

**“To Play, or Not to Play:” Renaissance Metatheatre and the Ethics of Acting**

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or  
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## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Graphics.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I: To Play or Not to Play: <i>Hamlet</i> and the Problem of Truthful Representation.....	21
Chapter II: <i>Coriolanus</i> , the Dull Actor.....	47
Chapter III: Was Ever Audience in this Humour Woo'd: <i>Richard III</i> 's Seduction.....	64
Conclusion: "The Play's the Thing.".....	85
Works Cited.....	88

# **Dedication**

For E.R.L.  
Always.

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## List of Graphics

Chapter 1: *Hamlet*: Hamlet Pondering Existence, pp. 20/21

Chapter 1: *Hamlet*: Who's Watching, pp. 29/30

Chapter 2: *Coriolanus*: Menenius at Work, pp. 46/47

Chapter 3: *Richard III*: Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor, pp. 63/64

Chapter 3: *Richard III*: One Does Not Just Order Strawberries, pp. 78/79

## Introduction

### Rogues and Vagabonds

During the English Renaissance, acting was not a legal profession unless an actor was under the tutelage of a royal patron. According to Queen Elizabeth I's 1572 "Vagabond's Act" within the *Tudor Poor Laws*, patron-less actors were nothing more than "rogues and vagabonds." They were perceived as the lowest stratum of society that included beggars, prostitutes, drifters, thieves and other outcasts.<sup>1</sup> The antitheatrical Puritans were outraged by acting and the theatre, and even the people who regularly let themselves be entertained by plays<sup>2</sup> did not fully trust the actor as part of society. Plays were captivating, but also suspect. The actor was a magnet, but also a pariah. Even playwrights and actors had internalized the antitheatrical stigma associated with them.

To comprehend why acting in the theatre was such a contentious issue with the antitheatricals and why, on the other hand, it was so popular with many people, it is crucial to view Renaissance theatre within its time frame. The English Renaissance was a conflicted era: the monarchy was unstable, the religious situation was volatile, society and its beliefs were in a flux, but the theatre exploded onto the scene with such momentum that its spirit can still be felt today. Elizabeth I had no heir, and the pope gave anyone wanting to assassinate her his public benediction. The Reformation and Catholicism imposed their doctrines on people's lives intermittently. The *Act of Supremacy* and the *Act of Uniformity* of 1559 formally established the Church of England and made any recusancy punishable by death. Modern capitalism was in its early stage, making merchants and the gentry rich, but many others poor due to unemployment and inflation. The very poor often became the "rogues and vagabonds" society was so afraid of. For many people, life became more and more uncertain, which created a niche for religions such as Puritanism because they promised certainty in the afterlife. Society was torn between the old, ordered philosophy of distinct values and hierarchies, and the modern philosophy of humanism that blurred the lines between

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<sup>1</sup> "Outcast by society, actors could practice their profession only on the unrestricted margins of city life" (Worthen *Actor* 12).

<sup>2</sup> "[B]y the sixteenth century, the European theatre was part of a secular entertainment market, competing with bear-baiting, animal shows, athletic contests, public executions, royal and civic pageants, public preaching," etc. (Worthen *Wadsworth* 4).



good and bad, upper and lower class, inherited and self-fashioned status. England was under constant threat of war from Spain, and it was riddled by religious and seditious upheavals which made spying and paranoia the order of the day.

Additionally, the plague was ravaging the country and gave credence to the Puritans' hard line against the theatre and acting. The plague, so the Puritans opined, was the punishment for theatre's blasphemy and licentiousness. Only God, not man, had the right to create different identities: "Stage-acting directly challenges God's established order in the person of the individual actor, and implies a demonic attempt both to efface the image of the Creator and to usurp his role in the cosmos" (Worthen *Actor* 21). To act, to self-fashion oneself into different identities and social strata, was hubris according to the most outspoken Puritans<sup>3</sup> of the time. Man, they argued, may not 'represent' what God, with His original creation, 'presented'. William Prynne, as an example, "condemne[d] these Playhouse Vizards, vestments, images, disguises, which [...] offer a kind of violence to God's own Image," and he called the employment of actors "the hire of an harlot," and actors themselves "Devils<sup>4</sup>" (Prynne 893, 873). All that can be learned from plays, as another disgruntled Puritan, Philip Stubbs, outlines in *The Anatomy of Abuses*, are: "falsehood, cheating, being a hypocrite, a liar, a blasphemer, a prostitute, a murderer, a thief, a philanderer, a whoremaster, a glutton, a drunkard, or an incestuous person" (cf. Stubbs quoted in McDonald 352). The Puritans' aversion to acting was considerable, particularly when taking into account that they eventually succeeded at having all theaters in England shut down under Cromwell's reign in 1642. While the theatre came back to England with Charles II in 1660, the impact of the Puritans on theatre and literary studies was still felt in America until the

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<sup>3</sup> During Shakespeare's era, Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* of 1579 and Philip Stubbs's *The Anatomy of Abuse* of 1583 were some of the most outspoken criticisms of the theatre, if not warfare against actors and stage-plays. Gosson addressed his pamphlet to Sir Philip Sidney who countered with *An Apologie for Poetrie* in 1595. One of the most famous antitheatrical tracts was *Histrion-Matrix* by William Prynne, published somewhat later, in 1633. Prynne criticizes the actors' "hypocrisy [of Stage-Playes] in counterfeiting not only their habits, gestures, offices, vices, words, actions [but he also condemns their] wantonness, and effeminacy (Prynne 876,877). Both Gosson and Prynne insist that nothing is sincerely acted, while Prynne also, contradictorily, insists that the actor becomes the character, f.ex. an actor playing a murderer really becomes a murderer by acting the part (cf. Prynne 174).

<sup>4</sup> Gosson, in *Playes Confuted in Fiue Actions* also calls actors demonic: "As the Diuell hath brought in all that Poetrie can sing" (sic) (Gosson Section 2, page unnumbered). Worthen points out as well that the "actor-as-devil is a recurrent image in antitheatrical writing" (Worthen *Actor* 23).

late 1800s:<sup>5</sup> “[P]layhouses” and acting were banned in America<sup>6</sup> throughout the 1700s and legitimate theatres did not exist until the 1900s. America’s “[c]olonial ancestors [...] greeted [the theatre] with the kind of demonstration they usually reserved for British tax collectors” (Morgan 340).

Both the English and later on the American Puritans were opposed to the theatre on the grounds that it corrupted its audience in myriad ways: it made men effeminate,<sup>7</sup> women lascivious,<sup>8</sup> people in general it made idle, unsocial, and it “promoted drunkenness, luxury, impudence, theft, murder” (Morgan 343). It turned everyone into a heathen, and, above all, it was anathema to the will of God. Acting and play-writing were professions that were not only disrespected by the Puritans, but they were considered a certain path to hell: “plays promote hypocrisy<sup>9</sup> and deceit. What else is acting but deceit, luring people into thinking a man is someone else. [...] Puritans looked on the theatre as a rival<sup>10</sup> to the church of Christ,” and thought of the theatre as the “devil’s church” where pagans worshipped (cf. Morgan 342-344). Since human nature was depraved, and since acting meant representing human nature, it was the actor’s profession, most Puritans deduced, to portray depravity, which, in turn, led actors to become depraved. This kind of reasoning<sup>11</sup> came from both ends of the spectrum in the Puritan field: from a former playwright and, in all likelihood, actor (Gosson), and from a man who had never seen any of the plays he so fanatically

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<sup>5</sup> “Harvard was founded in 1636, twenty years after the death of Shakespeare, by a man whose family came from Stratford-upon-Avon, and Yale was founded in 1701. But the first Shakespeare courses taught at Harvard and Yale did not appear until the 1870s” (Garber 32).

<sup>6</sup> The states of Virginia and Maryland were the only ones to never ban plays or playhouses.

<sup>7</sup> This was, of course, a veiled discrimination of homosexuals (or ‘sodomites’, as they were branded then), and a threat that any male entering a theatre, from actor to audience member, would become ‘unmanly’ and lose all vigor and male honor. Such hypersensitivity to ‘effaminacy’ is also charged with anxiety over being ‘infected’ by it.

<sup>8</sup> Women who watched plays were depicted by the Puritans as prostitutes and courtesans. Honorable women were not to be versed in the art of seduction the way the play-going women were.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that even Jesus considered the deceitfulness of the hypocrites their greatest sin. Jesus also, instead of saying it directly, used the indirectness of parables—f.ex. Matthew 13:13-15—to convey his message. Parables, as are plays, convey a profound message in their figurative speech and theatricality. As playwrights and actors have to accept about the purpose of playing: the truth is revealed to some, but concealed from others: “Because they seeing see not; and hearing, they hear not nor do they understand” (*KJV*). But the ones who do not just listen, but hear, “understand with their heart [...] [and allow Jesus to] heal them” (*KJV*).

<sup>10</sup> The Puritans were on to something when they suspected that theatre was a rival of the church, as my chapter on *Hamlet* will explain in detail.

<sup>11</sup> This kind of reasoning also contradicts the Puritans’ argument that “nothing [is] really or sincerely acted” (Prynne quoted in Worthen *Actor* 19).

attacked (Prynne<sup>12</sup>) (cf. Morgan 340-341). The hysteria over plays and the theatre may also have been too close to home for the Puritans due to their belief in life as a kind of cosmic play in which everyone played a predestined part, which was, of course, none other than the concept of the *theatrum mundi*<sup>13</sup> that the early modern playwrights so frequently evoked.

### Resisting the Antitheatrical Prejudice Through Metatheatrical<sup>14</sup> Play

Oh, 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 [...]  
(*Hamlet*.II.ii.526-529).

Within this context it becomes clear why the actor performing the part of Prince Hamlet of Denmark is metatheatrically drawing attention to his profession when he exclaims “what a rogue and peasant slave”<sup>15</sup> he is (*Hamlet* II.ii.526). It also explains why Hamlet refers to acting as “monstrous”<sup>16</sup> (*Hamlet* II.ii.527), why Coriolanus calls acting an

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<sup>12</sup> Prynne did not resent all forms of recreation. He recommends “shooting, wrestling and hunting” (cf. Morgan 341). Meanwhile, “the amorous kisses, [...] the beautifull faces [of the actors], the ravishinge Musick, the flexanimous enticements, the witty obscenities, the rhetoricall passages [all lead to] a tempest of unchaste affections” (Prynne 374-375). Prynne’s description betrays a fascination with the theatre.

<sup>13</sup> The notion that the world is a stage, and that human life is like a play written, directed, and cast by a divine playwright such as God or Fate. The complex metaphysical aspects this notion carries with it will be discussed in the following chapters.

<sup>14</sup> The *OED* defines metatheatre as “theatre that draws attention to its unreality, especially by the use of a play within a play” (*OED*). Marjorie Garber adds that metatheatre is “the play talking about its own materials, and the self-referential gestures toward the world as a stage (or Globe)” (Garber 471).

<sup>15</sup> Expropriated peasants often became vagabonds

<sup>16</sup> The *OED* defines “monstrous” as inhuman and unnatural (*OED*). When used as an adjective in Shakespeare’s works, it carries both latter meanings. When used as an adverb, it can carry the meaning of “extraordinary.” In this instance, Hamlet is horrified by the actor’s “inhuman” skill; a skill, it may be argued, that in its very unnaturalness is also extraordinary and awe-inspiring. See also *Othello*.V.ii.189: “O monstrous act,” *R3*.III.ii.64: “Oh monstrous, monstrous,” *Tempest*.III.iii.97: “O, it is monstrous, monstrous.” Within these examples, “monstrous” always refers to an unnatural act such as murder or a supernatural storm. W.B. Worthen also sees a double impression of the player’s performance on Hamlet: “There is something both trivial and menacing to Hamlet in the player’s assumption of another identity, in the wanning of his complexion and the flow of his tears” (Worthen *Actor* 229). Russ McDonald points out that women in the Renaissance were also seen as “‘monstrous’ or ‘dangerous’ [...] In 1615 Joseph Swetman published his *Arraignement of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* [in which women are charged with being] ‘unruly,’ ‘shrewish,’ ‘disorderly,’ and ‘monstrous’” (McDonald 258). This is one of many instances in which acting is aligned with women in a negative manner.

“unnatural scene” (*Cor.V.iii.184*), and why he shudders at the prospect of having to address the plebeians he abhors in the way an actor has to address an audience: “Away, my disposition, and possess me/ Some harlot’s<sup>17</sup> spirit! [...] the smiles of knaves/ [...] a beggar’s tongue/ Make motion through my lips” (*Cor.III.ii.138-145*). Coriolanus, when he thinks of having to act, thinks of prostituting himself (“harlot’s spirit”), of behaving unscrupulously, like a “knave,” and using “a beggar’s tongue” to sweet-talk people out of their money.

Richard, in both *Henry VI Part 3* and in *Richard III*, demonstrates that he has internalized the base stigma of the actor as well, despite reveling in it: he announces he will “play the dog”<sup>18</sup> (*3H6.V.vi.77*) and “prove a villain” (*R3.I.i.39*). Richard brags about his protean skills, but he uses negative terminology to do so: “I’ll play the orator as well as Nestor,/ Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could” (sic) (*3H6.III.ii.205-206*). Richard refers to his part-playing as prostituting himself (“play the dog”), being the anti-hero (“prove a villain”), a schemer (“set the murderous machiavel to school”), a murderer (he rhymes “slay” with “play”), a devil who “account[s] this world but hell,” and he calls the idea of someone loving him a “monstrous thought” (*3H6.V.vi.77*; *R3.I.i.39*; *3H6.III.ii.193*; *3H6.III.ii.187-188*; *3H6.III.ii.164*). Hamlet and Coriolanus demonstrate outright disgust towards acting, whereas Richard thrives on it.

The three characters my study draws on, in their different approaches to acting, explore and expose the two sides of the acting-coin: duplicitous feigning or authentic self-expression, ethical acting or unethical acting, successful representation within society or audience failure. They perfectly demonstrate the necessity of acting, its light and dark side, and how difficult it is to control the part/s one is playing. Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard substantiate in detail just how much power the actor holds, and how important his responsibility is to not just “hold the mirror up to nature, [but also hold the mirror up] to the nature of drama, and to the nature of our own [the audience’s]

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<sup>17</sup> A harlot is a female prostitute or promiscuous woman, originally also a beggar or vagabond in its Middle English meaning (cf. *OED*).

Coriolanus, in this instance, aligns acting with prostitution, particularly with female prostitution. See also footnote 47 on Eisaman Maus’s detailed commentary on the comparison of acting and female sexuality, and the anxiety it causes.

<sup>18</sup> Dog, in this context, means male prostitute as carried over from *KJV*, Deuteronomy 23:18: “Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the LORD thy God for any vow: for even both these are abomination unto the LORD thy God” (*KJV*).

Skura also points out that “[p]layers in general were also at times called dogs” with the connotation of male prostitute (cf. Skura 171).

actions”<sup>19</sup> (Worthen *Actor* 232). Their “play may reflect us, distort us, beautify us, but [none of these characters lets us forget that] it is the *actor* who holds the mirror” and who holds the power to express for us on the stage what is happening on the world-stage (cf. Worthen *Actor* 232, *italics mine*). The “mirror”<sup>20</sup> Hamlet speaks of when instructing the actors in “the purpose of playing” is not so much a mirror as it is a window into the soul of ourselves (*Hamlet*.III.ii. 18-20). When we, the audience, “look into the actor’s mask, [which occurs during metatheatrical moments], we hope—and sometimes fear—to discover our own features” (cf. Worthen *Actor* 232).

### The Metatheatrical Mirror

What is conspicuously missing from the antitheatrical discourse is that a play’s text ‘represents’ solely by nature of its being a written or printed copy. However, the text—as performed and interpreted by the actor—is not purely representative, but a new, creative presentation of an idea. The texts takes on new life and meaning in performance. Routinely, such an idea found its best expression in a play’s metatheatrical moments because it is there that the actors and the audience meet and affect one another: “mimesis was not enough [...] Performance or the relation between the actor and the audience [...] was even more important” (Skura 52). During metatheatrical moments the transmission of a greater idea and truth has the potential to spark a new way of thinking and introduce a new, potentially higher perspective on old thinking patterns to the audience. Since “[t]he theatre was a platform to address the world, and the actor the means” (Adler 178), metatheatre becomes the medium to affectively

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<sup>19</sup> During their metatheatrical moments, Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard all hold the mirror up to society as a whole, to the theatre, and to the soul of the audience.

<sup>20</sup> The “mirror” Hamlet speaks of can be interpreted as a direct reflection or representation. It is more than a reflective mirror, however, because to “show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image” implies that the mirror does more than just reflect or represent, namely the mirror actively gives back by “showing” and “scorning” (a judgment call). Therefore, the mirror is more so a window into the soul, such as when Hamlet “set[s] [] up a glass/ Where [Gertrude] may see the innermost part of [herself],” when he “speaks daggers” to his mother, and she is so affected by his “roaring act” that she exclaims “speak no more. Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul” (*Hamlet*. III.iv. 20-21; III.ii.371; cf.III.iv.53-54; III.ii.90). Hamlet is, of course, speaking about the purpose of acting and the theatre when he speaks of the mirror. Since the mirror actively gives back, judges, and affects others deeply, it is more so a window into someone’s soul—as Gertrude puts it—than a (solely) reflective mirror. Ophelia had earlier called Hamlet “the glass of fashion” (*Hamlet*.III.i.143), suggesting that he was, to the people of Denmark, a role-model for all that is good and fashionable, in and outside.

engage and to prompt the audience to reinterpret their ideas of theatre, actors, society, and man as actor in the Divine Playwright's theatrum mundi.

The playwrights of the English Renaissance had to be subversive in their line of expression, and metatheatre was a way of reaching the audience without provoking the Master of Revels. The latter reviewed every play and censored anything that might cause sedition. One likely and profound reason for Shakespeare's characters and plays being favorites amongst actors and audiences alike is because they give so much power to the actor's and audience's interpretation. The lack of intricate stage directions, didactic character descriptions, and the often-ambiguous language give the actor great freedom, but are also a great responsibility because rhetorical safety only exists within the text, whereas performance requires choices: Narration is a form of interpretation. Since human beings are both vexed and fascinated by the uncertainty that ambiguity brings, the plays' metatheatrical moments purposely seem to leave the answers up to the audience, which is a furtive way of making them think: "The actor becomes a metaphor for the ambiguity of all our actions. His [...] performance enacts the problematic relation that we discover daily between the self and the deeds that should reflect or reveal it, but that sometimes seem to deny it, to transform the self into an uncomfortable fiction" (Worthen *Actor* 9). Hamlet wishes to maintain a shred of ambiguity, the "heart of his mystery" (*Hamlet*.III.ii.338). He also draws the audience in by trying to get some certainty in an ambiguous world, for example when he chides the guards and Horatio to not give away the secret of the ghost with ambiguous gossip or gestures: there may be no "ambiguous giving out" (*Hamlet*.I.v.179). Claudius, on the other hand, prays to maintain his "rank" ambiguity, and to be able to remain "to double business bound" (*Hamlet*.III.iii.37,42). "Shakespeare seems to have been drawn to persons that were susceptible to plural and even contradictory readings. And having located such ambiguities, he exploited the inherent uncertainty of dramatic representation [...] He involved his audience in the complex process of interpretation to such an extent that interpretation becomes one of the principle themes of his plays" (McDonald 162). The use of theatrically self-reflexive moments to affect the audience without lecturing them was so pronounced in Shakespeare's plays that it must be viewed as serving a greater purpose than entertainment alone.

Metatheatrical moments are prominent everywhere in the plays and characters described herein. The play-within-a-play<sup>21</sup> is the most blatant show of metatheatricality in that it stacks two or more plays into one. Soliloquies are a more surreptitious approach to metatheatricality, but, they include some of metatheatricality's most powerful moments. Some metatheatrical moments are hidden in dialogue. Since metatheatricality is as varied as theatre, my thesis will focus on the following four practices of metatheatricality when giving textual examples that support my claim that metatheatrical moments explore the purpose and ethics of acting, resist acting's stigma, and defend the player by demonstrating that acting is necessary, that no one transcends representation, and that only the artist can truly express the inexpressible: I investigate metatheatricality that uses elements of the performance to comment on theatre, theatre as comment on social life, and theatre as a way of exploring epistemological and existential questions. Within *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard III*, these four practices blend into one another.<sup>22</sup> However, the plays' diverse characters use metatheatricality distinctly to show the audience the full range of ethical and unethical acting, its varied meanings in between, and how susceptible the audience and society are in respect to the dark side of acting. My thesis examines and compares the defiant, problematic actors, Hamlet and Coriolanus, with the character who is a consummate actor, Richard III. Throughout my analysis, I survey how successful these characters are at their endeavors and how their success depends on the audience's reception of them.

Metatheatricality, my study will show, is the very "mirror" Hamlet speaks of that both represents to the audience the truth about the theatre, about society, and about themselves. Hamlet runs the metatheatrical gamut from his initial refusal to act, to his eventual complete surrender to acting for a theatrical, worldly, and universal audience. *Coriolanus* is a profound and experimental example of what it means to refuse to act,

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<sup>21</sup> Since most literary criticism on Shakespearian metatheatricality focuses on the "play-within-the-play," I purposely focus on soliloquies and dialogue. Arguably, soliloquies and dialogue offer some of the most powerful moments of metatheatricality in their very subtlety and unexpectedness. The play-within-the-play is transparent in that it tells the audience that the theatre will comment on itself, and usually on the idea of the *theatrum mundi* as well. Soliloquies and dialogue, however, are a more covert way of sending a message about the theatre to the audience: the actor becomes the messenger, soliloquies and dialogues are the 'hidden' medium, and the message is usually a latent defense of the theatre and acting.

<sup>22</sup> *Hamlet*, philosophically speaking, is the play that asks the most existential questions, whereas *Coriolanus* and *Richard III* ask more epistemological questions. All three plays and characters use metatheatricality to redeem the actor and the theatre, as I will argue, by leading the audience down a path of recognition about themselves; often the path to recognition is subliminal, but it always subverts epistemological certainties held about acting and the theatre.

and to assume that one's character transcends representation. Richard is so submerged in his parts that he drowns in them. The metatheatrical "mirror" is also a window into epistemological and existential matters: It questions in how far we know ourselves, how much we can know about another person, and it allows the audience to contemplate "[t]he artificiality of all experience, with Providence as the artist, the divine playwright (McDonald 97). All three characters, Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard III, demonstrate, in their metatheatrical moments, that no one is exempt from acting, and no one successfully transcends representation. Everyone must "play," but the manner in which the characters choose<sup>23</sup> "to play" are what defines them.

The comparison of the three characters emphasizes the difference between ethical and unethical acting: it suggests that the actor ought to remain behind the mask, not become one with it, as is the case with the 'social act' and self-serving spying. In their metatheatrical soliloquies, Hamlet and Richard III externalize their inner thoughts and feelings in a confidential and ingratiating manner. I will question in how far the ideology of Shakespeare's rich and realistic character portrayals has shaped our understanding of theatre, character types, and literature. I will ask if an alternative perspective—which *Coriolanus*<sup>24</sup> touches on—might have challenged the basic principle of theatre as we know it today, namely that we can know the inside from the outside.<sup>25</sup> The ultimate goal of my thesis is to reveal the defense of the player and playing underlying Shakespeare's metatheatre: the existence of Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard shows that the need to create these characters and to make them "play" was greater than to give in to antitheatrical prejudice that dismisses the great service actors and plays provide to society. It is the actors' ambiguous power that makes them both

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<sup>23</sup> I used "choose" not to simplify the characters' complexity in respect to free will and determinism, but because there is no better term to express what the three characters demonstrate throughout their respective plays: While Richard vows to "prove a villain" (R3.I.i.30), it is never clear in how far he does, indeed, solely "choose" to do so. In the same way it is never completely clear if Coriolanus simply was so inflexible that he would rather die than bend to the will of the people, or if he had a smidgeon of "choice" in the matter. All three characters demonstrate, however, that adaptability to life's "heartache and [its] thousand natural shocks" (cf. *Hamlet*.III.i.63) is strongly aligned with survival. It may even be argued that Shakespeare was the first who used his characters and plays to popularize questions such as: "How much of our *selves* are societally constructed;" "how much of the *self* is innate;" and "at what point are we so set in our ways that we have *become* a certain self?"

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Greenblatt calls Coriolanus "perhaps Shakespeare's most opaque tragic protagonist" (Greenblatt Norton 1233). By refusing to play and to externalize his thoughts, he remains unknowable to the audience, which makes *Coriolanus* a radical experiment.

<sup>25</sup> By "outside," both appearance and what the character imparts and externalizes are meant.



monstrous and luminous; it is why they are feared and loved, outcast and celebrated. Their power of expression gives them great purpose, but it also represents the duty of the artist, who, with each portrayal of character—Hamlet, Coriolanus, Richard—must ask themselves, despite being thought an anti-Establishment “rogue and vagabond” by society: “To play or not to play,” and each time must find a meaningful way of answering “to play.”

### The Actor’s Duty: To Express the Inexpressible

To explain the greater idea and message behind the metatheatrical moments of the plays and characters I draw on, this thesis will use, beyond literary criticism and the texts themselves, the criticism of well-known artists and acting-teachers with the conviction that their background of both ‘doing’ and ‘critiquing’ often gives them greater insight into another artist’s ideas and ways of transmitting them. Theodore Dreiser, in his novel *Sister Carrie* of 1900, evokes a superlative understanding of the duty of the actor and the purpose of playing in a passage that will inform my thesis’s argument:

The world is always struggling to express itself, [...]. Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings. They depend upon others. That is what genius is for. One man expresses their desires for them in music; another one in poetry; another one in a play. Sometimes nature does it in a face--it makes the face representative of all desire. [...] This puts a burden of duty on you. [...] [N]ow that you have it, you must do something with it. [You must] make [your gifts] valuable to others (cf. Dreiser<sup>26</sup> 468-469).

The purpose of acting, as this passage suggests, is to “represent the world’s longing,” to express for others, with words, gestures, and behavior (the “face” of the actor in the passage is a synecdoche for corporeal all-expressiveness), what they cannot express

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<sup>26</sup> It is the character of Robert Ames in *Sister Carrie* who speaks these lines to the novel’s protagonist, Carrie Meeber. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to Ames’s insight by the author’s name throughout. *Sister Carrie*, while post-dating Shakespeare’s works by 300 years, equally portrays the world as a stage, where to live means to act. Curiously, the only character for whom acting is a form of sincerity is the actual actress. *Sister Carrie* also examines throughout if the actor ought to stay behind his mask instead of becoming one with it.

themselves. Such an understanding goes well beyond the Horatian<sup>27</sup> notion of art as being instructive and entertaining. Rather, the passage aligns with Stella Adler's assertion that "[t]here is no limit to what an actor can make the audience feel and understand" (Adler 27).

If acting is understood in the way Dreiser's passage suggests, it offers the playwright and player a significant means of transmitting a greater idea and a defense of their art. Since Shakespeare was an actor before he became a playwright, it is reasonable to assume that he must have been well acquainted with the routine and "purpose of [the actor's] playing," and must have felt that his first "art<sup>28</sup> [...] must enjoy a part," must be recognized by the public for its value (*Hamlet*.III.ii.19; Jonson 55-56). Dreiser's passage considers the actor's and artist's gift of having the inspired means of expressing themselves for others in their chosen medium as a "duty," which, in an almost religious understanding of fulfilling one's potential and calling, must be observed regardless of the outcome. Adler concurs: "The whole thing about acting is to give. The actor must above everything be generous" (Adler 26). Actors work in a field that is dedicated to telling the truth through the story of another: Good acting is not a quest for personal fame,<sup>29</sup> but "for the higher purpose of commemorating others" (Bevington 77), transporting the audience, making them see a key truth, and giving solace. Acting coach Patsy Rodenburg adds: Actors are "the healers of society, the people who witness the truth"<sup>30</sup> (cf. Rodenburg *TED Talks* 2008). Dreiser's passage

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<sup>27</sup> Horace's poem *Ars Poetica* maintained that: "The aim of the poet is to inform or delight" (*Epistolas Ad Pisones De Ars Poetica*). Horace was one of the most influential literary theorist from the classical period. His dictum that art should "inform or delight" is known as the Horation formula and is a cornerstone of literary theory.

<sup>28</sup> Shakespeare never gave up acting. He remained an actor even after he became a celebrated playwright in London.

<sup>29</sup> This is not to evade the popular notion of narcissism and self-loathing in actors. While the latter is often mis- or overstated due to the simple fact of the acting profession's publicity, the notion of one extreme swinging into another appears to be the case, as it is with all memorable art. Without pathologizing actors as a whole, Goethe—arguably more so than any contemporary psychologist—hit on the artist's yin and yang of "on top of the world, in the depth of despair-himmelhoch jauchzend, zu Tode betruert" best (*Egmont* III.ii). As Marcel Reich-Ranicki put it: the state of mind between euphoria and melancholy, inspiration and despair; the two states co-exist as corollaries, and do not cancel each other out (Reich-Ranicki *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 2013). It is the notion of the greatest joy always being accompanied by the most devastating pain; or the notion of the Sublime being both terrific and terrible. Fame, too, has two sides: the vanity of wanting to be loved by all (a kind of hunger for power), and the deeply human desire to be remembered, to having been meaningful to someone.

<sup>30</sup> Rodenburg explains that actors bring healing and connection to society, and they are needed more than ever. They are the only ones who do not run from another's pain, but share it, and by sharing it, help alleviate it (cf. Rodenburg *TED Talks* 2008).

describes the purpose of acting as powerful as long as the actor remains in deep sympathy with others; acting may never become selfish lest the artist loses their power to empathize<sup>31</sup> and express the world for others (cf. Dreiser 469). “To play” is “ultimately transcendental [...] an act of faith, a belief that art can redeem our alienation from ourselves and the world” (Vandenburg).

In keeping with Dreiser, Adler, Rodenburg, and Vandenburg, a good actor’s duty is to be fearless in the face of another’s grief,<sup>32</sup> madness, anger, hatred, sadness, or agony; any emotion, as disproportionate and as uncomfortable as it may be, the actor must engage with it so to give it back. They must be present where others withdraw, and compassionate where others walk away. In an effort to explain my argument that the metatheatrical moments of the plays I draw on resist the socially constructed stigma of the lowly actor whose skills are “monstrous,” it is imperative to keep Dreiser’s understanding of the purpose of acting in mind.

