespeare thoroughly plays out these preoccupations – looking a certain way versus feeling a certain way – in *Hamlet.* When Hamlet picks up the skull, he feels that no matter the *thickness* of makeup, extravagance of clothes, and gaudiness of jewels we slather on ourselves, at the end of the day, we will all end up like poor Yorick. Whether we laugh or cry at this futility (and Hamlet does both), Shakespeare leaves up to us.

Hamlet continues to poke fun at the hollowness of the self-fashioning process. Both Horatio and Hamlet cannot stand Osric's smugness and bombastic language, and the comedy within this scene roots itself in a comedy of attires, conceit, and performative ridiculousness. When Oscric arrives, Hamlet immediately takes issue with his hat, taunting him to "put your bonnet to his right use: 'tis for the head" (5.2.79). We may recall a quote cited earlier from Ophelia, where she observes that Hamlet had "no hat upon his head" (2.1.76). Clearly, to the characters in *Hamlet*, hat wearing is important. While Osric believes it is too hot to wear a hat, Hamlet insists that "'tis very cold; the wind is / northerly" (5.2.81-82). Osric predictably flips on his original testament, and agrees that "it is indifferent cold" (5.2.83). Like the superficiality of the hat, Oscric's words cover over any authenticity in character. He glorifies Laertes – the man

who Hamlet just challenged to a duel – as an “absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, / of very soft society and great showing” (5.2.93-94). Hamlet rightly asks “what imports the nomination of this / gentleman?” (5.2.112-113). Horatio has an answer: “[Osric’s] purse is empty – all’s golden words / are spent” (5.2.115-116). Indeed, Osric’s attempts to display rhetorical command and social currency has backfired; rather than looking like the gentleman he so highly desires to be, Osric instead acts like a shallow buffoon. To Hamlet, this is not uncommon for the time:

> ‘A did so, sir, with his dug before a’ sucked it.
> Thus has he, and many more of the same breed that I
> know the drossy age dotes on, only got the tune of
> the time and, outward habit of encounter; a kind of
> yeasty collection, which carries them through and
> through the most profane and winnowed opinions; and
> do but blow them to their trail – the bubbles are out.
> (5.2.167-173)

“Drossy age,” “the tune of the time,” “outward habit,” “winnowed opinions,” Hamlet appears to be attacking more than just Osric; this feels like a direct indictment on the live audience in the theatre watching him speak. This is a warning about the perils of a theatrical world – of role playing, obsequiousness, ostentatious display, and meaningless action. In this speech, Hamlet pops the bubble of the “self-fashioning” era.

Hamlet wears one more outfit often unexplored by the scholarly field: the fencing garb. While nothing within the text specifically references his *clothing*, it is fair to presume that Hamlet would have worn the proper outfit for the sword bout given the way characters react to

him. Before the fight, Hamlet unleashes an unhinged monologue to Laertes and the rest of the court, blaming his wrongdoings on his madness. Oddly, Laertes responds with cool headed sympathy rather than perplexity, treating Hamlet like a gentleman rather than a madman. Hamlet’s apology makes Laertes “satisfied in nature” (5.2.222). No one seems to mind Hamlet’s instability. All in all, nothing special about the attire comes to light except for the fact there is no mention of it. But because we know that the characters in *Hamlet* judge each other for wearing unconventional or out-of-place clothing (i.e. Hamlet’s “inky” coat, his madman attire), the fact the crowd remain silent in this scene tells us they are complacent with what he wears.

The interest for many scholars lies in the weapons that Laertes and Hamlet employ. In theory, Hamlet and Laertes will use the conventional “rapier and dagger” as their weapons, but the audience knows that Laertes has added a wrinkle by poisoning the tip of his sword (5.2.128). To understand the significance of the blades, we must look at its checkered history. The rapier came from Italy as “a highly specialized weapon – long and razor sharp,” but besides its function, many saw it as a token for something more: “it was an expensive and highly coveted status symbol, an article of fashion that could be kitted out with elaborate accoutrements” (Tribble 71). Like most things during the Elizabethan era, once again, status symbols reign supreme, and those who “aspired to be gentlemen” made use of the “new Italian weaponry and the concomitant code of honour” that the rapier carried with it (Tribble 70). Evelyn Tribble remarks how Claudius takes advantage of this premium, by wagering “six Barbary / horses” and “six French rapiers and poniards” (5.2.130-131, 132). However, the foreign weaponry also brought along with it stylistic and cultural tensions, as many Englishman noticed a shift way from the “English short sword and the native methods” of defense, which caused some early modern critics to fear the loss of English tradition (Tribble 70). So, when Hamlet and Laertes

strap on their rapiers, they also strap on a “visible clash of cultures” that underlines “strongly held debates about the relationship of arms and identity” (Tribble 71). To conclude her argument, Tribble rightly claims that “the theatre does not simply reflect that complexity but participates in it” (Tribble 71). The fact that Hamlet dies from a sword rooted in a complex identity crisis makes his demise more fitting. Furthermore, he plays in a game bounded by rules, etiquette, and honor, only to be killed by the rule-breaking Laertes (who Osric claims to be an “absolute gentleman”). What is perhaps more ironic is that Hamlet spent the entire play resisting outerwear norms, only to embrace the modern ones of rapier fencing. This may leave us with poisonous taste in our mouth, but Hamlet accepted his fate before his death: “If it be, 'tis not to / come. If it be not to come, it will be now” (5.2.198-199). This line harks back to the “to be or not to be” speech, as they both employ similar use of a chiasmus. Thus, like these lines, Hamlet is also a chiasmus; he lives in and dies from the tension between two realms of identity.

The fencing match blurs the line between stage and “reality” in more ways than one. Actors in the Elizabethan era faced great pressure to “cultivate” a set of miscellaneous skills, including the “demanding practices such as fencing and dance” (Tribble 11). Tribble defines this accumulation as *kinesic intelligence*. By marshalling together various performative skills, early modern actors could “produce plays despite minimum of group rehearsal time” (Tribble 11). While this may seem like overkill, by acquiring these capabilities, actors could learn “an entire way of being in the world” and foster “wit, timing, grace and skillful coordination with others” (Tribble 11) Thus, to be an actor in terms of logistics, one also had to be a fencer and dancer – these traits came hand in hand. But Charles Edelman sees fencing in theatre as something more than a means to help produce plays; it is a “versatile and important poetic element” of playmaking (Edelman 10). Moreover, with each swordfight, as demonstrated by the one in

*Hamlet*, the playwright has the chance to “enhance the audience’s appreciation and understanding of the characters and themes” (Edelman 182). Edelman and Tribble both agree that stage fencing plays a role in maximizing excitement in the audience, but they diverge in their opinions on the overall effect it has on them. On the one hand, Tribble believes that the audience, despite the seeming realism of fencing on stage, would have “been able to discern the differences” between staged fights and not (Tribble 82); indeed, the audience of the time were “skilled at watching plays” (Tribble 82). However, on the other, Edelman sees a more existential crisis taking place within the theatre:

> The first of these elements was the already-existent tradition of combat sport in the playhouses, and the Elizabethans’ enthusiasm for it, which would have in turn encouraged the actors to employ all the expertise they could muster in order to make the simulated sword fights of the plays as spectacular as the professionally fought prizes would have been. (Edelman 192)

Obviously the audience would have been able to discern that they were watching a play, but the fun in it lies in the intensity with which it is performed. Combat sports were performed in playhouses, and they were also performed within plays; actors were actors who also knew how to fence. If we combine both of these scholars’ arguments (and consequently, what Shakespeare suggests to us), what we see is that our world cannot be divided in such sharp lines. When Hamlet fights Laertes in the final scene of *Hamlet*, they are actors and fencers playing the role of two *actors* fencing. Shakespeare leaves the audience in a strenuous situation as they try to decipher between the spurious and the actual.

