

Speaking Daggers

BRUCE DANNER

THAT HAMLET CHOOSES TO “speak daggers . . . but use none” (3.2.387)—and thus to rely on language when he should most act—remains the central fact of the play for many audiences. Why he should become distracted in the speaking of daggers at all, however, continues to evade scholarly consensus. Over time this and related questions have led to comparisons between Hamlet’s increased distraction from his revenge and the metadramatic elements of Shakespeare’s art that undermine the play’s pretensions to mimesis. This pervasively metatheatrical character becomes all the more complicated in the face of Hamlet’s essentialist, almost naive conception of theatrical performance. As Robert Weimann has shown over a series of important essays, the play critiques such essentialist views by contrasting Hamlet’s humanist ideal of the stage (the purpose of which is to hold “the mirror up to nature” [3.2.22]) with the work’s discordant episodes of antic theatricality, where the presumed links between intention, representation, and interpretation become increasingly unstable.¹ In his effort to engage the play’s varied, “heterogeneous” forms of mimesis, Weimann attempts to move beyond unresolved critical disputes (humanist versus poststructuralist, character criticism versus formalism) to a more productive synthesis: “Shakespearean mimesis comprehends so many functions that neither the tradition-

I wish to thank the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies at the University of Alabama and its former director, David Lee Miller, for fellowship support that provided the foundation of research that led to this essay. I would also like to thank Xavier University, which provided release time that contributed to writing and polishing of the manuscript. Thanks also to participants in the “Shakespearean Character” seminar, led by Jessica Slights, at the 2000 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, where an abbreviated version of this essay was read and discussed, and especially to Julie Robin Solomon and Roberta Baker for reviews of my work. My thanks to Deborah Lewis, Virginia Danner, and Jake Honeycutt, who read and commented on the manuscript. Generous and valuable assistance was provided by the staff of the Folger and Huntington libraries, and the patient, careful work of Mary Tonkinson and the *Shakespeare Quarterly* editorial staff.

¹ See Robert Weimann, “Mimesis in *Hamlet*” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Geoffrey Hartman and Patricia Parker, eds. (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 275–91; “Society and the Individual in Shakespeare’s Conception of Character,” *Shakespeare Survey* 34 (1981): 23–31; and *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare’s Theatre*, ed. Helen Higbee and William West (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 18–28 and 151–79. All quotations from *Hamlet* follow William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), and are cited parenthetically in the text.

In one of the play's extraordinary non sequiturs, Hamlet protests his integrity even when it is not being challenged. Gertrude does *not* dismiss Hamlet's grief to mere seeming but rather accepts it fully in order to identify its cause and relief. Hamlet latches onto the queen's use of "seems" as pejorative when her emphasis falls instead on the word "particular"—a rejoinder to his concession that death is common to all. Gertrude thus singles out Hamlet's independence, his unique state of mind, yet he responds by amplifying this distinction, as if it had not already been evident. In this strained insistence on his own sincerity, Hamlet employs the topos of inexpressibility to elevate his mourning, even as his dismissal of its exterior form constitutes a veiled contempt for the courtiers' "show" of mourning, quickly abandoned after the marriage. While such a position attempts to authenticate his behavior by linking it to a referent, his rhetoric in fact dislocates the two, threatening to bind his actions to the false theatricality he rejects. In claiming for himself an inner "motive and cue for passion" beyond show (2.2.555), Hamlet does not simply pose the binary of being versus seeming. Rather he suggests that truth is precisely what cannot be represented, cannot be named, and therefore cannot be translated into the world without the taint of mediation. Later in the play he will refer to this inner truth as "the heart" of his "mystery" (3.2.357), in a context that precludes all exposure. Authentic as it is inaccessible, such mystery can be gestured at but not known, fretted but not played. Yet this appeal to a private realm "which passes show" is as much a trap as it is a defense, for in situating his grief outside the purview of representation, Hamlet mystifies it beyond comprehension or translation into the material world.

In his portrait of Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare offers a courtier struggling with the divide between *action* and *acting*, a figure whose call to violent force is countered by an obsession with the images of theater, text, and icon. An ardent admirer of theater, Hamlet nevertheless scorns theatrical improvisation because it sacrifices realism for cheap entertainment, advising the players at Elsinore that "anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.19–24). By this point in the play, it is clear that Hamlet's ideal of theatrical mimesis holds far more than aesthetic importance, for only through the actors' true-seeming portrayal of his father's murder will the prince finally be able to confirm Claudius's guilt. Representing the very "form and pressure" of the revised scene becomes crucial for the prince, for it is only under such conditions that the king's "blenching" can confirm the Ghost's story and set into motion Hamlet's delayed revenge:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,

Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions.
 (2.2.584–88)

However, instead of staging the Ghost's account of the murder, Hamlet preemptively launches his own attack on Claudius by representing Lucianus as a *nephew* to the king, not a brother. Instead of allowing Claudius to view only a representation of his own vicious betrayal, Hamlet wishes to upset his uncle by conflating the event with the revenge that the prince intends to exact for it.⁵ As dramatic as this performance is, it proves utterly disabling in practical results, for the scene both prepares Claudius for an impending threat of violence and obscures any conclusive determination of his guilt or innocence. If the king flinches before a nephew's murder of his uncle, it is not his own fratricide that he necessarily betrays but only fears of Hamlet's rebellion, fears shared by those ignorant of the murder such as Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Gertrude. Unaware of the facts of King Hamlet's death, these courtly observers perceive Hamlet's threat to his uncle's life, not his moral indignation. Hamlet thus "speak[s] daggers" to Claudius only by sacrificing the certain, "[m]ore relative" grounds for action that he so ardently craves (3.2.387; 2.2.600). But perhaps still more perilous for Hamlet is the way this instance of symbolic violence satisfies his desire to harm Claudius without requiring him to "give [his words] seals" (3.2.390), one of the prince's telling paraphrases for force. When Hamlet applies theatrical mimesis as a weapon and not merely as a means of knowledge, he begins to confuse the imaginary with the real, the verbal with the martial, in ways that will ultimately trap him in a vain attempt to locate violent action in "horrid speech" (2.2.554).

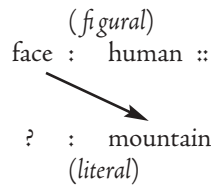
MIMETIC CONTAMINATION

By confusing the literal with the figurative, Hamlet's representation of Lucianus operates not by analogy but by catachresis. To define catachresis in these terms, while a functional starting point, remains at best a provisional strategy, for no single, accepted description of the figure exists in rhetorical or literary theory.⁶ Labeling catachresis under the Latin name of *abusio*, Quintilian defines it as "the practice of

⁵ On the problems surrounding this episode, see W. W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination," *Modern Language Review* 12 (1917): 393–421; as well as J. Dover Wilson's strained rejoinder in *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York: Macmillan; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1935), 149–60. See also Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag: essays on a critical process* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 92–119; and Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 179–91. See also Jenkins's long note concerning the function of Lucianus (508–9).

⁶ See Patricia Parker, "Metaphor and Catachresis" in *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, John Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 60–73; Jacques Derrida, "La mythologie blanche," translated as "White Mythology: Metaphor in the text of Philosophy" by F.C.T.

adapting the nearest available term to describe something for which no actual term exists.”⁷ The commonplace examples of catachresis consist of various forms of personification, as when we speak of the *leg* of a table or the *face* of a mountain. The attribution of human features to nonhuman entities does not exactly function as metaphorical because, as Quintilian specifies, these metaphors are not *analogies* of existing terms but are instead *literalizations* describing “something for which no actual term exists.” We can visualize this condition through an analogical diagram:



In this analogy, catachresis “abuses” its metaphorical potential to function as a literal term. In a normal four-term analogy, the word *face* would allude to some corresponding feature of a mountain, something already in existence to which the figure would be likened. Limited to this incomplete scheme, the diagram in fact *requires* some form of breach in order to complete the pattern, producing what Susanne Wofford calls a “collapsed analogy.”⁸ The word *face* cannot perform the act of metaphorical resemblance because no original term exists for it to resemble. Instead, the catachretic effect of a mountain’s “face” turns this prospective metaphor into an actual identity, producing what is commonly described as “literalized metaphor.” The figure now performs the function of a “proper” term, even though it is clearly “improper” in this context.

Catachresis derives its familiar name of abuse or misuse as a result of this sense of conflation between the literal and the figural, this substitution of an improper term for a proper one. It has traditionally served as a kind of poor relation to metaphor, whose identity it both coopts and subverts. As Patricia Parker has shown, rhetorical theorists have so repeatedly blurred the technical distinctions between the two figures that their relationship has become hierarchical rather than functional.⁹ Metaphors represent the transfer of proper terms to new meanings (“where . . . the

Moore, *New Literary History* 6 (1974): 5–74; and Paul deMan, “The Epistemology of Metaphor” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 11–28.

⁷ Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, 4 vols., trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1921), 3:320–21.

⁸ On catachresis as a “collapsed analogy,” see Susanne Lindgren Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1992), 138–41, esp. 138. For an important discussion of catachresis as a structuring principle for Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, see David Lee Miller, *The Poem’s Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 Faerie Queene* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988).