### Sympathy for the Devil (Who Is in the Metatheatrical Subtext)

When Hamlet denounces acting as monstrous, when Coriolanus calls acting harlotry and beggary, when Richard profanes acting as male prostitution, villainy, and the devil’s business, “Shakespeare accentuates the displacement and social inferiority [of] the player as [...] proud beggar living on alms” (Skura 85), and as nefarious outcast. “[T]he playwrights themselves are often more scrupulous in their criticism than their enemies are,” and they “critically examine the purpose and meaning—the ethic—of the actor’s performance” through theatrically self-reflexive moments (cf. Worthen *Actor* 13,14). Paradoxically, Shakespeare’s subtext<sup>33</sup> in these metatheatrical passages presents to the

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<sup>31</sup>“It’s empathy. When you create that moment between the audience and the people onstage, you’re asking the audience to live outside of themselves. You’re asking the audience to identify with people they might not [...] ordinarily identify with.” (Lin-Manuel Miranda).

<sup>32</sup> Acting coach Tony Greco once used the example of grief to explain an actor’s duty: Greco said that, when a friend or acquaintance had experienced a loss, one ought not to hem and haw, or call them up on the telephone to meekly ask if one should come over. Instead, Greco insisted, one must show up at their doorstep and face them, and love them. Even if they slam the door in one’s face. Greco repeatedly emphasized that “to get to it, one must go through it” (cf. Greco, private acting class in NYC, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> I use “subtext” with both its meaning within literature (the underlying and often distinct theme in a piece of writing), and its meaning within acting & performance studies (communicating something greater than what is said literally, such as an idea, a desire, an emotion, or an opinion; the unspoken meaning below the surface of the literal text, including pauses or silences, that is gained through script analysis).

audience what the text negates, and thereby resists the stigma of the unethical actor: The consistent antitheatrical reminders that acting is unethical are proclaimed so frequently that they lose their credibility, and instead reinforce the power of acting within metatheatrical moments<sup>34</sup> (cf. Calderwood *Hamlet*, xiv; 105; 106). A “subtle and qualified defense of the theatre [...] emerges [...] [t]hrough role-playing characters, actors, and plays-within-plays [during which] [...] dramatists critically examine the purpose and meaning—the ethic—of the actor’s performance” (cf. Worthen *Actor* 13-14). During metatheatrical moments, the three characters are free to open a window into the audience’s soul. It is within the bounds of metatheatre that “theatre” truly becomes its original Greek meaning, “the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation. The theatre is a spiritual and social x-ray of its time” (Adler 30); it is a “social barometer” (McDonald 120), and playing shows “the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (*Hamlet*.III.ii.22-23).

Hamlet’s metatheatrical soliloquy and his interaction with the players are supreme examples to demonstrate how the antitheatrical text is transformed into a defense of the player by interpreting the unspoken meaning of the subtext. W.B. Worthen highlights the metatheatrical aspect of the moment before Hamlet’s second soliloquy: “A man playing a man called Hamlet watches another man playing a man, called simply ‘player,’ who plays a man in a play” (Worthen *Actor* 10). Hamlet becomes the audience during the player’s speech, and then interprets the player’s speech for the actual theatre audience in his soliloquy. Within said soliloquy’s text, Hamlet maligns the acting profession: acting is “monstrous,” the player is moved by a falsehood, a “fiction,”<sup>35</sup> a dream of passion,”<sup>36</sup> the player can “force his soul to his own conceit,” he is moulding his soul according to his fancy and imagination, and his body follows suit in

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<sup>34</sup> Ironically, the same happens with the Puritans’ antitheatrical pamphlets: they badger acting and plays so aggressively and ubiquitously, with all kinds of biblical and Latin ‘evidence’ against acting that their texts read like an hysterical outrage about something they just cannot take their eyes and ears off. In other words, the pamphlets’ subtext, too, is the devil in the text’s details and makes the reader wonder just what can be so riveting that it drives the Puritans into a frenzy.

<sup>35</sup> “Fiction” is used only three times in Shakespeare’s works. Each time it carries the meaning of an invention, a fabrication, or a falsehood. The other examples are: “[t]o the Poet and for thy fiction” (*Tim*.V.i.81), and “condemn it as an improbable fiction” (*Twelfth Night* III.iv.127).

<sup>36</sup> “A dream of passion” is both monstrous and sacred to Hamlet. The player’s acting skills instill Hamlet with fear, but he is also envious of them. It is no coincidence that Lee Strasberg called his life’s work on acting *A Dream of Passion*. Strasberg’s book was dedicated to evoking such an inspired “dream of passion” for actors through a technique he had gleaned from Hamlet’s soliloquy by way of Stanislavski.

the make-believe, “his visage wanned/ Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect/ A broken voice,” all according to the actor’s imagination (Hamlet repeats “conceit<sup>37</sup>”), and the actor can make his soul and body express the kind of grief-stricken, bitter desire for revenge Hamlet wishes he could express. Moreover, the First Player can do it out of “nothing,” and for no one (“For Hecuba,” a mythological queen), which, to Hamlet, makes acting and the skill to do it “monstrous” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.526-534).

The fact that Hamlet uses such a strong adjective to describe the Player’s acting skills—“monstrous”—exposes a fascination with such an unnatural gift. “[T]he play’s obsession with seeming (‘Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems,’ Hamlet declares in his first scene in the play) perhaps explains its obsession with the arts of seeming, with acting, performance, theatre” (Worthen *Wadsworth* 284). Hamlet reveals a kind of sympathy for the devil in this instance because he grasps that the actor’s gift is both terrifying and “‘terrific,’ at once sacred and blasphemous, fascinating and fearsome” (Worthen *Actor* 6). Instead of suppressing his sympathy for the actor’s “monstrous” skill the way the antitheatricals command, Hamlet, over the course of the play, fully embraces it. He comprehends, in a kind of proto-Jungian<sup>38</sup> understanding of finding kaleidoscopic concord between darkness and light, that the sinister aspect of acting, if unexplored, will cause more discord within him and the world around him. To be heaven’s executioner and minister of divine retribution (“scourge and minister”), Hamlet must “be cruel to be kind.” He must explore the shadow side of duplicitous, courtier-like role-play and spying (“[b]y indirections find directions out”<sup>39</sup>) to be able to

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<sup>37</sup> “Conceit” is used by Shakespeare 40 times in his plays and nine times in his poems. It either means imagination/fancy, or understanding/notion. Within the instances of its use in *Hamlet*, it mostly carries the meaning of “fanciful notion” (*OED*). To call upon the imagination in acting was of utmost importance to Stella Adler as well.

<sup>38</sup> C.G. Jung understood a person’s dark side, their allegorical “shadow,” (such as melancholy, suicidal or homicidal impulses) to be most dangerous when repeatedly repressed into the unconscious. Only by embracing one’s shadow can one live in light, or bring darkness and light to a mental balance. By repressing the shadow, we project it unto others as a “monster,” the way Hamlet initially does with the First Player, and the way the Puritans do with the theatre. I use Jung’s darkness/light notion anachronistically in this instance. However, Jung would argue that archetypes, such as the shadow, have been carried within human consciousness since our origin.

<sup>39</sup> [M]uch of the action of [*Hamlet*] involves, as Polonius suggests, using theatrical ‘indirections’ to ‘find directions out’: Polonius sends a spy after his own son whose ‘act’ will be to spread false rumors so to make certain Laertes is behaving well in Paris; Claudius and Polonius ‘stage’ Ophelia for Hamlet to figure him out; Hamlet ‘stages’ ‘The Mousetrap’ to reveal Claudius’s guilt; Polonius hides behind a tapestry to spy on Hamlet, and Claudius stages a ‘duel’ between Hamlet and Laertes that is really a design for murder (c.f. Worthen *Wadsworth* 284).

arrive at the bright side of acting, which is to authentically express himself to the audience and for the audience (*Hamlet*.III.iv.178,181; II.i.66).

Curiously, only the genuinely theatrical efforts, such as the play-within-the-play, are successful at “finding directions out” (*Hamlet*.II.i.66), suggesting that acting on stage is valuable, necessary and ethical, whereas acting on the world-stage is not.<sup>40</sup> Acting on stage is a transparent endeavor that is developed out of the understanding of everyone involved that the performance is fictitious, whereas acting within the world is opaque and developed out of the understanding that one party has knowledge of the ‘act’ but not others. The player, even though he terrifies Hamlet, is the catalyst behind Hamlet’s plan of ‘action’. It is the actor who can transform demons into angels by expressing for the audience the imaginative experience of the shadow, of melancholy, of grief, of loss, of all the emotions that tend to be avoided. Behind the word “monstrous,” which, textually, is something negative (“unnatural/inhuman/abominable,” calling to mind an actual monster), the actor playing Hamlet has to evoke the subtext of “monstrous” as “something fascinating” to convey to the audience the greater meaning of the soliloquy. “The language here has become more than language. It is now part of the play’s plot, communicating to the audience in the theater—and to certain listeners onstage—something opposite from what we are apparently being told” (Garber 482), which must be communicated through the actor’s subtext. As abominable the actor’s skill is, the unspoken meaning of the subtext in this metatheatrical moment is its opposite: the monstrous player is needed to bring Hamlet back to life. Stella Adler says that “everything the actor does has consequence” (Adler 19). The First Player has so much consequence that he changes Hamlet’s mind about acting being “monstrous” to acting being necessary.

### The Stage and the World-Stage

One of the rare moments Hamlet’s mood changes from despondency to excitement occurs when the players arrive in Elsinore: “The players deflect Hamlet from suicide, and they allow him to take control over the situation which has made him

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<sup>40</sup> Acting on the world-stage is only necessary when there is a chasm between language and meaning within society. “When the everyday language of human beings cannot be trusted, the only ‘safe’ language is deliberate fiction and lies. The only safe world is the world of the imagination” (Garber 483). I will explain this idea in greater depth in my chapter on *Hamlet*.

powerless” (Skura 141). With a “blatant reference to the Globe itself” (Worthen *Wadsworth* 284), Hamlet had just explained that he views “this goodly frame, the earth [as a] sterile promontory” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.289-290). He emphasizes the “interchangeability of stage and world (Garber 471). He describes the world in theatrical terms as a world-stage: the earth is a frame, an enclosed setting, that seems to him “a sterile promontory,”<sup>41</sup> an empty plateau. “Promontory” is elevated land overlooking its surroundings the way a stage overlooks its audience. “[T]his goodly frame the earth” is an enclosed space that calls to mind “the universe [...] as an embracing structure” (*OED*), a theatrum mundi that Hamlet has come to view as a “prison” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.241). “[T]o be trapped in a theatrical world, a world where performance outruns truth, is to be trapped in a world of empty and sterile pretending” (Worthen *Wadsworth* 285). Hamlet goes on to describe the air as “most excellent canopy,” a cover hanging over something such as The Globe Theatre’s<sup>42</sup> “canopy” was the “air,” and “this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire” is how he depicts the sky that hangs over the earth (*Hamlet*.II.ii.291-292). This world-stage that Hamlet describes in great detail, “appears [to him] no other thing [...] than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors,” a flock of unsubstantial exhalations such as the breaths drawn by an audience lacking in substance, or worse, the “foul” odor given off by different audience members (*Hamlet*.II.ii.298-299). What is meant to be sacred in nature (a “congregation”) has become “a foul and pestilent” gathering of useless, insubstantial exhalations. The world is a waste of breath. To Hamlet, the world-stage and its people are the “quintessence of dust,” a wasteland (*Hamlet*.II.ii.304).

It is no wonder that he longs for the distraction and entertainment of the players. Paradoxically, Hamlet wants to escape the world-stage for the theatrical stage, which suggests that there is something in the world of the theatre that may help him not just

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<sup>41</sup> Richard describes the world in similar terms in *Henry VI Part III*. He describes himself as standing “upon a promontory/ And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,/ Wishing his foot were equal with his eye/ And chides the sea that sunders him from thence” (3*H6*.III.ii.135-138). Richard describes his desire for kingship (“dream on sovereignty”) in theatrical terms: an actor stands on a stage dreaming of glory, and it is the audience that must love him, otherwise they keep him from his dream (“the sea that sunders him from thence”) (3*H6*.III.ii.134, 138).

<sup>42</sup> The fact that Hamlet describes the world in theatrical terms that remind one of the Globe Theatre is, of course, a theatrical anachronism. *Hamlet* takes place in the late Middle Ages, whereas the Globe Theatre was built in 1599. However, Hamlet’s description emphasizes a theatrical approach to not just art, but life as well. It also shows a profound connection between art and life.

escape from Elsinore, but also elucidate his situation, “crystallize his identity,” and put him back on a path of ‘action’ and purpose (Calderwood *Hamlet* 103). Hamlet is in rare form when he, with great excitement, welcomes each and every member of the players, from king to madman to fool (cf. *Hamlet*.II.ii.313-319). It is not until the players arrive that Hamlet regains meaning in his life: he feels called upon to “set [the time that is out of joint] right” (*Hamlet*.I.v.189-190) by overhauling the corruption under Claudius’s rule, and by abolishing all spurious flattery from insincere courtiers such as Polonius, Osric, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, to the (what Hamlet perceives to be) fickleness and betrayal of his mother and Ophelia. However, Hamlet cannot act on his calling until he hears the First Player’s speech. Much of Hamlet’s powerlessness stems from not being able to express his grief and disappointment with the world by taking on the role of active revenger. Nonetheless, when the First Player does what a good artist ought to do, namely create meaning for others by expressing what others cannot express, Hamlet is initially horrified. Meredith Anne Skura describes latter phenomenon: “as we [the audience] admire his [the actor’s] power to transform himself, we also recoil from what it produces - an uncanny hybrid, one of us but not one of us, a deceptive creature we hold in contempt [but] secretly envy”<sup>43</sup> (Skura 26). The acting skills of the First Player affect Hamlet so deeply that he lashes out against them. The fact that Hamlet bursts into an hysterical Puritan-like antitheatrical rage, however, demonstrates that the First Player has struck a chord with Hamlet, and he has struck it to the core.

### Text Versus Subtext

The text of Hamlet’s soliloquy vilifies acting, whereas the subtext reifies its importance: the “play is not in the words [...] It’s behind the words” (Adler 80). While the text of Hamlet’s metatheatrical soliloquy gives the impression of having internalized the stigma of the actor as anti-Establishment “rogue and vagabond,” the soliloquy’s subtext resists

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<sup>43</sup> The prejudice and distrust of the actor Skura describes carries over from the Renaissance to the present time. In a recent article about the actor Mark Rylance, the writer describes how she called up Rylance’s wife after the interview with him to ask if he really was the unassuming person she thought she met: “Have I met Mark Rylance, or the version of Mark Rylance most suitable for meeting a writer over lunch, an audience of one” (Bray 93). The writer, as do many people, distrusted the actor Mark Rylance’s personal “portrayal” of himself solely because he was an actor. Her reasoning was that, because he *could* act so well, he *would* do it at all times. In other words, the writer automatically assumed that Rylance would ‘act’ unethically, that he would confuse the stage-act with the social act. It never occurred to her that the actor, *because* he knows he can do it (act), does not abuse the power to do it.



the stigma of the worthless actor: the antitheatrical rant, after all, is undertaken by an actor who plays a prince, in a metatheatrical moment, in the theatre, on a stage, in front of an audience; an actor who objects so much to the player's "monstrous" acting that his tirade loses credibility; an actor who, during the First Player's speech becomes the audience and is so affected by the player's acting that he lets himself be drawn out of his alienation and begins to act as well. The text is antitheatrical, but the subtext is "something opposite from what we are apparently being told" (Garber 482). The text of Hamlet's soliloquy says something like: "How horrifying is this actor's masquerade that it can affect everyone around here more deeply than I could ever affect them with real grief in my heart - acting is a monstrosity!" Whereas the subtext,<sup>44</sup> the inner monologue of the actor, says something like this: "I wish I could do what this actor can do. Expressing myself and my grief the way he does would give my life meaning again. Acting is the thing!" Ivana Chubbuck makes the following point several times in her book *The Power of the Actor*: "We as an audience will pick up on an actor's inner monologue. The truth of what you're thinking versus what you're saying will make us relate and respond. We identify with it because we rarely say what's really going on in our minds. Saying what's really on our minds is often contradictory to achieving our goal. We couch what we really want to say to elicit the response we desire"<sup>45</sup> (Chubbuck 174). The duty of the actor playing Hamlet, therefore, is to speak the text while playing the subtext and expressing the latter to the audience so they can grasp it.

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<sup>44</sup> It cannot be overstated that the notion of Shakespearian soliloquies not having subtext (known as "Just-say-the-words-advice") that has been making the rounds in acting schools around the globe, is wrong. It is a simplification of the understanding that Shakespeare allows the audience into the character's soul, and therefore, the advice goes, what the character says is what he or she means. This is not always true. It is correct to advise an actor that, when the text is clear and powerful, there is no need to undercut it with subtext. This does not mean that there is not a lot of subtext: There can be irony, rhetoric, or ambiguity within a character's inner world, all of which are not directly expressed. Characters often say something different than what they think or feel, be that consciously or subconsciously.

<sup>45</sup> Chubbuck reiterates this point several times for emphasis as it can make or break a performance: "Inner Monologue can be the obnoxious, brazen translation of the scripted dialogue" (Chubbuck 182).

The inner monologue of Hamlet's soliloquy is the opposite of what he is saying, and only when the actor interprets the subtext powerfully<sup>46</sup> do the words affect the audience.

Hamlet calls himself "dull and muddy-mettled," "a coward," "pigeon-livered," "an ass," "a whore [who can only] unpack [her] heart with words" (*Hamlet*.II.ii.544, 547, 554, 560, 564). Hamlet says that he is cowardly in that all he can do is use words ("unpack my heart") like a woman, and not just any woman, but a prostitute<sup>47</sup> whose only defense are her words and curses ("fall a-cursing") (*Hamlet*.II.ii.564-565). Instead of *acting*,<sup>48</sup> instead of doing, all he can do is be tedious ("dull"). He says he "can say nothing," but he is saying quite a lot (*Hamlet*.II.ii, 545). Previously, Hamlet had claimed that he was bound to silence and could not use language to express himself: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (*Hamlet*.I.ii.160). In his soliloquies, however, Hamlet's language has the power to reveal to the audience what he cannot yet show

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<sup>46</sup> It is not my aim to give directorial, didactic acting advice by making one acting choice as there are always many valid interpretations of text and subtext depending on which aspect of the character the actor focuses. It is my aim, however, to show that there are strong choices and weak choices. Strong choices usually are the ones in which the subtext runs counter to the text, or in which it heightens the text by giving it more meaning and power. A strong choice is when the actor "does not play the plot," but plays the subtext; when she or he "interprets the script by bringing in the humanity" (cf. Chubbuck 26), which is usually a primal need. The strongest choice for subtext is when the actor has researched the script in-depth and has found the most powerful and most basic objective the character has (such as love/power/winning), the highest stakes the character faces (such as fear of death), the biggest obstacle he has to overcome (such as pride/loss/failure), and the best strategy to overcome it (revenge/forgiveness). Cadence and intonation will follow. Subtext should be the silent exchange between actor and audience, or actor and acting partner that is implicit in the text's message. The actor is the interpreter of the text. Chubbuck repeatedly mentions that no one wants to watch a victim (cf. Chubbuck 7). Even if the character knows he is going to die, the actor—via subtext—must try to win until the moment their character leaves the text (cf. Chubbuck 25). They must "earn the right to die," and "it's not over 'til it's over" (Chubbuck 30, 51).

<sup>47</sup> Katherine Eisaman Maus points out in "Playhouse Flesh and Bone" that women during the Renaissance were attacked for the same reason as actors were, for being duplicitous and bewitching: "the Renaissance antitheatricalists and antifeminists strike the same note again and again, so that suspicion of the theatre and suspicion of female sexuality can be considered two manifestations of the same anxiety" (Eisaman Maus 603). Hamlet repeatedly takes issue with women's "dissembling." He accuses Ophelia and womankind - in the nunnery scene - of using make-up to deceive men, and he so obviously cannot cope with his mother's sexuality, which strikes him as "monstrous" as well. Here, Hamlet aligns female prostitution with words, and words with actors.

<sup>48</sup> Hamlet here draws attention to the "actor's doubleness," the two meanings relating to acting and drama: "to act is to deceive, to become a *hypocrite* (Greek for 'actor') [and] to act is [also] to do something, to express or create meaning through action (Greek *drama*: an 'act' or 'deed')" (cf. Worthen *Actor* 3,4).

Stella Adler, who disliked any kind of feigned acting, says: "The verb people [...] used to describe what actors did was 'play' [...] Let's not even use the word acting" (Adler 86-87). The reason Adler dislikes the verb "to act" is because it can suggest feigning, and because it lacks the enjoyment and physicality the verb "to play" contains. Since "to act" and "actor" are customary these days, I used them accordingly throughout my thesis. However, each time "to act" brings with it new or detrimental meanings, I point it out with either quotation marks, or through a separate explanation.

them with actions or behavior: in a doubly metatheatrical moment, the First Player's<sup>49</sup> speech affects Hamlet—who at that moment constitutes the player's audience—so deeply that Hamlet in turn affects and draws in the actual audience with his own speech about how affected he was by the player. Hamlet's soliloquies are powerful in that they allow him to ingratiate himself with the audience: "He talks us into [taking sides with him],"<sup>50</sup> (McDonald 57), and he talks himself into appreciating acting in the course of one soliloquy: He begins the soliloquy with "is it [the First Player's acting skills] not monstrous," and he ends it with "the play's the thing" (*Hamlet*.II.ii.527, 583). The subtext underlying Hamlet's metatheatrical and seemingly anti-theatrical soliloquy says and does even more to subvert the apparent message: When the actor speaks the text and performs the subtext, then words become actions and language becomes affective performance. Through the actor's interpretation of the subtext, the greater meaning of the text is expressed. It suggests that Hamlet finds more truth on the theatrical stage than on the world-stage: "The players cannot keep counsel. They'll tell all" (*Hamlet*.III.ii.128-129).

### The Necessity of Acting

While Hamlet wishes others would express themselves genuinely, he is deeply aware of the ambiguity in respect to truth, and he is obsessed with the gulf between seeming and being. The "epistemological problem posed by other people's interiority [and] the gap between [people's] interior and exterior" (McGinn 67) are what make *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus* and *Richard III* profoundly philosophical plays. The plays' self-awareness of "[a]cting and lying [being] closely related skills, the actor being a type of liar and the liar being a type of actor" (McGinn 66), draws attention to the metatheatrical subtext that reveals a greater truth: Ethically speaking, acting and lying are poles apart.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The First Player's "performance [...] draws the sullen prince closer to the center of activity in the play. By providing him with a model, the player prompts Hamlet to adjust his feelings to the demands of his social milieu, and to the requirements of his social role" (Worthen *Actor* 230).

<sup>50</sup> Russ McDonald makes this point about *Richard III*, but it is just as true for *Hamlet*.

<sup>51</sup> Hamlet has to accept that, even though he has genuine feelings inside, he must represent them on the outside. Iago is an example of someone who is one person on the outside, and another on the inside: "I am not what I am" (*Othello*.I.i.67). Iago is a liar who uses the "essential impenetrability of [other people's] mind[s]" (McGinn 70) to his advantage. So does Richard in *Richard III*. *Coriolanus* refuses to be an actor because he aligns it with lying. It is arguably his greatest mistake to believe that self-representation equals lying.

Alas, Yorick!  
I'm just a rogue  
and a vagabond.

Hum.



Hamlet

Hamlet—unlike Coriolanus—comes to see that he “must act himself, even when [he] is at [his] most authentic” (cf. McGinn 66). He must “self-represent.” “To be,” in Hamlet’s world, means “to play.”<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, “[t]o reject playing in Hamlet’s world is to reject action altogether” (Worthen *Actor* 29). Hamlet’s performance of the monstrosity that is performance prompts the audience to explore both, their relation to acting in the theatre and to acting in real life. Acting on stage is clearly defined by the boundaries of the theatre and the audience’s consent to enter an imaginary world. Acting in real life, however, is complex: self-representation is ethical and even necessary; lying is unethical.<sup>53</sup> The fiction the actors bring to life on stage reveals more truth about ‘seeming and being’ than real life, which makes it imperative “to play.”

## Chapter I:

### To Play or Not to Play: Hamlet and the Problem of Truthful Representation

#### Who’s There? That Is the Question

**BARNARDO**

Who’s there?

**FRANCISCO**

Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.

*Hamlet* begins with a metatheatrical moment: An actor addresses an audience he is—as of yet—uncertain about. The night<sup>54</sup> in Denmark in the opening scene is as dark and

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<sup>52</sup> “[T]he theatre is [...] a means for self-study, self-exploration, a possibility of salvation” (Brook 59).

<sup>53</sup> The greater good is often cited as an extenuating circumstance of a necessary lie, such as avoiding a panic amongst crowds by lying about its cause. Telling a patient a hopeful lie before a dangerous surgery is another example. Even then, lying remains a contentious point.

<sup>54</sup> Much speculation circulates in respect to the reason behind the guards having such trouble recognizing each other. Fog, supernatural circumstances, and other speculations have been offered. It can be argued with certainty, however, that it is nighttime. The guards have trouble seeing each other, but they all (including Horatio) see the ghost.

mystifying as is the rest of the play. Barnardo's "Who's there"<sup>55</sup> builds immediate suspense. Two guards are on stage, but neither recognizes the other. Both guards, despite being Elsinore's soldiers and defense, are panic-stricken; they are actively and passively *on watch*: they watch out for enemies, the ghost and each other, while the audience, and likely the ghost, are watching them. The first two lines of *Hamlet* establish that ambiguity, unease, and paranoia will reign in Elsinore throughout the entire play.<sup>56</sup> From beginning to end, in *Hamlet*, it is not clear who people are, even if they stand in front of one another, are related, or in a romantic relationship. Neither is it clear who is watching or who is being watched. People are uneasy about the other's motivations. *Hamlet's* theatricality reveals itself immediately by beginning the play with two actors whose roles—in the life of the stage—are difficult to read by both the characters and the audience. It turns out that Barnardo is addressing Francisco who offers a rather unusual response to Barnardo's "Who's there," namely a defensive countermand that bids Barnardo "unfold" and disclose *his* identity first. Initially, it is not clear who the guard on duty is, and who the replacement.<sup>57</sup> Elsinore's guards are wary of one another instead of focusing their suspicions on potential outside invaders.<sup>58</sup> By questioning not only the other guard but the audience about their identity, *Hamlet* literally and figuratively sets the stage for the ensuing difficulty throughout the play of

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<sup>55</sup> Barnardo's "Who's there" of I.i.1 is repeated by Francisco shortly thereafter at I.i.11, adding to the uncertainty and paranoia in *Hamlet*. The eternal snare of "Who's There" is present in all of Shakespeare's plays: the audience is asked to question at all times how well a character can be known, and in how far appearances can be misleading. F.ex., "Who's there" is used by the porter pretending to be the gatekeeper of hell in *Macbeth*: "Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i'th' name of Beelzebub" (II.iii.3-4). "Who's there," in *Macbeth*, occurs after murder has been committed. In *Hamlet*, "Who's there" announces a world full of darkness, gloom and uncertainty. In both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, "[w]ho's there" carries with it a crossing of boundaries between reality and a kind of netherworld filled with ghosts and witches.

<sup>56</sup> Colin McGinn points out that Horatio's laconic reply to Barnardo's question: "[i]s Horatio there" (I.i.16) adds to the theme of uncertainty within *Hamlet* (cf. McGinn 39). Instead of a clear "yes," Horatio responds: "A piece of him" (I.i.17). Similarly, Hamlet, upon seeing Horatio in Elsinore exclaims: "Horatio? Or I do forget myself" (I.ii.162), which adds another layer of uncertainty to the theme of lacking knowledge about others.

<sup>57</sup> "Barnardo's opening line, ringing out of the darkness, is a challenge not from the sentry on duty but to him, our first hint that the world of the play is inverted, out of joint" (Garber 479).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Edmondson reminds that *Hamlet* is "a political drama, not only a familial one. The reason why the soldiers are on the battlements when the play starts is that they are keeping watch for a threatened Norwegian invasion" (Edmondson 131). Claudius's fratricide and the ensuing appearance of the ghost have inverted Denmark's system from a military power focused on fighting exterior threats to a suspicious society focused on fighting each other. Garber adds: "the challenger is also a sentry, so that these sentries, instead of repelling invaders, find themselves in the confusion of a civil misunderstanding" (Garber 479), which becomes palpable in the final scene when Norway takes over Denmark effortlessly, because Denmark has self-destructed.

reading<sup>59</sup> other people, of “unfolding” their insides onto the outside correctly. The first two lines already hint at the fact that, in *Hamlet*, “not being able to read the signs [including another person’s identity and subtext]—as Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius [subsequently] all discover—can be fatal” (cf. Worthen *Wadsworth* 284).

The anxiety over identity<sup>60</sup> and its interpretation stems from the idea that identities are not as fixed into one manifest, God-given essence the way religious Renaissance culture promulgated, and the “actor must discover what ideas<sup>61</sup> the playwright wants to reveal through his characters. [...] When the great playwrights sat down to write their plays their intention wasn’t just to amuse an ignorant audience. The theatre was a platform to address the world, and the actor the means” (cf. Adler 178). Hence, “[w]ho’s there,” is a metatheatrical question about identity that the audience faces from the first moment of the play until the last,<sup>62</sup> because “Hamlet presents both the audience and the court an interpretive problem. [...] Hamlet’s alienation [...]

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<sup>59</sup> Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern try to read Hamlet. Hamlet tries to read the ghost, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Gravedigger, and Fortinbras. Polonius tries to read Hamlet, Ophelia, and Laertes. Reynaldo tries to read Laertes. Laertes tries to read Claudius, Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo try to read the ghost. Fortinbras tries to read Claudius. Hamlet and Horatio initially go through the process of reading each other. Only Hamlet succeeds at reading Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, Fortinbras, Oseeric, the Gravedigger, and arguably, Horatio (it is never fully made clear why Horatio came to Elsinore from Wittenberg and stayed on). Hamlet may or may not read the ghost correctly, and Hamlet misreads Ophelia tragically. The majority fails to read others with tragic consequences.

<sup>60</sup> By mentioning “identity,” I am not attempting to ascribe a contemporary keyword of socio-psychological theory to Shakespeare and Early Modern drama. I am, however, pointing out that, while *Hamlet* may not speak of “assigned identities” versus “adopted” ones, it most certainly addresses the problem of finding and reading one another’s identity, and the problem and question of having an essential, fixed “self” or a socially constructed one. While “symbolic interaction” and “social cognition” are contemporary ways of approaching the identity-debate in sociology and psychology, the play certainly foresees this debate, particularly when Hamlet grapples with the question of how to express his identity with language or clothes, and when he adopts different roles to express himself. The struggle between identity being predetermined or chosen freely—or both—is one reason, my study would argue, that makes *Hamlet* so timeless and relatable.