## Chapter 6: The "Antic Disposition"

While costume changes and accessories are external markers, the self-fashioning process has a strategic, instrumental, and internal purpose. Take, for example, a male courtier who wishes to rise up in the ranks. This person decides to reshape his public image, so he calculates that wearing gentleman's attire, reading up on the arts, acting enlightened, and portraying a sense of refinement, among other things, would make his peers view him as sophisticated and capable. Had he chosen to dress like a clown, he would have been met with a different judgment. The key point here, as it relates to *Hamlet*, is that there is a link between self-fashioning and a goal. We do not restyle our outward appearance without a purpose. In the case of *Hamlet*, Hamlet's purpose is clear: to avenge his father's death by killing King Claudius. He desperately tries to ready himself to commit this act. But as shown in Greenblatt's New Historicist theory, the self-fashioning process always falls within the context of society as a whole; like so, for Hamlet, living in a world that resembles a stage, he *refashions* himself as an actor. He creatively manipulates his apparel and performance with his "antic disposition," but always within the framework that his peers have established. In other words, Hamlet has always performed a role (like that of his peers), even before he declared himself an actor. He becomes so engrossed in his role as the madman, that we wonder: "is Hamlet mad, or is he acting?" For centuries, scholars have driven *themselves* mad in trying to decipher this question. We want to know if Hamlet is actually mad or if it is all a performance. We can't separate the two. I argue that acting and theatrics, madness and truth are all parts of the same world. Our pedantic attempts to separate these worlds – the stage and the audience – fail from inception. We push so hard to draw

boundaries and borders, and yet Shakespeare persistently urges us to embrace the grey area: Hamlet is mad and an actor; he is both at the same time.

The character of Hamlet is the character of an actor in every sense of the Elizabethan era understanding. While Hamlet histrionically puts on an “antic disposition,” if we look closely enough, we can see that evidence suggests he has always been perspicacious in the art of acting. As Marjorie Garber points out, in Hamlet’s first appearance in the play, “Hamlet is both audience and critic. He sees the performance of Claudius and in effect he gives it a bad review” (Garber 478). As we have already seen, when he wears his black outfit, he dismisses his peers’ judgments: his outfit, his sadness “are actions that a man might *play*. / But I have that within which passes *show*” (1.2.84-85). He has already admitted to being an actor, and in the case of the larger scope of the play, Hamlet will soon find himself in the lead role within the troupe. After all, Shakespeare named the play after him. To John H. Astington, author of *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time*, earning a lead acting role in the Elizabethan era demanded certain responsibilities: “the practical function of leading actors within a troupe was to take the large roles in plays chosen or commissioned for performance,” and for any company with a serious desire for financial success, “lead actors had to be able to compass comic as well as heroic and tragic parts” (Astington 108). At the very least, the lead player had to be able to reach each corner of this emotionally ranging triangle. Other intangibles like talent, “individuality of appearance and behavior,” and stage presence mattered greatly, while qualities like “voice” and “intelligence” could be “improved by training” (Astington 5). Players would play many different roles across many different stages covering many different plays. Leading actors also needed to know how to fence and dance. To boil it down, what an actor needed to be was versatile, graceful, commanding, and teachable.

Hamlet, as a character, fits this mold very well. Our first impressions of Hamlet should cue us into the full scope of his diverse personality. In Act 1, he begins as a figure of sorrow, albeit melodramatic to some extent. In his first moment alone on the stage, he laments “how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” (1.2.133-134). Perhaps worse, for as much heartbreak as he endures from his father’s death and mother’s swift remarriage, Hamlet “must hold [his] tongue” and keep his feelings to himself (1.2.158). He is alone and depressed, forced to reconcile with the breakneck pace with which characters realigned themselves in the wake of his father’s death. But when the Ghost calls upon him to enact revenge, he ambitiously accepts the heroic role when he tells the Ghost that “with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.29-31). Even before the Ghost hints at who he needs to murder, Hamlet accepts the challenge. Naturally, Hamlet’s father finds that this eagerness makes him “apt” for the job (1.5.32). Yet in addition to Hamlet’s moments of melancholy and audacity, Hamlet also harbors a comedic side. In his first lines of the play, he cracks two successive familial puns:

> Hamlet: [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind.
>
> King Claudius: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
>
> Hamlet: Not so, my lord; I am too much in the ‘son.’
>
> (1.2.65-67)

Moments before his joke, Hamlet sulks on the margins of the conversation, wearing gloomy clothing, and silent. But when the moment calls upon him to speak, he defies our judgement through his humor, which in effect, proves the point he makes later to his mother that his outward appearance may “seem” a certain way but cannot “denote” him truthfully. We know that in Shakespeare’s world *appearing* a certain way meant so much in assessing an individual’s

personality. Hamlet's first impression completely contradicts everything that would have been understood by both his peers on stage and in the audience watching. He appears gloomy, but still possesses comical wit.

Many Shakespearean scholars have noted how Hamlet's humor changes our perception of him. To Manfred Draudt, the jokes work to establish Hamlet's "role as a bitter court jester exposing the hollowness of political talk" that helps to set up an "intimate relationship with the audience" (Draudt 78). Hamlet's wittiness and banter add to "his complexity and convey his intellectual brilliance, enhancing his attractiveness to audiences" (Draudt 82). In contrast to Draut's favorable impression of Hamlet's jests, Teresa Hooper sees it as problematic of a larger internal confliction: "Hamlet is a living 'pun,' forced to live in more than one ideological space at a time" (Hooper 120). He uses "the ambiguity of the pun" in order to "avoid giving a definite answer" to some of life's hardest questions (Hooper 122). Regardless of the implications of his jokes, they provide valuable information: they show that Hamlet's personality cannot be so easily defined in one genre category. All three of these diverse theatrical spheres – tragedy, comedy, and heroism – are all interconnected and dependent on one another, and brew inside him. We see that his jokes play a role in delaying his heroic avengement, while also exacerbating feelings of confusion and anguish. Within the first act, Hamlet flips from role to role – from comedic to tragic to heroic – as fast as those he despises. Before he even defines himself as an actor, he abides by and navigates through the dramaturgical and acting standards of the time.

Through Hamlet's advice to the players, Shakespeare offers us historical insights into acting conventions of the time. Just before he stages the "Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet gives his lead player some last minute direction, attempting to teach him about vocal performance,

expectations, and how to command his audience. He explains to him how to pronounce words "trippingly on the tongue," to "not saw the air too much with / [his] hand," and to keep his "whirlwind of / [his] passion" smoothly in check (3.2.2, 4-5, 6-7). As for the "groundlings," Hamlet believes they are incapable of enjoying anything other than loud noises from a "robustious perwig-pated" actor on stage (3.2.9). Know your audience, but do not succumb to the low brow, yard standers' humor because that will make the "judicious grieve" (3.2.26). This metatheatrical knock about *not* telling jokes would have made the audience chuckle. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* continues to put the world on a stage: Hamlet's advice to the players is likely the very same advice any actor would have received. Moreover, Andrew Gurr insists that *Hamlet* "makes highly sophisticated use of the theatrical conditions of its time. The company players who arrive in 2.2. were real, not the caricatures of players found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 3). In harmony with Hamlet's advice, in the seventeenth century, "exaggeration was the only charge commonly flung at the players" (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 136). While critics constantly denounced playhouses like The Fortune and Red Bull for '"over-doing,"' Shakespeare's company escaped the bad press in large part due to their "more restrained" characterizations (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 136, 138). His group was the best of the bunch, the first-class of the theatre-going tradition in London. Shakespeare knew how his scripts could only take the production so far: he needed great actors to bring his characters to life.

As both Hamlet says and real-life directors taught, commanding the audience, harnessing the "modesty of nature," and avoiding "anything / so o'erdone" was the aim. (3.2.19, 20). However, it feels like wishful thinking. If actors performed in front of a really rowdy crowd, an occurrence that probably happened all too often at the Globe, no one would hear them if they

spoke in a natural tone. That is to say, in a loud theatre, actors are forced to speak loudly. They would have had to fight to regain the crowd’s attention. Thus, a possible solution would have been to frantically thrust their hands around, and harness the “torrent” and “tempest” that Hamlet warns of (3.2.6). Many scholars appear to forget this component when discussing acting in Elizabethan times: sometimes acting “naturally” on stage was impossible. Hamlet’s advice to the players shows his close acquaintance with acting customs of the time and reveals his command over performative techniques. It also reveals the high expectations Hamlet holds his players to. If the “Murder of Gonzago” fails to retain King Claudius’ attention, or if it comes across as ludicrous rather than sincere, then his plan fails. Hence, through Hamlet’s counseling, Shakespeare shines light on the delicate dynamic between actors and audience, where the weight and impact of a play relies on balance between this relationship. Shakespeare suggests that theatre is more than just what occurs on the stage: it is a symbiotic relationship between the stage and the seats.