⁹ Parker, 72–73.

transferred is better than the *literal*"¹⁰). Such a conception of the proper or the proprietary, however, inevitably appeals to a preverbal conception of the "natural." What constitutes resemblance, then, depends less on closed analogical systems than on notions of decorum and convention that figures cannot arbitrate. For example, even as Quintilian is "careful to distinguish between *abuse* [*abusio*] and *metaphor* [*translatio*], since the former is employed where there is no proper term available, and the latter when there is another term available," he admits that "poets . . . indulge in the abuse of words even in cases where proper terms do exist, and substitute words of somewhat similar meaning."¹¹ Catachresis, then, represents less an antithesis to metaphorical transfer than it does a disordering challenge to its connotative sense as a "natural," "elegant," and illustrative use of language. While metaphor exists where "the *transferred* is better than the *literal*," catachresis, by implication, occurs when "our metaphor will be out of place [*improprimum*],"¹² disordering conceptions of the natural to create analogies that are wrong, forced, and far-fetched. Here catachresis evokes not the traditional sense of "dead" or latent metaphor but rather something very much alive, the puzzling, illogical, and uncanny experience of metaphor that blurs figurative and literal, imaginary and material. While metaphor masks its translations of unlike terms behind the conventional distinctions of figurative and literal, catachresis openly demonstrates how metaphoric translation may easily cross this divide for an improper, unnatural effect. When we speak of faces on mountains, legs on tables, or (in Hamlet's world) the mind's eye and speaking daggers, we do not create elegant plays on reality so much as monstrous forms that distort logical understanding.

Just such a breakdown between the literal and metaphorical occurs in a portrait of beauty taken from *The Extravagant Shepherd* (see Figure 1). A satire of Petrarchan rhetoric, the picture shows a lady fashioned out of the grotesque materializations of poetic analogies: wiry hair, teeth of pearls, roses on each cheek, bows for eyebrows, globes for breasts (complete with equators, latitude markers, and continents), stars in place of eyes, and Cupid seated on her brow. Some details in particular highlight a "doubleness" repeatedly observable in catachretic transfer. We find pearls, for example, at both expected and unexpected places—strung in place of the lady's teeth but also hanging rather conventionally about her neck. In the place of her eyes are stars radiating arrowlike beams. In addition, however, each star has been given its own face and eyes. With disturbingly regressive effect, we look for the eyes of the lady and find instead alien forms that stare back with uncanny literalism.

We can anticipate the particular distortions to Hamlet's sense of reality by noting how catachresis functions as a trope of narrative structure. Wofford has traced

¹⁰ Quintilian, 3:303.

¹¹ Quintilian, 3:320–21.

¹² Quintilian, 3:302–3.



Figure 1: A literal portrait of beauty from the 1654 English edition of Charles Sorel's *The Extravagant Shepherd: or, the History of the Shepherd Lysis*, translated by John Davies. Reproduced by kind permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

the dynamics of catachretic narrative in her discussion of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Specifically, she examines the manner in which the allegorical figures of the *Aeneid*, its gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings, can actually cross into and "touch" its literal action.¹³ While the realm of the gods serves as an allegorical counterpart to the poem's action, structuring and commenting on events as they occur, it cannot logically take on any form within it. For example, although Juno is portrayed as the supernatural cause of the storm that ravages the Trojans at the poem's opening, such a cause cannot be construed in the naturalistic terms of the narrative or its characters. Thus, although the *reader* can understand Juno's anger as the origins of the harsh storm, Aeneas and his men see only the material effects of the weather itself.¹⁴ But, as Wofford notes, Virgil represents various allegorical figures intruding on the work's fictional reality so that they seem to "touch" and embody the action itself. Such narrative moments typify catachretic conflation, contaminating the action with figures that have no proper or logical relationship to it. A vivid example of this effect occurs in Virgil's description of Amata's rage in Book VII. Her anger is driven by the fury Allecto, who rouses the Latin queen's passions by means of a snake plucked from her own head and cast upon the woman's body:

Taking one of the snakes from her dark hair the goddess Allecto threw it on Amata's breast to enter deep into her heart, a horror driving her to frenzy and bringing down her whole house in ruin. It glided between her dress and her smooth breasts and she felt no touch of its coils. Without her knowing it, it breathed its viper's breath into her and made her mad. The serpent became a great necklace of twisted gold round her neck. It became the trailing end of a long ribbon twined round her hair. It slithered all over her body.¹⁵

The snake's intrusion into the narrative action at this point produces a strange and unresolved doubleness, one not comfortably structured by any literal/allegorical dichotomy but instead occupying the *single* space of the poem's naturalistic world. Clearly, the snake *touches* Amata even though she cannot *feel* it. It slithers and writhes on her body yet remains unperceived—perhaps because the literal action of the story allows Amata no way to interpret it. A ghostly presence, it is both there and not there, an agent of the narrative action without recognizably *appearing* as such. The serpent's catachretic nature is further evidenced in the way it takes material form on Amata's body, through shapes that seem proper to her identity and dress but cannot logically originate with her. It becomes "a great necklace of twisted gold round her neck" and "the trailing end of a long ribbon twined around her hair."

¹³ Wofford, 140–41, esp. 140.

¹⁴ See Wofford, 106.

¹⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West (New York: Penguin, 1990), 173.

Even these clear and realistic shapes prompt questions of causality and identity. Does the snake become a *necklace* or does it become a *ribbon*? Can it *be* a snake and a necklace at the same time? Is Amata's anger *like* the serpent that crawls over her, or is it the creature itself? The scene's ambiguity makes these questions impossible to resolve because its ghostly character materializes in parallel but mutually exclusive worlds, environments that cannot ontologically touch. For Wofford such incidents exemplify how catachresis functions as a trope of "compulsion," exposing the work of ideology to preemptively set the conditions for a text's interpretation.¹⁶ By openly courting disjunction and illogic in this process, however, catachresis also functions as a trope of mimetic contamination, one that cannot resolve its ideological claims through closed analogical systems.

In the uncanny figure of King Hamlet's ghost, *Hamlet* chronicles one such convergence between the natural and the supernatural. Shakespeare exploits this instance to great effect, however, for much of the play will be occupied with the implications raised by the Ghost's intrusion into the world of Denmark. In the time Hamlet will spend trying to confirm the Ghost's authenticity as well as the accuracy of its story, he will explore the complications of still another "double" or ghost of his own environment in theatrical performance. In fact, even as Hamlet employs theatricality as a vehicle for clarifying the Ghost's indeterminate nature, he succeeds only in exposing the theater as similarly dubious. For Hamlet the stage is a place of dazzling and magical effects, an alternate world that nevertheless serves as "the abstract and brief chronicle . . . of the time" (2.2.520). Yet the theater simultaneously creates this intense realism out of an equally intense artificiality, out of elaborate gestures of illusion that Hamlet acknowledges but cannot resolve. In a striking paradox, theatricality is both "nothing" (l. 551)—which abusively fashions the stage actor's fraudulent tears—and moments later the very "thing" that will "catch the conscience of the King" (ll. 600–601). The confusion between literal realities and their figurative analogues which catachresis produces takes shape in Hamlet's reliance on the stage as a tool of his revenge. For Hamlet, the verisimilitude of theatrical representation, the notion of the theater as *a world* (*theatrum mundi*), develops into a conception of the theater as *the world*, a mirror of historical event, a lens for determining guilt or innocence, and, ultimately, an agent for conducting worldly action.

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

Hamlet's reliance on theatrical representation as a crucible for the truth proves tragically disabling, as it is countered by his awareness of the fictive nature of literary effects. Over the years the opposition between these two views of theater has

¹⁶ Wofford, 23.

stimulated extreme views about the play itself among critics, who have echoed Hamlet's internal conflict with remarkable symmetry. Like the Danish prince variously weighing the powerful effects of the First Player's speech with its absent (and therefore "monstrous" [2.2.545]) cue for passion, critics have both admired and dismissed the coherence and stability of Hamlet's own character. Indeed, no other work has generated so much debate on the tension between its "realism" and its artistic "inconsistency" or "defects." For Romantic criticism (in both its nineteenth- and twentieth-century incarnations), the central role of Hamlet's character resolves the contradictions of the play's stage action, plot, and themes.¹⁷ As Shakespeare's great accomplishment, Hamlet's character not only represents the work's center and dramatic artistry but also serves as a window to both the nobility and failings of the modern subject. By searching for the nature of Hamlet's character in excruciating (even inconsistent) detail, such critics ascribe an essential coherence to Hamlet's intentions and motivations, responding to charges of inconsistency by asserting, with Hazlitt, that "Shakespear was thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of human character."¹⁸ Thus charges of illogic against Shakespeare's techniques of characterization are neatly integrated into praise for his ability to draw realistic human idiosyncrasies. This view has long been regarded as the classic nineteenth-century approach, developed by the German Romantics and Coleridge and reaching its zenith in A. C. Bradley's classic essay in *Shakespearean Tragedy*.¹⁹

For formalist criticism, however, character stands not as the play's solution but its *problem*, one revealed by the work's patchwork structure and dramatic inconsistencies, and one that psychological insight will never be able to resolve. Typified by T. S. Eliot's pronouncement of *Hamlet* as "an artistic failure," this position has taken new form through assertions that it is the *critic* who fails in teasing coherence out of a work never designed to verify conceptions of organic unity. This skeptical tradition did not begin with poststructuralist theory, but its influence on recent criticism and bibliography have certainly brought new questions to both Hamlet's intelligibility and the logic of the play's tragic themes.²⁰ Terry Eagleton, for example, con-

¹⁷ For a history of the Romantic critical tradition on *Hamlet*, see William Kerrigan, *Hamlet's Perfection* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 1–33. For a recent critique of Shakespeare from the Romantic perspective, see Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

¹⁸ William Hazlitt, "The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays" (1817) in *Hamlet: Enter Critic*, Claire Sacks and Edgar Whan, eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), 110–13, esp. 113.