<sup>61</sup> To relate the playwright’s idea to the audience is of utmost importance to Stella Adler: “Nothing is stronger than the Idea” (Adler 26). She reminds the actor: “You have to understand [the writer’s] ideas as clearly and completely as if they were your own. And they have to matter to you as much as if they were your own for you to feel the importance of communicating them to others. [...] The need you feel to make the audience actually see what you’ve seen will push your voice forward” (Adler 37). In this instance, Hamlet draws attention to the fact that one’s identity and self are not the same as one’s soul, as the Puritans claimed. The play—with its many mis-readings of identity—even suggests that it is a kind of arrogance to presume that one knows someone’s inside by “judging” their outside.

<sup>62</sup> In the last moment of the play, Fortinbras orders his men to “[b]ear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.401). There is no evidence in the text of the play that Hamlet has ever been a soldier. Hamlet is a prince and a scholar, who, even in the last scene of the play, is misread by another character. Even though Fortinbras uses “like a soldier” as a comparison, and even though he likely gives the command to honor Hamlet in the highest military fashion, Fortinbras’ command still overlooks—and leaves out—so much of what constitutes Hamlet and his story.

challenges the value both of sincere action and of dramatic performance. Since no act can be unequivocally expressive, all acts are to Hamlet perniciously ‘histrionic’” (Worthen *Actor* 27). *Hamlet* investigates both, acting on the stage and acting on the world-stage, to see if the actor can, in fact, “express ‘that within’ through an imaginative, feigned creation of meaning” (Worthen *Actor* 28). To ask “who’s there” of the actors, the characters *and* the audience<sup>63</sup> is a metatheatrical means of exploring “the actor’s ethical dilemma,” which, in *Hamlet*, “nearly becomes the kind of theoretical investigation of performance that the Renaissance theatre otherwise failed to produce” (Worthen *Actor* 28, 26).

Hamlet begins his exploration of identity and performance with a Renaissance Puritan’s aversion to acting, with a chastising, hysterical zeal for abstinence<sup>64</sup>—particularly when it comes to his mother and Ophelia— and with the need for absolute verisimilitude and sincerity. The play, however, to *be* a play and defend the player and theatre, must give its title character a reason “to play” despite Hamlet’s initial rejection thereof. Hamlet eventually does detour into “playing” by not only becoming “an actor but also master of the ceremonies, playwright and prince”<sup>65</sup> (Skura 140). Claudius “unwisely entrusts the office of Master of Revels [...] to Hamlet,” resting assured that the players will distract Hamlet from figuring out the truth behind Old Hamlet’s death (Montrose 101). Nevertheless, *Hamlet* “mocks the King’s conviction that drama is an innocuous pastime” (Montrose 101). Instead, Hamlet uses acting and the players “as an ethical instrument [...] to de-legitimize the monarch,” and to prove that theatre is not just a “representation of, [but also] a provocation to action” (cf. Montrose 101). While

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<sup>63</sup> Worthen explains this important point as follows: “A play begins with an actor taking his part; it also begins with a character taking his part, choosing a role in the play at hand” (Worthen *Actor* 27). Via the “who’s there,” the actor is asked about his or her part on the stage, the character is asked about his or her part on the world-stage, and the audience is asked about the actor’s part, the character’s, and their own, and how they all compare.

<sup>64</sup> As with most overly zealous attempts at abstinence, Hamlet’s often veers into hysteria or swings to the other side of the pendulum: as an example, Hamlet’s disgust over Claudius’s and the court’s debauchery (“this heavy-headed revel” that would be “more honored in the breach than the observance”) falls a bit short since Hamlet had earlier welcomed Horatio with “we’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart” (cf. *Hamlet*.I.iv.17-18; *Hamlet*.I.ii.174). The latter is an example that is dwarfed by Hamlet’s attempt to regulate female sexuality, which has him fall victim to the worst of logical fallacies, namely faulty generalization of one specific instance: Gertrude’s ‘weakness’ and lack of self-restraint = all women’s lack of self-restraint: “frailty thy name is woman” (*Hamlet*.I.ii.146).

<sup>65</sup> Hamlet was, of course, always the prince. However, he truly only grows into the “part”—a part being a responsibility, especially a public one—of Prince of Denmark over the course of the play. It may even be argued that it is Hamlet’s acceptance of his part—in word and deed—toward the end of the play that transforms him into the Prince of Denmark.



Claudius expects the play to entertain and soothe Hamlet into passivity, Hamlet uses the play to actively “galvanize his own revenge, to rouse him to regicide” (Montrose 101). Claudius views the play as an innocent “diversion, [whereas] his chiefest courtier [Hamlet] construes it as a means of subversion” (Montrose 101). Acting “function[s] as therapeutic displacement” to Hamlet that allows him to maneuver life’s cruelty, and, eventually, “demonstrate the sincerity of his grief and anger” (cf. Garber 496, 478). Moreover, Hamlet’s soliloquies and adoption of different parts enable him to persuade the audience that he “exist[s] apart from [his] represented words and actions, [and] that [he] has hidden dimensions” (Greenblatt Intr. *Norton* 63). The initial “who’s there” is a central idea of the play, and it is the actor playing Hamlet who must convey this idea of “[i]dentity in Shakespeare repeatedly [slipping] away from the characters themselves” (Greenblatt Gen.Intr. *Norton* 63), as it does from Hamlet when he cannot act on his promised revenge, or when he views the world as “sterile promontory” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.290).

Hamlet essentially suffers an identity-crisis, not a decision-making-crisis: to decide something, one has to explore<sup>66</sup> what it is first. Greenblatt observes that “[t]he [identity] slippage does not mean that [characters such as Hamlet] retreat into silence; rather, they embark on an experimental, difficult fashioning of themselves and the world, most often through role-playing” (Greenblatt Gen.Intr. *Norton* 63), which is exactly what Hamlet does to “hammer’t out” (*RII*.V.v.5), to work out, or at least accept, his part in life. The latter is neither the freely-chosen part Hamlet may have liked to play, nor is it the completely predetermined part leading to either salvation or condemnation (as the Puritans believed). The part, as I will explain at greater length, cannot be chosen, but the acceptance (“to play”) or rejection thereof (“not to play”) can. It is “the readiness” to play, and the attempt that matter (cf. *Hamlet*.V.ii.210). The “who’s-there”-quest-for-identity—as posed to Hamlet, the other characters, the actors playing them, and the audience—therefore, is a poignant metatheatrical method of exploring ethical versus unethical acting, theatrical performance versus ‘social act’,

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<sup>66</sup> “Life manifests a fundamental urge to observe itself as an action exhibiting both meaning and mystery” (Balthasar 78-79). “Humanity’s continual need to see itself mirrored makes the theatre a legitimate instrument in the elucidation of being” (Balthasar 87).

acting versus spying (a kind of ‘social act’), and acting versus doing,<sup>67</sup> so to find out “the purpose of playing” (*Hamlet*.III.ii.18-19) and vindicating “to play” over “not to play.”

### By Rejection of Acting Find Acting Out

#### HAMLET

“*Seems*,” madam? *Nay*, it *is*. I know *not* “*seems*.”

’*Tis not* alone my inky cloak, good mother,

*Nor* customary suits of solemn black,

*Nor* windy suspiration of forced breath,

*No, nor* the fruitful river in the eye,

*Nor* the dejected ‘havior of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,

That can *denote* me truly. These indeed “*seem*,”

For they are *actions that a man might play*.

But I have that within which *passeth show*,

These but the *trappings and the suits of woe*.

(*Hamlet*, I, ii, 74-86, *emphases mine*).

Hamlet’s first speech begins his identity-exploratory arc that ranges from rejecting all seeming and “questioning the reality of the entire dramatic illusion from within” (Worthen *Actor* 28) to his eventual acceptance of his part in life (“the readiness is all [...] let be”) (*Hamlet*.V.ii.210-211). It takes Hamlet eight negations (cf. Calderwood *Hamlet* 71), six descriptions of exterior and interior grief, two direct references to the theatre (“play,” “show”), three references to appearances (“seems”) vs. two references to reality (“is”), and eleven lines of explaining to his mother that he

<sup>67</sup> Kenneth Branagh and Michael Pennington both speak about the moments during which Hamlet has the opportunity to ‘do’ (f.ex. when he has the chance to kill Claudius at prayer), but instead of ‘doing’, Hamlet retreats into performing/acting and elaborate rhetoric (*BBC* 1996). The moment of Claudius’s prayer in III.iii. is ironic: The ghost had demanded of Hamlet to “remember” his murder, not to pass judgment on Claudius’s soul in the afterlife. Despite all that, Hamlet cannot execute his revenge at that time, because he has not fully found or committed to his part yet. The play, in this instance, also suggests that there is a strong line between theatrical acting and social acting, between performing and doing. It is not until the gravedigger lays out the “three branches” (*Hamlet*.V.i.11-12) of acting (act/do/perform), however, that Hamlet fully accepts “that only those who know they are actors are ‘real’” (Garber 498).

cannot “truly” explain himself (*Hamlet*.I.ii.83). Neither his clothes (“inky cloak,” “suits of solemn black”), nor his actions of sighing, crying and frowning (“windy suspiration of forced breath,” “the fruitful river in the eye,” “the dejected ‘havior of the visage”), nor any other variations of showing grief<sup>68</sup> (“all forms, moods, shapes of grief”) can “denote,” can represent him “truly” (*Hamlet*.I.ii.76-83). Hamlet disdainfully communicates to his mother that not only is he as distraught as his clothes signal (“seem”), but he has much more inside of him that transcends representation (“I have that within which passeth show”) (*Hamlet*.I.ii.83, 85). In his very first speech, Hamlet poses a problem to the world of the theatre: he says he is unknowable in theatrical discourse. He cannot be pinned down by signifiers. He will not let others “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” and raid his soul<sup>69</sup> (*Hamlet*.III.ii.338). He *is*<sup>70</sup> what he *seems*, and yet, he claims, he is so much more than that. His inside is unknowable from his outside, even though his outside seems (and very likely does if Hamlet is to be believed) declare his inside. Such a negation of theatrical representation would render acting and theatre at best superficial, at worst, pointless (cf. *Hamlet*.I.ii.85).

The hard stance Hamlet takes in respect to acting equals the Puritans’ antitheatrical resentment<sup>71</sup> surrounding Renaissance theatre. In a way, Hamlet might as well end the play at I.ii.86. If nothing substantial can “truly” be expressed by an actor, and if God or oneself are the only ones who truly know one, then, it must be asked, what is the purpose of acting and the theatre (cf. *Hamlet*.I.ii.83). By negating that there is such a point, the actor playing Hamlet has just drawn attention to it and the question that it raises. Is it at all possible, the actor playing Hamlet poses to the audience here, to

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<sup>68</sup> “Grief [...] has no private language. [...] By calling on the negative [...] Hamlet has come as close as he can to erasing his public self and retreating into an inner world of unspoken meaning” (Calderwood *Hamlet* 72). When everyone is performing grief, Hamlet realizes, then the real grieving person has no way of expressing themselves meaningfully.

<sup>69</sup> The feeling that others are “plucking out the heart of [one’s] mystery” and raiding one’s soul is, to a certain extent, what a good actor must be willing to brave in a performance (*Hamlet*.III.ii.338). The fact that Hamlet, in his first speech, recognizes that, to give out “that which passeth show”/“the heart of [his] mystery” is so deeply personal that, as an actor would feel, it cheapens one’s existence when it is given to the unworthy in the audience or in society. In Hamlet’s first speech, there already exists a theatrical thinking that is profoundly aware of the need to hold on to the soul’s last refuge of introspection.

<sup>70</sup> *Coriolanus* addresses this point in great and experimental detail.

<sup>71</sup> Marjorie Garber keenly observes in Hamlet’s first speech the cause of his antitheatrical resentment: “Hamlet is both audience and critic. He sees the performance of Claudius, and in effect he gives it a bad review. It is not convincing. [...] One result of this crucial perception, that all around him people are merely masquerading as mourners, acting grief rather than feeling it, [has Hamlet wondering] what is to become of real grief” (cf. Garber 478).

represent on stage something as intimate as one's "heart's core," one's "heart of heart" (*Hamlet*.III.ii.66). If viewed from Dreiser's perspective of the purpose of the artist, such metatheatrical self-consciousness suggests that, while generally speaking no one can ever know another person's inside, it is the artist that can express it through others and for others. And it is the artist's duty to attempt to express the inexpressible. *Hamlet*, the play in its entirety, proves that it can represent both the exterior and most of the interior<sup>72</sup> of its main character if, and only if, one believes Hamlet completely when he "unpacks [his] heart with words" and invites the audience into his innermost world throughout the course of the play (*Hamlet*.II.ii.563). If Hamlet's soliloquies—and the actor<sup>73</sup> playing Hamlet's interpretation of the soliloquies' subtext—align Hamlet's words with his actions and emotions, then the play's metatheatrical moments are a significant defense of acting, language, and the theatre.

By self-consciously negating the purpose of theatre through antitheatrical passages, *Hamlet* resists the societally constructed stigma of the actor: the play "phrases the contradictory ethics of acting as complementary, and alerts us to how dramatic action imagines a critique of the actor's duplicitous performance" (Worthen *Actor* 26). By pointing out the impossibility of genuine representation, *Hamlet* suggests, the true value of the artist and actor is underscored as he is the only one that makes it possible to represent the unrepresentable, and to express the inexpressible. The actor has the ability to "reveal what seems to be a mere fiction or fabrication as a key truth" (cf. Garber 500). Adler makes a similar point: "The lie has to become the truth in [the actor's] hands. That's [their] job as an actor—it is the highest responsibility [the actor] has—to erase the lie of the dramatic plot" (Adler 140). The "mere fiction" is not the same as the

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<sup>72</sup> Hamlet's soliloquies are "the hallmark of interiority and consciousness [...] and have come to define modernity and modern consciousness, the birth, in effect, of the modern subject, of modern subjectivity itself" (cf. Garber). It is important to note that these very inward-looking soliloquies did, also, shape the course of theatre.

<sup>73</sup> The responsibility of the actor playing the part of Hamlet cannot be overemphasized. He must draw in and convince the audience that they are sharing his innermost core with him, even when he is trying on another part. It is the actor's duty to give of his soul through the part of Hamlet, without which the play does not work, as anyone who has ever had the misfortune of watching a bad production of *Hamlet* will attest to. *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington wrote in 2015 that "no actor can ever quite fail as Hamlet" (*Guardian* 2015). While Billington's point about "the actor's individuality [being] a vital part of the interpretation" (*Guardian* 2015) is certainly valid, his point about the impossibility of an actor failing as Hamlet betrays a journalist's privileged access to top-tier theatre tickets, and would, most certainly, be considered baffling by most NYC casting directors and working actors around the world. Billington's point would be much better suited to *Coriolanus*. Oscar Wilde is correct in saying that "there are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies," but, realistically speaking, there are also as many Hamlets as there are bad actors.

deception the Puritans thought was acting, but a method to arrive at a meaningful truth. Through the lens of Dreiser's interpretation of the purpose of the artist, it is the power and the duty of the actors to give meaning to the text by way of their performance, and to turn the antitheatrical anxiety of "[w]ho is there" into a purposeful "This is I, Hamlet, the Dane," and the limbo of "to be or not to be" into the acquiescent grace of "Let be" (*Hamlet*.I.i.1; V.i. 241-242; V.ii. 211).

### Polonius: Spying & Lying vs Acting

All of *Hamlet*'s metatheatrical moments question the "actions that a man might play," and what it means to *be*, not *seem* (*Hamlet*.I.ii.84). "*Hamlet* is a play about taking a role" (Worthen *Actor* 26), and its title character has good reason to explore the questionable ethics of role-play at the Elsinorian court under Claudius. Elsinore is "a world miasmal with mystery, disease, degeneration, death, betrayal, and false seeming" (Calderwood *Hamlet* 20). People at Elsinore scheme, withhold, lie, pretend, are spies and use spies to get intelligence on other people. Performance, theatricality, and spying exist in almost every scene of the play: "*Hamlet* as a play is from the first concerned with playing, and the play offers its spectators not only a series of nested plays, but a series of nested audiences. [...] The audience of *Hamlet* never knows, securely, whether it is actor, spectator, or eavesdropper" (Garber 495). Every scene is its own play-within-a-play that contains a 'watcher' and a 'watched'. Each scene explores at least one form of acting: Acting on stage as an actor, acting on the world-stage as a social actor, or acting on the world-stage as a spy. The audience *watches* the guards *watch* the dumbshow<sup>74</sup> of the ghost (I.i), they *watch* Hamlet *watch* and 'review' Claudius's performance (I.ii), they *watch* Laertes instruct Ophelia in the art of circumspection (I.iii), they *watch* the guards and Hamlet *watch* the ghost, and then *watch* the ghost *watching* them (it is implied that the ghost can see them in the text) (I.v); they *watch* Polonius direct Reynaldo in the art of spying in a rehearsal-like scene (II.i), they *watch* Ophelia relate information about Hamlet's dumbshow-like appearance

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<sup>74</sup> While the dumbshow of the ghost and the dumbshow of Hamlet's ghost-like appearance in front of Ophelia are not, in and by themselves, the same as the dumbshow before a play that anticipates its plot. However, within the life of the play, both the ghost's dumbshow and Hamlet's ghost-like dumbshow theatrically signal the corruption of language through their very silence. Both the ghost and Hamlet initially spurn language because they cannot privatize words of sorrow and grief. Words and language have, as Hamlet would say, become "common."

to Polonius (II.i), they *watch* Claudius and Gertrude hire Rosencrantz and Guildenstern<sup>75</sup> as spies so they can all *watch* Hamlet (II.ii), etc. Instead of directly speaking to one another and addressing matters truthfully, *Hamlet's* characters circumvent words in favor of observing—or spying on—each other's behavior. Such a paranoid atmosphere can only be created in a world where language<sup>76</sup> has become unstable and is expected to mislead instead of tell the truth.

*Hamlet* consistently uses the spy-motif<sup>77</sup> to both demonstrate the similarity between acting and spying, and to differentiate between them. A spy is, in a way, a government-sanctioned actor, someone who lies about who he is and what he does in order to get information on others. A spy's 'act' is one distance away from the 'social act': while he or she 'acts' on the world-stage, the motivation is (or ought to be) a greater cause and not personal gain. A spy enjoys privileges under extenuating circumstances that regular human beings do not have, such as being able to lie, break the law, or even neutralize someone in the name of a greater cause. Similarly, an actor enjoys the privilege of engaging in all kinds of simulated behavior as long as he is performing on a stage. The moment the spy or actor 'acts' of his or her own accord, they

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<sup>75</sup> Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are terrible spies. The fact that Claudius and Gertrude hire them for 'parts' that entail above-average intelligence is often portrayed as humorous in *Hamlet*-productions. In the Michael Grandage-production of 2009 (starring Jude Law at the Broadhurst Theatre, NYC), for example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were repeatedly confused by Claudius and Gertrude, which received great laughs. The directorial choice was also good because it showed just how alike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are. There is a tragic aspect to them as well, as Tom Stoppard has found, in that they are in over their heads. If Claudius and Gertrude believe that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet's best friends, the request to turn them into spies is an unforgivable one. The play's extreme punishment of the two courtiers suggests that, in friendship or within family, there is no such thing as a higher cause—be it royalty-sanctioned or otherwise—that excuses spying. Such an employ is lying, and unethical. It betrays "the obligation of [each other's] ever-preserved love" (cf. *Hamlet*.II.ii.279).

<sup>76</sup> *Hamlet* reflects "seriously about the dramatic text as a representation of reality. [Shakespeare] explores the relationship between life and the stage, between the world and the word" (cf. McDonald 55). "[T]he perversion of language" (Calderwood *Hamlet* 57) reveals itself in many instances of *Hamlet*. The signifier, within most dialogue, does not signify the signified anymore, which runs anathema to expressing oneself authentically.

<sup>77</sup> The spy-motif in *Hamlet* is not surprising because the play was written at a moment in time when Francis Walsingham proved to be "the genius behind the regime's sophisticated system of intelligence, the father, in short, of the early modern spy network. His web of informants and double agents paid its most handsome dividends in the entrapment of Mary, Queen of Scots, in a plot to assassinate Elizabeth. [...] Walsingham's men were present in a tavern [...] when the [contemporary playwright of Shakespeare and Jonson] Christopher Marlowe was killed," likely because Marlowe was a spy himself (cf. McDonald 307). To find value in hiring playwrights or actors as spies is not far-fetched as they came into contact with many people from all walks of life, and they already made a living by "making things up." The fact that Shakespeare explores spying is also not surprising because he would have been familiar with the talk about Marlowe and with some of the regime's spy network. Furthermore, *Hamlet* was written around the time of the Essex-rebellion and trial, which Shakespeare would have been intimately familiar with.

become nothing more than ‘social actors’,<sup>78</sup> and the latter are not actors anymore in that they have become one with their mask. *Hamlet* questions in how far spying and acting are more ethical than plain lying, and by weighing all three, the play also draws a strong line between self-serving spying and acting. All the spies within *Hamlet* end badly: Polonius is stabbed, Claudius is stabbed and poisoned, Gertrude is poisoned. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are executed, Ophelia drowns, Hamlet is stabbed and poisoned, and Reynaldo<sup>79</sup> disappears. Furthermore, the motivations behind the spying are as questionable as the spies themselves: Polonius<sup>80</sup> spies for personal advancement, even though he claims it is his “duty” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.49). Claudius<sup>81</sup> spies because he wants to maintain his power (“we shall sift [Hamlet]”) (*Hamlet*.II.ii.58). Gertrude,<sup>82</sup> in all likelihood, spies out of guilt over her “o’erhasty marriage” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.57). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy (“make love to this employment”) (*Hamlet*.V.ii.60)

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<sup>78</sup> When Polonius sacrifices his daughter and her love for Hamlet for his own advancement (“I’ll loose my daughter to him”- II.ii.163), he has crossed the boundary from officious court-spy to unprincipled reprobate. When Claudius calls Polonius and himself “lawful espials” (III.1.33), he has crossed the boundary from intrusive monarch to unscrupulous tyrant. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern persist in their spying and attempt to, quite literally, sell Hamlet down the river, they have crossed the line between bumbling spies and associates to murder.

<sup>79</sup> Strictly speaking, Reynaldo’s disappearance after Polonius’s lesson in espionage in II.i. is left to interpretation. In one way, the disappearance speaks for itself: Reynaldo was taught by the worst of spies to surveil a man with the shortest of fuses, Laertes.

<sup>80</sup> Polonius’s spying often appears to be second-nature to him beyond being self-promotion. Polonius can be read as the stereotypical courtier who cannot speak sincerely anymore, only euphuistically. He can also be read as a conniving, power-hungry narcissist whose only redeeming feature is that he is simply not as intelligent as an Iago. After all, Polonius ignores Ophelia after using her and after watching her heart being ripped out by Hamlet. However, in most performances, the actor playing Polonius manages to portray him as a tottering fool. The actor portraying Polonius in Michael Grandage’s production in NYC of 2009, Ron Cook, as example, played up the stereotype of the bumbling courtier, and he did so very successfully. Small in frame and bookish in appearance, and repeatedly cleaning his glasses during his bromide speeches, Cook gave a nasal rendition of someone so in love with the sound of his own voice that received laughs from the audience at every turn. Not surprisingly, Cook doubled as the first gravedigger. This is only one example of an actor ‘making’ a part his own. Ron Cook made a potentially treacherous and sociopathic character lovable.

<sup>81</sup> Claudius, similarly to the point made about Polonius, is a calculating, homicidal, power-hungry politician. He is also a loving husband. On the stage, he has been beautifully turned into a flawed but feeling character. Patrick Stewart, as example, in the 2008 RSC Gregory Doran-directed (and 2009 BBC film-) production portrays a self-aware Claudius who loves his queen, and who feels things intensely.

<sup>82</sup> Gertrude is a complex character, and her motivations to spy are not transparent. A strong choice for the actress portraying Gertrude would be to portray her as a woman who loves Claudius (perhaps always has), and who is desperate to make her son understand her. Her perspective, this much the play allows for through its ambiguity, is most certainly different from Hamlet’s, and the text leaves the actress the possibility of bringing out the despair and potential great injustice done to Gertrude.

for money (“a king’s remembrance”) (*Hamlet*.II.ii.26). Ophelia<sup>83</sup> spies out of filial obligation (“I’ll loose my daughter to him”) (*Hamlet*.II.ii.163). Hamlet spies<sup>84</sup> on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because he senses their betrayal (“[g]roped I to find out them”) (*Hamlet*.V.ii.15). Reynaldo hesitantly agrees to spy (“[b]ut, my good Lord—”) (*Hamlet*.II.i.36) because he is bound by a servant’s obligation. Most importantly, all the spies, except for Hamlet, fail at gleaning or interpreting the information they seek, whereas “the transforming power of fiction and illusion [play-acting] will help Hamlet to objectify his feelings about life [and] ‘fiction’ will help him to discover ‘fact’” (cf. Garber 496).

Polonius, the busiest of the spies, represents to Hamlet everything that is “rotten in the state of Denmark” (*Hamlet*.I.v.94). Polonius, to Hamlet, is an extension of Claudius,<sup>85</sup> and a product of his corrupt, Janus-faced reign. Both Polonius and Claudius employ theatricality in its most unethical manner, namely as a beautiful mask that hides their real-life hideousness<sup>86</sup> and machinations. Polonius is a key figure in the Elsinorian

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<sup>83</sup> It is difficult to understand Ophelia’s obedience in respect to spying. While it was her filial duty to obey her father, it is still questionable why she would lend herself to such an underhanded endeavor. Juliet, one may assume, would have rebelled. In performance, this moment is even more problematic than on the page: the fact that Ophelia is given a prayer book to pretend she is reading divine literature, and the fact that she is, as per text, on stage, or at least listening, for the entire duration of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be”-soliloquy (III.i.57-91) makes this scene one of the most painful of the play. Hamlet’s cruelty and misogyny in III.i. are often remarked upon and for good reason. However, Ophelia has just caused Hamlet’s love-letter—a most private correspondence that reveals Hamlet’s great trust in her—to be read out loud to the court. She then agrees to act as spy for her father, hands Hamlet back all his remaining love-letters/mementos, and all that after having listened to him contemplate suicide for 34 long lines. The part of Ophelia—as is the case with Hamlet—heavily depends on the actress’s interpretation. In a way, only a good actress and subtext can (and they do) redeem her in this scene.

<sup>84</sup> Hamlet’s one ‘act’ of spying—he self-consciously calls it “indiscretion” (V.ii.8)—is really counterintelligence and self-defense. What is interesting is that, as with acting, Hamlet initially rejects all spying, but when he does it, he proves most apt. He even thinks of it in theatrical terms: “Ere I could make a prologue to my brains/ They had begun the play” (V.ii.31-32). Hamlet’s aptitude in the tradecraft of “Flaps & Seals”—as surreptitiously opening, closing and sealing envelopes is called in the language of modern espionage—is a sign that he has accepted his part in life. He has moved from ‘acting’ to ‘doing’, from “not playing” to “playing,” after “fighting it out in his heart” (cf. *Hamlet*.V.ii.4).

<sup>85</sup> Claudius’s and Polonius’s names sound alike. Hamlet confuses Polonius for Claudius when he accidentally stabs Polonius: “I took thee for thy better” (III.iv.33).

<sup>86</sup> Claudius corrupts language for personal advancement the way Polonius does: “our sometime sister, now our queen,” “a defeated joy,” “one auspicious and one dropping eye,” “with mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage,” delight and dole,” “my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (*Hamlet*.I.ii.8,10,11,12,13,64) may all sound very smooth coming out of Claudius’s mouth. However, “when language contradicts itself so effortlessly, so cosmetically [...] something opposite from what we [the audience] are apparently being told” is communicated (cf. Garber 482). Claudius corrupts an otherwise beautiful feature of language, such as grief being “bittersweet,” because the memories of the lost one are “sweet,” but the loss itself is most “bitter.” Such abuse of language is a cardinal sin. Garber also recognizes that the very first word of Claudius’s public address in I.ii. “is the politician’s ‘though’—a conditional hedge [...] [Claudius’s] elegantly turned sentence gestures toward grief but quickly comes back to the real subject, himself” (Garber 481).



jigsaw puzzle whose morals Hamlet wants to piece back together. To understand Polonius and his motivation is key to understanding Hamlet's initial disgust with all things acting, and his decision to punish all of it absolutely. Consequently, Hamlet shows almost no remorse after he finds out that he has accidentally killed Polonius, the father of Hamlet's "soul's idol," Ophelia (*Hamlet*.II.ii.110). In one of the most humorous, but also deeply disturbing metatheatrical scenes (II.i),<sup>87</sup> which demonstrates just how unsettling the paranoia in Elsinore has become, Polonius teaches his servant Reynaldo how to spy on Laertes, his own son. The scene plays out the way a stage rehearsal does with Polonius as the director and Reynaldo as the novice-actor. When Polonius tells his servant to "[o]bserve [Laertes's] inclination for [himself]," Polonius is telling Reynaldo to not trust words, but observe for himself what Laertes is up to. To not trust words must sound like questionable advice to the servant Reynaldo—he interjects "[b]ut, my good lord—" (*Hamlet*.II.1)—who was just instructed by his master, Polonius, with a shower of words, to spy on Laertes. Reynaldo, in the manner of a befuddled actor who has received too many irreconcilable directions, asks questions about the ethics of Polonius's directorial 'errand'. After all, Reynaldo, within the fiction of the play, is not commanded to perform his spy-act on a stage, but in Paris, a world-stage where the stakes are higher for a bad spy.