Hamlet’s preoccupations about staging a play are indicative of a changing theatrical culture. When Astington says seventeenth-century recruiters looked for actors with “strong and clear oral delivery and a suitable stage presence” (Astington 4), he drills home Hamlet’s point about “[speaking] the speech” (3.2.1). Without “clear pronunciation, and appropriate musical modulation of the voice, corresponding to the rhetorical structure, syntax, and emotional colour of the speech,” actors would have been in danger of failing on the stage (Astington 24). This is why Hamlet becomes unsettled when he notices the age of the boy players:

> You are welcome, masters, welcome all. I am glad to see
> thee well. Welcome, good friends. O old friend, why,
> thy face is valanced since I saw thee last! Com’st thou to

> beard me in Denmark? What, my young lady and
> mistress! By'r Lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven
> than when I saw you last by the altitude of a chopine.
> Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be
> Not cracked within the ring. (2.2.359-366)

According to Astington, when puberty hits, it would have marked "the end of the useful career of the boy player" (Astington 24). On top of changes in height and countenance, disruptions to the voice were the most difficult change for pubescent actors to overcome. But Hamlet's preoccupation with voice and changes in the body extends beyond the immediate predicament of casting his players, and onto what the character of Rosencrantz labels as the "late innovation" period in the Elizabethan era (2.2.296). In the essay "Eclipse of Action: 'Hamlet' and the Political Economy of Playing," Richard Halpern says that during the years of and leading up to the creation of *Hamlet*, "new companies and new styles of acting [emerged]," and replaced "the old ones" (Halpern 474). London's theatrical business was defined by a constant state of transformation and "abrupt changes in fashion" that had the potential to be detrimental to the older traditions (Halpern 474). Young boy players replace the older ones, and the traditional modes of acting – like the ones Hamlet taught to his players – were in danger of fading away. It is for this reason that Hamlet is "fascinated by signs of physical growth and alteration;" to Hamlet, "growth is always a prelude to decay" (Halpern 474). When he sees the boy players, he becomes uniquely aware of changing times and forgotten pasts. It scares him. In this lens, we can see that Hamlet struggles with change within the context of his own life; while he may be "young," he is no longer as innocent as he was before the curtains drew open. When we meet Hamlet, we learn that his world was flipped upside-down when a more ambitious and aggressive

leader replaced his father. Hamlet's melancholy over his father's death leads King Claudius to chastise his emotions as "unmanly grief," a direct attack at his manhood or lack thereof (1.2.94). Hamlet's longing for the past presents its ugly head when he wishes for his "sallied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.129-130). To Hamlet, progression is regression. Thus, when Hamlet looks at the boy players in Act 2, he sees more than just a staging challenge, but a metaphor for transformation – a changing theatrical industry, and a changing self.

Shakespeare creates Hamlet as more than an actor grappling with the threats of change; he is a playwright and producer as well. In the essay '"Guilty Creatures Sitting at a Play': The Audience in *Hamlet*," Michael Mangan discovers a small but revealing moment about Hamlet's staging prowess. Historically in real world London, every play that Shakespeare and his contemporaries put on had to receive the approval of the court because the "companies of players were licensed by aristocrats and royalty" (Mangan 36). The Master of Revels operated a board of censors, who "scrutinized" new plays coming out in England for potential negative political innuendo (Mangan 36). Even so, sometimes, a politically insensitive play would be staged; but in these cases, the playwright and/or the actors would take shrewd steps to "slip" their play through the holes in the system (Mangan 36). Mangan argues that Hamlet took clever steps when he staged his play-within-a-play, likely similar to the one Shakespeare took when staging *Richard II*. Hamlet was able to slip the '"Murder of Gonzago' past the censor's eye because it was not a new script, but an old one" (Mangan 36) – the censor being here Claudius and his regime. Furthermore, just by adding a "few additional speeches," Hamlet was able to "speak to the immediate situation in Elsinore" (Mangan 36). Mangan has taught us then how Hamlet is more than just an actor, but also a producer of some sorts, and perhaps an extension of Shakespeare's methodologies himself. Hamlet's clever wit extends beyond his words and puns that we so often

focus on, but towards his technical abilities. Shakespearean scholar Tiffany Stern furthers this argument when she points out that in Elizabethan theatre, “with daily performances, each of a different play,” actors were also under intense pressure to learn their lines quickly and efficiently (Stern 56). Stern sees Hamlet’s managerial awareness as thoroughgoing because he worries about his actors’ ability to keep up with the demands of the job, telling the first player “you could for need / study a speech” (2.2.476-477). Thus, just from Hamlet’s advice to the players, we can see how Shakespeare attuned himself to theatrical criticism of the time, and in many ways, he uses Hamlet as a means to show the world how in control he was over his productions. Shakespeare is telling the audience about acting through an actor. In part, *Hamlet* is about the difficulties and strategies behind staging a play in the early modern time, and it works as a historical text to preserve the ins and outs of Elizabethan theatre tradition.

Meta-commentary moments in *Hamlet* serve many functions, but most evidently, they offer effective “pop-culture” comedy. Shakespeare’s use of self-reflexivity brings out a sense of joy and playfulness, furthering embodying the “Elizabethan paradox of ‘tragedy played in jest’” (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage* 3). At one point Polonius introduces the players as:

> The best actors in the world, either for
> Tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical
> Historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-
> Comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or
> Poem unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor

Plautus too light. (2.2.420-425)[5]

Here, Shakespeare parodies the "mixed modes that were beginning to appear on the stage, and the academic, comically Aristotelian desire to classify them" (Garber 472). Referencing "Seneca" and "Plautus" would have particularly stood out to some audiences, especially those watching at Cambridge or Oxford universities. It is well known that Shakespeare staged many of his plays at the Globe and Blackfriars Theatre, but we often forget that university dramas were "an important element in the growth of the Elizabethan theatre" (Mangan 38). It was in these spaces that classical influences were studied, discussed, enjoyed, and in turn, influenced educated playwrights of the time looking to write their dramas in the vein of the classics (Mangan 38). In college halls, student actors and "traveling professional companies" would have performed *Hamlet* (Mangan 38). What we have here then with Polonius' speech is both an homage to the classics – as *Hamlet* is a type of Senecan drama – while also a playful jab at the obnoxiousness of certain types of students watching the play. This joke probably would have gone over the heads of the groundlings when performed at the Globe. A more unanimous joke, as we touched upon earlier, would have been when Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern debate the issue of children versus adult troupes. Hamlet becomes upset when he learns that adult actors have been forced to travel on the road because "there is... an aery of children, little / eyases" that "are now the fashion" within cities (2.2.362-363).[6] This controversy (i.e. children actors taking the jobs of adult players) would have been hotly contested during the time, and an issue that Shakespeare would have personally felt (Garber 25). We must avoid the temptation of reading too deeply into the meaning behind the meta-commentary, however, because not all of

[5] For this quote, I cite Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine's "Folger Shakespeare Library" edition (2009) of *Hamlet*.
[6] Folger edition of *Hamlet.*

these quips contain a grander meaning. Sometimes they are just jokes and palavers. Providing extensive background information on them reveal to us how Elizabethans would have understood the play, but at the end of the day, in real time, they served as comic relief in an otherwise solemn tragedy. For those watching in the Globe theatre, if *Hamlet* was as to be performed in its entirety (an event lasting around four hours), jokes like these also serve as cathartic relief in that they acknowledge the tedium that playgoing sometimes was. When the first Player recites a lengthy monologue from *Aeneid,* Polonius complains “this is too long” (2.2.436). Plenty of audience members would agree.