¹⁹ See A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1905), 79–174 and 401–23.

²⁰ Classic arguments against Hamlet's intelligibility by T. H. [Thomas Hanmer], Edgar Allen Poe, and T. S. Eliot, among others, are included in Sacks and Whan's *Hamlet: Enter Critic*. For a recent polemical critique of character criticism, see Michael Hattaway, *Hamlet* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ:

tends that Hamlet “has no ‘essence’ of being whatsoever, no inner sanctum to be safeguarded: he is pure deferral and diffusion, a hollow void which offers nothing determinate to be known.”²¹ For Karin Coddon, Hamlet’s character is no more available to us than the shifting, inconsistent discourse of madness in early modern culture.²² For Marjorie Garber, the play’s undecidability reflects critics’ own hollow appeals to an elusive authority of first principles: “What look like critiques, analyses, implementations of *Hamlet* to make some *other* point (philosophical, political, psychoanalytic) dissolve to bring us back to the play itself, not as referent, but as origin—or marker of the unknowability of origins.”²³

As opposed as both traditions have been, however, the play anticipates these interpretive extremes in Hamlet’s schizophrenic admiration for and dismissive remarks about theatrical illusion. Naively the prince can urge the players to embody an ideal stage mimesis by “suiting the action to the word, the word to the action,” even after he has sneeringly rejected how “the actions that a man might play” reveal only falsehood (3.2.17–18; 1.2.84). Such tension is exacerbated by interpretive conundrums such as the Ghost, which dazzles Hamlet with its authoritative and verisimilar form but which also puzzles the prince with its indeterminacy of being and origin. If in one sense both traditions have read the play well, both have also been limited by their inability to acknowledge the virtues of each other’s arguments. Psychological critics have been reluctant to acknowledge how Hamlet’s “self” and an audience’s determination of it fall under rigorous critique by the play’s metadramatic self-consciousness. Similarly, skeptics of character have been unwilling to observe how the play’s metadramatic undercurrent is inseparably connected to Hamlet’s crisis of subjectivity, the struggle of a dramatic personage’s attempts to live and act morally in moments of intense despair. If *Hamlet* questions the mystique of the individuated subject and its social fictions, it also represents the frustration and paralysis that attends such self-consciousness. In our recent fascination with the play’s signifiers, we risk overlooking how the metadramatic moment for Hamlet takes shape through events of profound tragic pathos, events that have not simply distanced the prince from his unknowable theatrical audiences but that have also bound him inexorably to them throughout the centuries.

Humanities Press International, 1987). Other recent critiques of Shakespearean character include Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992); Harry Berger Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Erickson (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997).

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 72.

²² Karin S. Coddon, “Suche Strange Desygn’s: Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture,” *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 20 (1989): 51–57.

²³ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as uncanny causality* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 158.

J. L. Calderwood's study of metadrama in *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* offers an example of the critical limitations of an exclusively formalist stance. In tracing the play's deconstructive ruptures, Calderwood considers Hamlet's delayed revenge as an occasion for critiquing the play's dramatic form while avoiding the question of "why he delays the revenge, an issue that leads into the labyrinths of character psychology."²⁴ By pursuing this strategy, Calderwood divorces the play's metadramatic underpinnings from Hamlet's urgent and failed attempts to establish a basis of knowledge for subsequent action: "Hamlet's expressions of bafflement serve . . . to publicize the structural hiatus in Shakespeare's play and—by announcing that he has cause, will, strength, and means to do it, and yet cannot—to suggest that his delay is at least partially arbitrary, occasioned less by Hamlet himself than by the dramatic structure in which he finds himself."²⁵ Although this nuancing avoids leveling Eliot's charge of incompetence against Shakespeare, it nevertheless dovetails with skeptical assumptions that Hamlet's illogical (or "partially arbitrary") motivations are rooted solely in the play's structure of delay and deferral. As the character of Hamlet disappears into the digressive structure of Shakespearean metadrama, Calderwood observes him fade from a naive mimetic physical presence to a sophisticated symbol of stage artifice:

The theatergoer who submits himself to the illusion of presence in the theater and weeps for Hamlet is pretty much at one with Polonius, who is moved by the actor who weeps for Hecuba. However, if Shakespeare deprives us of the Polonius-experience, in part by putting Polonius into the play, he compensates us for our loss by presenting us with the duplicitous but richly complex experience of Hamlet's world caught in the perspective of theatrical art. From this perspective *Hamlet* becomes a constitutive metaphor that simultaneously reflects and creates its own tenor.²⁶

Calderwood's assertions ring false, particularly in their casual disregard for psychological nuance. Polonius is not at all drawn into the verisimilar force of theatrical art ("this is too long" [2.2.494]) in the way Hamlet is ("It shall to the barber's with your beard" [1. 495]; "tis well" [1. 517]). Calderwood's false opposition between Polonius and Hamlet is in actuality a conflict within Hamlet himself, who struggles to reconcile his sensitivity to dramatic presence with his understanding of its imaginary form. Though promising, Calderwood's sketch of *Hamlet* as a "constitutive metaphor" too easily loses sight of how metadrama functions through the characterizations of the play, how the work's metadramatic self-consciousness operates *within* Hamlet's attempts to act morally and with epistemological clarity. In alluding

²⁴ James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), xiii.

²⁵ Calderwood, 27.

²⁶ Calderwood, 191.

to how Hamlet's blindnesses reveal the blurring distinctions between theater and world, fantasy and reality, Calderwood's analysis inhibits—indeed, prohibits—further examination of how those blindnesses lead to Hamlet's crippled judgment, despair, and death. A complete metadramatic analysis of the play, then, must balance Hamlet's "richly complex experience" with its "duplicitous" and ultimately destructive consequences.

EAR-SPLITTING

While Calderwood hints at the catachretic effect of *Hamlet's* metadramatic structure, I propose to develop the relationship of that doubleness to the play's environment. We can begin to define this relationship through the soliloquy after *The Mousetrap*, where Hamlet's attempt to infuse language with violence produces a corresponding dissolution of violence into language. Viewing Claudius's sudden exit as evidence of his guilt, Hamlet appears to have resolved his doubts over the Ghost's veracity and seems poised to execute his revenge against Claudius:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

(3.2.379–83)

In the face of this ominous prelude, however, Hamlet's subsequent plan of action introduces another of the play's striking non sequiturs:

Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:
How in my words somever she be shent,
To give them seals never my soul consent.

(3.3.383–90)

At the very moment Hamlet gathers the courage and moral conviction to revenge his father's murder, he resolves *not* to attack Claudius but instead to scold his mother, insisting repeatedly that his violence will not take physical form. To "speak daggers . . . but use none" marks a retreat from the prospect of force beyond mere delay. Taken at face value, the phrase evokes the proverbial metaphor of violent speech as "sharp-tongued" or "cutting." But if Hamlet's violent language echoes the "bitter business" he has just resolved to perform, it also assumes a catachretic structure that

can only negate the prospect of real physical force rather than carry it to fruition. Muddying the distinctions between violence and speech that he hopes to maintain here, Hamlet's "speak daggers" does not simply make daggers out of words; it also makes words out of daggers. While it wrenches figuration into the play's situational "reality," the phrase also dislocates and mystifies the material action of revenge, consigning it to the realm of the imaginary. It does not so much fill in or replace a missing literal term as it creates the conditions *for* a missing term—in this case, an actual dagger and the action to be committed with it. As a *speaker* of daggers but a *user* of none, Hamlet obviously wants it both ways. Obligated to revenge his father's death, he fantasizes instead about applying the brute authority of virtuous action to his speech without ever risking real violence. Turning from Claudius's material heart and its "hot blood," Hamlet aims for Gertrude's emotional heart, which he will cleave "in twain." Such force, however, comes at the cost of a deep confusion between figurative image and literal effect. If Hamlet's catachresis sharpens his scolding speech, it does so only by blunting the edge of his actual revenge. Neither enacted in the plot nor truly abandoned in principle, Hamlet's violence resembles the ghostly effect of Allecto's snake in the *Aeneid*. Suspended between the figurative and the literal without resolution, it is both there and not there, real and unreal, a potentially defining action that is nevertheless continuously deferred, recycled, and unrealized.

In this collapsing of martial force into malicious speech, Hamlet engages in an act of substitution that diverts his execution of revenge while providing a satisfying reencoding of it within the symbolic. Yet, rather than resolving the divide between action and speech, this example of catachresis exposes it all the more. The play foreshadows such a dichotomy early on, when Hamlet traces the figure of cutting speech to both its positive and negative extremes. In one instance he imagines a stage actor inspired by his own motivations and "cue for passion" to the extent that he could

. . . cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.