When the boundary between the stage and the world-stage is crossed, the difference between acting and spying is revealed. Spying, while it is acting, is always problematic in the way the 'social act' is. Acting is transparent, spying is at best indirect, at worst underhanded. Acting makes the rules of the theatre known to everyone involved, while spying serves one party, yet harms another. Self-serving spying amongst family or friends, as Hamlet puts it, betrays "the rights of our fellowship, [...] the consonancy of our youth, [and] the obligation of our ever-preserved love" (*Hamlet*.II.ii.277-279). Spying for personal gain—the way Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do—is nothing but a 'social act', and therefore "guilty of betraying the

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<sup>87</sup> Since this scene is one of the few moments in *Hamlet* that allows the audience some comic relief, it is a key moment. What occurs in II.i. is more tragic than funny. However, if played well, the scene conforms to the saying: "it is so bad, it's good," because Reynaldo—that much can be gleaned from the text—is no Walsingham, and Polonius, as it will turn out, is even more inept. In the same way Hamlet's talk with the players about the boy-actors is a veiled commentary on the theatre in London at the time, so the episode with Polonius and Reynaldo appears to be a commentary on a bad director. The latter is not only metatheatrical, but also self-effacing as there were no directors in Renaissance England, and it would have been the playwright directing. These co-factors take the edge of this otherwise unpardonable exchange, and even make it funny.

word, of using language dishonestly. It turns words into weapons”<sup>88</sup> (McDonald 57), and it turns what could be transformative fiction into a blatant lie. “[L]anguage must unite with action, [it] must not only be but mean” (cf. *Metadrama* Calderwood 20). When words have become “windy agents” (*Metadrama* Calderwood 54), then indirections (spies) must find directions (the son) out.

It is with great self-adulation (“a fetch of wit”) that Polonius imparts his ill-conceived “drift” to Reynaldo that “[his] bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth,”<sup>89</sup> that a little lie will reveal the truth (*Hamlet*.II.i.39,38; I.iii. 80; II.i. 62), which is, in respect to espionage, incorrect. Polonius, two lines later, corrects his spying-technique without realizing that he does so: “By indirections [Reynaldo will] find directions out” (cf. *Hamlet*.II.i. 65), which comes nearer to realistic espionage by advising Reynaldo to employ roundabout ways (not lies) to get to the truth. Polonius, in the course of the play, never recognizes the important difference between the two strategies, which is the same as between acting on a stage and acting on the world-stage: “indirections” are detours (such as transformative fiction), a “falsehood” is a lie; acting on stage is a detour to a greater truth and purpose, the ‘social act’ is a lie; role-play is wearing a situational mask to find one’s part, the ‘social act’ is becoming one with the mask. To Polonius the two remain interchangeable. All lies are created equal to him, and, as is the case with Macbeth, he is undone by a misinterpretation of words: “the deadly power of words, [...] [employed within] a theatrical creation—demonstrates the opposite, the positive and living power of language” (McDonald 58), and the purpose of playing. In a metatheatrically, extraordinarily self-aware moment, the actor playing Polonius tells the actor playing Reynaldo that one must lie to get to the truth. While drawing attention to the actors’ profession throughout the spying-instruction-scene, the difference between acting and lying are made clear. The play in general draws a sharp line between Hamlet’s detour into role-play to arrive at his greater part in life and

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<sup>88</sup> “In Shakespeare’s book this is a very serious offense. Words are the medium of imagination, and the imagination is Shakespeare’s means of livelihood. The perils of imagination as registered by the perversion of language is one of Shakespeare’s abiding themes” (McDonald 57).

<sup>89</sup> With “your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth” (II.i.62), Polonius butchers one of the cornerstones of espionage. What he is attempting to get at is known as the “chicken-feed” in modern espionage. The chicken-feed holds that the spy feed the enemy small, discardable truths, *not* “falsehoods”—the enemy is not ignorant—to establish the enemy’s greater truth. “By indirections find directions out” (II.i.65) happens to be correct, because ‘indirections’ are small detours on the road to truth, but ‘indirections’ are not barefaced lies, which would be ‘misdirections’. *Hamlet* establishes in this scene that Polonius is one of the most incompetent spies Elsinore, or Western literature in general, has ever encountered. It is his very ineptitude that allows him to appear less treacherous than he really is.

Polonius's and Claudius's deceitfulness to advance their own causes. In fact, *Hamlet* crushes Claudius's and Polonius's sanctimonious belief that they are "lawful espials" (*Hamlet*.III.i.33). Claudius, as king, is the law. To say that he and Polonius are justified in their spy-act because they represent the law is circular reasoning. Appealing to authority when one is the authority is not only hypocritical, but also unethical. Claudius's and Polonius's spying is neither sanctified by a greater cause, nor is it anything like transparent and transformative acting. It is lying.

Polonius's Machiavellian advice, which maintains that the end justifies the means, that lying is allowed as long as the final result is the truth, contradicts his earlier farewell-"blessing" (*Hamlet*.I.iii.81) to Laertes as well. Ironically and tragically, in his direct address to his son three scenes earlier, Polonius had advised Laertes: "to thine own self be true/ And it must follow, as the night the day/ Thou canst not then be false to any man" (*Hamlet*.I.iii. 78-80). This advice is, at its core, ambiguous non-advice whose meaning depends entirely on the interpretation of "self" and "true." The dictum either means one should deal with people justly according to one's moral nature, or one should deal with people self-servingly according to one's optimal benefit (and immoral nature). Once more, Polonius offers a shower of words and fails to see the moral ambiguity in his "blessing." What it means to be true to oneself is a core question that runs through all the metatheatrical moments of *Hamlet*.<sup>90</sup> It leads back to the ever-present question of "Who's there" of line 1, since even Hamlet himself wavers between an absolute moral universe of "I know not 'seems'" (I.ii.75) and a relativist one of "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet*.II.ii.246-247). Hamlet begins by denouncing all kinds of acting, on and off-stage, as "monstrous," but soon enough he himself uses role-play to get to the truth: he puts on "an antic disposition" that allows him the fool's freedom of speech, and he directs, co-writes, and acts in a play-within-the-play to get to the bottom of his father's death: "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (*Hamlet*.I.v.174; II.ii. 584-585). With the help of the play-within-the-play, Hamlet's "[a]rt now acts on life," and "the play was in the audience" (cf. Garber 500): Claudius is both audience to the play, but more importantly, he is the one the play revolves around during the performance of "The Mousetrap." Claudius is both watcher and watched, audience and actor, and he is

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<sup>90</sup> Identity and its stability or instability is also a mainstay in *Coriolanus*, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

caught by Hamlet's metatheatre. Hence it is not Polonius's "falsehood" (II.i.62) and his "forgeries" (II.i.20) that bring out the truth, but the formerly "monstrous" fiction, namely acting ("the play's the thing") (*Hamlet*.II.ii.584-585).

### The Playwright's Pen as Kill-ink

Both Hamlet's first move toward the truth and his murders<sup>91</sup> are theatrical: he writes and produces "The Mousetrap," and he writes and signs Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's death warrant. He catches the king's conscience, and he kills his friends, all with a playwright's pen. The former deed involves acting, and the latter deed involves murder, both undertakings Hamlet had initially rejected, but comes to accept through role-play: "While the players are only maskers, and their play is fiction, and their passions are but a dream of passion, there is a way in which their brand of intentional illusion is more trustworthy, and more open to Hamlet" (Garber 492). However, Hamlet's metatheatrical moments also reveal how difficult it is for him to control his 'parts', such as when he swerves in and out of madness. "Being true to oneself," in Hamlet, is problematic, and Hamlet does struggle with his situational masks not becoming a permanent mask. The play illuminates that "the self is a theatrical construct" (McGinn 107), and as such, must be consistently monitored. It is not absolutely clear to the audience on stage or off-stage when Hamlet crosses the line between truthful self-expression and 'social act'. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, there is an ambiguity in Hamlet's soliloquies the audience has to leave room for. Either they believe Hamlet allows them into his soul, or they question if he is trying on another part. It is this ambiguity, however, that involves the audience so profoundly in the metatheatrical questions the play asks them to interpret. *Hamlet* prompts the audience to interpret both: how much interiority can be represented on a stage, and how much interiority can be represented

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<sup>91</sup> Hamlet's first murder is highly theatrical as well. He stabs Polonius through an arras, a kind of curtain, which was used to conceal things. Later on, the theatre curtain would become the most popular prop to conceal the scenery when needed. While Renaissance theaters only used the drop curtain, the fact that a curtain is a great prop to hide props and actors behind would have been obvious during the Renaissance as well. Furthermore, the fact that Hamlet stabs Polonius through a curtain adds another layer of metatheatre: The arras as double-curtain. Hamlet thinks he is stabbing Claudius, but he does, in fact, stab Polonius. Since Polonius's exterior is veiled by an arras, Hamlet confuses him for "[his] better" (III.iv.33). The accidental stabbing of Polonius emphasizes the fact that people's interiors are always hidden from others. One's appearance can serve as a curtain to hide intentions behind.

on the world-stage, where the audience cannot hear soliloquies or asides.<sup>92</sup> It also asks the audience to compare who can relate more truth and elucidate identity better, the actor or the ‘social actor’, the ethical liar or the flagrant liar. In *Hamlet*, absolute truth eludes the audience as it does elude them in real life. Even in death, in Elsinore, the morally ambivalent do not profess the truth:<sup>93</sup> Claudius dies lying, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die spying, and even the morally motivated Hamlet dies trying to tell the truth: “So tell him, [...] more or less, [...]. The rest is silence. O, O, O, O” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.359-361).

#### metatheater and Metatheater<sup>94</sup>

To address Hamlet’s ambiguity of who is watching, and who is being watched, who acts ethically and who acts unethically, who “plays” and who lies, it is not enough to engage with the plays’ metatheatrical moments from the perspective of the stage or the world-stage alone. *Hamlet*’s greatest ambiguity, perhaps, lies in its “Metatheatre,” its metaphysical moments that hide within the play’s metatheatrical moments. The difference between appearance and reality is a constant theme in *Hamlet*, and so is the idea that the theater and the world-theatre are closely interlaced. What makes *Hamlet* unique is that Shakespeare has its main character not just explore the similarity between theatre’s and life’s artifice, but he shows him as overcoming the notion that the theatre is nothing but a substandard representation of life: “[T]he theatre stages itself as the place where the truth is revealed to be a product of illusions (e.g. ‘The

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<sup>92</sup> If all theatre is artifice, then, *Hamlet* suggests, the world is even greater artifice. *Hamlet*, in a way, inverts the Classical Platonic belief that our reality is made up of shadows on a wall and all art is a shadow of the shadow (*Republic*). *Hamlet*, on the other hand, portrays fiction as truer than reality, and, as Garber called it: “Art acts on life” (Garber 500). If acting is more truthful than ‘social-acting’, *Hamlet* implies, the actor has great value to society.

<sup>93</sup> Horatio, does, of course tell Hamlet’s story in the final scene. But Horatio’s story “is and is not *Hamlet*” (Garber 505). “Horatio himself cannot [retell Hamlet’s story]. He has not heard the soliloquies, without which the play has a very different quality” (Garber 505). To truly “remember” Hamlet by “telling his story,” Horatio’s speech of V.ii.323-329 shows, can only be done by performing the play. Even in this final instance, the implication is that only performance can relate the tragedy in all its facets and depth.

<sup>94</sup> Metatheatre or meta-metatheatre: The metaphysical and theatrically self-referential consciousness of playing for a divine audience even on the theatrical level. I use the term to differentiate it from the “theatrum mundi,” in that Metatheatre is meant to refer to the theatrical self-awareness of the actors on stage themselves as playing for a divine audience in addition to a worldly one. Metatheatre can be understood as the stage-play being the play-within-the-play of the world-play. Hans Urs von Balthasar addresses a similar concept, the “Theo-Drama.” “[T]here must be dramatic ways (legitimately so) of presenting it, be they ever so indirect, risky, precarious, and ambiguous. And such forms of presentation [...] must yield conclusions with regard to the nature of this same theo-drama” (Balthasar 112).

Mousetrap’))” (Quiring 7). *Hamlet* suggests that fiction is more powerful than reality: “fiction has greater longevity than material things, since Shakespeare’s plays [...] will last longer than any building erected in his time; immortality belongs, if anywhere, to the characters of fiction, not those of real life” (McGinn 150). The story of *Hamlet* lives on through its fiction. Alexander the Great’s<sup>95</sup> ashes may now be a barrel-plug (cf. *Hamlet*.V.i.187), but he lives on through his story. Yorick’s “infinite jest” and “flashes of merriment” live on through his story (cf. *Hamlet*.V.i.169,174). Moreover, *Hamlet* suggests that the artist who tells these stories, and the actor who performs them, is more meaningful than the ‘social actor’. So profound is the artifice in the reality of the play’s atmosphere that “Hamlet realizes that he is [also] an actor, and that everyone else in Elsinore is playing a role. [...] With the arrival of the players, the function of illusion in the play begins to shift. Hamlet begins to use it [acting] to investigate his own society—as well as himself” (Garber 498). Furthermore, Hamlet begins to investigate the purpose of playing for a higher audience<sup>96</sup> than the worldly one.

Uncovering “the conscience of the king” (II.ii.567) can be read as a metatheatrical, and also deeply metaphysical undertaking that addresses acting on the stage, acting on the world-stage, and acting on the cosmic stage: Hamlet is not just seeking the conscience and truth behind King Claudius. Hamlet is seeking his own conscience and truth, and he is also seeking a higher, universal conscience and truth behind the ultimate King, God or Fate (or the lack thereof). Such a metaphysical reading of these lines aligns with Hamlet’s response to the courtier (Lord) in Act V who bids Hamlet fight the duel with Laertes. Hamlet, at that point, has resigned himself to his part in the world. He says: “I am constant to my purposes/ They follow the king’s

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<sup>95</sup> Alexander the Great, was, of course, a real-life person. However, he lives on as a fictional character because his story has moved into mythical status. There is not one ‘truthful’ biography of Alexander the Great, but there are various legendary stories about his life. We are told he tamed Bucephalus and we are told Aristotle was his tutor, but we don’t know what exactly transpired between them. Perhaps it is the ambiguity around his character that makes him so fascinating to people.

<sup>96</sup> Tertullian was one of the early Christian figures, together with St. Augustine, who spoke of the world as a ‘theatrum mundi’ that was watched by a divine audience. “Tertullian’s doctrine of the contemptus mundi strongly influenced Christian and Calvinist thinking. For Tertullian, the ‘spectacle of life is [...] purely transcendental.’ Conversely, the earthly play of life in which man is an actor has ‘no meaning at all.’ Instead, the Christians are referred to the true transcendental drama on Judgment Day, where they will be the wise spectators. This is the view adopted by the early modern English Puritans” (Ruge quoting Lynda Christian 35). Curiously, with all his antitheatrical thinking, Tertullian does not only conceive of the world as theatrical (theatrum mundi), but he also conceives of the Last Judgment as theatrical (cf. *De Spectaculis*). It is a “spectacle” to him, namely God’s spectacle during which the elect will sit beside God while He judges the ignorant: “the deployment of the ‘theatrum mundi’ metaphor in attacks on the stage is [...] ironic, because it employs a residual attachment on the part of the antitheatricalists, at least on a metaphorical level, to the very institution they want to abolish” (Ruge 26).

pleasure”<sup>97</sup> (*Hamlet*.V.ii.189-190). Not only has Hamlet resigned himself to fighting the duel that King Claudius has arranged, but, more importantly, he has also resigned himself to “a divinity that shapes our ends,” even if such a divinity bids him to play a part he did not choose<sup>98</sup> (*Hamlet*.V.ii.10). Hamlet’s profession to be “constant to [his] purposes [since] [t]hey follow the kings’s pleasure (cf. *Hamlet*.V.ii.189-190), meta-and Meta-theatrically speaking, moves from addressing a moment on the theatrical stage (the final dual), to addressing a moment on the world-stage (acting one’s part within the world), to addressing an existential question (acting one’s part on the cosmic stage). The sense that a divinity is watching everyone “play” pervades *Hamlet*: Upon seeing the ghost, Hamlet exclaims: “Angels and ministers of grace defend us,” and later: “O all you host of heaven” (I.iv.42; I.v.92), “O heavens” (III.ii.119); before the duel, Hamlet assures Horatio that everything will ‘unfold’ according to God’s plan: “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow”<sup>99</sup> (V.ii.207-208); Ophelia implores God to give Gertrude<sup>100</sup>—and likely everyone else—what they deserve (“God’ield you!”); Ophelia hopes for Gertrude that “God [will] be at [her] table”<sup>101</sup> (IV.v.41,43), and she cries out: “God ha’ mercy on his soul.—And all of Christian souls, I pray God. God be wi’ ye,” in response to which Laertes implores: “Do you see this, O God” (IV.v.196-198). Claudius

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<sup>97</sup> Can be read as a biblical allusion to Timothy 2:4: “that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (*KJV*). Timothy, in 2:3, is instructed by St. Paul to “take thy share of suffering” and persevere in pain and spiritual hardship (*KJV*). The overall meaning of the passage is that God’s soldier should never get too entangled in worldly affairs, because that would interfere with his *duty* to his God and General. If V.ii.189-190 is an allusion to Timothy, it illuminates why Hamlet is buried as a soldier on a stage, blending both the martial (God’s soldier) and dramatic aspect (acting) of his role.

<sup>98</sup> *Hamlet* begins with a title character who—as does Coriolanus—thinks he is in the wrong play. Hamlet does not want the part that was given to him. He would prefer the part of scholar or lover, not the avenger. The beginning of *Hamlet* exemplifies what Oscar Wilde called: “All the world’s a stage, and the play is badly cast.” Hamlet is stuck in between “to play or not to play.” To feel lost in one’s part or miscast is highly relatable, seeing as Christ himself initially rejects his part in Gethsemane.

<sup>99</sup> An allusion to Matthew 10:29: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall upon the ground without your Father” (*KJV*). Hamlet suggests, via Matthew, that not even a small bird, a sparrow, dies without God’s knowledge and bigger plan.

<sup>100</sup> Ophelia likely also includes herself in the “God’ield you” (IV.v.41), since her next line, “[t]hey say the owl was a baker’s daughter,” suggests that she is remorseful about having rebuked Hamlet earlier—the way the baker’s daughter rebuked Jesus—when she should have shown kindness (IV.v.41-42). Ophelia’s madness shows her despair and remorse, but it also reveals the heartlessness of Hamlet’s ambiguity (“I did love you once”- “I loved you not”) (III.i.116-117;120-121) in combination with the jaded advice of Polonius (“Do not believe his vows” (I.iii.127) and Laertes (“Fear it, [...]Fear it [...] /Be wary then. Best safety lies in fear” (I.iii.32,42) to distrust Hamlet. In a way, Ophelia, as is her father, is undone by ambiguity: “Ambiguity can be deadly” (McDonald 47).

<sup>101</sup> Either an allusion to Psalm 23:5: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies” (*KJV*), or an allusion to the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor.11:20,24-26, which commemorates the death of Christ: “This do in remembrance of me” (*KJV*).

cries out: “Help, angels” (III.iii.70). Hamlet’s soliloquies often sound like prayers addressed to an audience that may or may not be there: “Am I a coward” (II.ii.547); “O God, God” (I.ii.132), “Heaven and earth” (I.ii.142), “O God” (I.ii.150).

### Time and Metatheatre

Instead of viewing Hamlet’s much-disputed delay<sup>102</sup>—his having “lapsed in time” (*Hamlet*, III.iv.109)—from a theoretical perspective, it may offer greater insight if it were viewed from the performer’s perspective. As example, it does not matter if the actor playing Hamlet thinks Hamlet’s ‘delay’ is irrational, because the actor must, eventually, make sense of said delay and accept the script the way it was written. The actor does not get to argue with the playwright’s reasons. In the same way Hamlet, the character, “remains a revenger, though a revenger with a conscience and a consciousness” (Garber 490). Hamlet does not want to accept the part of revenger. Ultimately, however, he does because the part is his duty and purpose: in the theatre, in the world theatre, and in the cosmic theater. While it appears illogical—particularly because Hamlet sheds no light on his transformation from ‘actor’ to ‘doer’ through soliloquies after his sea voyage—from a performer’s perspective it is simple: Hamlet was given the part of revenger by the playwright, and the play unfolds accordingly with Hamlet having the choice of rejecting or accepting his part. Hamlet has free will in respect to the latter, but he does not get to override the play. The implication is that Hamlet, the character, does not get to argue with the playwright’s reasons in the way all human beings do not get to argue with the Original Artist’s reasons, even if they

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<sup>102</sup> “When reading a play it is easy to be seduced by the text, to think of the play’s language as mainly narrative, describing the attitudes of the character. [Instead] ask questions of the text from the point of view of the performers or characters” (Worthen Wadsworth 2). The actor does not get the luxury of asking: “But why would Hamlet wait here, or why does he say no one comes back from the dead when his father just came back from the dead, etc.” As every actor knows, these kinds of questions are cut short by a pragmatic director, who will inevitably tell the actor: “But Hamlet *does* do what he does, and your job is to make the text work and give it meaning, not to poke holes into it.” In that way, the actor’s approach is based less on logic than on finding the character’s humanity, less on choosing one’s part than on either accepting, or rejecting it. If the actor does accept the part, he or she must approach it not in the way people do in real life, with ambivalence and quiet desperation: that would be playing the plot. The actor must accept and understand the part the way *Anna Karenina*’s Dolly understands forgiveness: “If one forgives, it must be completely. Completely” (Tolstoy I.19.50). If the actor accepts the part and commits “to play,” it must be completely. Completely.



consider themselves actors in a theatre of divine cruelty.<sup>103</sup> Stella Adler<sup>104</sup> emphasizes that an actor is “in a profession that recognizes life as important and not casual,” and that “the theatre is epic” (Adler 41,31), never half-hearted. Hamlet, in the end, not only accepts his part as his duty, but he also commits to it completely, the way an actor has to commit to their part to give meaning to it. If this metatheatrical moment in the text—(“I am constant to my purposes/ They follow the king’s pleasure”) (*Hamlet*.V.ii.189-190)—is read with a metaphysical subtext, Hamlet’s part is his purpose, and his constancy in that purpose “follow[s] the [ultimate K]ing’s pleasure” (*Hamlet*.V.ii. 190), and the ultimate King’s timeline.<sup>105</sup>

The way the Dreiserian actor’s duty is to express the world for others, so Hamlet’s duty is to act out his part, even if it is a tragic one:<sup>106</sup> “the readiness is all”<sup>107</sup> (*Hamlet*.V.ii.210). Hamlet’s response to the courtier underscores the metaphysical, Metatheatrical reading: “If his fitness speaks, mine is ready, now or whensoever” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.191). Hamlet is ready when Claudius orders him to. Beyond that, Hamlet is ready when the King/God/Fate is ready for him. Such a reading does not simplify Hamlet’s dilemma into an evasive ‘everything happens for a reason’ solution.

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<sup>103</sup> Rufus Goodwin recites a poignant anecdote that captures the essence of Hamlet’s (and the human condition’s) struggle to a fault: “From Auschwitz [...] comes the story of the rabbis who, faced with death, [...] debate [...] about the goodness of God. Some argued this way, some that way, trying to reconcile God’s goodness with [their] dire situation. To no avail. The debaters found unequivocally that God was bad, not good. Then, at the end of the debate, the rabbi in charge said, ‘Now, let’s pray!’” (cf. Goodwin 4). The rabbis’ choice was “to pray or not to pray” in the way Hamlet’s choice is “to play or not to play.” The rabbis’ grace—like Hamlet’s—lies in their acceptance of calamity. They perform their prayers as a sacred, unassailable duty despite their circumstances.

<sup>104</sup> “When we treat life as casual and ordinary, we lose the sense of ourselves and where we come from. We lose a sense of the continuity of history - and the sense that history continues in everyday life. You are living or re-living history every moment” (Adler 42). Adler makes a strong point about the theatre affecting, provoking, and moving the audience actively, not just entertaining them passively. Art acts on life. The actor is “more alive” when acting, so he or she can “give [that aliveness] back from the stage” (cf. Adler 48).

<sup>105</sup> Even the ultimate King’s timeline has a theatrical subtext. Hamlet is an actor, and an actor’s duty is to give his part the highest stakes and make it shine. Therefore, the actor—and the playwright who created him—is not going to choose a haphazard moment to execute his revenge. Instead he will choose a heightened moment, such as the final scene, during which everyone is there, everyone watches, and almost everyone dies. Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, writes the way an actor acts: absent himself, he only exists through his characters. Therefore, Hamlet’s delay is no indecision that wastes time. Instead, Hamlet’s delay suspends time by heightening each moment.

<sup>106</sup> Antonio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, echoes a similar resigned outlook: “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano/ A stage where every man must play a part/ And mine a sad one” (*MV*.I.i.79-81).

<sup>107</sup> Edgar, in *King Lear*, says something eerily similar to his father, Gloucester: “Men must endure/ Their going hence even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all” (*King Lear*, V,ii, 9-11). Both Hamlet’s response to Horatio and Edgar’s to Gloucester occur in Act V, Scene ii in their respective plays.

To read V.ii. as Metatheatre, with Dreiser in mind, puts a burden on Hamlet that transcends worldly motivation. In *Hamlet*, language is the prime mover, “the word [is] God,” and the part is the purpose. It is not the appearance of the ghost that seals Hamlet’s fate. It is Hamlet giving his *word* to the ghost that he will “remember” him: “now to my word./ [...] I have sworn’t” (*Hamlet*.I.v.110-112). Hamlet gives his word of his own free will, and by doing so, paradoxically, he seals his fate. Hamlet has *accepted his part*.<sup>108</sup> In fact, he gives his word to the ghost without having heard the full story from it: “Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift/ As meditation<sup>109</sup> or the thoughts of love/ May sweep to my revenge” (*Hamlet*.I.v.29-31). If Hamlet has been in the wings of the world-stage until now, it is here that he agrees to being pushed out onto the thrust stage of Elsinore’s corrupt court. And there, Hamlet must “play,” meta-and -Meta-theatrically; according to the playwright’s, and the Ultimate Playwright’s word.<sup>110</sup>

The instance of Hamlet’s overly rash decision “to play” the part of avenger is what he later refers to as an “indiscretion<sup>111</sup> [that] sometimes serves us well/ When our deep plots do pall” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.8-9). Hamlet may have ‘acted’ rashly when he gave his promise of revenge to the ghost, but his impulsivity, he now realizes, fell in line with “a divinity that shapes our ends/ Rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.10-11). Hamlet certainly, for most of the play, attempts to “rough-hew” his ends, to shape his own part and play. As an actor on the world-stage, Hamlet admits with theatrically self-reflexive language, he was unprepared: “Ere I could make a prologue to my brains/

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<sup>108</sup> In a reading that views Hamlet’s revenge as circular or taboo, the argument for Hamlet being undone by ambiguity (like Macbeth) is viable. The ghost specifies to “[l]eave [Gertrude] to heaven,” but he never specifies how Hamlet ought to “pursue this act” (cf.I.v.86,84) of vengeance against Claudius. The ghost’s stipulation that Hamlet “taint not [his] mind” in the effort of revenge (*Hamlet*, I.v.85) is “a riddling impossibility” (Calderwood *Hamlet* 20). Furthermore, the ghost never explicitly says to kill Claudius. The latter, while it is the most obvious solution—is merely Hamlet’s interpretation of “this act” (I.v.84).

<sup>109</sup> The irony is not lost on the audience, since both “meditation” and “thoughts of love” do not come “swiftly” to Hamlet at all. Consequently, the drama of *Hamlet* is made up of Hamlet’s grappling with the part he agreed to, as most of humankind does on a daily basis.

<sup>110</sup> I use “the word” as originally translated from Greek as “logos,” with both its meanings: a) the controlling principle in the universe within Greek philosophy, and b) the Word of God, or principle of divine reason and creative order (cf. *OED*). Both, arguably, inform Hamlet’s understanding of “a divinity that shapes our ends,” and “there’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (*Hamlet*, V.ii. 10; V.ii. 206-207). I am not ascribing religiosity to either the play or the playwright. I am, however, pointing out moments of profound Metatheatre within the text than cannot be ignored as they all touch on the sacred. At times, these moments range from Christian beliefs to pagan ones.

<sup>111</sup> Hamlet directly refers to his writing Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s execution letter here. However, his “indiscretion” of acting impulsively may just as well refer to his agreeing to execute the ghost’s bid for revenge. Hamlet’s ‘part’ comes full circle: He had given the ghost his word, and now he must ‘act’ on it with deeds.

They had begun the play” (*Hamlet*.V.ii.31-32). However, his promise “to play” the avenger must be kept if Hamlet is to put ‘time back into joint’. After all, Hamlet’s admonition of the players to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” is not just a theatrical tenet, but also a worldly and universal one (III.ii.16). If Hamlet wants to overcome all the corruption in Elsinore, he must bring back with him stable language. Hence, whatever one says, one must mean and act upon. Whatever one does must be in alignment with what one means and says, lest “speech, the medium of truth, is tainted, then truth itself can only withdraw into silence” (Calderwood *Hamlet* 71). The moment Hamlet ‘acts’ upon his word, he moves from “not to play” to “to play.”

### Time & Remembrance

The fact that different times are given for Old Hamlet’s death by different characters draws attention to everyone’s inconsistent time-perception. During the play-within-the-play, Hamlet quibbles with Ophelia over how much time has passed since Old Hamlet died. Hamlet claims that his “father died within these two hours,” whereas Ophelia says it has been “twice two months” (III.ii.116-117). For Hamlet, during “The Mousetrap” in Act III, to claim that his father died in the last two hours is highly metatheatrical because, in real-time of the performance, Old Hamlet would have died at the beginning of the play when his death<sup>112</sup> is first mentioned to the audience by Barnardo (I.i.39). Hamlet’s failure to put things into motion suggests that, for him, time stopped when his father died. Since action and motion do not exist without the time that measures them, the metatheatrical moment of Hamlet’s drawing attention to the real-time of the play versus the actual time since Old Hamlet died, underscores just how “out of joint” the times are for Hamlet (I.i.189). Hamlet’s metatheatrical comment about the short passage of time since his father died also emphasizes the brevity of the mourning period for Old Hamlet within the play’s storyline. Moreover, Hamlet’s comment draws attention to the lack of proper burials for Ophelia and Polonius<sup>113</sup> as well. In Elsinore, grieving-time is

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<sup>112</sup> *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s longest play. Therefore, Hamlet’s metatheatrical claim that his father died two hours ago at III.ii.116, sounds approximately accurate.

<sup>113</sup> Laertes bemoans both, the lack of a proper burial for his father, Polonius: “his obscure funeral” (*Hamlet*.IV.v.210), and the lack of proper last rites for his sister Ophelia. Twice Laertes implores the priest: “What ceremony else” (V.i.206, 208).

“out of joint” as well. Mourners are neither allowed a proper farewell-ritual for their loved ones, nor are they given time to come to terms with their grief.