The meta-commentary in *Hamlet* runs deep within its veins. By just reading the text of *Hamlet*, we can rob ourselves from some other joyous self-reflexivity. Evidence suggests that Shakespeare catered his script to specific actors:

> In 1601, when *Hamlet* was most probably written and first performed, Richard Burbage, for whom the part of Hamlet was written, was thirty-four years old. The Hamlet whom the original Elizabethan audiences would have seen on the stage, would not have been an adolescent by any means. This may well explain why the audience is told so frequently, early in the play, that Hamlet is young: a playwright sometimes needs to compensate for the visual effect of his actors. (Mangan 40)

As noted, characters refer to Hamlet as “young” or “younger” to the point of *ad nauseam* especially in the earlier scenes of the play (1.1.169; 1.3.123; 1.5.16; 2.1.113; 4.1.19; 5.1.139), not necessarily because Shakespeare wanted to obfuscate Hamlet’s age for poetical purposes, but more likely out of practical necessity. He tells the audience to believe in what they see, even if

what they see is not worth believing. If Shakespeare understood the theatre as I say he did – which is an intricate relationship between audience and spectator – then it should not surprise us how often he recognizes their existence. Metatheatrics give Shakespeare a chance to tell the audience watching the play to relax, and enjoy their leisure time. When someone makes a joke, it lightens the mood and further perpetuate the notion of "tragedy played in jest." Once an elephant in the room has been addressed, so to speak (e.g. an older actor is playing a younger character), Shakespeare urges his audience to dive into the *realities* on stage. "It is only what Shakespeare calls the 'imaginary puissance,'" Marvin Carson writes in his book *Shattering Hamlet's Mirror*, "that actually allows mimesis, and the theatrical illusion, to take place at all" (Carson 105). When we accept that we are watching a play, we allow ourselves to embrace the complexities of the theatrical condition. The actor on stage is more than an actor; he is "existing both as a living being in the real world and as a representation of a fictive being in the theatrical world," operating on a "double level of fiction and reality" (Carson 104). Hamlet is perhaps Shakespeare's most self-reflexive character; he deserves to be in a play that is just as reflexive as his personality

When Hamlet asks the first Player to recite a speech from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the monologue contains more meaning than Hamlet lets on. "Aenas' tale to Dido," as Hamlet calls it, tells a classical story of revenge from the Trojan War. In this tale, Pyrrhus, the son of the Greek mythological hero Achilles, invades the walled off city of Troy in a wooden horse in order to kill their king, Priam. While Priam did not directly kill Achilles, we may recall that his son, Paris, was the one who shot the fatal arrow. Clearly, a stark parallel between this tale and Hamlet's exists – both Pyrrhus and Hamlet wish to avenge their father's death, and they do so through deceptive means. So, when Hamlet explains that he wishes for the player to recite the speech

because it was "never acted," and that the populous crowds (like the ones sitting at the Globe theatre then and there) could not appreciate its beauty, we know that Hamlet is not telling the full truth (2.2.373). To him, this speech strikes a personal cord. And so, Hamlet, who just loves acting, begins the speech himself. While he messes up the first line, he quickly recovers, and all-in-all, puts on a modest performance – Polonius compliments him for his "good / accent" and "good discretion" (2.2.404-405). Not coincidently, these are the sorts of compliments Hamlet wishes for his Players to receive when they perform the "Murder of Gonzago." However, things get a little stickier after the first Player takes over, and puts on quite the act. We learn from Polonius that the actor managed to "[turn] his color" and create "tears in's eyes" (2.2.457, 458). Thus, this epic performance is both helpful and problematic for Hamlet. On the one hand, the player proves himself trustworthy as the lead man in the "Murder of Gonzago," the all important play for Hamlet. But on the other, it raises questions in Hamlet's mind about his own worthiness.

After the first Player recites a speech from the *Aeneid*, Hamlet looks at him and sees that he can seemingly carry out his role (the role of an Aenas) with ease. The Player shows a wide range of seemingly real, fervent emotions – passion, anger, and sadness all bundled up and exploding out in a single act – that Hamlet just cannot to tap into. Instead, Hamlet, who is trying to carry out his own revenge, is dormant and melancholic, moody and indecisive, only able to put on an act of passionate madness in order to hide his real emotions and hesitation. In other words, the first Player has no issue performing his role, while Hamlet struggles to fulfill his as the avenger. Moreover, the activity of the actors causes Hamlet to reflect on his own abilities, to which he finds that it is easier to be an actor:

> O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
>
> 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 wanned,
> –Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing –
> For Hecuba? (2.2.485-493)

But Hamlet cannot grasp something vital. This is just an act. The Player is merely reciting lines and following a script that has been prescribed to him. The Player has nothing at stake. Hamlet may be an actor, but he also deals with real psychological issues and the dynamics of his reality. What we see here is the complication of living in a dual reality, of actor and non-actor, where deciphering between these two worlds becomes impossible. Shakespearean scholar Richard Halpern recalls how the copycat nature of acting created a reason for distain in certain sixteenth and seventeenth century groups: unlike hard laborers of the time who offered a tangible, economically sound craft, “players did not *make* anything; they did not produce material, durable commodities” (Halpern 459). Worse yet, as we touched upon in the introduction, some people saw theatres as harmful. In a petition against public playhouses formed in 1575, Lord Mayor and Aldermen to the Privy Council criticized theatres for “endeavors” that “elicited... economic hostility;” playhouses pulled “apprentices away from their work” and thus disrupted the industry (Halpern 459). And for what? To these critics, the art of acting was “dismissed as a form of ‘idleness’” that was not just “nonproductive,” but actually “antiproductive” (Halpern 459). This term *idleness* is the key that unlocks our understanding of the dynamic between the players and Hamlet. When Hamlet encounters the actors, he sees them as productive and himself as, well,

what many pundits of the time viewed actors as: *idle*. Make no mistake, up to this point, Hamlet has been static in his revenge quest. Thus, "we can now see that Hamlet's mental conflict between activity and the act is, at another level, constitutive of theatre as such. Hamlet's internal dilemma is simply the dilemma of Renaissance theatre projected onto – or into – character" (Halpern 477). Hamlet's inaction stems from his dramaturgy. He embodies theatrical principles as well as absorbs the views Elizabethan society has cast onto actors like him. When we criticize his idleness, we merely take part in the early modern distaste for actors.

But we still have not solved exactly why Hamlet delays his revenge. We can discover the answer by returning to the first act. Unlike the Players who can merely read a script and suddenly become a hero, the Ghost asks Hamlet to both *write* and *star* in his own story. The Ghost equates Gertude's behavior to that of the biblical character Eve when she gave into temptation and ate the forbidden apple: "So lust, though to a radiant angel linked, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed, / And prey on garbage" (1.5.55-57). However, despite this vituperation, the Ghost disallows Hamlet to involve his mother in his revenge plot:

> But howsomeever thou pursues this act
> Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
> And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
> To prick and sting her. (1.5.84-88)

Thus, the Ghost's request to be revenged is vague at best, filled with laborious gaps and a concise restriction. Why would he leave Hamlet, a "young" emotional man, much room for interpretation? In essence, he gives Hamlet the ending to his story (the death of King Claudius), but nothing in between except a limitation. Hamlet must devise a plan on his own. This challenge

to write and act in his own “play” freezes him. What steps does he have to take to fulfill his father’s demands? The very next time we see Hamlet, he enters the stage reading a book. While he brushes his reading off as mere “words, words words,” we know that something more is going on when he tells Polonius that the book is about “old men” with “grey beards,” and “wrinkled” faces, purging eyes, and “a plentiful lack of wit” (2.2.189, 194, 195, 196). On the surface this acts as an insult to Polonius while furthering Hamlet’s disguise of madness. But upon a closer inspection, Hamlet’s reading choice feels more like an indoctrination against the older generation, and perhaps Claudius himself. By reading a book that dismisses the worthiness of older persons, it feels like Hamlet readies himself to act out against his older peers. While we may never know for certain, one thing that does ring true long after the scene closes: Hamlet is thinking about *words*.