(2.2.557–60, emphasis added)

Yet only two scenes later, Hamlet inverts this ideal image of active rhetoric to one of clumsy bombast in his advice to the players: "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to *split the ears* of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" (3.2.8–12, emphasis added). The intensity and grandeur that infuse the figural violence of the first example turn vulgar, false, and impotent in the second. Hamlet's insistence on stage decorum is one way of distinguishing between the

effects of these two assaults upon the ear.²⁷ In another sense, however, both forms of ear-splitting defy distinction. Hamlet's and Polonius's diametrically opposed reactions to the player's speech—the one gazing with rapt concentration, the other with pedantic impatience—reveal how the gestures that so brilliantly succeed for one audience will inevitably fail for another. And as Hamlet's variously positive and negative responses to violent speech show above, the response of even an individual may never be uniform. Juxtaposed, Hamlet's remarks highlight the way in which the figure of speaking daggers conveys force and weakness, action and passivity. Its contradictory effects, so frankly acknowledged in passages so close together, highlight why such violent language seduces Hamlet away from his revenge and produces such revulsion in him for its ineffectuality. Chasing the ghostlike quality of violent speech, Hamlet will find it variously real or unreal, depending on the context for viewing it. Even in its complimentary form, Hamlet's figural violence to the ear is itself a curious sublimation of the revenge play's original cause, Claudius's murder of the sleeping King Hamlet. As the prince damns Claudius for pouring the "cursed hebenon" (1.5.62) into his brother's ear, he can only subject such violence to neurotic repetition in his caustic, "cutting" remarks. And while Hamlet projects this scorn against Claudius, Gertrude, and the court in general throughout the early acts, he evokes the ghostly presence of the king's wounded ear in a violence that remains unperformed.

In his soliloquy after *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet worries that his violent rhetoric may be exposed as mere illusion. In admitting that his "tongue and soul . . . be hypocrites," he invokes the sense of playacting in the Greek root *hypocrisis*, implying that his verbal daggers may themselves be only the "dancing rapiers" of the stage actor. Similarly, Hamlet's representation of force cannot extricate itself from symbolic co-optation. In rendering violent acts as authenticating "seals" of the language with which he will attack Gertrude, Hamlet fashions another speaking dagger in its weakest sense, substituting a symbolic term of ratification for actual bloodshed. The figure of seals thus symbolizes the rejection of force that Hamlet describes, situating violence utterly within the structure and effect of language.

GHOST WRITING

Hamlet's descent into malicious language follows from his confusion of physical violence with the force of rhetorical illusion. The catalyst for such substitution is the Ghost, whose introduction to the play sets the tone for a curious and unresolved doubleness, a state neither truly "real" in the material sense nor mere "fantasy." Shakespeare foregrounds the catachretic structure of this double nature in the play's

²⁷ For a discussion of the blending of representative and nonrepresentative forms of mimesis projected in these contrasting forms of ear-splitting, see Weimann, "Mimesis in *Hamlet*," 286.

opening lines, where the Ghost emerges into the corporeal world out of the symbolic traces of oral narrative:

HORATIO	Well, sit we down, And let us hear Barnardo speak of this.
BARNARDO	Last night of all, When yond same star that's westward from the pole, Had made his course t'illuminate that part of heaven Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself, The bell then beating one— <i>Enter GHOST.</i>
MARCELLUS	Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.
BARNARDO	In the same figure like the King that's dead.

(1.1.36–44)

The horror of the Ghost's entrance stems from its uncanny convergence with both Barnardo's verbal narrative and the material environment of the Elsinore ramparts. The watchman's story of his past night's encounter purports to take Horatio *backward* twenty-four hours, but the various details of place and time instead rush the teller and his companions headlong into the present. Marking the moment of the Ghost's appearance by star position, Barnardo gestures up to the light ("yond") and finds the world around him in exact resemblance to the moment he describes. In this congruence between the natural world and narrative language, the Ghost's subsequent presence functions less as an interruption to the tale than a completion of it, as if Barnardo's words take shape in the apparition itself. But, as in the case of Hamlet's speaking daggers and their curious duality, the watchman's words hover somewhere between mastery of the Ghost and service to it. Has the guard in some way conjured the spirit out of his tale, or has his story been royally upstaged by the Ghost's armored form? In dramatic terms, Barnardo paints a scene only to discover that he and his friends are already in it, actors as well as audience, so that they, too, are doubled, suspended between realities they cannot negotiate. It is perhaps because of this ambiguity that the men remain so oblivious to the Ghost's immanence, unable to interpret the merging details that place them in both narrative and reality. The effects of this fusion are subtle but manifest. Just as the Ghost emerges out of Barnardo's tale, so do the guards find nothing unusual in resuming their story once it departs, as if King Hamlet's apparition were a kind of vivid illustration set within the frame of their speech. With commendable aesthetic closure, Marcellus picks up the narrative thread just as the Ghost exits: "Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour, / With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch" (ll. 68–69). Such a moment illustrates the ease with which the Ghost's supernatural double nature may be rendered into literary and imaginative terms.

The two-sided aspect of the Ghost is also evident in its curious illusion of materiality—its quality of being at once there and not there: "'Tis here / 'Tis here / 'Tis gone" (ll. 145–47).²⁸ As the Danish guards perceive, the Ghost's verisimilar presence not only offsets its insubstantiality but even seems to overcome it. As Marcellus notes,

We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence,
For it is as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery.
(ll. 148–51)

Immediately striking is the invulnerability the Ghost projects. Clearly, King Hamlet's image offers no threat of or target for violent action. Nevertheless, the Ghost demonstrates its existence in and importance to the state of the Danish kingdom. The soldiers, for example, do not wrong themselves in mistaking the form for true but, instead, wrong the apparition by mistaking its nature. Yet certainty of the Ghost's incorporeal form does not diminish its significance. Rather, its verisimilar quality places it more firmly within the fictional reality of Denmark, for the image of King Hamlet typifies his form in personal and historical memory. The king's beard, says Horatio, "was, as I have seen it in his life, / A sable silver'd" (1.2.241–42). Horatio also finds celebrated acts of heroic valor evoked in the Ghost's appearance:

Such was the very armour he had on
When he th'ambitious Norway combated.
So frown'd he once, when in an angry parle
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
(1.1.63–66)

Horatio's insistence on the figure's exact resemblance to King Hamlet appears more than a little ironic given that he actually saw him on only one occasion. Horatio tells Hamlet that he "saw him once" (1.2.186) and once only, but certainly not thirty years ago during the duel with Norway. Horatio, then, is not asking his companions to trust an eyewitness account of this event. He is asking them instead to read historical narration as mimetic truth, accounts of the past as the veritable images of events as they actually happened, and to trust the way these images verify the identity of the figure before them. The true-to-life presence of the Ghost's martial form, then, rests inevitably on the mediations of literary and pictorial artifice. Thus Old Hamlet's ghost becomes "more than fantasy" without actually crossing *beyond* the realm of fan-

²⁸ See Garber, 129.

tasy, or, rather, it intrudes on the real world precisely because Horatio cannot distinguish his immediate sense impressions from the collective fantasies of portraiture, memory, and history. From this imaginative basis the men confirm the Ghost's presence in the world and attribute a materiality to it so strong that they strike at it. To confront this apparition with even the threat of force is to acknowledge the potent heroic aspect inherent in King Hamlet's living figure. The Ghost's insubstantiality, however, rather than cheapening this image, instead reduces the world around it, rendering the guards' attempts to resist it a mere "show of violence." In comparison to the Ghost's embodiment of knightly prowess, the guards offer "vain blows," pretending a "majestical" pose inherent only in the king's regal figure. Ironically, the ghostly image of historical antiquity becomes far truer than reality. Hamlet will repeatedly reinforce how both surviving contenders to the Danish throne remain more false and insubstantial than his father's Herculean image as viewed in his imagination.

Against this imposing yet unreal presence, Hamlet obsessively proclaims his own inferiority. But, like Marcellus, he cannot fully dissociate it from a fantastical discourse that makes it epistemologically (and therefore morally) suspect. The various terms applied to the Ghost eloquently express its ambiguous form: "sight" (1.1.28), "apparition" (l. 31), "illusion" (l. 130), "spirit" (1.5.9), and "figure" (1.1.44) on the one hand; "thing" (l. 24), "old mole" (1.5.170), "truepenny" (l. 158), "pioner" (l. 171), and "Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane" (1.4.44–45) on the other. But if this flurry of designations reflects the Ghost's variously real and unreal forms, the most eloquent of them all embeds that ambiguity in its very act of naming: "A *mote* it is to trouble the mind's eye" (1.1.115, emphasis added). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a *mote* as "A particle of dust . . . an irritating particle in the eye or throat,"²⁹ but this definition can only partially clarify the sense of Horatio's term. Not only does this instance of catachresis give a local habitation and a name to something that would otherwise have none; it also gives identity to something that could scarcely seem to exist until it *had* been named. Just what exactly *is* a mote to trouble the *mind's eye*? The metaphor on which it plays seems clear enough. The "eye of the mind" (or "*oculus mentis*") as a term for the imagination has a long and venerable literary-historical pedigree.³⁰ By definition, the mind's eye does not function as an eye, does not *actually* see but, rather, generates images within a cognitive non-space, ranging within what Sidney would call "the zodiac of one's wit."³¹ As an intrusion into the imagination, such a "mote" does not present a trivial challenge to the mind's speculative freeplay.

²⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prep. J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, 2d ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. "mote," n.¹, 1.a.

³⁰ On the "mind's eye," see Jenkins, 191n.

³¹ Sir Philip Sidney, *Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 2d ed. (Madison and London: Wisconsin UP, 1983), 108.

On the contrary, it “troubles” the mind’s eye by blurring the distinction between its imaginative non-space and the palpable materiality of its literal counterpart.