Once more, within the scope of the play itself, an “indirection” reveals a greater truth, a stage-act draws attention to the greater truth about the relativity of time perception, which differs vastly between those who are bereaved, and those who are not. Furthermore, to question how time is perceived always means to question ultimate reality. Stephen Greenblatt observes that “the disruption and poisoning of virtually all rituals<sup>114</sup> for managing grief, allaying personal and collective anxiety” are the reason why such rituals have moved “to the space of the stage” (cf. Greenblatt *Purgatory* 247,257). Garber adds to this the astute point that “[r]evenge is repetition, and repetition is compulsion. [...] [Hamlet] cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering” (Garber 490,496). Revenge is, after all, a form of ritualistic remembrance. *Hamlet* is, indeed, a play that fixates on the fear of being forgotten over time; it repeatedly alerts to the significance of remembrance in the here and after. Arguably, the greatest driving force behind Hamlet’s decision “to play” is his need to be remembered, and to give remembrance to those whose memory has not been honored; even at the cost of self-sacrifice.<sup>115</sup>

### Remember Me

Until Hamlet returns from his ship voyage and takes ‘action’, he exists in a vacuum of suspended time. To suspend time also means to suspend oblivion in order to remember:

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<sup>114</sup> Greenblatt’s book *Hamlet in Purgatory* deals first and foremost with the Catholic doctrine of purgatory in *Hamlet*. His greater point, however, is that *Hamlet* reveals a “cult of the dead” (Greenblatt *Purgatory* 257), because the right to celebrate and remember the dead with a ritual has been taken from the mourners, who, as a consequence, ‘act’ out the way Hamlet and Ophelia do because they are not allowed to grieve. While Greenblatt emphasizes that the Catholic church exploited the mourning ritual with the concept of purgatory at the time *Hamlet* was written, he also argues that, for Protestantism, to do away with all rituals, left mourners with a hole in their hearts. The circumstances during the Renaissance certainly wove their threads into *Hamlet*, but in its theme of longing for “time & remembrance,” the play defies all eras. *Hamlet* can be seen as an early example of ‘theatre & playing’ becoming a sanctuary for spiritual and metaphysical debate. In that sense the play is timeless: it seeks space for interiority in a world mostly dedicated to exteriority.

<sup>115</sup> “Sacrifice is bearable only when recognized and appreciated, witnessed, and, even if silently, applauded” (Skura 215). Hamlet is not driven by survival, but by restoring the memory of the dead in a time when funeral rituals are cut short by marriages, or beloved court jesters’ skeletal leftovers are bounced about in what ought to be sacred ground. “Serving some of the functions once performed by then-vanishing popular and religious rituals, theatre did more than simply gather people. [...] the saturnalian patterns of comedy, as well as the sacrificial pattern of tragedy, also drew on ritual’s power to convene a crowd and to channel its energies into socially sanctioned forms” (Skura 33).

“Like the Ghost of Old Hamlet, [...] poor souls cry out to be remembered, fear the dull forgetfulness of the living” (cf. Greenblatt *Purgatory* 249). Remembrance is what many of the characters in *Hamlet* are intoxicated with. If Claudius’s poison is meant to make Elsinore forget—about Old Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia, murder, usurpation, incest, war—then the antidote to the poison is remembrance. There are 38<sup>116</sup> instances of *remembrance*, *memory* and *oblivion* in *Hamlet*: Claudius only cares about “*remembrance* of [himself]” (cf. I.ii.6-7); Hamlet cries out: “Must I *remember*” (I.ii.143) when confronted with his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage; the ghost’s stark “*Remember me*” (I.v.91) reverberates throughout the entire play, and is echoed three times by Hamlet: “*Remember thee*” twice (I.v.95, 97), and “*Remember me*” (I.v.111);

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<sup>116</sup> **Remember:**

I.ii.143: Hamlet: “must I remember?”

I.iii.84: Laertes: “Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well”

I.v.91: Ghost: “Remember me”

I.v.95,97: Hamlet: “Remember thee” (twice)

I.v.111: Hamlet: “Remember me”

II.ii.418, 423: Hamlet: “I remember” (twice)

III.i.90-91: Hamlet: “in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remembered”

IV.v.176: Ophelia: “I pray you, love, remember”

V.ii.3: Hamlet: “You do remember”

V.ii.4: Horatio: “Remember it, my lord”

V.ii.108: Hamlet: “I beseech you, remember”

**Remembrance:**

I.ii.6: Claudius: “with remembrance of ourselves”

II.ii.26: Gertrude: “as fits a king’s remembrance”

IV.v.175: Ophelia: “that’s for remembrance”

IV.v.177-178: Laertes: “thoughts and remembrance fitted”

**Memory:**

I.ii.2: Claudius: “the memory be green”

I.iii.58: Polonius: “and these few precepts in thy memory”

I.iii.85: Ophelia: “Tis in my memory locked”

I.v.96: Hamlet: “whiles memory holds a seat”

I.v.98: Hamlet: “from the table of my memory”

II.ii.429-430: Hamlet: “If it live in your/ memory”

III.ii.120-121: Hamlet: “man’s memory may/ outlive”

III.ii.174: First Player: “Purpose is but the slave to memory”

V.ii.116-117: Hamlet: “the/ arithmetic of memory”

V.ii.393: Fortinbras: “I have some rights of memory in this kingdom”

**Forget:**

I.ii.162: Hamlet: “do I forget myself”

III.ii.119: Hamlet: “and not forgotten yet”

III.ii.123-124: Hamlet: “the/ hobby-horse is forgot”

III.ii.178: First Player: “Most necessary ’tis that we forget”

III.iv.15: Gertrude: “Have you forgot me”

III.iv.112: Ghost: “Do not forget”

III.iv.206: Hamlet: “I had forgot”

V.ii.18: Hamlet: “My fears forgetting manners”

V.ii.36: Hamlet: “How to forget that learning”

**Obscure:**

IV.v.210: Laertes: “his obscure funeral”

**Oblivion:**

IV.iv.39: Hamlet: “Bestial oblivion”

Hamlet bitterly quips: Old Hamlet died “two months ago and [is] not *forgotten* yet/ Then there is hope a great man’s *memory* may outlive half a year” (cf. III.ii.119-121 *emphasis mine*); Ophelia, right before her death, implores: “There is rosemary, that’s for *remembrance*/ Pray you love, *remember*”<sup>117</sup> (IV.v.175-176 *emphases mine*); Fortinbras usurps Denmark with the *reminder*—and indirect nod to his late father—that he has “some rights of *memory* in this kingdom” (V.ii.393 *emphasis mine*). In *Hamlet*, the idea that as long as someone is remembered they will always be among the living, persists. For Hamlet, the method of not forgetting, of stopping time, is “to play.” To metatheatrically draw attention to the hope that remembrance will triumph over “[b]estial oblivion”<sup>118</sup> (IV.iv.39) also means to draw attention to the value of the ones<sup>119</sup> whose art can suspend time; the ones who tell the stories, engraft them new, and by doing so, grant remembrance and meaning to their subjects and to the audience; the ones who “are the abstract and brief chroniclers of the time,” who “tell all” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.504; III.ii.129), the players.

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<sup>117</sup> Ophelia’s supplications of remembrance have a strong sense of foreshadowing. Her pleas are the dark versions of Portia’s: “I pray you, know me when we meet again” (*MV*.IV.i.413). Ophelia’s prayers sound like haunting reminders to not forget her. She sounds like someone who knows they are about to die.

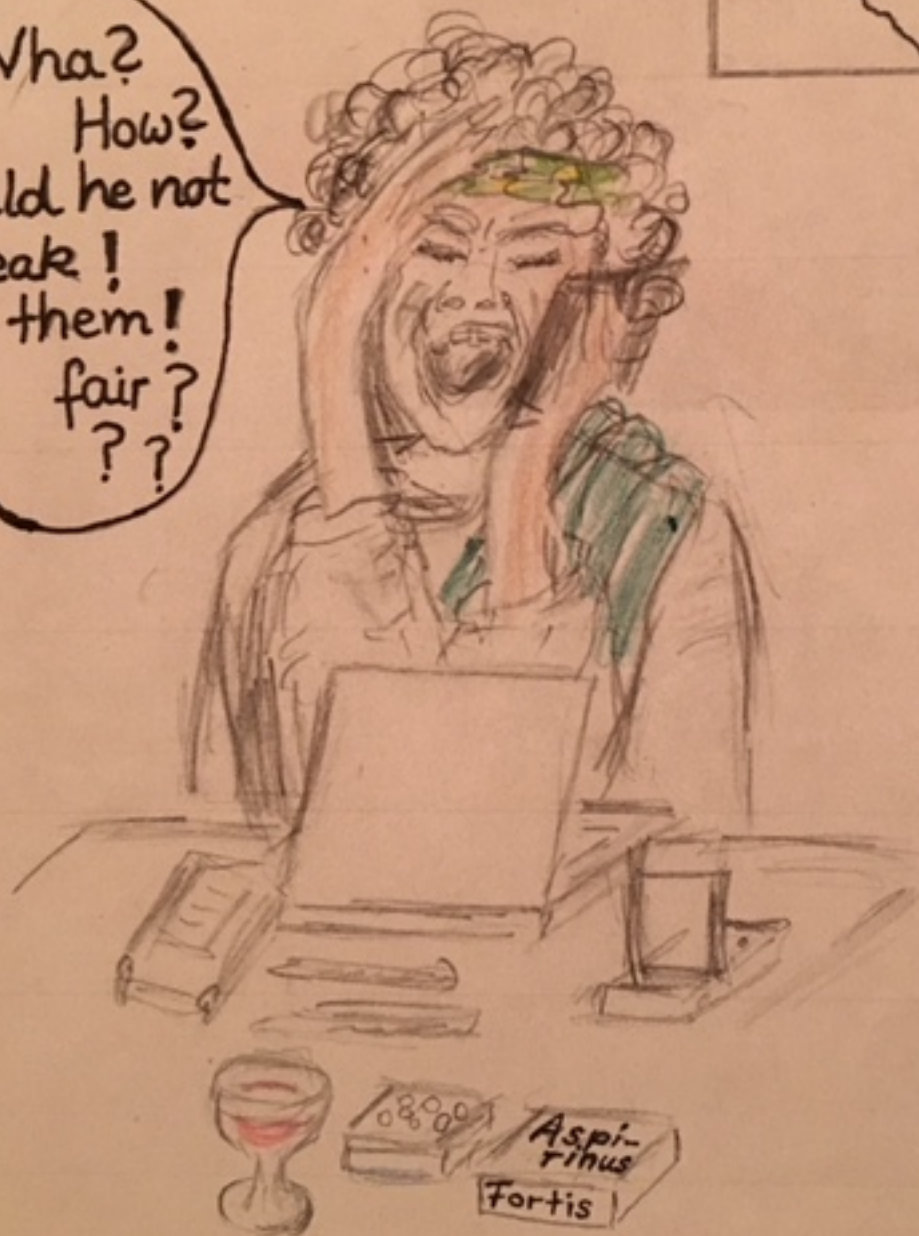
<sup>118</sup> The actor “must capture the audience’s love and attention over and over again; his greatest terror is that they will have no response but will be oblivious to his performance” (Skura 16). Accordingly, *Hamlet* is, in itself, a ritual of remembrance with a protagonist who serves as the moving force behind it: “An actor practices a calling that sets him apart from the rest of us, formally estranging him in order that, in the fashion of priests and judges, he can serve as our chosen surrogate” (Skura quoting Edith Oliver 27). Metatheatrically speaking, the actor playing Hamlet is the surrogate, and Hamlet is “the abstract and brief chronicle[] of our time” (II.ii.503-504) who demonstrates to the audience the importance of remembering someone’s story: “You that look pale and tremble at this chance/ That are but mutes or audience to this act” must hear what happened in Elsinore to satisfy your need for ritualistic remembrance (“Report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied”) (V.ii.239-240; V.ii.334-335).

<sup>119</sup> Nia Vardalos gives a heartfelt example of actors affecting the audience deeply and leading them through painful (“bittersweet”) memories that, eventually, offer a kind of catharsis. Vardalos speaks of a female audience member who burst into uncontrollable tears of grief during Vardalos’s monologue about having left the room the moment her mother died: “I felt I had to carry her through the show [...]. We must listen constantly, not just to each other, acting and reacting, but also to what is going on in the audience. Because the audience becomes part of the performance...[...] Sometimes, I will have been so affected by what happens in the audience, that I don’t come out right away,” [Vardalos] said. “I need to just sit by myself. I know people are waiting — and as actors, we aim to please — but there are times I can’t come out. I just can’t. [...] “There is a lot of pain [...] And I think that [the playwright’s] words are a salve for the pain we are going through.” (*NYT* 24 Oct 2017). Vardalos’s insightful statement resonates very well with many moments of *Hamlet* that deal with grief and mourning, or the lack of it due to societal pressure. Grotowski said that that “[t]he actor is not there for us but instead of us” (Skura 203), but arguably, the actor is there “for” and “instead of” us.

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FAME-CORIOLANUS

Wha?  
How?  
Could he not  
speak!  
them!  
fair?  
??



## Chapter II: Coriolanus, the Dull Actor

### The Re-Casting & (Un)-Making Of Coriolanus

While a political play, *Coriolanus* is as much about the performance of politics as it is about politics itself. And politics, to use a modern term, is in great part show business. In its theatricality, *Coriolanus* can easily be envisioned as the making of a contemporary stage production. The play has Caius Martius Coriolanus, the difficult ‘celebrity’-protagonist who is trying to transition from personality-actor to character-actor; it has Volumnia, “the mother of all stage mothers”<sup>120</sup> (Skura 193), it has the silver-tongued patrician publicists (Menenius and Cominius), the ‘celebrity’s’ neglected family (Coriolanus’ silent<sup>121</sup> wife Virgilia and son Martius), the mysterious past (the missing father), the resentful “[t]ribunes [who are] ‘stage-managing the Plebeians in planning to remove Coriolanus’ consulship” (Olmsby 8), the envious antagonist Aufidius, and the fickle audience that “with every minute [does] change a mind” (*Cor* I.i.180). Coriolanus has the reputation (soldier extraordinaire), the patrician prestige, the courage (“all alone Martius did fight”) (*Cor* II.i.158), the confidence (“thy face bears a command in’t”) (*Cor* IV.v.61), the nobility (“his nature is too noble for the world”) (*Cor* III.i.320), the honorability (“account me the more virtuous that I have not been common in my love”) (*Cor* II.iii.97-98), the good looks (“youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way”) (*Cor* I.iii.8), and the popularity (“I have seen the dumb men throng to see him and/ The blind to bear him speak”) (*Cor* II.i.279-280). So far, in the parts of “warrior” and “dutiful son,” Caius Martius has proven a star. Furthermore, he has just been given a unique ‘stage-name’ for conquering Coriolis to mark his singularity (“aidless” and “[a]lone he entered the mortal gate of th’ city”) (*Cor* II.ii.128,126-127). To make his transformation from Caius Martius (the man who rejoices in martial bravery, named after the god of war) to Coriolanus (the man named after the place—a thing— he conquered) complete, the one jewel missing in Coriolanus’s crown is the consulship.

<sup>120</sup> Or, as Marjorie Garber puts it, Volumnia is “the stage mother to end all stage mothers” (776).

<sup>121</sup> Virgilia appears to have retreated into silence and forsaken language before Coriolanus does. Upon meeting her and throughout the play, the audience must wonder if Virgilia’s “gracious silence” (*Cor* II.i.74) is truly gracious, or if it is a coping mechanism. The few times she speaks, people brush over her. Virgilia’s silence is so pronounced that it appears to be a way of rejecting the part her society expects her to play. She does not fit into Roman war-culture with a masculine honor-code measured in blood spilled. Her society appears to have silenced her more so than she chose the part of “gracious silence” (II.i.74).



Regrettably, to assume the part of consul, Coriolanus lacks the political language of “artifice and social grace” (Garber 780): “I cannot bring my tongue to such a pace” (*Cor* II.iii.50-51); “When blows have made me stay, I fled from words” (II.ii.85). Enter: “the dragon.”<sup>122</sup> The talent manager/acting-coach/agent/publicist/casting-director/director, and the mother of public relations and politics, Volumnia, whose sheer name is “a spell, you see, of much power”<sup>123</sup> (*Cor* V.ii.100). As long as Coriolanus keeps playing the part of silent warrior, his charisma is god-like: “as if that whatsoever God that leads him/ Were slily crept into his human powers” (sic) (*Cor* II.i.226-227). While Coriolanus claims he is content with his warrior-star-status,<sup>124</sup> it is his mother who sees “one thing wanting” (*Cor* II.i.205), namely for her son to be “cast” (II.i.206) in the pre-eminent position of Roman consul. As the First Citizen points out: Coriolanus follows fame “to please his mother” (*Cor* I.i.29-30), who “to a cruel war [had] sent him, from where he returned his brows bound with oak” (*Cor* I.iii.12-13). As Brutus confirms, Coriolanus is the ‘shooting-star’ on his way up into a godly realm: “Fame, at the which he aims/ In whom already he’s well graced, can not/ Better be held nor more attain’d than by/ A place below the first” (*Cor* I.i.278-281). “Volumnia has cast her son in the dashing role of Soldier. Now she wants to recast him” (Skura 194): “To have my praise for this, perform a part/ Thou hast not done before” (*Cor* III.ii.109-110). To gain his mother’s acclaim, Coriolanus is to transform from a brutish soldier into a social “gilded butterfly”<sup>125</sup> (*Cor* I.iii.61) with wings of politic persuasion. However, the

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<sup>122</sup> Menenius compares Coriolanus to a dragon: he has grown from caterpillar to butterfly, then “from man to dragon” (cf. *Cor* V.iv.13). The real dragon, as I will show, is Volumnia. She is the politician in the family, not Coriolanus. As a woman, Volumnia may only live such a career vicariously through her son. She is the stereotype of the modern stage-mother: her own desires are frustrated, so she revels in the reflected glory of her son. “Volumnia identifies vicariously with her war hero” (Greenblatt *Norton* 1233).

<sup>123</sup> I appropriated a quote referring to Menenius to Volumnia because, in her case, it is not an insult but true. Menenius, an eloquent patrician Roman whose main power lies in his language skills has to learn the hard way that, in war, individual names lose all power. The Volscian soldiers strip Menenius of his power by stripping him of his name. I will elaborate on the importance of names below.

<sup>124</sup> Coriolanus tells his mother in respect to consulship: “Know, good mother/ I had rather be their servant in my way/ Than sway with them in theirs” (*Cor* II.i.202-206). The First Citizen states that “soft-conscienced men can be/ content to say it was for his country he did it to/ please his mother and to be partly proud” (I.i.27-30). It is likely that Coriolanus aims high solely for the sake of his mother and because of the way she raised him. Volumnia points out that Coriolanus inherited his courage from her, but not his pride: “Thy valiantness was mine [...] But owe thy pride thyself” (*Cor* III.ii.153-154). She takes credit for her son’s courage, and shrewdly disowns his negative character trait, pride.

<sup>125</sup> The tragic irony of the butterfly-motif is that the moment Coriolanus transforms from an unfeeling ‘thing’ into a feeling—is it mercy or fear of his mother?—human being, he is torn apart in the manner Young Martius had torn apart the butterfly he was ‘playing with’. The moment Coriolanus surrenders to his filial bond, he becomes as fragile as Young Martius’s butterfly.

difference between the skill-set of a soldier and the one of a politician<sup>126</sup> could not be vaster, and Rome's tough plebeian audience—the fickle, “cowardly” “rabble,” “the beastly plebeians” with herd-mentality, the monstrous “multitude,” the “Hydra,” the “common cry of curs” (*Cor* I.i.204,220;II.i.94-95;III.iii.11;III.i.121;III.iii.147)—demands Coriolanus “audition” for the part of politician first.

### To Speak or Not to Speak

A soldier relies on direct orders (words) resulting in actions. A politician relies on words to result in votes and popularity. Politics *is* language.<sup>127</sup> The art of speaking is debate, “manipulation, obfuscation, compromise” (Garber 792), persuasion and power to a politician. A soldier has no use for artificial language or social grace, whereas the politician's career depends on both. Coriolanus identifies himself as a Roman patrician soldier whose actions on the battlefield ought to speak for themselves. He refuses to stoop to the level of a lowly actor-for-hire who needs to sell<sup>128</sup> himself to the plebeian audience: “Must I with base tongue give my noble heart/ A lie that it must bear” (*Cor* III.ii.121-122); must he “mountebank [the plebeians'] loves/ [and] [c]og their hearts,” Coriolanus asks in disgust and perplexity (cf. *Cor* III.ii.157-159). As did Hamlet, Coriolanus questions if he is “to play or not to play, to speak or not to speak, to stoop or not to stoop.” In short, he asks if he must play a part he does not want to play. The resounding affirmative from his pragmatic stage mother and diplomatic handlers, and their promise to cue him—“Come, come, we'll prompt you” (*Cor* III.ii.128)—through all his public appearances, is not enough to eradicate the antitheatrical stigma Coriolanus has internalized. As did Hamlet, Coriolanus refuses to “seem.” Unlike Hamlet, however, who is guided by his self-awareness, introspection, philosophical

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<sup>126</sup> Cominius balances both, the part of general and politician. His political finesse and oratory, however, are inconceivable in Coriolanus's case. At the same time, Cominius does not match Coriolanus's fearlessness in war.

<sup>127</sup> In Rudyard Kipling's words from his speech “Surgeons and the Soul” of 1923: “Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind. Not only do words infect, egotize, narcotize, and paralyze, but they enter into and color the minutest cells of the brain” (Kipling 223). Menenius and Cominius are aware of the power of words. Coriolanus does not understand the power of words at all. When he is supposed to speak, he does not. When he ought to keep silent, he says too much and offends everyone.

<sup>128</sup> Coriolanus “regards such politicking among the commons as unworthy” (Garber 784). However, much of politics, as stated above, is show business. And show business is not a misnomer: it is not show ‘art’, but involves business and salesmanship. A candidate, just like an actor, has to sell himself to the public. And, as Shakespeare must have been intimately aware, popularity votes and ‘box office’ numbers matter.

thinking, empathy, and the skill to share himself with a select few (Horatio and the audience), Coriolanus has no such sophistication. One of Coriolanus' few insights is that he will not be able to pull off the part he is asked to play: "You have put me now to such a part which never/ I shall discharge to the life" (*Cor* III.ii.126-127). However, he does not 'act' on that insight and, instead, robot-like, is ruled by his mother's ambition. Moreover, he believes that he is in a position where he does not need "to play" the politician's part, or any part for that matter. Coriolanus thinks it is enough "to be" who he is. He arrogates to himself a god-like attitude and altitude that maintains that his character transcends representation, that it merely 'is'.

The play, as an attempt to portray a character who believes he "passeth show," is highly experimental but problematic. Coriolanus is a theatrical cypher. The play's text is innovative in attempting to capture the reality of people's inaccessible interior. Coriolanus denies the audience all satisfaction of knowing him. As a consequence, all the power is given to the actor performing the part of Coriolanus. If the audience likes him, they will like the play. The actor's humanity, interpretation, and subtext dictate the satisfaction the play as a whole brings to the audience. *Coriolanus* runs the risk<sup>129</sup> of the audience demanding: "Wilt thou leave [us] so unsatisfied" (cf. *R&J*.II.ii.125). From the actor's perspective, it is his duty to redeem the character. Such a responsibility is no small feat during a time period in which people were at best suspicious of actors, and at worst hostile towards them. On the metatheatrical level, however, *Coriolanus* is problematic because there is a conflict between the play's portrayal of a leader who will "not play" and dies tragically, and a lead actor who is, of course, "playing," and usually successfully. The latter aspect defends and redeems the player, but it, arguably, diverges from the greater meaning of the play as a whole about the dire consequences of "not playing" and not speaking. The audience is mislead into thinking they know who Coriolanus is, whereas really, they do not. Not even Coriolanus knows who he is.

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<sup>129</sup> *Coriolanus* works, arguably, solely because of its lead actor. In a way, the textual risk the play takes is lost on the audience. The play's text is, arguably, not compelling: Its protagonist rejects the audience by denying the idea of character as something that can be known. He is the thing itself. Hamlet initially makes a similar argument ("passeth show"), but neither does he reject the audience nor does he claim that he merely "is." Coriolanus is either read as a noble, sacrificial figure, or as arrogant aristocrat or tyrant. All interpretations are audience reactions not to the play, but to its lead actor. *Coriolanus*, if meant as an experiment to show "that within which passeth show" fails because the actor has to show (to play).

### I Play the Man I Am

The only part Coriolanus is willing to play—in an ‘act’ of concession after his banishment—is the part of himself: “Rather say I play the man I am” (*Cor* III.22.13-14). The problem with Coriolanus’ statement is that it is “richly ambiguous” (Garber 794). Certainly Coriolanus refers to his contempt for acting and artifice, but he also chooses the word “play,” which implies that he is, and always has been, playing a part. If he needs to act at all, the only part he can play is the one of a personality actor, not a character actor. Since his performance of the part of “Roman patrician soldier” was flawless, Coriolanus identified with it so completely that he overlooked the fact that his mother, in the manner of a modern agent and casting-director, had ‘type-cast’ him in said part: Coriolanus “really is Volumnia’s puppet” (Skura 194), and he believes his self<sup>130</sup> to be innately fixed in the part of “Caius Martius Coriolanus, Roman patrician soldier.” In what Volumnia “regards a harmless little scenario” (Garber 792), she attempts to explain life’s theatricality<sup>131</sup> to Coriolanus: “If it be honor in your wars to seem/ The same you are not [...] how is it less or worse/ That it shall hold companionship in peace” (*Cor* III.ii.60-63). If Coriolanus sees fit to mislead the enemy in war, why can not he bring himself to do the same in peace, Volumnia pithily asks her son. “She reminds him coldly that he has been acting all along, and that he has not been doing a very good job” (Skura 194). What Volumnia is telling her son is that, if he does not like the audience, all he has to do is ‘act’. Volumnia, vicariously well-versed in the ways of the world ranging from battlefield to politics, portrays the demanded role-shift as a hop, skip, and a jump: Just kneel before the people because they see before they hear, she implores him, “for in such business/ Action is eloquence, and the eyes of the ignorant/ More learned than the ears” (*Cor* III.ii.93-95). Since Coriolanus is not

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<sup>130</sup> “Overstated differences—between patrician and plebeian, Roman and Volscian, male and female, man and boy—are the principles upon which Coriolanus has established his own sense of identity. Pride, contempt, and anger, like aggression, reinforce and clarify the boundaries of the self, marking it [...] off from those whom one despises and conquers. [The problem with such a construct of the self is that] to distinguish oneself from other people [...] one must rely on them” (cf. Greenblatt *Norton* 1233).

<sup>131</sup> It is not clear if Volumnia is attempting to force her son into a part that she knows he will never grow into, which would be living a daily lie (a social act). It is more likely that Volumnia, as did the Renaissance Puritans, believes that by repeatedly living a lie, the new part of politician will become ‘second nature’ to Coriolanus. Stella Adler says: “The lie must become the truth in [the actor’s] hand” (Adler 140), and “the worst thing an actor can do is [fake it]. [...] [The actor] ha[s] to understand [the dramatic text] completely” (Adler 35). Coriolanus, however, is *not* an actor. Neither does he understand his own dramatic text and context, nor does he have the technique to transform himself.

eloquent, Volumnia deftly attempts to direct her son to use supplicant gestures. However, she raised a soldier, not a politician, and “her proposal that he display his worthiness and manliness to the people [violates] every rule and law of honesty to which he has heretofore been trained” (cf. Garber 792).

Consequently, Coriolanus stumbles through his ensuing ‘acts’ with the grace of a somnambulist crossing a busy intersection, resulting in an inevitable ‘crash and burn’. At times Coriolanus behaves as though—in an extreme form of metatheatricality—he were a Renaissance Puritan that had been plucked off the streets of London, forced onto the early-Republic-arena-stage of Rome,<sup>132</sup> and coerced ‘to act’ at the threat of his soul’s eternal damnation. So violent and hysterical are Coriolanus’s outbursts at having ‘to act’ during initially amiable moments of confrontation with the plebeian audience that Volumnia keenly observes: “You might have been enough the man you are/ With striving less to be so” (*Cor* III.ii.23-24). While Coriolanus appears to have internalized the antitheatricalist’s acting stigma, his defiant ‘acts’ of ‘non-acting’, and his overblown rejection of praise<sup>133</sup> are so disproportionate that they prove, instead, the value of acting. He refuses to see that self-representation is self-preservation within society, particularly within politics. Only a man whose self is not as fixed as he thinks, would overcompensate, would ‘over-act’ the part of anti-actor to the extent Coriolanus does. To play a role, one must be in touch with one’s humanity and identity<sup>134</sup>—one’s main individual characteristics built over time—so to delve into another person. *Coriolanus*, as does *Hamlet*, is “arguably positing that actual human identity [...] is inherently

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<sup>132</sup> In *Coriolanus*, the early-Republic-Rome has striking similarities with Renaissance England in its anxieties over monarchical power and questions of rulership: In the play, King Tarquin has just been overthrown. At the time of writing the play, James I was ruling too absolutely for the English parliament; early-Republic-Rome reveals chaos over who should rule and with how much power. Metatheatrically speaking, *Coriolanus* takes place within the historical context of three stages: its early-Republic-Roman context, the context during the writing of the play, and the context during the performance of the play (cf. Garber 777). The latter has been made to fit many historical and political circumstances.

<sup>133</sup> Cominius observes that Coriolanus’s terror in the face of praise equals someone on a suicide mission: “If ‘gainst yourself you be incensed” (*Cor* I.ix.63). Coriolanus is as afraid of praise as he is of acting: “[M]y mother, [...] when she does praise me grieves me” (*Cor* I.ix.16-18). Likely, he fears his mother’s praise because it was random, as the praise of a stage-mother is wont to be.

<sup>134</sup> The popular notion that actors have unstable identities is contrived. To play another person means to use one’s own humanity and to have a heightened knowledge of oneself. The actor must be firm in their beliefs about their identity so they can transcend them. It takes skill, timing, and constant monitoring to separate the mask from the face. Actors must let themselves be affected and enriched by their work without losing themselves in it. At times, it is a tight-rope walk, hence technique is vital. To quote acting-coach Tony Greco: “If [an actor] really decide[s] to go where these great roles will take [them], then [they] come out of them a changed person. [They] come out of them different because ... when an audience sees a great role, it should make them question their own lives. And when an actor takes on a great role, it should make them question their lives. They change” (*The Atlantic* 2014).

theatrical; like the effect of subjectivity in the theatre, both are formed through transaction with an audience” (Ormsby 8). Hamlet eventually decides “to play,” and he employs profoundly philosophical soliloquies to perform a positive transaction with the audience. Coriolanus, on the other hand, absolutely refuses “to play.” Because he lacks interiority, the possibility of constructing a stable identity through playing—the way Hamlet does—remains closed to him. He rejects the part, and, as a consequence, his identity slips: he forsakes his patriotic ties to Rome and goes from soldier to mercenary, from Roman to Volscian, from ‘thing’<sup>135</sup> to ‘nothing’, from god<sup>136</sup> to outcast.