Hamlet is an actor (played by an actor) who loses himself in a web of theatrical principles that he cannot untangle himself from. After he first meets the Ghost, he affirms that the memory of the encounter will fittingly “[hold] a seat / in this distracted globe,” a metaphor for his mind (1.5.96-97). Following the relocation of Shakespeare’s group to the Globe theatre in 1599, the new playhouse was the talk of the town, and Shakespeare was keen to reference it in his next play (Cohen 978). Clearly, audience members currently sitting (or standing) within the newly built Globe theatre would have picked up on the reference. What is more interesting to note is what Shakespeare slips under their consciousness: audience members would have shared a similar predicament to Hamlet, as they would have been warding off “distractions” of their own. As shown before, large crowds at Elizabethan plays did not silently enjoy a play like we do today. In all likelihood, people talked at will, nudged and fidgeted against each other, stood for

hours straight, and endured "rotten" smells, all of which factored into the playgoing experience. Everything about going to play distracted them from their *task* of watching the play itself. The playhouse presented a paradox, where an "inevitable competition" formed "between the mind concentrating on the play and the distractions suffered by the body it was housed in" (Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 128). In short then, we see that the globe theatre and Hamlet's mind work in the same manner: Hamlet's mind is a theatrical space; it is "distracted" in the same way the "Globe" theatre audience was distracted. For Hamlet, it his uncle-father and aunt-mother, a complicated love life, grief and grievance, political aspirations, and now, the memory of his father's ghost, i.e. a plethora of distractions that fly at Hamlet from every which way, pushing him into emotional turmoil and away from his *task* at hand. Shakespeare, once again, capitalizes on the personality of Elizabethan theatre by reflecting it on stage.

By calling his mind a "distracted globe," Hamlet reveals so much more about himself and his mental condition than already suggested. He admits, in plain sight, to early signs of confusion, calamity, and *madness*. Once again, to understand the exact implications of Shakespeare's words, we must return to the context in which characters utter them. In the early modern era, to *be* "distracted" meant something completely different from today. According to Carol Thomas Neely, "distracted" in the time of Shakespeare actually meant "'deranged in mind; crazy, mad, insane,"' a "near synonym for extreme madness" (Neely 3). While we may view a distraction today as a minor nuisance, the Elizabethan public deemed those suffering from "distraction" as "divided, diverted, disassembled" individuals, living in a state of dishevelment for a temporary period of time (Neely 3). Luckily, the condition was not seen as permanent, but nevertheless its cure was vague and ill-defined. Your "distraction" ended, it was understood, when your memory became restored. So, when Hamlet calls his memory a "distracted globe," we

cannot lose sight of its full implication. Before he puts on his madman act, before we know whether he may or may not have gone insane, before we wonder whether his playing madman has turned all too real, Hamlet plants a flag signaling where these questions begin. For those watching in the theatre at the time, Hamlet’s words may have felt like a self-diagnosis. To be mad or to be feigned? Hamlet’s madness, from its inception, is umbilically tied to his theatricality.

## Chapter 7: Science, Madness, and Changing Western Thought

To put it simply, to be "mad" in early modern England meant many different things. In this final chapter of my thesis, for the sake of space, I will limit myself by providing just a brief definition of what madness was in European thought at this time, who was deemed mad, and what symptoms they presented. Given the broadness of the subject, I will just stay close to madness' intimate relationship with the theatre and playwrights, and how the two seemingly unconnected systems not only functioned together, but helped define each other in this era. Elizabethans were fascinated in diagnosing each other, in discovering the root of why someone went mad, and they oftentimes arrived at inconsistent, irrational, and sometimes detrimental conclusions. Crucial to our reading of the play, we must explore how new ideas about madness arrived with the winds of the Scientific Revolution. We must remember that Shakespeare lived in the age of Nicolaus Copernicus and Francis Bacon who, with their findings on the universe and scientific methodologies, forever shaped Western thought. It took a while for humankind to realize the implication of their work, and change was slow, messy, and inconsistent, but their inquisitiveness was as contagious as the plague itself. Despite an increasing sentiment that our world could be understood through empiricism, Shakespeare should never drift far away from the world of the play.

We know that Shakespeare had staged madness many times before – in *King Lear* and *Macbeth* to name a few instances – but perhaps never as complicated and intricately as he does in *Hamlet*. One way we can read Hamlet's derangement and temperament is that he suffers from "melancholy," a condition believed to stem from excessive black bile discharge within the body,

which was an imperfect scientific explanation for why someone behaves and feels as they do.[7] Yet discerning Hamlet's true state of mind is so difficult because he is an actor, and his commonly devised symptoms could all just be an act. Though if we take that point of view, that Hamlet is either mad or feigning, we defeat the purpose of what Shakespeare suggests to us. To lose a sense of the self, to enter into a new character's identity, to become something that you are not, Shakespeare asks us: what really is the difference between acting and going mad? More pressing, if we all play a role in our lives, then are we all a little bit mad too? Everywhere Shakespeare would have looked, he would have seen madness: on the streets of London, in the psychiatric wards of Bedlam, and on the stage itself. It was ubiquitous. It was theatrical. The cases of Ophelia and Hamlet present us two different forms of madness, Hamlet's melancholy and Ophelia's distraction, which juxtapose each other. When we watch them descend into mental discomposure, we learn from them, sympathize with their affliction, and understand the complexities of the human mind. In many ways, we take on the *role* of scientists ourselves, observing Hamlet and Ophelia's conditions like medical practitioners observing their patient, making judgments about their affliction based on symptoms. Writing in the age of the very beginning of the Scientific Revolution, Shakespeare shows us that the stage can still help us understand things that many believed could only be understood through the empirical – and the theological. "Science has given us a new world," Dan Falk writes in the last line his book *The Science of Shakespeare*, "and Shakespeare illuminates our place within it" (Falk 314).

At the turn of the seventeenth century, the idea of "madness" was in the midst of a transformation; and in fact, the whole of the European continent was too. Shakespeare lived in the early years of what we call the "Scientific Revolution," which describes the vast

[7] In today's day and age, we would call this pseudoscience, but at the time, maintaining proper balance in the humors was believed to lead to strong mental and physical health.

improvement in rational thought stemming from 1500 through 1800. In this time period, Europeans looked to understand the natural order through experimentation and observation in an attempt to break away from traditional thought. The term "Scientific Revolution," however, is a misnomer for two reasons. For one, people living in the time never would have used the word "science." Instead, they would have called it "Natural Philosophy." According to Falk, the difference between our two terms goes beyond their semantics: "natural philosophy... was broader in scope" as it "encompassed not only the observational sciences, but also theology and metaphysics" (Falk 29). Religion was never pushed out of the equation because scientists saw God as a crucial factor in their findings. To them, God created the universe for us to uncover its mysteries, and in fact, this creation only reveals the vast range of the Almighty's powers. As Falk tells us, the "Scientific Revolution" feels like a concoction of "astrology, witchcraft, alchemy, magic… and science. It was all part of a package; all were thoroughly intertwined in the sixteenth century, and even into the early years of the seventeenth" (Falk 245). Second, the "Scientific Revolution" was not a "revolution" at all, but rather a gradual shift in thought. It did *not* arrive "out of the blue," as Falk explains, and it "was built on a foundation established in the latter part of the middle ages" (Falk 30). What was understood in the past could be actively challenged, as opposed to statically embraced. Europeans began to question, slowly but surely, the ways they thought about the universe, earth, their bodies, and their minds, all while archaic theories still abounded. Like most movements, the scope of it is best understood years beyond its conclusion, so it is undoubtedly easier for us living in present day to recognize the more signature achievements of the time. For this reason, scholars traditionally felt that many living in the time of Shakespeare did not realize the importance of the work being done around them. The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century surely played a role in expediting the

spread of information faster than ever before, but on the whole, it was an unfurling of ideas (Falk 30). Given the slowness and broadness in scope of the Scientific Revolution, many scholars felt that Shakespeare did not – and could not – have known much about the gravity of the events occurring around him. This has curbed the imaginations of many modern Shakespearean scholars for too long.