Gertrude’s caution to Hamlet against excessive meditation on his father’s image alludes to the Ghost’s function as mote: “Do not for ever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust” (1.2.70–71). Later in the scene, Hamlet seems innocent of the dangers of such imagination, unintentionally frightening Horatio and Barnardo by exclaiming “methinks I see my father” (l. 184). Not yet aware of the Ghost’s presence, Hamlet holds his father’s image safely tucked away in the utopian “no place” of his own mind’s eye. With grisly comic effect, Horatio’s startled reaction—“Where, my lord?” (l. 185)—reminds us that King Hamlet has in fact already been placed, no longer strictly fantasy but something more. As a mote to trouble the mind’s eye, the Ghost represents a return of repressed physicality to the imagination’s kingdom of infinite non-space. As if slipping through the cracks of fantastical perception, the Ghost as dust or grain turns visualization from a perfected metaphorical eye back into a literal eyeball, one vulnerable to blindness or scarring that may irrevocably call into question its power of discernment. The implications of such a figure go to the heart of Hamlet’s tragic paralysis. Just as the Ghost’s supernatural presence at Elsinore disturbs the coherence of the play’s “natural” world, so will its invasion into the empire of the senses prevent Hamlet from properly arbitrating its truth or falsehood.

EMPTY PICTURES

In order to sharpen his blurring powers of discernment, Hamlet turns to tenuous symbols of theatrical representation. He forges this connection between theater and world by means of the First Player’s speech and its ability to inspire real emotion by means of literary illusion. Such power derives from the trope of *enargeia*, or verisimilar description, which, as Quintilian observes, “makes us seem not so much to narrate [*dicere*] as to exhibit [*ostendere*] the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.”³² John Florio’s 1611 dictionary defines the figure as an “evident representing of a thing, euidence, perspicuitie,”³³ encompassing the representational strategies of vividness and verisimilitude that evoke the immediacy of sensory experience. Quintilian renders the trope in Latin as *evidentia*, connecting its function as legal evidence to the act of seeing (*videre*).³⁴ While contemporary theorists typically discuss *enargeia* with reference to

³² Quintilian, 2:434–37.

³³ John Florio, *Queen Anna’s New World of Words, 1611* (Menston, UK: Scolar Press, 1968), 168. *Enargeia* is treated extensively by Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoria*, 2:83–85, 433–37; 3:245–51.

³⁴ On the function of *enargeia* in classical legal tradition, see Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986), 71–75.

narrative and pictorial description, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) specifically relates these functions to dramatic verisimilitude, praising the ability of comedy and tragedy to represent the “action of many persons, or by many voices liuely represented to the eare and eye, so as a man might thinke it were euen now a doing.”³⁵

Collapsing the distinction between literary artifice and true representation, *enargeia* draws an audience into a fiction by erasing its fictive identity and redirecting attention to a work’s sensory details that activate and take hold of the imagination. Once verisimilar description has taken this hold, however, and a fiction begins to assume life in the memory, the boundaries between its metaphorical role as a *model* for real life and its catachretic role as a *substitute* for it become ambiguous. In cautionary tones, Sir Philip Sidney claims that the “speaking picture” of poetry should not be confused with actuality but should instead be regarded as the inspiration by which human will translates authorial conceit into worldly practice.³⁶ Even as Sidney argues this point, however, he downplays the manner in which vivid description can be taken for real, producing not a model of virtuous action but a delusion.³⁷ As he contemplates the prospect of revenge, Hamlet is drawn into this uneasy dichotomy and will find himself pulled in both directions. He will find the evidential function of *enargeia* eminently practical for confirming the Ghost’s story and securing a proper basis for revenge. However, if the theater provides Hamlet with an instrument for distinguishing truth from falsehood, it also threatens to absorb his attention in the verbal and symbolic terms of that medium, to the exclusion of the real-world events he seeks to mediate. We have already highlighted how the speaking picture of Lucianus slips from being a means of *evidence* to one of *retribution*, a preemptive speaking dagger that punishes Claudius for the very crime it is supposed to confirm. Such a transformation of image into violence is in no way limited to this episode. In fact this moment is only the most notable of a series of translations throughout Act 3, where prospective daggers turn into words and words turn into daggers.

Hamlet’s reception of the First Player’s speech exposes his admiring yet suspicious relationship to verisimilar art. Both the anonymous play from which the passage is taken and its well-known Virgilian source emphasize the scene’s concern with the problems of realism and verisimilitude. Hamlet, for instance, compliments

³⁵ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1936), 31. On the idiosyncratic uses of *enargeia* in this work, see Linda Galyon, “Puttenham’s *Enargeia* and *Energeia*: New Twists for Old Terms,” *Philological Quarterly* 60 (1981): 29–40, esp. 29–31. I regard the attribution of the *Arte* to George Puttenham as problematic.

³⁶ Sidney, 136–37.

³⁷ See Sidney’s references to benign forms of catachresis in dismissing the dangers of poetic illusion: “We see we cannot play at chess but that we must give names to our chessmen; and yet, methinks, he were a very partial champion of truth that would say we lied for giving a piece of wood the reverend title of a bishop” (137).

the play for maintaining its “honest method” of representation against the interests of commercial entertainment:

[T]he play, I remember, pleased not the million, 'twas caviare to the general. But it was, as I received it—and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine—an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection.
(2.2.431–39)

Hamlet praises the play for its very *lack* of popularity, marveling earlier on that it may never have been actually performed. Punning on notions of dramatic nourishment over taste, he prefers a serious digestion of scenes to the popular sentiment for savory one-liners. Above all else, Hamlet's criterion of good theater is “modesty,” a term that he later glosses to the actors as “the modesty of nature,” a restraint that holds “as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.19, 22–24). Before he has even concocted a use for the theater, Hamlet's standards for playing are strictly mimetic. Shakespeare identifies this view as unrealistic in Hamlet's utter disdain for commercial necessity. The prince insists, “though it [clownish farce] makes the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others” (ll. 25–28). For Hamlet to expect a playing company to alienate an entire audience for the sake of one individual's insistence on dramatic verisimilitude indicates just how extreme his expectations of the theater have become. Hamlet's instructions here are, of course, context-specific. The judicious grievance of “one” (himself) must outweigh the potential disapproval of “others” (king and court) in order for the play to work its intended effect on Claudius. Nevertheless, such hopes for drama to reproduce the “very age and body of the time” depend on an aesthetic contrary to Shakespeare's own practice of projecting the audience as a unified whole to which the players refer with elaborate gestures of apology and humility.³⁸

As the Player's speech itself gratifies Hamlet's need for a theater of vivid and precise representation, the subject of Aeneas from Book 2 of Virgil's epic provides him with an exemplar of virtue steeped in artistic self-images. The subject of his own speech, Aeneas claims the role of poet in this section, validating the literary endeavor of Prince Hamlet, who will soon be composing his own verse about the murder of a king. Like Hamlet, Aeneas is a famous *consumer* of artistic images as well. His

³⁸ On the idiosyncratic perspective of Hamlet's theory, see Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, 150. For an examination of how Hamlet's neoclassical view of theatrical mimesis functions in relation to the play's multiple and “heterogeneous” strategies of representation, see Weimann, “Mimesis in *Hamlet*,” 280–81.

own narrative has been inspired by viewing scenes of Troy's fall in the sculptures that adorn Dido's temple to Juno. Elizabeth Bellamy describes Aeneas's reaction to these murals as "one of the most dramatic manifestations of sheer physical affect in all of epic literary history."³⁹ Standing in wondrous astonishment, groaning and weeping over images of events in which he has taken part, Aeneas "feeds his soul on [the empty picture]" ("*Animum pictura pascit inani*").⁴⁰ The scene dramatizes the duality of Aeneas's character, which functions as a literal speaker of his history and, conversely, as an audience to the events that he narrates. Such a striking response to representational images has its parallel in Hamlet, who is also feeding on "empty" pictures in this scene, but who also comes to realize the practical effects such pictures can produce. In fact Hamlet's own dual role in Act 3 can be traced to Aeneas's self-reflexive model of literary production and consumption. As playwright-director of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet nevertheless remains absorbed in observation during the play, his future hanging in the balance over what he will discover in his uncle's reaction.

This experience of verisimilar images (at once "empty" and yet decidedly full) intruding on and contaminating the world of Aeneas's Troy acts profoundly on Hamlet's reception of the First Player's speech. After the sensory immediacy of the prince's opening portrait of Pyrrhus, the speech begins to translate this immediacy into material events as the Player takes up the monologue:

*Unequal match'd,
Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide;
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
Th'unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. For lo, his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seem'd i'th' air to stick;
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.*

(2.2.467–78)

The catalyst of Pyrrhus's empty blow begins a chain of affective responses that inextricably blend perception with reality. The Trojan citadel, Ilium, personified as witness of its sovereign's fall, seems to feel Priam's experience so completely that it, too, falls. Yet its animation is rooted in specifically aesthetic and verisimilar form, for Pyrrhus

³⁹ Elizabeth J. Bellamy, *Translations of Power: Narcissism and the Unconscious in Epic History* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell UP, 1992), 63.