### What’s In a Name

Even when his foremost enemy cannot identify him when he stands in front of him does Coriolanus realize that he does not transcend representation. Aufidius, with whom Coriolanus has shared numerous intimate single combat moments, does not recognize him because the latter is dressed like a pauper. Aufidius has to ask Coriolanus for his name six times—“thy name” (*Cor* IV.v.50,51,56,59,62,65) before Coriolanus finally gives it to him, but not before reprimanding Aufidius that he ought to “think me for the man I am” (*Cor* IV.v.52-55). Aufidius is supposed to be able to recognize Coriolanus dressed like a beggar, in enemy territory, and at a private gathering he was not invited to; and Aufidius ought to recognize him muffled in a scarf, without words (“[w]hy speaks’t not? speak, man”) or actions, just for ‘being’ there. Later on, Aufidius marvels out loud about what caused Coriolanus’s belief that he transcends all representation: “whether ’twas pride/ [...] whether defect of judgment/ [...] or whether nature/ Not to be other than one thing” (cf. *Cor* IV.vii.39,41,43-44). The man who insists on not

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<sup>135</sup> Coriolanus is repeatedly referred to as a “thing” to mark his singularity, but also his inhumanity. He cannot relate to others. He also cannot see himself from any other perspective but his own. He is a “thing” that cannot take on a role, because to do so, he would need empathy. “He was a thing of blood” (II.ii.125) says Cominius when he describes Coriolanus on the battlefield. Aufidius calls his enemy Coriolanus: “Thou noble thing” (IV.v.120). “He leads them like a thing,” says Cominius about Coriolanus leading the Volscian troops (IV.vi.115). Coriolanus is “more than a creeping thing” (V.iv.14); he is “a thing made for Alexander. What he bids be done is finished with his bidding” (V.iv.24-26). Even Coriolanus says “I seem unnatural” (V.iii.94).

<sup>136</sup> Apart from being referred to as a “thing,” Coriolanus is often referred to as a god. Both “thing” and “god” are non-human: “as if that whatsoever god who leads him/ Were slily crept into his human powers” (sic) (II.i.226-227); “You speak o’ th’ people/ As if you were a god to punish” (III.i.103-104), says Brutus to Coriolanus; “He is their god” (IV.vi.115), says Cominius; “thou Mars,” exclaims Aufidius (IV.v.122); Coriolanus “wants nothing of a god but/ Eternity and a heaven to throne in” (V.iv.26-27); Coriolanus is “as though he were son and heir to Mars” (IV.v.193-194).

acting, who only wishes “to be,” does not demonstrate any kind of self-knowledge or sympathy: Coriolanus is a “thing” until his mother kneels before him and brings out (some of) his humanity in Act V. He tells Aufidius, after six prompts, that his name is “Caius Martius/ [...] My surname Coriolanus<sup>137</sup>/ [...] only that name remains” (IV.v. 66,69,75), to which Aufidius politely replies “O Martius, Martius!/ [...] noble Martius/ [...] Thou noble thing/ [...] Worthy Martius/ [...] most absolute sir” (*Cor* IV.v. 104,110,120,130, 140). At almost perfectly timed (and lined) intervals, Aufidius, the host, tells Coriolanus (his guest, petitioner, and enemy in exile) that he would rather call him a “noble thing” (IV.v.120) than ever refer to him by his “stol’n name Coriolanus of Corioli” (*Cor* V.vi.105-106). Coriolanus never takes the hint, and in a final act of hubristic self-sabotage, he reminds Aufidius and the Volscians just why he is called “Coriolanus:” “I flutter’d your Volscians in Corioli: Alone I did it. Boy!” (*Cor* V.vi. 133-135). Honesty may be a virtue, but delivering it without tact, the way Coriolanus does again and again, is arrogant and cruel. As his audience’s reaction proves each time, they would have preferred Coriolanus “to act,” and with ‘t’act’.

To Coriolanus, a name is a word, and he always “fled from words” (*Cor* II.ii.85). As is language, names are meaningless to him. As Menenius observes, Coriolanus would even “forget that ever/ He heard the name of death” (*Cor* III.i.325-326). The emphasis on names or the absence of them is crucial in *Coriolanus*. Aufidius’s repeated demands for “thy name” recalls Barnardo’s question of “Who’s there” (*Hamlet*.I.i.1). Coriolanus’s cognomen was bestowed as a title, which he was to “bear [...] nobly ever” (I.ix.72-73). A title is not just an honor, but a responsibility to conduct oneself accordingly, and to treat one’s fellow men compassionately. Moreover, a title is a ‘role’ to be played. The concept of *noblesse oblige* is as foreign to Coriolanus as is the

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<sup>137</sup> “Roman merit, inextricable from social goals and needs, demands an admiring audience. Even while he professes to despise flattery, Coriolanus takes pride in such apparently trivial honorific gestures as the surname that commemorates his victory at Corioles” (Greenblatt *Norton* 1234). To assume the name and title bestowed by a country’s government or leaders means that one is part of that country. And in a way, a title is flattery. Coriolanus reminds of Julius Caesar in this instance. Says Decimus about Caesar: “But when I tell him he hates flatterers,/ He says he does, being then most flattered” (*JC*.II.i.215-216).

concept that names<sup>138</sup> have meaning<sup>139</sup>. When he cannot remember the old Volscian man's name who took him in, he condemns the man to death: "By Jupiter, I forgot" (*Cor* I.ix.102). The fact that the plebeians have no names at all is a sign that they lack power and are insignificant as individuals. They begin with a fragmented group of First, Second and Third Citizen, but eventually they are metonymically classified as "voices." The fact that they are described as a fickle mob may be viewed as a metatheatrically subversive message in respect to volatile and hostile audiences: Twice the play refers to the people as "rabble" in the stage directions (III.i.180; III.i.262). Upon siding with the Volscians and denying his Roman identity, Coriolanus swears off all names and language. He becomes "speechless" (*Cor* V.i.67): "Coriolanus/ he would not answer to: forbad all names; He was a kind of nothing, titleless/ Till he had forged himself a name o' the fire/ Of burning Rome" (*Cor* V.i.12-16).

### The Core of Coriolanus

Stephen Greenblatt calls Coriolanus "perhaps Shakespeare's most opaque tragic protagonist" (Greenblatt *Norton* 1233), which is true in the sense that Coriolanus gives the audience nothing to interpret but the actor playing him. He is hieroglyphic. It is Valeria<sup>140</sup> who sheds insight into Coriolanus's character by describing his son, Young Martius, tearing to pieces a butterfly:<sup>141</sup> "I saw him run after a gilded butterfly: and

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<sup>138</sup> In *Introductory Letters to Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud says: "Words and magic were in the beginning one and the same thing, and even today words retain much of their magical power. With words one man can make another blessed, or drive him to despair; by words, the teacher transfers his knowledge to the pupil; by words the speaker sweeps his audience with him and determines its judgments and decisions. Words call forth effects and are the universal means of influencing human beings" (Freud 7).

<sup>139</sup> Ancient cultures "believed that knowing a name gave a person power. [...] The name was considered so powerful by the ancient Egyptians that the names of enemies were deliberately removed from their tombs and other monuments. [...] The ultimate punishment was to remove someone's name and not replace it, thus condemning them to a second death after physical death" (Webster 10).

<sup>140</sup> Valeria is 'strong', as her name implies. As does Volumnia, she aligns her passion for war in an equally masculine manner. In a Gertrude-like moment, Valeria tells Virgilia—who is terrified her husband may have died in the war—to "cast her nighted color off" (*Hamlet* I.ii.68), to "turn thy solemnness out o'door and go along with us" (*Cor* I.iii.107-108) lest she spoil the celebration of war and wounds.

<sup>141</sup> In the biography *Natasha*, based on the life of actress Natalie Wood, Suzanne Finstad tells the anecdote of the eerily similar, cruel behavior of a stage mother. When a five-year old Natalie Wood was not able to cry on cue on a movie set, her mother Olga "pulled her to the side where no one could see, 'took a live butterfly out of a jar and tore the wings of it.' Tenderhearted Natasha went into hysterics as her mother cried out 'She's ready!' grabbing her by the hand and pushing her in front of the camera. Natasha cried so profoundly, [the director] was moved to write about it later, describing her tears as 'seeming to come from the depth of some divine despair'" (Finstad 38).



when he caught it, he let it go again; and after it again; and over and over he comes, and again; caught it again; or whether his fall enraged him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it; O, I warrant it, how he mammocked it" (*Cor* I.iii.61-66). Valeria finds Young Martius's behavior endearing and admires his "confirmed countenance" (I.iii.60). Volumnia<sup>142</sup> proudly compares Young Martius's determination to tear apart a butterfly to "[o]ne on's father's moods" (*Cor* I.iii.67). However, Young Martius has not single-handedly overpowered a tiger. He has torn apart the most delicate creature in nature after he has repeatedly toyed with it, and he receives praise for it. Encouraging a little boy to act like a "thing" without empathy means to 'direct' him onto a path of cruelty, lack of regard for others, and isolation (both Coriolanus and Young Martius are only children who 'play' alone). Furthermore, it is Young Martius's intemperate violence that has both Valeria and Volumnia agreeing that he is "a noble<sup>143</sup> child," like father like son (*Cor* I.iii.67). Both father and son are named after the god of war ("son/ And heir to Mars") (*Cor* IV.v.192-193), and the Greek gods, Mars in particular, were not known for their humanitarian efforts and humility.

It is with equally cruel irony that Coriolanus<sup>144</sup> should have had a "great ancestor," [by the name of] "Censorinus, nobly named so/ Twice being by the people chosen censor (*Cor* II.iii.262,260-261). It is difficult not to view this detail as a

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<sup>142</sup> While it is easy to view Volumnia as cruel and unnatural in her lack of maternal nurturing, it is imperative to see that, were she a man, her words and actions would be perfectly acceptable within Roman war-culture. Her dressing-down of Brutus and Sicinius is not only comical, but reveals a strong woman with the ability to think like a man. When Sicinius levels the oldest charge of *mankind* at her, namely that "she is mad," and clearly "wants her wits" (IV.ii.14,58), Volumnia is non-plussed. Instead of dignifying the hackneyed, sexist accusation with an angry overreaction that points out that men call a woman mad when she either perplexed or vexed them, Volumnia composedly tells him he is a fool, and to "[t]ake my prayers with you" (*Cor* IV.ii.59). She doesn't fight craven with crazy. Sicinius's rude 'review' of Volumnia's behavior—"Are you mankind"(IV.ii.24)—implies that Volumnia is not acting ladylike, that she is not 'playing her part right'. Even then, Volumnia's feathers remain unruffled. Only after the tribunes scatter—after she has "told them home" (*Cor* IV.ii.64)—does she explode into curses. It is at this moment that Volumnia demonstrates her grace under fire: She is a self-composed politician and leader. It is latter composure her son lacks. He loses his temper without foresight of the consequences, whereas his mother knows how and when to choose her battles.

<sup>143</sup> "In Shakespeare's rendering, valor in battle seems less a 'Roman' than a distinctively aristocratic trait, exercised and uniquely cherished by the patrician class" (Greenblatt *Norton* 1231). *Coriolanus* shows both the glorification of valor in battle while questioning it at the same time.

<sup>144</sup> Coriolanus, as does Cordelia, has at its root the Latin word for "heart." Both characters act from the heart when they ought to be acting from the head. Cordelia refuses to describe her love for her father because she believes it to be an unnecessary and purely theatrical 'act'. Coriolanus refuses to "speak fair" the people, because he believes it to be a purely theatrical and deceitful 'act'. Both refuse to play their parts within their society and are punished with death. As honorable and honest as Coriolanus's and Cordelia's 'acts' of defiance may be, their audience demonstrates that they would have preferred a ritual 'act' over the lack of an 'act'.

metatheatrical inside-joke<sup>145</sup> that gives the audience a not-so-subtle-hint that Coriolanus's intemperate violence in both speech and action might have benefited from his great-ancestor's censorial skills. Hence, names and language are not just meaningful, but they are "the index of humanity" (Garber 792). And, "to play" takes great humanity and self-awareness, both of which Coriolanus does not have. At core, Coriolanus is not just a bad character-actor, he is also a bad personality-actor. His identity shifts from "Roman patrician soldier" to a character who seeks fame through revenge, and who seeks identity in a name (conqueror of Rome). To others, he appears like a god because he himself is, at all times, free of self-doubt, even during moments of utter failure.

Metatheatrically, *Coriolanus* addresses not only the value of the actor, but the need to constantly re-think what is valued by society, in how far, and why. The play is a reflection on acting authentically in an uncertain world made up of a fickle audience: "And here remain with your uncertainty" (*Cor* III.iii.151). Coriolanus feeds into the universal need for certainty in a world of ambiguity. Coriolanus is Caius Martius Coriolanus, patrician Roman soldier: No one else. Coriolanus is certain that acting is bad and base: No need to rethink. Coriolanus's honesty is certain: Most cruelly. Coriolanus is certain he has the solution for all human uncertainty and fickleness: Just kill them. Coriolanus just "is" and transcends representation: No language or names necessary. Coriolanus's vision is certain: Fight for Rome (or the Volscians, or himself, or his mother). Coriolanus is certain about his identity being certain: Certainly; no need for introspection,<sup>146</sup> self-doubt or second-guessing: "To be or not to be" - asked no Coriolanus, ever (*Hamlet* III.i.57). And in the end, all of Coriolanus's certainty does not just collapse like a house of cards, but is literally torn apart into fragments; he dies at the cost of "not playing:" "Cut me to pieces, Volscies" (V.vi.130). And these fragments

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<sup>145</sup> Another metatheatrical inside-joke is made when Cominius, in his speech about Coriolanus's heroism, says: "When he might act the woman in the scene" (II.ii.112), referring to Coriolanus's youth. This line interrupts the moment and draws attention to Coriolanus being, after all, an actor on a Renaissance stage, who, in his youth, may have been cast as a woman. The line also prompts the audience to think about acting in general. The point the play repeatedly makes is that Coriolanus does not just reject acting, but he actually cannot do it at all, not even under the direst circumstances. As base as society considered the acting profession, *Coriolanus* underscores that it is not all that easy to be a good actor.

<sup>146</sup> "Coriolanus does not merely happen to be inflexible and narrow-minded; too much tolerance, too much sensitivity, would endanger him to the *core*. So would *introspection*, which might reveal an unwelcome complexity within. [Coriolanus] is not inclined to reflect upon his own motives either in conversation or alone" (cf. Greenblatt *Norton* 1233 *emphases mine*).

leave the audience questioning all their assumptions about acting and playing parts. The core to Coriolanus: there is no core.

Silence Is the Language of God<sup>147</sup>

Coriolanus absolutely rejects language as artifice. He does not see that language is the gift of the living that allows them to express themselves to others, to be heard and remembered. To use language and its subtext can be a most sincere form of expressing oneself authentically. “To play” can be a genuine path into people’s hearts. “Playing” is not, the play repeatedly appears to emphasize, automatically a form of deceit or a cheap trick. There are various forms of language and playing, and they are not created equal. To use language truthfully, “to play” authentically can be a heartfelt means of expressing what otherwise remains unexpressed, and as a consequence, is often misread—the way Coriolanus is misread throughout the entire play. However, Coriolanus cannot overcome his contempt for the people’s need for a performance: “I would not buy/ Their mercy at the price of one fair word” (*Cor* III.iii.113-114). He refuses to flatter the people and show off his battle wounds to them: “Show them the uncaring scars which I should hide” (*Cor* II.ii.174). Scars are private and intimate. Coriolanus feels as though he would be standing “naked” (II.ii.159) in front of an audience for whom his vulnerability and scars are entertainment. To have the people “put [their] tongues into those wounds” (II.iii.6-7), as the Third Citizen puts it, sounds at best deviant, at worst, like rape.<sup>148</sup> Coriolanus does not wish to “hear [his] nothings [his actions and scarred body] monster’d [performed in a debasing manner] (cf. II.ii.92), just like Hamlet feels about the First Player’s performance: “Is it not monstrous” (*Hamlet*.II.ii.510). Coriolanus says that the entire performance in front of

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<sup>147</sup> “Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation” (Rumi). Or more specifically tailored to Coriolanus: Silence is the language of God *only*. On earth, we must use language, and use it judiciously. Coriolanus included. Even Jesus used language. He used parables to express messages expertly.

<sup>148</sup> As mentioned earlier in respect to *Hamlet*, there is a fear behind the antitheatricalism of Coriolanus that public ‘performance’ is a physical (tongues in wounds) and spiritual assault (“possess me some harlot’s spirit”-III.ii.135) on the body and the soul; a fear of giving away—or better, selling—one’s soul. Both *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus* reveal that performance is relevant, but they also reveal a deep-seated fear of losing one’s soul to an unworthy audience: “is it not monstrous” (*Hamlet* II.ii.510); “to hear my nothings monster’d” (*Cor* II.ii.92). To use a contemporary analogy: The way certain indigenous peoples (e.g. Native Americans) used to believe, and still do, that a photograph can steal their soul, so do Hamlet and Coriolanus fear that a cheap performance chips away at something sacred. To them, such soul-larceny means giving up or ‘monsterring’ a part of themselves that ought to remain distinctly private.

the people “is a part/ That [he] shall blush in acting, and might well/ Be taken from the people (II.ii.170-171). Coriolanus wishes to “o’erleap that custom” of prostituting himself to the people altogether: “Away my disposition, and possess me/ Some harlot’s spirit” (III.ii.134-135).

Anything to do with performing in front of an audience to Coriolanus is unmanly: “my throat of war be turn’d [...] into a pipe/ Small as a eunuch, or the virgin voice/ That babies lulls asleep” (III.ii.135-138). Such performances are for “knaves” with “a beggar’s tongue,” and he will not succumb to such “inherent baseness,” “[I]est [he] surcease to honor [his] own truth” (*Cor* III.ii.138,140,146,144). However, Coriolanus never succeeds at communicating what exactly his “own truth” (III.ii.144) *is*, all he does is condemn what it *is not*. He rejects acting, he resents praise, he despises the people, and he won’t perform according to custom. Coriolanus is “a man whose characteristic gesture is violently to resist whatever he perceives to be outside himself. [...] Battle is Coriolanus’s model for identity formation, and his ideal self is like an impermeably walled city” (Greenblatt *Norton* 1233), a fortress-like “thing.” He is silent about what exactly he would like to be<sup>149</sup> or do: He says he is “constant” (I.i.247), that he is always what he is (cf.I.i.236), that he would rather be the patricians’ “servant” (II. 208), but he never specifies what this means: “The striving for autonomy depends on the existence of something set off against, beside, or below it” (Greenblatt *Norton* 1233), otherwise it is arrogance<sup>150</sup> and alienation. Besides, as Sicinius says, “the people must have their voices; neither will they bate/ One jot of ceremony” (II.ii.162-164). The people want a performance and will insist upon it.

Menenius—who often sounds like a contemporary publicist overtaken with his client—gently urges Coriolanus to honor the ritual of ceremony the way his predecessors did: “fit you to the custom” (II.ii.166). However, Coriolanus finds that:

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<sup>149</sup> Coriolanus says: “I had rather be their servant in my way,/ Than sway with them in theirs” (II.i. 208-209), but he cannot go back to being a soldier at this stage. Coriolanus’s line almost sounds like an inversion of what later became Lucifer’s famous quote from *Paradise Lost*: “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (*PL*, Book I, Milton). Both statements incur a kind of cosmic warfare in that they attempt to re-write the Original Artist’s script. It is clear what Lucifer wants: to reign over all instead of God. It is, however, unclear how Coriolanus wishes to serve at this point.

<sup>150</sup> “The superior is always dependent on the inferior, the inside on the outside, the civilized on the barbarian, the patrician on the plebeian, the performer on the audience, the man on the woman and on the boy, even while the ‘upper’ term prides itself on its difference from its subordinate” (Greenblatt *Norton* 1234). Actors instinctively know that they need the audience. To share any idea or value with another, there must be a give and take, a giver and a taker—and the roles may be reversed. Coriolanus believes he is an island who needs no one. He needs no speech, no performance, not even a public gesture to communicate who he is, but even the war hero needs an audience.

“Better it is to die, better to starve/ Than crave the hire” of a custom he feels is monstrous (cf. II.iii.113-115). Even Menenius loses his patience with Coriolanus after the latter repeatedly derails all of Menenius’s, Volumnia’s, and Cominius’s efforts to direct him to success: “Could he not speak ‘em fair” (III.i.330), could Coriolanus not have given the people what they wanted and sweet-talked them, Menenius asks in sheer consternation over Coriolanus’s inflexibility. The paternal Menenius seems to wonder whether Coriolanus is stubborn, proud, naive or simply obtuse. After all, Menenius and Cominius are expert story-tellers. They know how to entertain, instruct, and calm down an audience. They know it is necessary “to play,” and they know that “to play” does not automatically mean “to deceive.” Menenius and Cominius are aware that a performance is what the people want, and that the ritual of it is what they need.

Menenius must have empathy for the people to tell them a fable when they are mutinous. Cominius must be in touch with his fickle audience when he tells them the heroic story of Coriolanus’s battlefield achievements. It takes skill to move the people. Cominius shows great self-awareness by beginning his speech with a self-deprecating: “I shall lack voice” (II.ii.98). Subsequently, he talks for 40 lines (cf. II.ii.98-138). Both Menenius and Cominius have a keen radar for the mood of the people, and both patricians are articulate and employ language to persuade. In Menenius’s opinion, his question of “could [Coriolanus] not speak [the people] fair” (III.i.330) is not sinister in spirit. Similarly, to Volumnia, her request that Coriolanus speak to the people “not by [his] own instruction/ Nor by the matter which your heart prompts you/ But with such words that are but rooted in/ Your tongue” (III.ii.68-71) is ‘innocent’. Coriolanus, however, views his mother’s and Menenius’s command to “speak the people fair” as an unethical, “monstrous” command for him to lie. From Volumnia’s and Menenius’s perspective, “speaking the people fair” is not lying, but “playing along,” or better, sharing with them one’s thoughts in an important decision that affects them. They perceive it not only as self-preservation, but also as a performative part of life that the people, and society in general, demand. They know that one must bend so not to break, and that “not playing” is a form of social suicide. In Coriolanus’ case, “not playing” turns out to be actual suicide.

### Role-Play, Perspective, and Empathy

At this point, *Coriolanus* becomes intimately metatheatrical, and philosophically complex. If Coriolanus' identity truly were innate and fixed, his dread of 'playing a part', of being "[f]alse to [his] nature" (*Cor* III.ii.17) might be justified. However, Coriolanus was not born "[t]he man that [he] is (III.ii.17-18). Neither was he born a great soldier, nor was he born with the belief that playing a role was taboo. In fact, most children revel in role-play, which is, after all, a social activity. Not only does it teach social skills, but it also challenges a child to empathize with others. It teaches the most important acting rule Stella Adler advocates: "[A]cting is not about you" (Adler 9). Role-play teaches a child to respect others, to listen to them, to see the world through another's eyes, and to see themselves through the eyes of another: "The actor has to have perspective" (Adler 10). Moreover, to respect others teaches self-control. Arguably, role-play with friends may have been a better strategy to teach Coriolanus the cooperative skill set to become a politician. The play repeatedly states how singular and unique Coriolanus is. However, the play also emphasizes how alone and isolated he is. Encouraging an only child to play by himself and tear apart dainty creatures does not teach boundaries. It slowly builds habits that have been informed by culture and society. The fact that the part of "warrior" resonates more with Coriolanus than the part of "politician" is likely because he has been shaped by a culture that finds meaning in war and that is informed by a masculine honor-code. Coriolanus may have some innate proclivities toward fighting over speaking because the uncivilized qualities in him were fostered for years, whereas the civilized ones are meant to spring up over night. "Roman soldier," nonetheless, remains a "part" as proven by Coriolanus's quick loss of it. Moreover, not being able to play another part but "the man that I am" (III.ii.18) does not mean the first part was Coriolanus' fixed identity. It just means that Coriolanus is inflexible, and a "dull actor" (V.iii.44).

Coriolanus' insistence that "to play" is degenerate ("teach [his] mind/ A most inherent baseness") is certainly not an innate aversion, but a societally transferred stigma. In fact, Coriolanus does not seem to grasp that he is already playing a part in life, and therefore, looking down on another 'act' and 'part' is hypocritical. If he only resisted the distasteful entertainment aspect of acting, such as having to show his scars

to the people, his rejection of acting would be intelligible. However, Coriolanus resists even sincere forms of representation, as his behavior at Aufidius's home shows. He truly believes he does not have to explain himself in any way, and people ought to recognize him by his godly 'aura'. He would rather be a "thing of nothing" (cf. *Hamlet*.IV.ii. 26-28) than enter into his community and accept its foremost means of communication: language. Instead, he denies all names, words, language and cuts all ties to his family and community, which de-humanizes him even more than when he was out on the battlefield. Hamlet eventually embraces role-play, which helps him crystallize his identity, his duty and part in life. Coriolanus, by rejecting all parts, loses himself in a mire of identities. The first role he thought he identified with absolutely, the Roman Soldier, is also the first one to go. Coriolanus seeks "a world elsewhere" only to realize that the same societal rules apply there. "Who is there," in Coriolanus, is never quite made clear. The audience is given an outline of Coriolanus, but the core of him is, indeed, "opaque," and left to the interpretation of the actor playing him and the audience watching him, giving, once more, great power to the actor's subtext and the audience's interpretation thereof.

### Be Some Other Name

To separate himself from his former identity, Coriolanus tries to be the "author of himself" (V.iii.38) by creating his own part and name. He has a distinct chance to become independent upon being banished from Rome. During his exile, he could have re-established himself in "a world elsewhere" (III.iii.162), forged a name for himself, lived quietly, or he could have strategically waited for Rome to beg him to return. However, as does Hamlet, Coriolanus chooses revenge over forgiveness, remembrance<sup>151</sup> over oblivion. Unlike Hamlet's decision to seek revenge, however, Coriolanus's is utterly unexamined. He wants to be remembered as the conqueror of Rome. All personal appeals made to him are rebuffed: "Wife, mother, child, I know not" (V.ii.86). Volumnia, however, lives up to her name, which speaks volumes. She is the only one who enters enemy territory with a meaningful strategy, ever ready for improvisation: She appeals to Coriolanus's legacy, to the *name* he means to forge

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<sup>151</sup> As Greenblatt points out as well: "[I]t is impossible for him to retire to a quiet corner of Italy and live out his life in obscurity" (Greenblatt *Norton* 1234).

himself by destroying Rome. She makes it clear to him that there is no fame in a Roman destroying Rome, only infamy: “such a name/ Whose repetition will be dogged with curses” (V.iii.160-161). The fact that it has not occurred to Coriolanus that he, as a Roman, cannot forge himself a name by conquering his home town demonstrates how little introspection he engages in. When Coriolanus initially does not bend to Volumnia’s approach, she deftly switches her strategic gear from language to silent gesture. She bids: “Down, ladies. Let us shame him with our knees” (V.iii.170), publicly.<sup>152</sup> And Volumnia succeeds. Coriolanus “holds her by the hand, silent” (V.iii.198), and he folds despite holding the winning hand. Neither does he choose the name Caius Martius, nor Coriolanus, nor “vanquisher of Rome,” but, as Aufidius is quick to point out, he is still his mother’s “boy”<sup>153</sup> (V.vi.118).

### The Power of Performance

The tragic irony is that Volumnia persuades Coriolanus with the very performance she had instructed him to give earlier for the Roman people: “I prithee now, my son/ Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand; [...] here be with them/ Thy knee bussing the stones—for in such business/ Action is eloquence” (III.ii.91-93). The very ‘performance’ Coriolanus could not bring himself to give proves more powerful than all personal appeals: “Like a dull actor now/ I have forgot my part, and I am out/ Even to a full disgrace,” Coriolanus realizes (V.iii.44-46). So affected is Coriolanus by the ladies’ performance that, for the first time, he gains some self-insight: “O mother, mother/ What have you done? Behold the heavens do ope/ The gods look down, and this unnatural scene/ They laugh at. [Volumnia has] won a happy victory for Rome [that is] most mortal” to Coriolanus (cf. V.iii.199-206). She has made and unmade her son, and

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<sup>152</sup> Tullus Aufidius and other Volscians are watching this ‘scene’, and Aufidius will use it against Coriolanus in the ensuing moments. As was the case in *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus* leaves its characters little to no space for privacy. Public processions, elections, executions, and even private supplications are watched by an audience. There is always some kind of performance going on.

<sup>153</sup> Volumnia, as she has done for all of Coriolanus’s life, tells him who he is when she comes to see him at the enemy camp. Not only are “blood relationships, the ties of the body [...] impossible to disown” for Coriolanus (cf. Greenblatt *Norton* 1236), but he demonstrates once more that he does not really know who he is. The man who is certain about his “self,” really is not. He depends on his mother to guide him toward identity formation.



# Richard III



"I would like to thank  
God,  
my beloved family,  
my late wife Anne,  
my agent Buckingham—  
God rest his soul—  
the great people of  
England, and the  
Hollywood Foreign Press  
for this great honor."

(He cries).

the gods are laughing because the one thing Coriolanus was too proud<sup>154</sup> and prejudiced to do, “to play,” has undone him.

### Chapter III: Was Ever Audience in this Humour Woo'd: *Richard III's* Seduction

#### Pleased to Meet You, Hope You Guess My Name<sup>155</sup>

Hamlet initially rejects his part, and struggles heavily with it. Coriolanus rejects his part absolutely. Richard, however, has cast himself in the part of a lifetime, and he is - to use a befitting colloquial term - “killing it.”<sup>156</sup> From his first appearance on stage in *Richard III*, “solus,” Richard is irresistible, charismatic, seductive, funny, witty, improvisational, and highly entertaining. He is also thoroughly evil, allegedly unattractive, and physically deformed. As if to make up for his physical shortcomings,<sup>157</sup> Richard has become an extraordinary actor:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,  
And cry 'Content!' to that which grieves my heart,

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<sup>154</sup> Prejudice and pride stem from ignorance, which is not only the lack of knowledge, but also a lack of wanting knowledge (a kind of laziness). Prejudice in respect to “playing” is heavily bound up with stigma, the mark of disgrace of actors.