That skepticism now is beginning to fade, and it is opening up a whole new world of literary interpretations previously unexplored. In the last twenty years, a new reading of Shakespeare has emerged that sees him as "more conscious of the changing conception of the cosmos than we usually [imagined]" (Falk 12). Perhaps the most irrefutable evidence supporting Shakespeare's awareness of the scientific discoveries around him lies in Peter Usher's controversial yet essential essay, "Hamlet and Infinite Universe." Recalling our high school history classes, we may remember that sixteenth century astronomer Tycho Brahe refuted the classical idea of "immutable heavenly spheres" (Falk 8). But we certainly never learned in school that among Brahe's relatives, one was named "Rosenkrantz" and another was named "Gyldenstierne" (Usher, "Hamlet and the Infinite Universe"). How does this change our reading of *Hamlet*? To Usher, it changes everything. In the book *Hamlet's Universe,* Usher finds that the play "is an allegorical account of the historical struggle for acceptance of the New Astronomy," a staging of a cosmological battle of the minds with different characters representing different astronomers (Usher, *Hamlet's Universe* 91). In this reading, Hamlet "personifies" the astronomer Thomas Digges; the Ghost is "the spirt of Leonardo Digges whose memory and works guided and inspired his son;" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent Tycho Brahe and his "bounded hybrid" model of the universe; and King Claudius stands in for the Greco-Roman astronomer Claudius Ptolemy (Usher, *Hamlet's Universe* 90). Whether or not Usher's argument wins you

over, the undertone of it brings us back to *As You Like It* and Jacques: all the world is a stage, and yes, that includes those astronomers and physicists, and any scientists who want nothing to do with the theatre and everything to do with the worlds beyond. Falk regrets that Usher's analogy feels a little "far-fetched" (Falk 10), but it nonetheless sheds light on how Shakespeare was in conversation with the scientific discoveries occurring around him.

Clearly influenced by Usher's imagination, Falk takes Usher's ideas and synthesizes them closer to facts by drawing upon historical information that connects Shakespeare with famous astronomers of the time, such as Thomas Digges. At one moment, Falk tells us that "Digges's son, Leonard, lived less than three blocks apart [from Shakespeare] in their north London neighborhood. Leonard, a poet, was an early Shakespeare 'fan' who contributed an introductory verse at the start of the First Folio" (Falk 8). In other cases, Falk finds that:

> Shakespeare may have encountered England's other great men of science of the day, from Thomas Harriot to Queen Elizabeth's own 'science advisor,' John Dee—the man often put forward as the model for Prospero in *The Tempest*. And then there was the Italian philosopher and mystic Giordano Bruno, who traveled to England in the 1580s, lecturing on Copernicanism and other provocative notions. Shakespeare is unlikely to have met Bruno, but may well have encountered his ideas." (Falk 8)

At the very least, this new evidence suggests that Shakespeare was aware of the scientific inquiries of the time, and may have been familiar with the gravity of their work. Shakespeare's writings undoubtedly preoccupy themselves with other themes and motifs more so than the

questions raised by the scientific community. Nonetheless, these discoveries by the likes of Falk and Usher allow us to revisit *Hamlet* in a new light.

One no longer needs a microscope to see that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare converses with the questions raised by astronomers of the time, in part through metatheatrics. According to Falk, "it is impossible not to think of the play, at least in part, as a reflection of its turbulent times—a period of remarkable intellectual upheaval" (Falk 146). When Hamlet says that he is "crawling between earth and heaven" (3.1.127), Falk views it as an allusion to this dramatic moment of shakeup in human history (Falk 146). We can also view it as a tighter comment on the astronomers of the time, how people slowly began shifting their attention away from earthly matters and towards the sky. Hence, we can only wonder how much Hamlet sympathizes with astronomers when he says to Claudius "I am too much in the 'son'" (1.2.67). Likewise, Shakespeare instructs us to be astronomers ourselves "right from the opening scene" when we "are asked to look upward" (Falk 146). It is night in Elsinore at the castle front, with the stars shining as bright as the night before, when Bernardo tells Horatio that he saw the Ghost "last night of all, / When yond same star that's *westward from the pole* / Had made his course t' illume that part of heaven / Where now it burns" (1.1.35-37 emphasis added). Bernardo's words about the directionality and temporality of stars would not have forced the audience to imagine anything themselves because all they had to do was simply look above at the "wooden canopy projected out over the stage" and see that "its underside – known as 'the heavens' – was decorated with brightly painted stars and constellations" (Falk 13). Hamlet even references "the heavens" later on when he says "look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this / majestical roof fretted with golden fire" (2.2.266-267). Just below Hamlet's feet would have been a trap door, leading to an underground space known as "Hell" (Garber 27). This area would have

served multiple functions, such as a hiding space for a character to leap out from, or perhaps as the space for the Gravedigger's to hang out in when they speak to Hamlet. We see then that by the very nature of the design of the Globe theatre, Hamlet stands in between multiple worlds – heaven and hell, the stars above and the earth below.

But Falk misses something crucial by neglecting the rest of Hamlet's speech. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two characters we have already learned may represent the scientific field, a harrowing justification for his gloom.

> I will tell you why. So shall my anticipation
> prevent your discovery and your secrecy to the King
> and Queen moult no feather. I have of late, but
> wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all
> custom of exercises and, indeed, it goes so heavily
> with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems
> to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy
> the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this
> majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it
> appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent
> congregation of vapours. What piece of work is a man
> – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form
> and moving; how express and admirable in action; how
> like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the
> beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to me
> what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not

> me – nor women neither, though by your smiling you
>
> seem to say so. (2.2.259-276)

With our new lens, we see that Hamlet struggles to grapple with the implications of the scientific findings of the time. He praises humankind's ability to learn, discover, and reason, while also fearing for the result of those very inquiries. He only feels smaller and less significant when he marvels at the perfection of nature, looking up at the skies and seeing how bright the stars burn, all while his subjective world still smells rotten. In this monologue, Shakespeare warns us that the further we explore outwards, and the more we discover about the universe's endless beauties and mysteries, we risk seeing that our own reality fizzles in comparison to the vastness beyond. This is why Hamlet's internal affliction, his madness, only becomes exacerbated when he looks out past the canopy and essentially sees what Copernicus said to Western thought fifty years earlier:[8] we are not as significant as we think we are. The more we learn about our universe, the more we will feel like Hamlet. Not surprisingly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "laugh" in response (2.2.279). We would think that the scientific discoveries of the era, which showed us that there is so much more out there than just our own world, would destabilize *Hamlet's* central dogma – that all the world is a stage. Further, the irony cannot be lost upon us that a playwright dedicated his entire career to putting the *world* on stage, only to live in a unique era that questioned humankind's placement within their *world.* How would this make Shakespeare feel? Perhaps, as Hamlet says, like a piece of "dust" in the wind? The problem that science presents to mankind, however, also feels like a problem of theatricality. We *appear* to be "noble in reason," "infinite in faculty," as Hamlet tells us, and yet the more we learn, the more we will feel unremarkably insignificant on the *inside*. We once again return to the problem of "exteriority"

[8] In *De revolutionibus* (1543), Copernicus found that contrary to popular belief, the sun (and not the earth) was at the center of the universe (Usher "Hamlet and the Infinite Universe")

versus “interiority,” that there “are actions that a man might play.” On the outside, we show courageous inquisitiveness, yet on the inside, we feel something totally different. Hamlet embodies to some extent what any educated person on galactic matters would have felt at the time: it was a moment of awe and excitement; it was also a moment of fear and self-doubt.

Along with new ideas on the cosmos came new and competing ideas about our own mental condition. For the most part, two ideas about madness dominated the field: religious and medical. Starting when Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in AD 313 up through the eighteenth century, many felt that the reason why someone went “mad” was due to a battle between the Holy Ghost and the Devil for the “possession of the individual soul” (Porter 17). Some “holy innocents, prophets, ascetics, and visionaries... might be possessed by a ‘good madness,’” but for the most part, “derangement was more commonly viewed as diabolic, schemed by Satan and spread by witches and heretics” (Porter 18). From the late fifteenth century to around the mid seventeenth century, Europeans orchestrated witch hunts mostly against women. They saw “uncontrolled speech and behavior as symptoms of satanic *maleficium* (malice)” and deeply felt that these mad persons colluded with the Devil himself. The result of these diagnoses caused the death of over 200,000 people. While Shakespeare lived in the peak of this ghastly time, the intemperance of the harmful witch hunts “eventually bred official and public skepticism about demoniacal possession” (Porter 25). In *Madness: A Brief History*, Roy Porter outlines a few of the brave souls living in the time of Shakespeare who used “early medical expression” to speak out “against the grain” (Porter 25). He names medical practitioners like Johannes Weyer, Reginald Scot from Kent, and Edward Jorden as leaders who fought the mania (Porter 25-26). By the time of the mid-seventeenth century, Enlightened thinkers and “ruling orders were giving such teachings up: not only did

they seem irrational and pre-scientific, but they had failed to provide guarantees for social order" (Porter 32). At the time of Shakespeare, the cracks in the religious explanation of madness were beginning to form.