⁴⁰ The translation is Bellamy's (66), while the portion in brackets is mine.

does not inflict a martial wound but instead produces a “blow” of wind, a strangely theatrical gesture that nevertheless converts its failure into real force. The affective “response” of Ilium (“seeming to feel this blow”) echoes a destruction that is as yet only illusory. Conversely, the “hideous crash” turns the savage Greek warrior *himself* into an amazed and malleable audience. The reversal is neatly symmetrical, for while Pyrrhus’s ineffective sword seemingly forces Ilium to fall, the tower’s real collapse stops the warrior in his tracks. Pyrrhus, here, becomes yet another image, the static form of a “painted tyrant” in startled confusion. But if the Greek stands imprisoned *in* an image, it is one that curiously derives from his *own* initial image of ferocity. In this stasis Aeneas is mirrored as well, for his ability to recount the scene of Priam’s death so vividly stems from his total passivity before it. Virgil’s poem places the hero on top of the palace roof, which he conveniently occupies by means of an old secret door undiscovered by the Greeks. Staring with amazement at the fall of his king, Aeneas is captured by a vision that reveals what is at stake in this speech for Hamlet as well: “Then for the first time I knew the horror that was all about me. What was I to do? There came into my mind the image of my own dear father, as I looked at the king who was his equal in age breathing out his life with that cruel wound.”⁴¹ The scene of Priam’s death, which fills Aeneas with such anxiety over the fortunes of Anchises, functions as a crucial reference point for Hamlet’s similar fears about his father’s murder. The account renders “evidence” of what Hamlet was unable to witness.

Hamlet’s experience of the scene in fact caps an elaborate series of observations: The audience observes Hamlet watching the actor as Aeneas, who recounts watching Pyrrhus, who witnesses the fall of Ilium, which topples because it has seemingly been aware of the Greek’s attack on Priam. The Player’s speech continues this intense focus on observation and its effects in the description of Hecuba, who excites grief not merely as an object of pity but also as a grieving subject who must helplessly watch her husband’s slaughter:

*But if the gods themselves did see her then,
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs
The instant burst of clamour that she made,
Unless things mortal move them not at all,
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven
And passion in the gods.*

(2.2.501–14)

When the Player invokes the gods as observers of Hecuba, he does more than merely position his audience as a secondary witness to her act of observation.

⁴¹ Virgil, 47.

Rather, he encourages his audience to reassess Priam's slaughter through the medium of theatrical distance. What viewers seem to sympathetically experience "outside" the fictional boundaries of Troy suddenly appears onstage, itself the subject of representation. With dislocating effect, the on- and offstage spectators of the scene take the place of the absent gods by crossing into the fiction to weep for Hecuba. The culmination of this speech in the actor's own tears continues this displacement of audience sensibility into the literal terms of the fiction. Weeping before the court, the player gives concrete support for his description of the scene's pathos, translating the fantasy of a violent spectacle into "real" sorrow. Hamlet balks at the performance's indeterminacy. We never learn whether the First Player weeps "in character," in virtuoso imitation of Aeneas's grief, or whether the tears are "true," bursting uncontrollably through the theatrical mask. For Hamlet, neither possibility offers any resolution to the tears' dual role. Just as the First Player's grief can never transform him into Aeneas, his fictional role cannot vitiate the pathos that he exhibits and generates in his courtly audience. Like the pictures Aeneas views upon Dido's temple, these tears are both deeply empty and profoundly full. No matter their origins, the Player's tears remain more than just fantasy, striking both the eye and the mind's eye with simultaneous effect.

Aware of this dichotomy, Hamlet responds to the speech with admiration on the one hand and with contemptuous disbelief on the other. Although he is enthralled with the effect of the Player's performance, his critical perception of theatrical "conceit" forces him into a skeptical consciousness of its mimetic infidelity. Hamlet exposes an insoluble contradiction between the players' role as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" and their "monstrous" strategies of fiction-making (ll. 520, 545). Such a distinction prevents him from appreciating how the actors' function as *chronicles* depends on their ability to efface their role as *chroniclers*, representational media instead of "present" subject matter. By conflating the actor's performance with his own motive and cue for passion, Hamlet fantasizes a version of himself with absolute authenticity, an ideal mourner who both moves others and is himself moved by genuine sorrow. And yet, when he attempts to ascend to this level of invention, he finds that sincerity looks just like bad acting—the form of excess he later reproves in Laertes at the grave of Ophelia. Hamlet, then, finds no performative outlet for sincere feeling. The heart's mystery cannot be revealed—only unpacked and whored, reduced to the stock character of the garrulous female. It is a humiliating defeat for a personage so desperate to create an unhistrionic form of representation, a seamless balance between word and intention. Hamlet finds here that the actions a man might play are disabled by intention, the opposite mode of sophisticated actors such as the First Player or Claudius, who can eloquently feign emotions they do not feel. Thus, when Hamlet later complains of those actors "who imitated humanity so abominably" (3.2.35), he may well include himself among

them. Yet, rather than relinquish his hope in the ability of theatrical representation to reveal truth, Hamlet turns to reception theory for what he could not achieve through performance:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.

(2.2.584–90)

Even as Hamlet turns to the theater for proof of the Ghost's word, he knows that such proof rests only on testimonial report. Just as Horatio discerns the Ghost's form through historical accounts of what he has never seen, so Hamlet's search for knowledge will depend on a theory of audience response that he has never witnessed. There is, always, his own case. He has himself been so struck by the Player's speech that he proclaims his malefactions in soliloquy. Yet it is precisely Hamlet's distrust of his own powers of determination that drives him to seek outside confirmation of his belief.

A THING OF NOTHING

In harnessing theatrical *enargeia* as a means of proof, Hamlet takes its evidential function to the level of criminal investigation. Long recognized as a critical touchstone for the soliloquy on the player's tears in 2. 2, Quintilian's discussion of *enargeia* specifically relates the aesthetic trope to legal advocacy:

I have often seen actors, both in tragedy and comedy, leave the theatre still drowned in tears after concluding the performance of some moving role. But if the mere delivery of words written by another has the power to set our souls on fire with fictitious emotions, what will the orator do whose duty it is to picture to himself the facts and who has it in his power to feel the same emotion as his client whose interests are at stake? . . . when we desire to awaken pity, we must actually believe that the ills of which we complain have befallen our own selves, and must persuade our minds that this is really the case.⁴²

As language relates events at a narrative remove from reality, so it is obliged to evoke that reality through descriptive detail. Evidence, then, constitutes not merely the material remnants or even the narrative accounts of the past, but also the psychological perception of that past, "whereby things absent [*rerum absentium*] are pre-

⁴² Quintilian, 2:437.

sented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes."⁴³ Such vividness serves the legal advocate's need to recapture moments of his case which seem distant from the formal arena of the court. For Hamlet, this need is even more urgent, since he functions both as advocate *and* judge. *Enargeia* tantalizes both Quintilian and Hamlet because it is simultaneously absent and present, allowing an irretrievable past to be analyzed and judged. However, an actor's ability to harness this psychological power in the service of a fiction destabilizes the relationship between the veritable and the verisimilar. In a later discussion of *enargeia*, for example, Quintilian suggests introducing fictional elements to amplify the trope: "And we shall secure the vividness we seek, if only our descriptions give the impression of truth, nay, we may even add fictitious incidents [*falso adfingere*] of the type which commonly occur."⁴⁴ The rhetorician's obligations begin and end with advocacy for his client, but Hamlet has no such luxury. Any illusions that sway him from a just assessment of the truth merely hamper his impartiality. Moreover, by investing verisimilar performance and its unpredictable effects with the full force of proof, Hamlet will cripple his ability to distinguish between the imaginary and the real.

That Hamlet relies on theatricality to determine the boundaries between fantasy and reality reflects the deep associations between theater and world. Hamlet laces his description of his environment with terms from the playhouse: "indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this *goodly frame* the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most *excellent canopy* the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this *majestical roof* fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" (2.2.297–303, emphasis added).⁴⁵ World elides into theater in this passage, even in Hamlet's derogatory conclusion, for the "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" was itself a familiar, indeed, stereotypical criticism of contemporary playhouses. Thus when Hamlet calls mankind by the same term he uses for a play, a "piece of work,"⁴⁶ he implies a connection between the two as artistic performances.

Precisely this ambiguity hovers over Hamlet's version of *The Murder of Gonzago* and his unsettling breach of the barrier between performance and audience. In his search for verisimilar evidence, Hamlet devises a revenge whose form is increasingly rhetorical and elusive. Quintilian outlines the cognitive uncertainty that theatrical illusion generates. If a subject can be tricked into experiencing events "with such

⁴³ Quintilian, 2:432–35.

⁴⁴ Quintilian, 3:249.

⁴⁵ See Anne Righter [Barton], *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), 159.

⁴⁶ "What piece of work is a man" (2.2.303); "Will the King hear this piece of work?" (3.2.46–47).

extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes," he can be equally fooled into conceiving himself as an active agent:

When the mind is unoccupied or is absorbed by fantastic hopes or daydreams, we are haunted by these visions [of *enargeia*] . . . to such an extent that we imagine that we are travelling abroad, crossing the sea, fighting, addressing the people, or enjoying the use of wealth we do not actually possess, and seem to ourselves not to be dreaming, but acting [*nec cogitare sed facere*].⁴⁷

Hamlet's hope that "murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ" foreshadows his provocative insinuation of his revenge into the play as Lucianus, "nephew to the king" (2.2.589–90; 3.2.239). If Hamlet tries to make murder speak, even though it lacks a tongue, he will also try to make speech wound, even though it cannot cut.

The very moment before Hamlet reveals Lucianus's identity (l. 239), his words link the actions of "touching," "troping," and "trapping":

KING	What do you call the play?
HAMLET	<i>The Mousetrap</i> —marry, how tropically! This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna—Gonzago is the Duke's name, his wife Baptista—you shall see anon. 'Tis a knavish piece of work, but what o' that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not.