<sup>155</sup> “Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,/ But what’s puzzling you, is the nature of my game” are the first two lines of the Rolling Stones’ lyrics to *Sympathy for the Devil*. The title and lyrics tell their story from the devil’s point of view, which is, arguably, Richard’s. He gives the audience insight into himself through his many soliloquies. The lyrics also hint at the importance of “names” and language.

<sup>156</sup> In contemporary, colloquial entertainment-business language, a great performance by an actor is often referred to as “the actor killing it,” or it is said that “the actor slayed the audience.” *Merriam-Webster* gives two definitions for “to slay:” “to kill violently, wantonly, or in great numbers,” and “to delight or amuse immensely” (*Merriam-Webster*). It is no accident that all these performance-descriptions are of violent nature. Skura adds: “We mowed ‘em down tonight! We laid them in the aisles! We brought down the house! The actor’s goal is a ‘hit’ or, better, a ‘smash hit’” (Skura 14). Skura explains that an actor going on stage is like “a soldier going to battle” because the audience can make or break him (14).

<sup>157</sup> It is Richard who makes this claim: “But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,/ Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;/ I, that am rudely stamped and want love’s majesty [...] And since I cannot prove a lover/ [...] I am determined to prove a villain” (I.i.14-16,28,30). Richard is brilliant at self-representation. Note the obsessive use of “But I, I, I, Why, I” (I.i.14,16,18,24) etc. “Richard is the supreme egotist, and his world is all within himself” (Garber 134). He is also an utterly unreliable soliloquist: “He speaks rhetoric, rather than simple truth, even to himself” (Garber 134). He says, for example, that he “cannot prove a lover,” only to prove one in the very next scene. He also begins by telling the audience a logically-sounding argument: I am not a seducer, I’m not attractive, I am even deformed, the world cheated me out of good looks, dogs bark at me...therefore, I have decided to become a psychopathic villain. There is, of course, no logic in this argument, but Richard is so excited about all the evil fun to be had that the audience is seduced into watching. In a way, after Richard’s first soliloquy, the audience symbolically accepts his ring before Anne does in I.ii.206.

*And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,  
 And frame my face to all occasions [...]  
 I can add colours to the chameleon  
 Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school  
 (3H6.III.ii.182-5,191-93, emphases mine).*

As a child might, Richard bubbles over with excitement at the thought of demonstrating to the audience all his multifaceted acting skills. He uses “*and*” four times, linguistically almost bursting with glee: I can pretend, *and* be whoever you want me to be, *and* entertain you, *and* please you, *and* be nice, *and* be naughty, *and*, *and and*. With great enthusiasm, Richard shares with the audience that he is an actor without scruples. In his first soliloquy, he metatheatrically tells the audience: “I am determined to prove a villain” (I.i.30), *and* “[p]lots have I laid, inductions dangerous [...] I am subtle, false, and treacherous” (I.i.32; 37). Using theatrical terms, he confides in the audience that he will play the part of the villain, and play it to a fault; he is going to act out “plots” he has laid like traps for his gullible victims, and even his prologue (“induction”) is a perilous snare.

Richard baits and hooks the audience by giving them a god-like point of view of the play’s actions, all set into motion by his machinations. Unlike regular people who are always forced to speculate about the truth behind someone’s appearance, Richard offers the audience the privilege of sharing his thoughts with them. He tells the audience exactly what he plans to do, and that he, “like the formal Vice,<sup>158</sup> Iniquity,/ [will] moralize two meanings in one word” (cf. *R3.III.i.82-83*). He will stir the pot, equivocate, provoke, manipulate and commit murders, and he is happy to do it. Moreover, the “audiences invariably appreciate Richard’s power over them” (Skura 64). Unlike the medieval stock-character of “Vice,” Richard unveils layers of depth over the

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<sup>158</sup> “Medieval allegory often involved the personification of moral or psychological abstractions” (Worthen *Wadsworth* 244). Richard refers to a stock character from medieval pageants: “The character called Vice is an inheritance of the medieval morality play: the busy enemy of mankind, the Vice was at once the agent of hell [as Margaret calls Richard ‘hell’s black intelligencer in IV.iv.66] and the tool of divine providence, a master puppet in a play that is not of its own making [...] Shakespeare constructs Richard out of many elements of the Vice tradition: a jaunty use of asides, a delight in sharing his schemes with the audience, a grotesque appearance, a penchant for disguise, a manic energy and humor, and a wickedly engaging ability to defer though not finally to escape well-deserved punishment” (Greenblatt *Norton* 560).

course of the play. His revelations to the audience are shocking, but he imparts them with such manic exuberance that the audience vicariously wants “to play” alongside Richard in his game of thrones. Richard makes the audience an accomplice, and they gladly join him on his trip to hell.

### But What’s Puzzling You, Is the Nature of My Game

In the manner he manipulates other characters, Richard also manipulates the audience. He makes them feel special (as he does Lady Anne and Buckingham), he makes them feel privy to inside information (as he does when he shares with them his secret schemes), and he makes the audience feel smarter than the rest of the “many simple gulls” (R3.I.iii.329) of this world by making them complicit in his plots. In short, Richard appeals to everyone’s vanity, and he demonstrates to the audience that the horrible is never far from the sublime. The audience are the chosen ones who get to look behind the curtain of Richard’s performance, and they savor the pleasure of the entertainment.<sup>159</sup> Richard, the quintessential outcast whom “no creature loves” (R3.V.iii.212) will do anything to make his audience love him: “The twin delusion of love and power fed by the audience’s attention are irresistible” (Skura 13). *Richard III* documents, in theatrical terms, a good actor gone bad. Richard is “this charismatic figure who is both himself an actor and a perfect actor’s medium” (Skura 64), “[who] knows that the actor’s pride lies in moving the audience so as to confirm his own sense of himself” (cf. Skura 153). He begins as a dazzling actor on stage, who, with childlike delight, beckons the audience “to play” with him. However, his lack of empathy for others and his obsessive-compulsive ‘playing up’ to the audience undo him eventually: “[I]t is a paradox of the theatre that the more you do it [act] for the audience, the less

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<sup>159</sup> From the beginning, Richard tells the audience that he is going to play the villain and behave reprehensibly. Through the character of Richard, the play reflects back to the audience something devious about them: As Eric Wilson puts it: “Everyone loves a good train wreck. We are enamored of ruin. The deeper the darkness is, the more dazzling. Our secret and ecstatic wish: Let it all fall down [...] The morbid is ameliorative” (Wilson 8,23). C.G. Jung explained that people are attracted to watching evil, dark, morbid things because they allow them to experience destructive impulses or events without having to undergo them themselves. The theatre, therefore, is and always has been cathartic. It is a place to watch others and let emotions course through us, through them, the actors. In the Dreiserian actor’s sense, that is the actor’s purpose.

they want it”<sup>160</sup> (Adler 174). The moment Richard achieves his goals and loses control over his narcissism, he loses his protean edge, and he loses the audience. The art of acting, as other arts, is “madness controlled and domesticated”<sup>161</sup> (McGinn 31) and an expert seduction. Richard, in respect to acting, walks a fine line between brilliance and madness, between charisma and pure narcissism, and toward the end of the play, he loses all humanity and truly becomes the two-dimensional medieval Vice-character. Until then, however, he casts a spell over the audience that reveals not just the power, but the magic<sup>162</sup> of words.

### Game of Thrones and Mirrors

Richard treats the audience and other characters as mirrors who reflect back to him who he is, and how much he is worth: Such narcissism and neurosis<sup>163</sup> are, of course, anathema to healthy acting: “the actor must surpass his narcissism” (Skura quoting Stanislavski 16). “Acting [...] is to want, to want, and to want again”<sup>164</sup> (Skura quoting Vakhtangov 15). As long as Richard expresses the never-ending longing of the Dreiserian actor, he has the audience spellbound. The allure of Richard lies both in his

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<sup>160</sup> What Adler picks up on in this quote is the fact that performance underlies the same rules as seduction: “If I chase you, you run. If I don’t, you come.” Richard’s seductive performance is exactly what the Puritans were afraid of in actors. Or, put differently, Richard behaves as though he had internalized the stigma of the Renaissance actor and by doing so, is making his audience complicit in watching him.

<sup>161</sup> Colin McGinn makes this point about acting and art in his chapter on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. His overarching point is—as was Stella Adler’s, as was Stanislavski’s—that the moment acting becomes too mad, too self-indulgent, too wayward, it quickly becomes uninteresting” (cf. McGinn 31). Moments of madness may be inspired, and so are moments of “the darker side of artistic creation” (McGinn 31), but pure madness, evil, or narcissism are better in a therapist’s office than on a stage. They are not about the character anymore, but based on ego or psychoses. The artist “must glance between heaven and earth, between ideal and the real, which is imagination’s usual dwelling place” (cf. McGinn 31).

<sup>162</sup> Words and language, in *Richard III*, do not just have power over others, but they create actions out of nothing. Richard’s words animate his desires; they bring to life most of the action of the play. Similarly, Margaret’s curses, in *Richard III* are predictions of what is to come, not, as Buckingham falsely assumes, powerless words made of air (cf. *R3.I.iii.286-287*).

<sup>163</sup> Stella Adler makes a strong point on narcissism and neurosis: “A lot of people think of actors as neurotic. That’s because the actors they are thinking of are bad actors” (Adler 82).

<sup>164</sup> Skura interprets Vakhtangov’s statement as follows: “While most of us find some way to compromise, displace, or deny the pain of longing which early losses leave, actors seem to be driven to assuage the nostalgia for unalloyed love and power through performance—and to be therefore always vulnerable to renewed loss, new wounds” (Skura 14-15). The actor Dreiser describes has an equally bottomless longing within her that the audience relates to very well. “[S]ubjectivity is a wound. Self-consciousness begins with the sense of loss” (Skura quoting Jacques Lacan 18). Stella Adler puts it less cerebrally: “I want you [the actor] to be innocent, wise and ninety-five” (Adler 24), meaning that the actor needs to be able to approach and express losses or longing with a child’s innocence and sensitivity while also being wise enough to know when to let go.

theatrical ease to adapt to every situation like a chameleon, and in his audacity to act out all his desires, no matter how depraved. Acting, to Richard, is a kind of revenge visited on an audience that has always looked down on him. The fact that he revels in that revenge, and that he is in such high spirits seducing his audience makes him magnetic to watch. Richard knows that the actor conspires with the audience to make the story. Both the audience off and on stage have an inkling that Richard is taking them for a ride, but both are lured into going along with him anyway. Buckingham, even more so than Anne, is aware that Richard may not be who he lets on, and that no one truly is “inward with the noble duke” of Gloucester: “We know each other’s faces; for our hearts,/ He knows no more of mine than I of yours,/ Or I of his” (III.iv.8,10-12). *Richard III*, as do *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*, presents the audience with the problem of seeming versus being: the incessant snare of “Who’s There” (*Hamlet*.I.i.i). Buckingham tells Hastings that “other minds are essentially impenetrable, concealed, and unknowable”<sup>165</sup> (McGinn 63), but he still becomes Richard’s wingman, in part, because Richard flatters him so well: “My other self, my council’s consistory,/ My oracle, my prophet, my dear cousin,/ I, as a child, will go by thy direction” (II.ii.150-152).

Richard uses Buckingham as a two-way-mirror: He calls Buckingham “[m]y other self,” while also reflecting back to Buckingham a flattering image of himself. Richard—in the way movie stars would become later—serves as a blank canvas for his audience to project themselves on. What Richard III reflects back to the audience is that they see what is going on, but they relish it: “Everywhere we look, Richard sets up a mirror in which we can see our own flaws writ large upon the stage before us” (Flachmann). Buckingham and Lady Anne are onstage representations of the off-stage audience. Richard seduces them by blindsiding them with flattery. The fact that they do not walk away from him once they become aware that he is thoroughly evil is a reflection on why the audience’s eyes remain glued to Richard: They know he is a transgressor and murderer, but he uses every trick in the seducer’s handbook to keep the audience’s attention and love. And vanity is one of his favorite sins to exploit. Richard

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<sup>165</sup> McGinn elaborates on the point that we are all cyphers to each other: “The mind is ‘hidden’ from everyone except its possessor. No one (except perhaps God) can peer into your mind and discern what is in there. [...] You tell me that your intentions are honorable, but I have to take this on trust. [...] I have to make a transition from [...] a person’s outward behavior [to] his inward states of mind. And this inference is fraught with difficulty: the inference is not just notoriously fallible, but it seems to be structurally flawed, since states of mind are ‘private’ while our outer behavior is ‘public’” (cf. McGinn 63). McGinn’s explanation of the unknowability of another sheds light on an audience’s attraction to a god-like perspective, which *Richard III* offers them.

gives Buckingham the ultimate compliment when he says that he will be guided by him the way a child would. Richard stoops to conquer. He debases himself before Buckingham by fawning over the latter's brilliant leadership skills, knowing all the while that Buckingham is as disposable to him as anyone else.

Richard personifies the highs and lows of the actor's profession: The actor "bore the brunt of the city's ambivalence about theatre. 'His profession has in it a kind of contradiction [...] for none is more dislik'd, and yet none more applauded'" (Skura quoting Earle's 1628 *Micro-Cosmography* 35). No one likes Richard, but he nonetheless enthralls everyone, usually by appealing to their vanity. He is what Skura calls the Elizabethan actor, a "proud beggar" (cf. Skura 29): He knows he has to flatter the audience to get what he wants, but he also resents the audience for making him stoop to it. He knows that only indirections find directions out. He cannot say: "Give me the crown, give me love, give me fame." Instead he knows how to please, *and* fawn, *and* play the fool, *and* humiliate himself, *and* entertain, *and* distract, *and* persuade, *and* improvise, *and* he knows how to make his audience feel as though he enjoys it all, which, for the most part, he does. His language, however, is colored with a taint of bitterness and lack of respect for the rest of the world: He frequently refers to others as fools for believing his performance, and he even mocks their gullibility in respect to his seemingly godly actions. From Richard's point of view, which is portrayed as the devil's point of view,<sup>166</sup> all the other characters deserve his deceit by either asking for it (they want to be lied to and flattered), or by deciding to believe him (they see what they want to see). The world is a virtual 'vanity fair' to Richard, a 'theatrum mundi' or chess game with pieces to move around the board or eliminate. He plays whatever role needed to win the moment, colorful dress-up included: He is "a perfect role player" (Greenblatt *Norton* 557). He is a risk-taking high-stakes-gambler. He is bold, and his sense of humor dances circles around the gallows. However, "his immediate concern is always to

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<sup>166</sup> Richard III may be read as an inside into the devil's point of view, or it may be viewed as Richard representing God's scourge. The interpretation depends heavily on: "I am determined to prove a villain" (*R3.I.i.30*). If "determined" is read as "decided," then Richard's playing the villain is a choice. If "determined" is read as providential—in a Calvinistic understanding of determinism—Richard has no choice but to play the villain.

please—and often to seduce<sup>167</sup>—his present audience. The god Proteus himself was a seducer, but Shakespeare seems to have found the image of player as seducer especially congenial, and to have dwelt on the abjection as well as the power of that position” (Skura 65). Seduction, in its dark meaning, is a pretty word for manipulation, and Richard uses it thusly: to lead astray.<sup>168</sup>

“The Prince of Darkness Is a Gentleman”<sup>169</sup> - “Oh Come Now”<sup>170</sup>

On the page, Richard’s seduction of Lady Anne reads almost impossible. On the stage, however, it has worked like a charm ever since Richard Burbage initiated the part and allegedly received personal invitations from Renaissance ladies to come visit him after the performance, in character, “by the name of Richard III”<sup>171</sup> (Greenblatt *Norton* 557). Marjorie Garber points out that “[w]hen we speak of Shakespeare as anticipating issues and character types in the eras that came after him, we should remind ourselves that the plays, and the high regard for Shakespeare in the centuries following his death, have *created* these ‘modern’ types as much as they have paralleled or predicted them” (Garber 776). Certainly, with *Richard III*, Shakespeare created, or helped create, the character of the “irresistible rake,”<sup>172</sup> which would go on to become a Restoration-era staple on England’s stage. Richard’s ingenious seduction of Lady Anne is a

<sup>167</sup> The fact that Richard is portrayed as a successful seducer may be read as another point in which a text reveals a character who has internalized the antitheatrical stigma of the actor. One of the strongest points made by Renaissance Puritans against actors, if not *the* strongest point, was that they were all seducers and in cahoots with the devil. The Puritans argued that watching a play would lead to lustful thinking and devilish ‘acting’.

<sup>168</sup> The origin of “to seduce” are: Late 15th century “to persuade someone to abandon their duty;” from Latin *seducere*, from *se-* ‘away, apart’ + *ducere* ‘to lead’ (cf. *OED*).

<sup>169</sup> From *King Lear*, Act III, iv, 134. Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, speaks this line to Gloucester and Lear.

<sup>170</sup> Northrop Frye’s quip about the “oh-come-now school of critics” (Calderwood *Metadrama* 3).

<sup>171</sup> Greenblatt quotes a “London law student, John Manningham,” as having recorded in his diary of 1603 “a ribald story” about Richard Burbage and William Shakespeare and a female audience member who asked Burbage to come visit her, in character, after a performance of *Richard III*. Allegedly Shakespeare overheard their conversation and went to visit the lady first—with the clever line that William the Conqueror, historically speaking, came before Richard III, ergo, he ought to have the first ‘turn’ (cf. Greenblatt *Norton* 557).

<sup>172</sup> Richard III arguably cleared the path for literary characters such as Milton’s Lucifer, Frankenstein (and his creature), Dorian Gray, Heathcliff, Mr. Rochester or any Byronic hero. It may even be argued that the character of Richard III was an early literary vampire-archetype. Richard sucks the life out of people and still fascinates the audience in the manner of Dracula, Lord Ruthven, or Lestat. These character-types are “monstrous” either physically or psychologically, and it appears as though their very flaws are their attraction. “Rake,” after all, stems from to “rakehell.”



performance from start to finish. The ‘scene’ is staged by Richard, but the execution demands his best improvisational acting skills. Richard is the epitome of the “player”<sup>173</sup> with its three meanings: he is the perfect actor, a high-stakes-gambler, and a seducer.<sup>174</sup> To him, the three align into winning the scene by going after his objective: “Make the woman whose husband and whose father-in-law I killed fall in love with me.”<sup>175</sup> It is important to understand that the character of Richard III is so alluring both despite his evil tendencies, and because of them: “Through the immense ritualistic power of the morality motif, the characters in *Richard III* undergo a “psychomachia”<sup>176</sup> or “soul struggle” in which the forces of good and evil contend for moral and ethical control of an entire nation” (Flachmann). A strong actor will play the conflict within Richard, not the evil plot: he will “establish a dynamic journey that will be cathartic to play (cf. Chubbuck 200) and watch. Despite his evil doings, the audience will root for Richard if

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<sup>173</sup> The word “player” can mean “actor,” “a person who plays a game,” or, more colloquially and in current usage, “a person and especially a man who has many lovers” (*Merriam-Webster*). Originally, “playboys,” were the young males—usually well-off law students—who attended Renaissance plays. The fact that the quintessential “seducer”-type linguistically evolved out of the quintessential Shakespearean “player” may be accidental, but that is not likely. Certainly, the colloquial phrase “Don’t hate the player, hate the game”—a corruption of St. Augustine’s phrase in *Letter 211* (Aug. Letters 25): “Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum,” made famous by way of Ghandi’s: “Love the sinner but hate the sin”—might have been taken out of Richard III’s rulebook. While the colloquialism postdates Shakespeare by over 400 years, and while the connection cannot be proven, the catchy turn-of-the-phrase’s attempt to absolve a person of all the responsibility for their questionable actions, and instead, blame the system that made them that way, sounds like Richard III’s motto. Furthermore, the current usage of “player” and the catchphrase both involve the idea of the world as a *theatrum mundi*, in which “the game” is the system and all people in it are “merely players” (*AYLI* II.vii.143). In that sense, characters such as Richard III shaped Western literature, linguistics and philosophy.

<sup>174</sup> Chubbuck’s advice on playing a serial killer is most applicable for the seduction scene of Richard and Anne, and for all of *Richard III*: “When playing a serial killer, the act of killing can be compared to a seduction and should be performed that way. [...] [T]hey don’t kill upon contact with their victim. Like a cat with a mouse, there’s the joy of the hunt—playing with his food—before the murder is committed [Richard will eventually kill Anne]. This gives the killer additional power in watching the victim squirm and beg. A serial killer will say and do things that push the buttons of the victim until the victim retaliates with behavior similar to the original abuser. This enables the killer to justify his murder. In the killer’s mind, the victim actually deserves to die” (Chubbuck 234). This advice is enlightening for the actor playing Richard and sheds great light on Richard’s potential psychology. It is, however, problematic for the critic to ascribe—and thereby rationalize and justify—Richard an etiology for his heinous crimes.

<sup>175</sup> Such an objective is a perfect scene-objective for the actor playing Richard: the stakes are high (Richard offers Anne to kill him or for him to kill himself if she does not give in to him), the need is primal (love from Anne and power over her), and the obstacles are severe (Richard’s having killed Anne’s husband and father-in-law in addition to the corpse of the father-in-law being on stage the entire time). Actors are taught to use the highest stakes to win a scene, because, as Ivana Chubbuck emphasizes, audiences can relate to the primal need of a character to win: Richard does “anything in the name of attention and love, because anyone and everyone who is in an actor’s [Richard is an actor playing an actor] general vicinity becomes an instant audience for their award-winning performance of life” (Chubbuck 265).

<sup>176</sup> “Richard III offers many joys to attentive audiences, not the least of which is the opportunity for a spiritual conversion in which the faith of the spectators is strengthened by the very theatricality of evil. As we are seduced by Richard’s obscene lust for power, so too are we edified by his fall from grace” (Flachmann).

he expresses his extreme, but conflicted need to win others over. As a vampire does, he feeds on the love of his audience.

When Lady Anne spits on Richard—a sign of utmost contempt—Richard is not offended or startled in the least. In fact, he appears to thrive on rejection: “Never came poison from so sweet a place” (I.ii.150). Instead of arguing<sup>177</sup> with Lady Anne, Richard allows her to humiliate him. First, he uses false logic and guilt to manipulate her: “your beauty was the cause” (I.ii.125) he killed both her husband and father-in-law; consequently he gaslights her by insinuating that she is deranged for wanting revenge on the man who loves her, namely himself: “It is a quarrel most unnatural/ To be revenged on him that loveth thee” (I.ii.138-139). Eventually, he cries,<sup>178</sup> claiming that “[t]hese [manly] eyes [...] never shed remorseful tear (I.ii.159; cf.I.ii.168). As a final coup de grâce, Richard goes in for “the kill,”<sup>179</sup> reversing the victim/killer-roles by seemingly giving all his power to Lady Anne: “If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,/ Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword” (I.ii.177-178). Richard “kneels and lays his breast open; she offers at it with his sword”<sup>180</sup> (I.ii. *stage direction* 182-183). Margaret is not there to elucidate for Anne what she knows to be Richard’s *modus operandi*: “[T]ake heed of yonder dog!/ Look when he fawns, he bites; and when he bites,/ His venom tooth will rankle to the death” (I.iii.291-292). While he kneels, Richard exposes his “supposed” (I.i.76) crimes as “actual” crimes by confirming what Lady Anne already knew, namely that he killed King Henry and Edward. Richard even taunts Anne after she drops the sword: “Take up the sword again, or take up me” (I.ii. 187). At this point, he knows, he has won Anne, and he has won the scene. He has won

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<sup>177</sup> Ever the improvisational actor, Richard always thinks on his feet and can change pace and tactics within seconds: “But, gentle Lady Anne,/ To leave this keen encounter of our wits/ And fall something into a slower method” (I.ii.119-120). He notices that sparring with Anne will lead nowhere, so he swiftly changes his tactic: he appeals to Anne’s guilt by telling her she is responsible for the murders. Note that a tactical change does not change a scene objective. It is merely a way of finding the most effective method to achieve the overall objective.

<sup>178</sup> Here, Richard changes his tactic once more: he appeals to Anne’s pity, which leads straight into appealing to Anne’s ego (vanity) by giving her hope that she can make a bad man good.

<sup>179</sup> A very strong tactic for the actor playing Richard, in this instance, would be to play the opposite of what is happening, to literally stoop to conquer: To achieve that goal, the stakes must be sky-high. Richard is an extreme character with extreme needs, and he is willing to die for them. “Always, always, take risks, [...] To create risks there must be huge, risky obstacles to overcome” (Chubbuck 64).

<sup>180</sup> If the audience does not believe that Anne may kill Richard, the scene is not powerful. It is a common interpretation to claim that Richard would never truly risk his own life, but, in terms of performance, it is a weak choice. From the performer’s perspective, the risk of death has to be there lest the scene fall flat. The audience ought to sense that, on this particular night, Anne might just stab Richard.

both despite impossible obstacles (the murder of Henry and Anne's husband Edward) and impossible stakes (offering her his life). Lady Anne is aware that Richard's heart and tongue "are false" (cf.I.ii.198), but she accepts his ring anyway.

### We Find Delight In the Most Loathsome Things<sup>181</sup>

The question of how Richard accomplishes such an impossible feat has baffled many critics, and it even baffles Richard: "[W]as ever woman in this humor wooed?/ Was ever woman in this humour won" (I.ii.38). How does the "[f]oul devil" (I.ii.50), "that bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad" (IV.iv.76), "the wretched'st thing" (II.iv.18), the "elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog" (I.iii.224) that is both "deformed [and] unfinished" (I.i.20) win over the "divine perfection of a woman" (I.ii.75) after having murdered her husband and father-in-law? Stephen Greenblatt asserts that Anne "virtually invents uncertainties to mask the calculating murderousness she herself has perceived with cold clarity" (Greenblatt *Norton* 561). That indictment of Anne is not quite accurate because Richard is a master of instilling the seeds of doubt in his victims and making them question their own judgments. Note, in detail, how Richard creates uncertainty in Anne: "Vouchsafe, divine perfection of a woman,/ Of these *supposed* crimes to give me leave/ By circumstance but to acquit myself" (I.ii.75-77, *emphasis mine*). First, Richard flatters Anne's beauty with the highest of compliments: she is "divine perfection" (I.ii.75) and his life's light: "my day, my life" (I.ii.134). Consequently, he calls into question his crimes by calling them "supposed crimes" (I.ii.76), and by claiming: "Say that I slew them not" (I.ii.89), and "I did not kill your husband" (I.ii.91). Hence, Anne does not solely "invent uncertainties," as Greenblatt argues, but she is expertly gaslit into them, and so is the audience. Greenblatt calls Anne "frightened," and "shallow" (Greenblatt *Norton* 561). Anne is certainly frightened after having lost all the protection of the men in her life at a time when women had little to no power. However, Anne is not necessarily "shallow." The psychological method of "gaslighting" is often viewed as something only weak women fall victim to despite evidence that anyone can be susceptible to it. Gaslighting someone is a powerful, subtle, surreptitious, and insidious method whose high points have been perfected by the

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<sup>181</sup> "The Devil pulls the strings which make us dance;/ We find delight in the most loathsome things" (Baudelaire).

perpetrators (often psychopaths, sociopaths, and narcissists) to get what they want. In Richard's case, Anne's submission is not just what he wants, however, but what he needs. His primal need to be cherished, his strong actor's objective, make him such a skilled manipulator.

Anne—as does the audience, as does everyone in the play—serves as Richard's mirror. If he can get Anne to love him, a woman who despises him, then he must be attractive and lovable. Of course, Richard does not care about Anne herself, but he needs her to reaffirm his self-worth.<sup>182</sup> As an actor, he has the ability to keep his emotions real because of his primal need to be loved, or better, to love himself: “he seeks not only vengeance against an unloving world but also the pleasure of cherishing himself” (Greenblatt *Norton* 559). The audience is just as seduced by Richard as is Anne, and not because of “shallowness,” but because Richard is willing to go to extremes to achieve his objective. If this scene is viewed from the actor's perspective, and if the actor wants to make this scene as poignant and believable as possible, he must give Richard the highest stakes possible: The need for love in Richard must be so strong that he is willing to lay down his life for it. Audiences do not respond to the evil doings of a psychopath, but they do respond to the humanity behind the evil doings. It is not necessary to give Richard an etiology and pathologize<sup>183</sup> him by justifying his actions, as Greenblatt does. It does not matter if Richard is a villain because the world made him one, what matters is that Anne believes him when he talks her into it: “I never sued to friend, nor enemy;/ My tongue could never learn sweet smoothing word” (I.ii.171-172);

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<sup>182</sup> Richard's overall objective throughout the play could be: “To make everyone fall in love with me,” “to have power over everyone,” “to make my mother love me,” or “I am going to make you feel my pain.” The first two appear to be rather obvious and good choices since Richard aims at love from all (fame) and power. The latter two objectives may work better for certain actors. Olivier, for example, might have chosen the mother-objective. The last objective: “to make you feel my pain” sounds weaker than it is. It may well work for the right actor: “This [lack of love, rejection, etc] was done to me, so now I will make everyone feel my pain.”

<sup>183</sup> Greenblatt somewhat over-justifies Richard's actions, which is a temptation hard to resist because Richard is *that* seductive: “a child unloved by his mother, mocked by his peers, forced to regard himself as a monster will develop certain compensatory psychological strategies” (Greenblatt *Norton* 556). While Greenblatt's insights are always sincere, it is a mistake and a trap, I would argue, to justify Richard's psychotic actions. To do so is exactly what Richard III, and psychopaths in general, thrive on. My B.A. dissertation entitled “An American Tragedy” dealt in depth with a fictional psychopath and his real-life equivalents: while my thesis argued that schizophrenic and psychopathic tendencies can be culturally transferred, it also argued that the people who seek for an etiology behind the psychopath's actions are hardly ever the psychopaths themselves. Greenblatt, by trying to give meaning to the ‘why’ behind Richard's actions, fails to point out that such is exactly the trap Lady Anne falls into. Garber is more on point when she says that Anne falls for the trap of believing herself to be the exception, not the rule, the good woman to make a bad man good again (cf. Garber 142). Falling into this trap does not make Anne “shallow,” however, but human. And it shows the power of the actor that is Richard.

but you, Lady Anne, are so special that I am willing to do anything for you: “Then bid me kill myself, and I will do it” (I.ii.190). If Richard cannot make Anne believe that he would kill himself if she told him to, neither will the audience. It is especially important not to view Anne as a pushover, but as someone who senses that “both [Richard’s heart and tongue are] false (cf. I.ii.196-198), but who is seduced by him anyway: “[S]he wants to believe in his passion, wants to think of herself as the salvation of a ‘bad’ man who will be converted by the love of a good woman” (Garber 142). Richard’s winning of Anne shows the power of the actor, not Anne’s “shallowness,” because Richard’s power over her is also a reflection of his power over the audience.