Natural philosophers in the Elizabethan era used the writings of Greek derived thought as a means to understand human health, both mental and physical. According to ancient Greek philosopher Hippocratic of Cos, "the body was subject to rhythms of development and change, determined by the key humours constrained within the skin-envelope" (Porter 32). Ancient Greeks and early modern thinkers saw that fluctuation in these humours – choler, phlegm, blood, and melancholy – affected temperament, bodily functions, appearance, among other things. While the ideas developed by Greek medicine translated deep into the era of Shakespeare, but like its religious counterparts, early Enlightened thinkers began to rework the established order, albeit slowly; Porter cites professor Denis Fontanon and Felix Platter as sixteenth century examples of practitioners who saw mania as an association with excessive humours, but through a new angle (Porter 49, 50). More crucial to our reading of *Hamlet*, many scholars believe that Shakespeare familiarized himself with the writings of Timothie Bright and his *Treatise on Melancholy,* a text that takes a biological look at the connection between the spleen and madness (Porter 52). At the time*,* Bright's writing helped propagate a general attitude that saw excess black bile in the spleen to be the cause of "irritability, impulsiveness, and quick-changing passions" in a patient (Falk 259). In other words, the more that black bile built up in someone's system, the more melancholic they would become. Although natural philosophers of the period never completed detached Christian dogma from their findings, people like Bright show us that strictly theological reasons no longer cut it; there needed to be a more scientific, biological, and

specific explanation for mental disturbance. The fascination to discover why someone went mad roared on.

What did madness look like, and who was considered mad? These are questions that playwrights oftentimes tried to answered on the stage. When Porter says that "folk wisdom has assumed that madness is as madness looks" (Porter 63), we can see that Polonius taps into this sentiment when he tells Gertrude "to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (2.2.93-95). This surface level understanding of madness is all we really have: we know it when we see it. According to Porter, writers and artists have always capitalized on this exteriority of madness through the fool character: "in jokes and on the stage, the insane have standardly been depicted as strange and disheveled" with the "character flaw written all over the face" (Porter 64). Carol Neely sees the immediate link between real-life mad persons sent to the hospitals of Bedlam, and those who performed the role of a distracted person:

> Although a few severely distracted persons did end up in Bedlam, this small hospital for the mad has only the most tenuous links with the Bedlamites that are represented on the Jacobean stage. The hospital does not confine mad persons cruelly or indiscriminately; but the stage madhouses make spectacles of them as the hospital is imagined to do. (Neely 1)

Even with the discrepancy, there exists a palpable relationship between seemingly opposite places like the Globe theatre and bedlam, as playwrights were greatly influenced by the mentally ill. And what could better embody "a tragedy played in jest" than persons who had gone mad themselves? Are we not tempted to laugh and cry at a distracted person's condition? In the book *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare,* Duncan Salkeld argues that "tales of madness

are unsettling" because they "seem to be tragi-comedy itself: familiar, yet at the same time uncannily removed from everyday experience; entertaining but profoundly disturbing" (Salkeld 8). Madness, by nature, presents as a performative state.

To be mad, however, did not always have a negative connotation; in fact, quite the contrary. Playwrights of the time would not have taken advantage of the mentally deranged, because artists themselves would have been seen as mad. Commoners living in the early modern period thought that people like Shakespeare received "visions in dreams and daydreams; [and that] gloom and woe fired the poet's fancy; and, especially on the stage, there skulked the melancholy malcontent, clad all in black, disaffected, disdainful, dangerous, yet brilliantly discerning and diamond sharp" (Porter 67). According to Porter, artists were thus "supposedly mad, and those who were mad suffered from *cacoethes scribendi*, the writer's itch" (Porter 67). We know Hamlet has had "bad dreams"[9] before (2.2.275); we know that Hamlet claims to see Ghosts when they are not really there – "On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares," he professes to his dumbfounded mother, imploring her to see the nonexistent ghost in the room (3.4.121). We also know that he has the writer's bug because he "[sets] down" a "speech of some dozen lines, or sixteen lines" for the players to learn (2.2.477-478). The link between madness and artistry needed no further explanation after Robert Burton put it simply in 1621 in his *Anatomy of Melancholy:*[10] "all poets are mad" (Burton 97). What we see from the Renaissance era is that there was a dexterity and adaptability of interpretations of madness. The term had many connotations, acting out "a bewildering multiplicity of parts... moral and medical, negative and positive, religious and secular. After all, man was an 'amphibian,' part angel, part beast, and

[9] I cite the Mowat and Werstine's edition of *Hamlet.*
[10] Burton's book discusses the correlations between madness, melancholy, and the humours. It also essentially summarizes early modern biological thought on mental derangement.

hence a divided self" (Porter 69-70). The term of madness is and has always been a term in constant disarray and existing in a sort of identity crisis. The definition was like Hamlet himself.

The Elizabethan stage was a critical tool for commoners to understand madness, functioning alongside and interacting with theological and medicalized definitions. In Renaissance drama, madness was commonly shown in "typical humoral" verbiage, of "melancholic or love-sick characters, and visually in disruptions of conventional appearance used to display its metamorphosis" (Salkeld 2). Following common conventionality, Polonius thinks that Hamlet is *acting* mad because of his love for Ophelia, telling the audience in an aside "though this be madness / yet there is method in't" (2.2.202-203). While he is ironically right to some extent that there is a "method" to Hamlet's madness, he is wrong when he says it is loved based. Shakespeare signals to us that *Hamlet* will forgo the normal love-sick madness portrayal, *de rigueur* in Elizabethan theatre, in favor of a more complicated exploration. Public theatres in London "staged madness regularly" in the years from the 1570s through the 1630s, which also so happened to be the time period when "medicalized diagnoses of madness became more widely available" (Neely 4, 6). Neely argues that playwrights of the caliber of Shakespeare depicted the medicalized understandings of madness, and therefore, ultimately "contributed to the gradual replacement of supernatural explanations of distracted subjects with medical ones" (Neely 6). The stage was a safe space where regular people could see madness, grapple with it, and learn about its different conditions; madness, as we know, was not a singular term, but instead consisted of a wide net of meanings. In *Hamlet*, Neely sees that Shakespeare explores the medicalized differences between two terms we oftentimes use interchangeably today when discussing Early modern mental disorder: "madness" and "melancholy." According to Neely, in the early modern period "madness" actually denoted more volatile, mercurial, and visibly

disturbing behavior, while '"melancholy' in contrast, [denoted] torpor, passivity, and the inner emotions of fear and sorrow" (Neely 4). These two separate diagnoses play out in the cases of Hamlet and Ophelia, where Hamlet's "madness is in every way contrasted with [Ophelia's], in part, probably, to emphasize the difference between feigned and actual madness, melancholy and distraction" (Neely 54). In Neely's eyes, Hamlet is faking his madness and is actually just melancholic, whereas Ophelia experiences actual "distraction." The crux of her argument rests on the fact that Ophelia kills herself and Hamlet does not: Ophelia ignores the Christian sin of self-destruction because she has gone mad, whereas Hamlet cannot bring himself to death because he still maintains sanity as shown by his wish to go to heaven. What works with Neely's argument is that it furthers Shakespeare's interest in the sciences, showing us how the medicinal and the empirical cannot only be explained through the world of the arts, but understood fundamentally. We can read sixteenth and seventeenth philosophies on medicine, but madness is a visual and emotional balance, an exterior and interior experience. The theatre can teach audiences about new scientific findings in an accessible manner.