(3.2.231–37)

But if Hamlet's trap "touches" Claudius by means of a trope, it does so only by disrupting the boundaries by which such a trope operates. We have already noted the incongruity of Lucianus as an improper or abusive substitute for Claudius, as he simultaneously refers backward to Claudius's murder of King Hamlet and forward to Hamlet's own prospective revenge. Doubtless Hamlet has been inspired by Pyrrhus's dual function as murderer and revenger in the Player's speech, but the investment in this analogy is far higher now—nothing less, in fact, than confirmation of the Ghost's word and the certainty of Hamlet's course of vengeance. For *The Mousetrap* to fulfill Hamlet's intent, it must capture Claudius in the uncanny experience of being "inside" the fiction even as he sits outside it, and thus provoke a reaction far beyond mere aesthetic involvement: "If a do blench, / I know my course" (2.2.593–94). As a test of the Ghost's word, anything apart from a drama of fratricide casts doubt on the source of Claudius's reaction. It is simple enough to note that the figure of Lucianus violates this analogy. What purpose, then, is served by Hamlet intruding his own identity into the character of Lucianus at this point,

⁴⁷ Quintilian, 2:435.

and why at the play's abortive end does he exult over upsetting Claudius without recognizing the doubt that still remains?

To examine the function and effect of Lucianus as a catachretic substitute for Hamlet's violence, I would like to return to Susanne Wofford's remarks on the trope in her discussion of epic ideology. Particularly compelling in Wofford's analysis is the way in which catachresis conflates literal narrative and allegorical commentary in order for the two to "touch," but only through improper or unrecognizable transfers that inevitably reinscribe the boundaries between them:

Catachresis . . . attempts to establish a metaphorical transfer of figure into the action in order to make it appear that the figure can "touch" the action; it is thus the principal trope on which the poet relies to make his interpretive claims about the action appear to have a place within it rather than reveal themselves as external and secondary to it. The trope has the difficulty, however, that it accomplishes this touching by using a figure to "replace" an event or actor that otherwise has no name or naturalistic existence within the action and thus cannot be understood in its terms.⁴⁸


Catachresis exposes the divide between epic narrative and epic ideology, which the poet employs to dictate the conditions of his work's interpretation within the very narrative itself. Such "touching," however, comes at a cost. By calling attention to the arbitrary conditions that it imposes on the characters of the fiction, catachresis reemphasizes the discontinuity between narrative action and the poet's figurative argument. For Wofford, catachresis becomes a "trope of narrative compulsion, for these unrecognizable, unacknowledged, and invisible figurative transfers control the action, dominating the characters very much in the manner of the obsessive daemons of allegorical theory."⁴⁹ In the fluid interchanges between the world of the audience and the world of the play, Hamlet applies such forces of compulsion to Claudius, who knows that he is *attending* a play (*The Murder of Gonzago*), but who cannot know that he is *performing* in one as well (*The Mousetrap*). Thus when he asks what "the play" is called and hears "*The Mousetrap*—marry, how tropically!" Claudius may realize that he is no longer simply viewing *The Murder of Gonzago*, but he cannot know what *The Mousetrap* means or how its "tropical" effect may enclose him within it as a character compelled to play his part. In constructing a *theatrum mundi* in which performance and audience function interchangeably, Hamlet creates an arena to exploit his passive-aggression to best advantage. By stage-managing the boundaries between theater and audience, Hamlet turns the "nothing" of theatrical fantasy into "the thing" of evidentiary proof. Within such "space" the violent action that he delays performing can nevertheless be savored in verisimilar form. Thus

⁴⁸ Wofford, 23.

⁴⁹ Wofford, 23.

even as the king's sudden departure strikes Hamlet's mind's eye with irresistibly verisimilar effect, Lucianus's murder of Gonzago functions no less vividly. In the arena "whereby things absent are presented with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes," the murder of Gonzago is a spur to action, but it is also a speaking dagger, evidence that Claudius can be haunted by the same forms of fantastical perception that plague Hamlet. Like his father's ghost, Hamlet's fiction is "more than fantasy," yet it is not real; so while it alludes to a troubling knowledge and intent on the part of the prince, it nevertheless remains free of outright treasonous content, a "poison in jest. / No offense i'th' world" (3.2.229–30).

As author, director, actor, and audience, Hamlet can relentlessly "touch" on Claudius and the court while also asserting quite properly that "it touches us not." But if the figure of Lucianus places Claudius uncomfortably *within* the play's boundaries, it leaves Hamlet inevitably *outside* the reality that Lucianus is supposed to confirm. Conflating Hamlet's need for proof with his desire for vengeance, Lucianus nevertheless proves nothing conclusively and avenges no one. Standing as an improper substitute for Claudius, he can *touch* both worlds but *belong* to neither. As a substitute for Hamlet's violence, the actions of Lucianus illustrate how catachresis touches yet can never completely link world and theater:

Lucianus : Gonzago ::

 [Hamlet] : Claudius

The figure of Lucianus does not resemble but instead replaces an absent term, the absent category being Hamlet himself, who yearns to act but cannot. Lucianus, then, does not simply figure Hamlet's violence; he *is* Hamlet's violence, poured into Claudius's ears and eyes even as the king is yet constrained to play his role as silent auditor.

Hamlet's conversion of speech into violence reaches its zenith in Gertrude's closet, where the queen gratifies her son's fantasy of a speech "like daggers" (3.4.95) that can cut both to the heart and through it. Such daggers, moral exempla of hero and villain mirrored forth in this scene by *enargeia* and portraiture, parallel those visited on Claudius. Yet Gertrude's simile exposes the artifice inherent in Hamlet's effort, acknowledging how words are *not* daggers, even as they aspire to be. In fact Hamlet's first attempt to set up such a mirror in the scene results in disastrous misperception. Threatening to use the same mimetic weaponry with which he attacked Claudius, Hamlet promises Gertrude to "set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (ll. 18–19). Although Hamlet has vowed to avoid violence, he also reveals the impulse to commit matricide: "Let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom" (3.2.384–85). Hamlet portrays violence with such realistic passion and ferocity, then, that he provokes it in a chain of affective responses similar to those in the Player's speech. Again, Hamlet's *hypocrisis* is false and real—for in trying to

speak but not use daggers, he precipitates both. While finally crossing the divide between the theatrical and the real to commit violence, Hamlet nevertheless produces an action that reveals his utter inability to contain violence within those forms of morality and honor that guide his intentions.

“AND YET AM I SUBDUED”

It is a truism of Romantic criticism that Hamlet possesses an expanded consciousness—“comprehensive,” “immense,” “capacious,” Harold Bloom asserts—one capable of minute levels of understanding.⁵⁰ In keeping with the Romantic critical tradition, Bloom singles out Hamlet’s expanded consciousness—a transcendent “inwardness”—as Shakespeare’s quintessential accomplishment in the construction of human personality.⁵¹ We should note, however, that Hamlet’s term for this inwardness is “conscience,” and that he (as well as Laertes) distinguishes it as disabling and corrupt. It is strange, then, that a consciousness singled out as the epitome of human subjectivity should itself long for annihilation, or that a personality of considerable intellectual gifts should be reduced to doubt and incapacity. Still, for all his cognitive resources, Hamlet comes to knowledge only with great difficulty. Less a skeptic than a thwarted idealist, he has a relation to violence that grows inconsistent and illogical—so much so that it is often read as indecisive. Yet Hamlet’s decisions over action or delay are in themselves never hesitant—only contradictory and irreconcilable. While Hamlet can rationalize inaction against the kneeling Claudius, he finds himself just as readily inspired to action by the futile, meaningless deaths of two thousand (or twenty thousand) soldiers “for a fantasy and trick of fame” (4.4.61). The passive dishonor of waiting for an opponent to sin cannot be reconciled with the irascible honor of “greatly [finding] quarrel in a straw” (1. 55)—or to the corrupted “impostume of much wealth and peace” (1. 27) that precipitates such honor. Hamlet urges himself to make his thoughts “bloody or be nothing worth,” forgetting that thoughts themselves possess a “pale cast” that sickens “the native hue of resolution” (3.1.84) or that, “quarter’d, [possess] but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward” (4.4.42–43). While thought is, ostensibly, the antithesis of action, in Hamlet’s figure it may carry the honorific weight of an heraldic insignia—if only to reveal its own ineffectiveness. Like Hamlet’s despairing conclusion to the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, where enterprises “lose the name of action” (3.1.88) through excessive contemplation, this speech exerts a profound tragic pathos; for Hamlet spends so much time meditating on his revenge in word and image that it becomes the *name* of action and its imaginary form that he fears los-

⁵⁰ Bloom, 4, 383, and 387.

⁵¹ Bloom, 5.

ing rather than violence itself. To lose the name of action in a context where action can only be named represents a crippling tautology.