### One False Glass

On the one hand, Richard’s audience, on stage and off, mirrors back to him how he views himself. On the other hand, Richard mirrors back to the audience their willingness to believe in appearances: “[T]he Devil comes clothed in the shape of an angel, so the protean Richard comes cloaked in plainness and innocence—and fools them all” (Garber 139). As the Duchess, Richard’s mother, points out, Richard is “one false glass” (II.ii.53), a “distorting and distorted mirror [that] reflects back upon society the corruption and hypocrisy he finds there” (cf. Garber 136). Richard had just told the audience that he was “not made to court an amorous looking glass” (I.i.15), and now that he has won over Anne he exclaims: “I’ll be at charges for a looking glass” (I.ii.260). He goes from self-loathing (I am unattractive and unlovable) to narcissism (I am so gorgeous I have to purchase a mirror) from one act to the next. The way the stereotypical actor’s<sup>184</sup> moods swing high with applause and popularity, and low with rejection and failure, the way Richard appears to depend entirely on his audience. His ambivalence toward them is a bittersweet push and pull of love and hate. The way the Renaissance actor must have internalized society’s low opinion of his profession, the way Richard has internalized everyone’s low opinion of himself. The moment he wins

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<sup>184</sup> Skura repeatedly portrays actors as vacillating between self-loathing and self-love: “Richard’s story almost parodies [an] actor’s history of narcissistic wounds, subjective crisis, and dependence on the mirroring response of others, all of which make performance an ambiguous achievement” (Skura 71). “[A]cting moved between the poles of identification and technical distancing” (Skura 52). “The Elizabethan player [...] was marked as the Other whose strangeness fascinates and repels, the charismatic transgressor who all too easily becomes a screen for the projection of the audience’s disowned impulses” (Skura 38). Richard certainly demonstrates the “vacillation between professional ambition on the one hand, and self-effacement, even self-abasement” before his audience (cf. Skura 74).

Anne, he gains self-regard, but loses all respect for her: “Hath she forgot already that brave prince,/ Edward, her lord [...]/ Young, valiant, wise, and no doubt, right royal/ The spacious world cannot again afford”<sup>185</sup> (I.ii.245-250). Richard depends on Anne’s love (and the audience’s love), but at the same time, he resents the fact that she was so easily corruptible. She had looked upon him as “[f]oul devil” (I.ii.50), and “lump of foul deformity,” but she let herself be talked into loving him in the blink of an eye. Richard has “contempt for a world that despises him and yet cannot resist him” (Greenblatt *Norton* 556). The way society views the actor as outcast, the way the actor may resent them at times for lapping up his entertainment of them.

### A Good Actor Gone Bad

*Richard III* can be viewed as a character study of a good actor gone bad. The play takes a look at the dark side of acting. It portrays the exact idea the Puritans had of an actor, someone who is so steeped in his ‘act’ that he drowns in it: “But I am in so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin” (IV.ii.65-66). Richard becomes and does almost all the things he says. He creates everything out of language. Like a wizard, Richard’s spells make things come alive by merely speaking the words. Furthermore, he is a master of the art of self-representation. From the beginning, Richard goes on the offensive before anyone has attacked him, and portrays himself as a victim of a dissembling society: “Because I cannot flatter and look fair,/ Smile in men’s faces, smooth, deceive and cog,/ Duck with French nods and apish courtesy [...] Cannot a plain man live and think no harm” (I.iii.48-50,52). Richard depicts himself as a “plain man” and as an anti-actor. He says he cannot indulge in the dark side of acting (flattering, fawning, dissembling, deceiving, seducing, and pretending), but it is what he is best at:

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<sup>185</sup> This is the only instance in which Richard says that someone is irreplaceable, which is a sign that he recognizes Anne’s husband as better than himself. Throughout the entire play, he tells grieving characters around him, often in the most bizarre and perverse terms, that their loved ones can easily be replaced. Someone else can play their role. The way Bottom, the weaver—dreamweaver and actor—believes that he can play all the parts, so does Richard III: “What though I killed her husband and her father?/ The readiest way to make the wench amends/ Is to become her husband and her father” (I.ii.155-157). He tells Queen Elizabeth to stop grieving her family: “Harp not on that string, madam; that is past” (IV.iv.365). He even tells Queen Elizabeth that “in your daughter’s womb I bury them [the two little princes he killed]” (IV.iv.424), suggesting that his having children with the young Elizabeth will replace Queen Elizabeth’s two sons. Richard’s mind, once more, reveals itself as one vast *theatrum mundi*, in which any character may be replaced by another actor, including unborn characters. It is his theatrical thinking that makes him hold fast to his lead-role by any means possible.

I sigh and, with a piece of scripture,  
 Tell them that God bids us do good for evil;  
 And thus cloak my naked villainy  
 With odd old ends stolen out of Holy Writ,  
 And seem a saint when most I play the devil  
 (R3.I.iii.335-339).

The part of “plain man” suits Richard well for as long as he has to persuade others that he ought to be king. Hastings, in his naivety, is a sitting duck to Richard. So fooled by Richard’s acting is Hastings that he exclaims: “I think there’s never a man in Christendom/ Can lesser hide his love or hate than he,/ For by his face straight shall you know his heart” (III.iv.51-53). Twenty-two lines later, “plain man” Richard has ordered Hastings’s head to roll, and to roll before lunchtime.<sup>186</sup>

Richard, in his very tyranny, is funny. Even when he is ordering someone’s execution, he is in a manic rush. III.iv. is a difficult scene for the actor playing Richard: if he plays Richard’s cruelty too seriously, the scene loses its humor, and Richard loses the audience; if the actor plays the scene as too comically, the scene loses its ruthlessness. Within twenty-two lines Hastings goes from life to death, and the actor playing Richard must, as Chubbuck puts it, “earn the right to kill” him (cf. Chubbuck 31). Richard, metatheatrically speaking, will make Hastings pay for trying to take his “cue” and “part” away from him, a cardinal sin amongst actors: “Had you not come upon your cue, my lord,/ William Lord Hastings had pronounced your part” (III.iv. 26-27). Richard, the actor’s actor, must be bristling on the inside over Hastings’ attempt to steal the lead -“part” from him. The play has Richard express his fury—and he was already livid at Hastings’s opposition to his kingship—by having him order “good strawberries”<sup>187</sup> (III.iv.32). To buy himself time so to conjure up a believable excuse for

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<sup>186</sup> Giving whole new meaning to the condescending, contemporary command to make haste: “Chop chop.” Literally.

<sup>187</sup> In *Essaying Shakespeare*, Karen Newman explains: “In the Renaissance, strawberries signified virtue or goodness, but also hypocritical virtue as symbolized by the frequently occurring design and emblem of a strawberry plant with an adder hiding beneath its leaves” (Newman 56). In *Othello*, similarly, the strawberries on Desdemona’s handkerchief signify both virtue and lost virtue: “This doubleness is, of course, appropriate for Othello’s perception of Desdemona [...] They become signs of Desdemona’s deceit” (Newman 56). Furthermore, the comment is, in a way, so outlandish that it is both funny and creates a “What?”-moment in the reader and audience. Such a line has so many possibilities of creative staging, from the hilarious to the tragic and in between.



One does not simply order strawberries  
Without contemplating homicide.



condemning Hastings to death, Richard orders the symbolical fruit of purity: strawberries. Even during homicidal rumination, Richard knows, image is everything. The “strawberry”- moment is rife with possibility. The director may choose to have Richard chomp on a strawberry when he comes upon his “Eureka-solution” of how to most efficiently neutralize Hastings while still maintaining his “plain man”- reputation. Such a directorial choice also brings out Richard’s crazed frenzy while still being funny.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that Richard baits Hastings with vanity, proving that vanity is, indeed, “the devil’s favorite sin.”<sup>189</sup> The question about conspiracy to kill Richard through witchcraft was, after all, posed to all the men in the room. Hastings’s ego undoes him. He hands Richard the rope to hang him with: He is “most forward” (III.iv.64) in responding when everybody else senses that it is best to keep silent (and keep one’s head). Hastings’s vanity sabotages him, and Richard’s extempore (re)-acting<sup>190</sup> skills capsize Hastings, hook, line, and sinker.

### Let Me Entertain You

The coronation scene, and the scenes leading up to it, have the potential of being equally humorous as the ‘strawberry-scene’, if not more so. Richard and Buckingham are having so much fun playing dress-up for the people and the Lord Mayor, they make it impossible for their audience not to be entertained. While the scene itself is serious in its subject matter of deceit and corruption, Richard and Buckingham’s zest for performance, in all its underhandedness, is comical. Richard and Buckingham are made

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<sup>188</sup> Such a directorial choice is not in the text, but it is also not ‘not’ in the text. It could easily be added between Richard and Buckingham’s exits and re-entry without taking away from the text. Shakespeare’s plays are littered with such loaded moments during which he appears to give his actors great creative license. Such moments often read like cues for the actors to implement whatever they are skilled at. A lack of stage directions, therefore, may be viewed as a cue to the actors to enrich the play with their unique artistry.

<sup>189</sup> There is an historical and postmodern irony to the fact that Al Pacino, who plays the Devil by the name of John Milton in the film *The Devil’s Advocate* of 1997, made the line “Vanity, definitely my favorite sin” famous. John Milton, the Devil in the movie, is a modern version of Richard III: small, outwardly unassuming (“they never see me coming”), but mesmerizing in his seduction of people through language. The Devil, in the film, is the head of a law firm. What is even more curious is that Al Pacino had acted in—and made his directorial debut—with a profound examination of *Richard III* and the character’s lasting impact on culture with *Looking for Richard* in 1996. As Margaret Garber pointed out: Shakespeare “created these modern types” (Garber 776).

<sup>190</sup> “Acting is reacting” (Adler 181) is one of Stella Adler’s most important lessons. Richard plots to set the stage, but he is always ready to *react* to the other character. Richard excels at improvisation, which is the mark of an experienced actor. When things go off-course, he swiftly re-routes. In extreme cases, the play humorously suggests, he may need a “strawberry-break” to come up with a new devilish plot.

for each other the way successful acting-duos<sup>191</sup> are. They play off each other as if they had been doing the “coronation-corruption-act” for years. To the contrary, they are extemporizing Richard’s crown-heist each step of the way. In preparation to sending his partner-in-crime out to the people to curry favor with them and plant some slander, Richard asks Buckingham: “canst thou quake and change thy color,/ Murder thy breath in the middle of a word,/ [...] /As if thou wert distraught and mad with terror” (III.v.1-4). In short, Richard asks Buckingham—in a dramatic fashion—if he can act. Buckingham, with equally histrionic flair, replies: “Tut , I can counterfeit the deep tragedian” (III.v.5). Buckingham then falls into a long-winded affirmation and accolade of his own acting skills. For their “performance,” Richard and Buckingham dress up “in rotten armor, marvelous ill-favored” (III.v.1 *stage direction*). No humiliation is too great for those two, no armor too rotten, no ‘act’ too degenerate but they will undertake it, and undertake it with swagger: “Look back! Defend thee! Here are enemies” (III.v.19), they exclaim while acting out for the Lord Mayor that they are under attack. Of course, there are no enemies there, and the ‘attack-act’ is a ruse to persuade the Lord Mayor that Hastings was an “ignoble traitor” (III.v.22), not an isolated pawn that threatened Richard’s chess game.

Neither does the Lord Mayor see any enemies, nor does he see any evidence that Hastings was, in fact, a traitor. And yet, he lets himself be bamboozled by Richard (who bullies him-III.v.40-46) and Buckingham (who flatters him-III.v.50-61) into taking their ‘word’ for it: “[Y]our Graces’ words shall serve/ As well as I had seen and heard him [Hastings] speak” (III.v.62-63). What reads, on the page, as a bizarre and paranoid endeavor of two lunatics in their manic phase, must necessarily be successful on the stage: The actors “have to see things they’ve never seen before [such as imaginary

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<sup>191</sup>Richard and Buckingham, at the zenith of their performance, are a kind of prototype for acting duos of subsequent eras, such as Abbot and Costello. Richard and Buckingham have wonderful comedic timing and artistic chemistry. They bounce words off each other the way great tennis players ricochet backhand drives. Their actions are, of course, deeply immoral and ought to be despised by the audience. Nonetheless, the duo’s delight in the game of acting takes the audience in a different direction, namely pure entertainment. Richard and Buckingham are rascals, and the audience cannot resist a good rascal. They lie and twist language into a Gordian knot of meaninglessness, and it is their childlike ingenuity that have the audience riveted. A skit such as Abbot and Costello’s “Who’s On First” is a modern-day “Richard/Buckingham”-version of language being used as a deliberate means to confuse and entertain. It is the complete breakdown of language, communication, and the lexical ambiguity that ensues that make the skit timeless. Richard and Buckingham appear to have cleared the path for such acting duos.

enemies]. Then they have to give it back to the world” (cf. Adler 27).<sup>192</sup> Richard and Buckingham, in fact, manage to convince the Lord Mayor that they did the right thing by executing Hastings. Buckingham even assures the mayor that he was included in their decision, or rather, that he was complicit in it: “Yet had we not determined he [Hastings] should die/ Until your Lordship came to see his end” (III.v.52-53), but our friends went ahead and decapitated Hastings prematurely; “Yet witness what you *hear* we did intend” (III.v.70, *emphasis mine*). As with Anne, it is easy to read the Lord Mayor as a “shallow” dolt for being hoodwinked by Richard and Buckingham. However, he is likely more spellbound by their powerful performance. Once more, a character (the Lord Mayor) reflects back to the audience that they are as complicit in the actions on the stage as is said character. Says acting coach Patsy Rodenburg: “In Dante’s *Inferno*, those who are complicit have their own special place in hell for this passive sin” (Rodenburg 32). As is the audience, the Lord Mayor is but an observer to Richard and Buckingham’s ‘razzle-dazzle’ performance. The mayor serves as a reminder to the audience of how easily everyone can be “played” in everyday life. He also poses the question to the audience that asks in how far they enjoy being betrayed as long as they were entertained or seduced by the performance of it all.

Stella Adler says that “the worst thing an actor can do is [fake it] [...]. We have to take the same attitude to the dramatic text. We have to understand it totally” (Adler 35). Adler argues that, if the actor can imagine an enemy attack, so will the audience. To imagine an enemy attack, the actors have to understand that the text demands they be utterly believable, otherwise the scene will not work. Instead of making the Lord Mayor “shallow” or ignorant, the actors must be excellent enough to hypnotize him. *Richard III* repeatedly makes the audience complicit in onstage-actions because it shows them their own weaknesses: The scrivener wonders out loud who could be so stupid to not see the obvious fraud-in-action: “Who is so gross/ That he cannot see this palpable device” (III.vi.10-11). Subsequently, the scrivener imparts some of the most ethically-loaded lines of the play: “Yet who is so bold but says he sees it not?/ Bad is the world,

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<sup>192</sup> Adler expounds on the point of actor-audience communication and the actor’s imagination several times: “If the actor sees it he can make his audience see it” (Adler 36); “Communication is making someone else see what you see” (Adler 36-37); “Our job is to make the audience believe in the circumstances, but if we’re completely absorbed in the world onstage and what we’re doing in it, we carry the audience along with us” (Adler 82); “When you see a thing, it exists and has life. See that life. Respect everything. Everything will speak back to you” (Adler 50); “There is no limit to what an actor can make the audience feel and understand” (Adler 28).

and all will come to naught/ When such ill dealing must be seen in thought” (III.vi.12-15). Everyone, he argues, is afraid of the consequences of speaking out; the world is a bad place where morality takes a backseat to fear and outward appearances; one may only think, not speak, what one knows. It is important to see that the scrivener speaks for the people. They see what is going on but are powerless to stop it. Similarly, Margaret sees what Richard is doing, but she also, as a woman, cannot stop it. She “haunt[s] the royal court like a bitter, half-crazed Greek tragic chorus” (Greenblatt *Norton* 557). Initially, no one believes her. Margaret falls victim to the tried-and-tested charge of being crazy: “Dispute not with her; she is lunatic” (I.iii.258). She watches Richard’s actions and, metatheatrically, calls them a horrible prologue (“[a] dire induction am I witness to”) to a scene that is going to be even more “[b]itter, black, and tragical” (IV.iv.5,7). Richard III, the good actor gone bad, is a look at the Stygian side of acting: “An actor has the ability to control the audience. It is power; and it is beyond power” (Skura 14). And for most of the play, Richard is simply that good.

#### Karma Chameleon’s<sup>193</sup> Coronation<sup>194</sup>

The people are not swayed by Buckingham’s solo-performance. As a matter of fact, in their very silence, they give it a bad review. Buckingham is, as he has already proven and will prove again shortly, a good actor. The fact that the people still consider his performance an epic failure reveals that they are conscionable and, in acting terms, a “tough” crowd; or as Richard calls them, “blocks of wood” (III.vii.56). Therefore, Richard and Buckingham have to reach deep into their protean handbook of the “deep tragedian” (III.v.5) and pull out all their thespian stops. If their performances were entertaining earlier, they now become farcical in their absolute shamelessness.

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<sup>193</sup> The most famous lines of Culture Club’s song “Karma Chameleon” of 1983 are: “I’m a man without conviction/ I’m a man who doesn’t know/ How to sell a contradiction” (Culture Club 1983). Richard is a man without convictions, and he is a walking contradiction. He is not what he appears to be, and he cannot outwardly be who he is (or believes he is). Since Richard, in the end, does get his karma, the title is fitting in terms of the timeless relevance of *Richard III*’s treatment of “appearance vs. reality,” and “having to play a part to please society.”

<sup>194</sup> England is a hereditary monarchy, but in this instance, Richard has “to play” the people to get their votes and depose Edward. The throne does not just fall to Richard. He must put on a brilliant performance to get it, and even then, the people are silent except for the hired “actors.” The difference between hypocrisy and authentic performance is perceived by the people, but in their silence, they still enable Richard and Buckingham.

Buckingham's acting advice to Richard is to pretend he is saintly, and to play hard to get in the manner of the Ovidian coy virgin:

Intend some fear; [...]  
 And look you get a prayer book in your hand  
 And stand between two churchmen, good my lord,  
 For on that ground I'll make a holy descant.  
 And be not easily won to our requests.  
 Play the maid's part: still answer "nay," and take it  
 (*R3.III.vii.58-63*).

Richard is certain the two of them will pull it off: "No doubt we bring it to a happy issue" (*III.vii.67*). It is Richard and Buckingham's time to shine, and they ham it up with all the hypocritical gusto imaginable. Buckingham "harps the string" of Richard's saintliness: he is "on his knees in meditation; [...]/ Not sleeping, [...]/ But praying, to enrich his watchful soul./ Happy were England would this virtuous prince" (*III.vii.86,88-91*); he has "a book of prayer in his hand./ True ornaments to know a holy man./ [...] [Richard is in the midst of his] devotion and right Christian zeal" (*III.vii.111-112,116*). What ensues is a performance in form of a seduction. This time, Buckingham is the seducer, who "heartily solicit[s] Richard to 'lower' his saintly self to the position of king: "take on you the charge/ And kingly government of this your land" (*III.vii.144-145*).

Richard plays the part of the unwilling maiden majestically: "I cannot tell if to depart in silence/ Or bitterly speak in your reproof" (*III.vii.154-155*). Richard and Buckingham fall into a back-and-forth-seduction that is wonderful to behold in its wit and wickedness: "Refuse not, mighty lord, this proffered love" (*III.vii.215*). Buckingham adds some well-calculated slander<sup>195</sup> of Richard's competition to his pursuit, and after some sanctimonious denials of Richard's ("I'm unfit for state and majesty;"<sup>196</sup> "you will buckle fortune on my back;" "How far I am from the desire of

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<sup>195</sup> Richard and Buckingham have spread the rumor that Edward is a bastard. Therefore, Buckingham claims, the people of England would not accept Edward as their king no matter what. Buckingham lays it on thick by claiming that, if Richard does not budge, the York line will end altogether. A made-up story, a fiction—Edward is never proven to be a bastard—has the power to silence the people.

<sup>196</sup> Ironically true.

this”), the deed is done, and the crown is won (III.vii.218,241,249). Richard and Buckingham have by indirections found directions out. Through dissembling, flattery, slander and fake modesty, Richard and Buckingham have gotten away with murder, and the crown: “Long live Richard, England’s worthy king” (III.vii.253). Like two little boys playing at draughts, the acting duo Richard and Buckingham has outwitted the people (the tough crowd). So well do the two work together, that it is entirely possible to imagine for Richard to have remained king had he maintained Buckingham by his side. The moment Richard ascends the throne, however, he loses his acting-partner-in-crime with his disproportionate ruthlessness. Not even the unprincipled Buckingham wants to murder the two little princes for Richard: “Give me some little breath, some pause, dear lord” (IV.ii.25). When he loses Buckingham, arguably the only one who may have “stay[ed Richard] from the fall of [absolute] vanity” (cf. III.vii.110), Richard loses all humanity, and with it, his protean edge, and the audience’s favor. He has gained what he desired, but he has lost the ability to express—what Dreiser called—the world’s longing for them, and what Vakhtangov referred to as the actor’s endless want.

### Actorcism

The second Buckingham does not immediately agree with Richard, the latter’s malignant narcissism and paranoia overpower him. He turns on Buckingham, and, as is his way, immediately replaces him with someone else: “I will converse with iron-witted fools/ And unrespective boys. None are for me/ That look into me with considerate eyes” (IV.29-31). The problem with wanting to deal with dim-witted fools and inattentive boys is that they cannot replace the virtuoso Buckingham. Moreover, Richard’s fear of people who regard him with perspicacious eyes demonstrates that, from this moment on, his acting-skills will suffer. An insightful audience will see through him, Richard intuitively, and he is right. His pendulum swings all the way into self-obsession and inhumanity. He has become one with the mask. It is no wonder he cannot recognize himself in the end. Even in his attempt at self-confrontation, Richard “stages” a dialogue between the “set of theatrical masks” he has become (cf. Greenblatt 562):

What do **I** fear? **Myself**? There's none else by.  
**Richard** loves **Richard**; that is, **I** and **I**.  
 Is there a **murderer** here? No. Yes, **I** am.  
 Then fly! What, from **myself**? Great reason why:  
 Lest **I** revenge. What, **myself** upon **myself**?  
 Alack, **I** love **myself**. Wherefore? For any good  
 That **I myself** have done unto **myself**?  
 O, no! Alas, **I** rather hate **myself**  
 For hateful deeds committed by **myself**.  
**I** am a **villain**. Yet **I** lie. **I** am not  
 (R3.V.iii.194-203, *emphases mine*).

Greenblatt calls Richard's undoing an "exorcism" in the sense that Richard's "vicious skills [of] playing with the doubleness of words and exploiting the slipperiness of language [make him] a demonic master" (cf. Greenblatt Norton 560) whose punishment it is to be rid of the demons that were his parts. He loses his acting range and the ability to see himself from the outside. Since Richard fails to recognize who he is, he cannot bridge the distance between self-love and self-hatred. He is a man apart: "I and I" are one too many, "no" and "yes", "love myself" and "hate myself" are not transformations any longer, but fragmentation. In ten lines, Richard refers to himself and his roles twenty-four times, twice *four* times per line. Stella Adler made it clear: "[A]cting is *not* about *you*" (Adler 9, *emphases mine*); she also reminds actors that their most important task is to work on their minds<sup>197</sup> (cf. Adler 19).

The exorcism Greenblatt speaks of, the ritual of expelling Richard's demon-parts is really an "actorcism:" Richard loses his gift "to play." He is confronted with his victims<sup>198</sup> in a dream, and for a short moment of introspection he faces himself; and it is

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<sup>197</sup> "The actor has to develop his body. The actor has to work on his voice. But the most important thing the actor has to work on is his mind" (Adler 19).

<sup>198</sup> Richard, in a dream, is confronted with all the people he murdered. The words they choose to undo him strike right at the core with the visuals they create, and through the many vowels and diphthongs they employ: "Let me sit heavy in thy **soul** tomorrow" (R3.V.iii.123-124,138,147); "Despair, and die" (cf. R3.V.iii.126,132,133,142,147,151,159,167,175). Buckingham, Richard's final victim, gets the honor of adding: "Dream on, dream on [...]/ Fainting, despair; despairing, yield thy breath" (R3.V.iii.184,185). There is a reason that the word "**soul**" retains its Old English diphthong in both spelling and pronunciation: Its onomatopoeia **sounds** (!) like the immortal essence belonging to another realm. The ghosts' language truly sounds ghostly and cannot be ignored. It cuts to the quick.

a spectacular disaster of undesired insight: Richard is forced to look into the Hamletian mirror, and what he sees is the window into his soul. So perplexing to him, so loathsome is the specter, that he swiftly shuts the window to what promises to be painful self-examination and lingering self-loathing. Richard has fused the stage-act with the social act, which is an actor's greatest sin. The punishment for that sin is that Richard is left with only one part: the villain, or better, Vice. He can no longer express the world's longing or enter another person's consciousness and perspective. Presently, all Richard can express is his Brobdingnagian selfishness. He is no longer an actor, but a stereotype. A good actor forms empathy out of self-absorption, creativity out of trauma, and love out of hate and apathy. His duty is to use fiction "to serve the truth<sup>199</sup> in order to bring recognition" and solace to the audience (cf. Leimberg 69). Richard has gone too far, and, as would inevitably happen to Vice, he must go down. But not without making a final spectacle of himself on the battlefield by fighting to the death and howling for a horse. He goes out with a sensational bang. He may have lost the crown and the battle, but he certainly wins the play (cf. Garber 159).

#### Conclusion: "The Play's the Thing"

It is the self-awareness within the fiction of *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard III* that allows them to form a conspiratorial alliance with the audience. The plays' metatheatrical moments join actors and audience in a ritualistic, alchemical performance that has the power to transform a prop into the infinitely jesting character of Yorick, and a strawberry into a weapon. By transparently acknowledging that "[i]t is required you do awake your faith" (*WT.V.iii.118-119*), the three plays enable the audience's imagination to embrace the plays' fiction with an open-mindedness that allows for more than entertainment, namely for the ability to receive the plays' meaningful truth. "[T]ruth has no temperature" (McCarthy), it evolves out of the telling of stories that people can give meaning to. It unfolds in the playing of the play. "Language makes a world appear, and in so doing [discovers] the story-like power of truth to

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<sup>199</sup> I use "truth" as referring to that which is most coherently true in accordance with fact or reality on this globe. I do not use the term in the philosophical sense of the highest, absolute, infallible Truth as viewed by an omniscient mind with the conviction that such may not be attained within worldly boundaries. I do, however, keep such a higher Truth in mind as an *attempt* to strive for by all, and at all times, so to avoid ethical relativism.



reveal” (Gelven 134). When Touchstone says that “the truest poetry is the most feigned,” he suggests that the the greatest truth exists within the most artificial fiction; it is because of and through fiction that the truth may be expressed persuasively (cf. Leimberg 67, 69). “Great theatre is the conduit, the medium, the divine spark that helps us understand our place within history” (Flachmann). “To play” is the process, “the thing,” as Hamlet puts it, of gleaning the truth. The playing of the play *is* the recognition or solace, or both. *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard III* all examine the ethics of acting, and the truth about playing with critical self-awareness that takes into consideration the actor’s stigma of baseness and the antitheatricalists’ denunciation of acting as deceit. “Drama was found to succeed best when it staged itself as a great unmasking” (Quiring Overview). Each play draws attention to the danger of ‘not acting’ on one side of the spectrum, and ‘over-acting’ on the other. At the same time, all three plays emphasize the value of the player and the necessity of Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard III “to play” by imparting to the audience: “The truth is cloaked; the play is truth’s cloak; by playing, the truth may be uncloaked” (cf. Leimberg 66, 75). It, quite literally, plays out.

*Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard III* unfold three different defenses of the play and player: Hamlet’s acceptance of acting demonstrates that art can act on life, and fiction has the power to find out key truths (Hamlet’s role-play and the play-within-the-play find out Claudius’s treachery). Coriolanus’s refusal “to play” shows that such inflexibility—be it motivated by honor or arrogance—is unfeasible within society and self-defeating. Richard is seductive and greatly entertaining, but his becoming one with the mask causes widespread calamity and the collapse of his self. *Richard III* does not lecture its audience. Instead, it shows them the truth about how Richard’s manipulation of reality unravels. Without Richard’s confessional soliloquies, the play shows, he might have fooled everyone. Without Hamlet’s metatheatrical soliloquies, the audience may have been led to believe that Claudius is a decent king. Hamlet and Richard must “play” to persuade the audience of the truth. The fact that, in real life, no soliloquies are shared to aid people in determining the truth about others is hinted at by Coriolanus’s refusal “to play.” It tells the unkind truth about the lack of truth to be found in real life. The plays prompt the audience to explore the truth about others and themselves, which is uncomfortable and hard work each step of the way.

In Ian McEwan's meta-narrative 'fiction about fiction', *Atonement* of 2001, the story about atonement *is* the atonement. The narrator is self-aware about holding the story's strings, but she also knows it is the artist's "duty to disguise nothing" (McEwan 349). Subsequently, she shares with the reader both the alternate story in its "pitiless" truth (McEwan 350), and her story: "I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me" (McEwan 351). The metafictional aspect of *Atonement* is that the narrator's art *is* the truth in the way that the play *is* the thing. In the way Dreiser views the artist's gift as their duty to give, the narrator views the telling of her story as her duty. Only in the narrator's fiction is atonement possible. The rest will only ever remain "an impossible task" [but] [t]he attempt was all" (cf. McEwan 351). She cannot bring people back to life, but through her fiction—tendentious or not—she can express herself and approximate redemption. She must play out her fiction in the same manner as Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Richard III have to play out theirs. The result will always be a bittersweet, conflicted attempt to relate that "which passeth show," (*Hamlet*.I.ii.85) of having to be cruel to be kind, and kind to overcome too much cruelty, but the attempt "to play" matters. It is not evasion, but a joint ritual between players and audience that serves the truth. Therefore, Hamlet was right all along: "The play *is* the thing" (cf. II.ii. 564). But then again—the antitheatricalists would say—he was just a rogue and vagabond.

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