I summarized Neely's argument in order to address a counter-argument, in which I suggest what Shakespeare really wants us to get out of *Hamlet:* we are all mad, and we are all actors. Shakespeare's point is not to try to separate the two terms, but to understand how they function together. Is there really a difference between madness and acting? They are both performative; they both are an external display of an internal issue. We all play a role in our lives, and most likely, given the vast, unrestrained, and short-lived definitions of "madness," we all have been mad a time or two. When we embark on a role, we can lose ourselves so deeply that we forget who we really are. In the final scene of the play, Hamlet appears to completely lose himself in his role:

> Give me your pardon, sir. I've done you wrong,
> But pardon't as you are a gentleman.
> This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
> How I am punished with sore distraction.
> What I have done,
> That might your nature, honour and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged –
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (5.2.204-217)

However, despite the overt lunacy in this monologue, every sentence Hamlet utters can be read in the context of feigning or distraction. We remember that only a few moments before, he gives Horatio a gentle speech about "a special / providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.197-198). How about earlier, in the closet scene, when Hamlet tells his mother: "I essentially am not in madness / But mad in craft" (3.4.185-186)? Where do we even begin trying to unpack this loaded quote? We would be chasing our tails. Neely insists that "characters' madness does not make them nonhuman or inhuman, but, however, disruptive, might be said to represent them as excessively human" (Neely 66). This is where the truth lies. Hamlet is only human. When Gertrude questions his sanity, he shoots back that "my pulse as yours doth temperately keep time

/ And makes as healthful music. It is not madness" (3.4.138-139). The heart, the blood of a madman is the same as anyone else's. One sign of madness is when you think you live in real life, but are actually on the stage. Or when you think you are on the stage, but you're actually in real life. To entertain the question "is Hamlet mad?" is to risk a kind of madness ourselves. We're trying to devise normal ways of seeing the world when things are never so separated. Because we have to question if Hamlet is mad or acting, because we raise this very question, it is clear that Shakespeare has done his job in blending the real world and the fake. "To be or not to be" Hamlet asks humankind in the play's most iconic moment: is it worth living in a world that resembles a stage? A world that we cannot tell whether actions are genuine or real? Whether our peers will sympathize with our internal distress, or will shut us out? Given that Shakespeare wrote in an era that began to raise more questions than it could answer, *Hamlet* feels like the perfect play to emblemize its time.

## Conclusion

I began this inquiry with a quote from *As You Like It* to show how Shakespeare thought about our world: all the world is a stage, everyone is both an actor and audience at the same time. We can interpret *Hamlet* in any number of ways, but I believe that it is best to understand it through the lens of Jacques' words, because of three reasons, two of which I outlined in the introduction, and the third being what I based most of my exploration on: (1) Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* during the exact same time period as *As You Like It,* which tells us there is an overlap in thought. (2) Shakespeare and his Lord Chamberlain's Men built their own theatre just before the production of *Hamlet*, and *Hamlet* was likely the first play to christen the new space. Not surprisingly, they named the theatre the "Globe," which is not a very subtle way to tell us that that our world is a theatre. We have explored how the very design of this theatre affected both the playgoing experience for a fan of the theatre, as well as for an actor on the stage. It was as if the whole socio-economical field was packed into this wooden globe, where the people watching presented entertainment on par with what occurred on stage. Hence, through *Hamlet,* Shakespeare plays with the observational culture of playgoing when he has his entire cast spy on one another. When everyone is watching each other, it leads to a contagious thought that everyone *knows* they are being watched, and thus a culture of audience/actor emerges.

The third reason I believe *Hamlet* plays out Jacques' monologue is because many scholars have noted the overwhelming *theatricality* of early modern England and, more specifically, London. When Shakespeare took a step outside his home, he must have seen theatricality everywhere: the self-fashioning processes his fellow Elizabethans participated in, the way the monarchy functioned, the manner in which Queen Elizabeth and her peers presented themselves to the public, and even within the new ideas emerging in the Scientific Community.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare takes great pleasure in alluding to these facets. We see this because everyone has a role to play – on top of their stage names. As the saying goes, "the king is dead, long live the king!" and not surprisingly when King Hamlet dies in *Hamlet*, King Claudius takes his place without the public blinking an eye. Gertrude slides over to join him on the throne, leaving Hamlet with an aunt-mother. Even the two little nosy guys who were once school friends of Hamlet, and who really have nothing to do with politics, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves with new roles when the king calls upon them. All of their progressions between parts alludes back to the seven steps of Jacques' speech – while it is not an exact word for word reenactment of the different steps from infant to old man, it still gives us a sense of the bounce between parts. Once we move forward in life, once we take on our next role, there is no turning back. Thus, *Hamlet* tells us so much about time and temporality, how the decisions we make in the past have dire consequences in the future. When Claudius kneels down to pray for his sins, hoping to find anything to help wash away the "rank" of his deeds, he admits that "[his] fault is past" (3.3.36, 51). The only option for the King is to move forward.

Everyone has a costume to wear, and a perception to build. In his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* Stephen Greenblatt introduces us to a theory about how we construct our own personal identity to present to the public. According to Greenblatt, it all began in the Renaissance period. While Shakespeare certainty never thought about it in Greenblatt's terms, as the two lived four-hundred years apart, the great playwright nonetheless plays up to the idea of self consciousness, self-reflexivity in shaping an identity and developing a sense of one's own self in *Hamlet.* We see that Shakespeare presents to us a case of "self-fashioning" in more ways than one. Not only does Hamlet undergo identity changes based on costume and language, but he also struggles to connect with his own identity. His acute self-awareness and insecurity probably

touched many audience members of the time, as it does still today – Hamlet doesn't know who he wants to be, or even whether he wants *to be* at all. We also see that he constructs his identity, becoming an actor, in the vein of what others have done; Greenblatt's New Historicist theory tells us that we govern our actions based on social standards of our time. Likewise, Hamlet chooses to become an actor because he has absorbed the culture around him.

The star of *Hamlet*, however, is of course Hamlet, and Shakespeare runs his main man through the gauntlet of Jacques' words. Early on in the play, even before he puts on an "antic disposition," Hamlet readily admits to himself and to the audience that he is an actor when he calls his mind a "distracted globe." And Hamlet fulfills his job title well, showing a keen eye for the ideal actor. The advice he tells to the players provides us an exact indictment of the acting standards of the time. However, Hamlet shows us the challenges in acting and starring in your own story.

The beginnings of the Scientific Revolution bubbled under the surface of Western culture in the time of Shakespeare; in similar fashion, in *Hamlet*, we feel a sense of change on the horizon – a whisper of optimism and fear in discovering the truth – that spreads throughout the world of Denmark. Rosencrantz, in one of his only astute observation, says to Hamlet that the "world's grown honest" (2.2.232-233). Hamlet laughs off the notion of a "doomsday," sarcastically telling the two knuckleheads that he "could be bounded in a nut shell and / count [himself] a king of *infinite space*" (2.2.273-274, emphasis added).[11] But we know that Hamlet feels smaller than this. The fear is that we may all feel small and insignificant in the light of new cosmological discoveries. There is hope however, as Shakespeare shows us that the stage can provide a guiding hand as we walk into the abyss together, hand in hand, uncovering the

[11] Mowat and Werstine's Folger edition of *Hamlet.*

mysteries of the world that may make us feel insubstantial. But he tells us we are all together in this struggle. After all, we are all actors in the same globe. As shown in the example of staging different medicalized understandings of madness, Shakespeare sympathizes with their cases. If we are all actors, then we are all a little bit crazy too.

We must avoid becoming trapped in identifying the "universality" of Shakespeare's work. This is a fallacy we often fall into, and perhaps I may have unconsciously done it myself. It feels too easy to say "we relate" to these characters, that we can see the world through their eyes, and *understand* them because they are "us." Why read a piece of literature only to see ourselves? Has Shakespeare's work made an indelible impact across the globe – *Hamlet* alone has been translated into over one hundred languages – only because it "holds a mirror up to nature?" Why sit through a four-hour long play in order to merely identify with the characters on stage? How vain are we? Rather, I believe we should grapple with art because we wish to understand each other better; we should be able to see the world through another's eyes, and not necessarily agree with their actions. Literature should be a window into another's eyes, not a mirror. Shakespeare was an entertainer, writing for a particular audience with particular interests. What he created was of a rare sort: a play that entertained both the ground standers and the elites relaxing in the balconies, while also displaying a mesmerizing artistic sensibility. When we read *Hamlet* while understanding the context that enveloped it, we can learn so much about our ancestors. We can see the world as they did. If we close our eyes, we should feel ourselves standing in the pit next to them, rubbing shoulders, while Richard Burbage, the man starring as Hamlet, shouts down at us "groundlings, / who for the most part are capable of nothing but / inexplicable dumbshows and noise" (3.2.10-12). And we would yell back at him, and perhaps throw a piece of cabbage, which a new friend of ours just handed us, onto the stage. When we

read *Hamlet*, we shouldn't just feel the words of the actors on stage, but see through the eyes of the people standing next to them, and feel the power.

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