Rather than speak of Hamlet's expanded consciousness, then, it would be more accurate to describe it as burdened, fraught with contradictions inherent in a narrative whose complex reception and reinvention stretch back to the ninth century. The notorious inconsistencies in Hamlet's behavior lie less in theories of dramatic structure or character psychology than in the historical discontinuities of the Amleth legend—a narrative that is overwritten and reinterpreted with new values and assumptions without ever being reconciled to its previous incarnations, worlds that range in setting from pagan to Christian, Catholic to Protestant, medieval to Renaissance, Elsinore to Wittenberg, in versions from Saxo to Belleforest to Kyd, to at least three distinct versions of Shakespeare. Among the many breaches in "continuity" created by these reinterpretations, several appear key to Hamlet's dislocated sense of self: the classical conception of a Fortune against which one must "take arms" (3.1.59) as opposed to a Christian definition of a Fortune that the mind must "suffer" (1. 57); the related contrast between a pagan principle of the *wyrd*, the radical uncertainty of Fate against Christian, specifically Tudor Protestant, definitions of providentialism epitomized in Hamlet's "Let be" (5.2.220); an honor code rooted in a mystique of violence as opposed to a modern culture of courtiership that refashioned duelling as rarefied sport or mere brawling; a fervent and palpable belief in the existence of purgatorial spirits as opposed to a reformation skepticism that viewed Purgatory as a superstitious "vacancy."⁵² These competing realities form not merely the detached "background" against which characters function; they serve as central authorities for their motives and cues for passion.

That *Hamlet* was a successful play is demonstrated by its early publications as well as by numerous contemporary references. That this overwritten, internally inconsistent play achieved such success may be in part due to the way its discontinuities found their analogues in the culture of Shakespeare's elite audience, one that struggled with its own inconsistencies in action and motivation. Elizabeth's reign had overseen, but not entirely completed, a transformation of the English nobility from a primarily military class to a courtly one that fashioned identity and power out of the symbolic modes of language, portraiture, gesture, clothing, and emblem.⁵³ In this environment the opportunities to achieve individual honor and reward through military heroism dwindled. In fact such codes of chivalric valor, revived in fictional narrative, historical chronicle, and Tudor pageantry, were themselves throwbacks to out-

⁵² On the changing historical forces that affect Tudor conceptions of "honor," see Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 315 and 385.

⁵³ Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984).

dated practices of mounted combat.⁵⁴ And yet, as the technology of antique virtue became increasingly obsolete, its symbolic importance retained currency for an elite class with few contemporary avenues for virtuous action. The consequent rise of symbolic modes of power created an inevitable dislocation between the Elizabethan courtier and his military heritage, as exemplified in the careers of such figures as Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, and his precursor, Sir Philip Sidney.⁵⁵

The pervasively symbolic cast of Elizabethan court practice provides a vivid context for the tragic fall of a character such as Hamlet, for it is precisely through the pleasures and perils of aesthetic images that Hamlet's revenge is conceived, fostered, and ultimately crippled. The sixteenth-century English nobleman was celebrated through a mystique of knighthood that defined itself in opposition to words, language, and signs even as it was itself constructed *by* words, language, and signs. As Alexander Barclay's *Mirroure of Good Maners* exhorts its prospective noble audience, "A straw for thy study, thy reason is but blind, / To waste time in words, and on no deed to muse, / . . . Therefore reader refuse / Superfluous study and care superfluous, / And turne thy chief study to deeds vertuous."⁵⁶ Barclay enacts this argument for knightly ignorance right down to his clumsy rhymes, evoking a rich proverbial tradition that defined action and language as strict antitheses.⁵⁷ Further reinforced by discourses in religion, philosophy, and science, this tradition operates in Shakespeare's play through the ideal of King Hamlet, whose victory over Fortinbras confers on the Danish monarchy its particular prestige, and whose Herculean persona typifies the *vita activa*. The paradox of King Hamlet's active identity, however, is that it cannot "touch" the world of the play, except through unreliable forms of mediation: ghostly nonpresence, *enargeia*, portraiture, memory, history, and theater. Like any fictional exemplar of virtuous action, this model of the active life is itself a construction of signs, an irony very similar to (although almost certainly unintended by) Barclay's text, which expends its aesthetic energies on persuading its audience *not* to read. Such representations of virtuous action depend on a benign, mimetic conception of language that mirrors an ethos of violence uncon-

⁵⁴ On the Tudor feudal revival, see Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977); Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1960); and Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

⁵⁵ On the increasing symbolic modes of social identity in Elizabeth's reign, see Frank Whigham, "Elizabethan Aristocratic Insignia," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 27 (1985): 325–53.

⁵⁶ Alexander Barclay, *The Mirroure of Good Maners* (1570), quoted here from James, 311.

⁵⁷ Studies that examine criticism against imaginative literature in Tudor England include Peter C. Herman, *Squitter-wits and Muse-haters: Sidney, Spenser, Milton and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996); and Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981).

taminated by mediation (explicitly so, in the case of Barclay's title). The paradox of mimesis, however, is that its mystique cannot exist without a free-ranging poesis of words, signs, and images—a self-generative art humbled in self-concealment. Added to this complicated definition of virtuous action is a further refinement of learned knighthood offered by Renaissance humanists such as Sir Thomas Elyot, who enlisted language as an essential agent of the active life: "A knyght hath receiued that honour not onely to defende with the swerde Christis faithe and his propre country . . . but also, and that most chiefly, . . . he shuld more effectually with his learnyng and witte assayle vice and errour . . . hauinge therevnto for his sworde and speare his tunge and his penne."⁵⁸ If Elyot and his colleagues offered a way for words to emerge from mere mimetic self-effacement to function as weapons in the struggle for active virtue, they also bound them to a similar dependency. If the aura of heroic action lay in a concealed form of representation, then the linguistic weapons proposed by humanist learning drew their authority directly from this mystique and would inevitably be relegated to a secondary position.

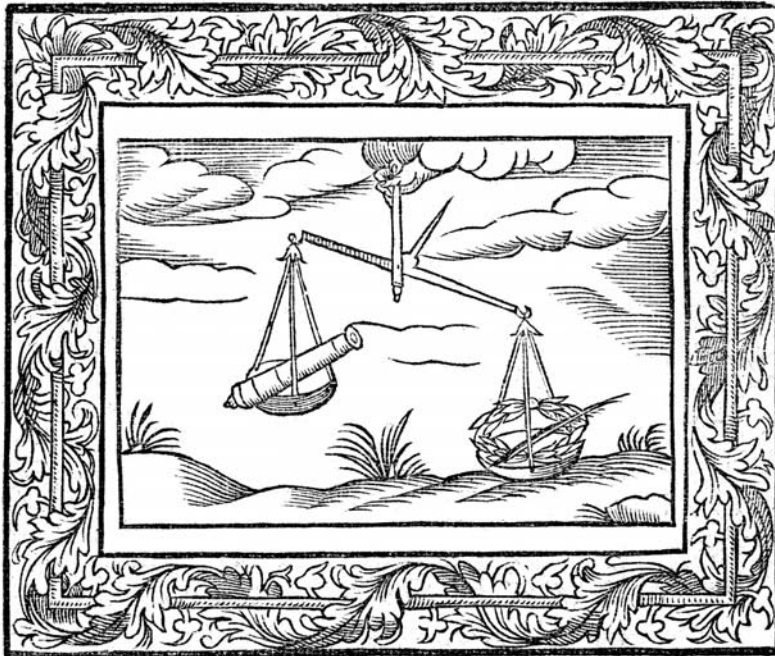


Figure 2: "Et tamen vincor [And yet am I subdued]," a tournament *impresse* of Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, from Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britannia* (1612). From the Folger Shakespeare Library collections.

⁵⁸ Sir Thomas Elyot, *A Preservative Agaynste Deth* (London, 1545), sigs. A2^v–A3^r.

We find these inextricable links between action and language crystallized in one of Essex's tournament *impreses*, preserved for a time in the queen's gallery at Whitehall and recorded in both the diary of Philip, duke of Stettin-Pomerania, and Henry Peacham's 1612 collection of "Heroical Devices," *Minerva Britanna* (see figure 2).⁵⁹ The design as described by Philip was "a shield made with a pair of scales upon it, and in one scale was a big cannon, in the other a writing-pen which nevertheless outbalanced the cannon, with this inscription: 'Et tamen vincor [And yet am I subdued].'"⁶⁰ Such a device illustrates the symbolic constraints within which military ambition was forced to maneuver in the Tudor Court. Gifted in such image-making, Essex certainly delighted in insinuating the skewed logic that placed the skills of language and writing of the Cecil faction over his identity as a heroic figure. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether he could have realized the degree to which such designs reduced his martial identity to a courtly aesthetic, or how much more effectively he represented his military pretensions through such symbols than he ever did in outright execution. Like Hamlet's appeal to the metaphor of the mirror, Essex's scales suggest a longing for a fixed standard of truth, a means by which the material and the symbolic may be "weighed" against each another. Yet both the content and the form of the design concede that no such measurement exists. For all its paradoxical sarcasm, Essex's complaint acknowledges that both his martial identity and its representation in the ponderous cannon lie equally "subdued" to the quill pen. Further, by defending the *vita activa* within the frame of an aesthetic image, he reveals that action cannot carry the same social currency as its own naming. In a world where all things convey their value through the lens of representation, even the sword must rely on the intermediary of the pen. Under similar conditions Hamlet progresses from speaking pictures to speaking daggers, from *enargeia* to cat-achresis, conflating the violence he is called on to perform with the language by which he names it.

⁵⁹ Philip Julius, duke of Stettin-Pomerania, "Diary of the Journey of Philip Julius, Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, through England in the Year 1602," ed. Gotfried von Bülow and Wilfred Powell, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s., 6 (1892): 1–67, esp. 23; Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna Or A Garden Of Heroical Devises, furnished, and adorned with Emblemes and Impreses of sundry natures* (London, 1612), 44.

⁶⁰ Philip, duke of Stettin-Pomerania, 23.