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Performing through Forms in Shakespeare's and Branagh's *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the performative play *par excellence*, as it is concerned with acting and staging, as well as with achieving a dramatic coherence between action and word (Aasand 2003); theoretical performative issues powerfully come to the forefront in the course of the plot and are subsumed in Hamlet's quest for "that which passes show" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.85) and in his investigation into the power of forms. Hamlet "cannot reconcile his desire to perform (to express himself through forms and to create forms through action) with his desire to displace forms through his delving critique" (Watt 2016, 166). His attitude allows for an insight into "the heart of performance where the solid stuff of the stage world connects to the intangible stuff of the will" (ibid. 167).

The whole play focuses on the act of writing; in the setting of a society in transformation due to the recent and intertwined political and familial events, foreign affairs are emphasized as conducted through paperwork based on the production, reproduction, and transmission of documents, while observing the effects of this activity on the characters' lives (Kiséry 2016, 91-92).¹ In the same way, internal affairs are also shaped through the materiality of writing, as Claudius and Polonius often engage in devising metaphorical scripts to be played by different people, in order to foster the achievement of their aims (as it happens in the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia in 3.1, and in the closet scene between Hamlet and the queen in 3.4, in the dialogue between Claudius and Laertes in 4.7). Moreover, Hamlet rewrites a former Italian drama, *The Murder of Gonzago*, turning it into his *Mousetrap* for a public enactment of (self-) knowledge. For this reason, the work conveys a deep energy which derives from its constant being "in progress." Actually, when Hamlet enters the scene, he disrupts it, as well as its own foundations, opening the text and his own character to a deep metafictional dimension. As Cook asserts, "Shakespeare stages a play that self-deconstructs; scene after scene reminds us that things are rarely as they seem" (2010, 85).

Theatrical works include stage directions, which represent the voice of the author and communicate the "*spiritus moti*" to the scenes they refer to (Aasand 2003, 9), yet they can leave the intended meaning of the scene suspended or ambiguous, a potential to be concretized by the actors. As a matter of fact, stagings as well as adaptations "literalize meaning for [...] the audience by removing figurative and/or symbolic dimensions of language" (Alter 2003, 162). Performance, intended as "bringing to completion through a form" (Watt 2016, 165), displays the actors' answers/interpretations to all the questions that Shakespeare's texts pose, but refuse to solve (Alter 2003, 168). However, in a work which discusses forms from its very beginning, performance leads the audience to a deep awareness of the represented issues and involves the viewer in the process of interpretation through an enhanced visual dimension. The relationship

1 As Kiséry points out, this context seemingly anticipates the 18th-century formation of the word "diplomacy," which etymologically implies a business that has to do with written documents.

between author, performer and audience resonates of the cultural context of the text and unfolds dynamic perspectives.

Hamlet's Role Playing

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) presents an original version of Hamlet's world through the leitmotif of the reflected/refracted image of the protagonist both on a concrete and metaphorical level, as well as through a peculiar emphasis on role playing. The engendered *ekphrasis* of such an attitude leads to a deep investigation of the opposition between being and appearing, of performance intended as showing doing (in Schechner's terms) aiming at delving into its founding elements of being and doing (Schechner 2013, 28). This relates to the Renaissance concept of identity self-fashioning, i.e. a manipulable and artful process (Greenblatt 2012, 2), that Hamlet openly attacks in 1.2.

Branagh's Hamlet is called onto the scene, rather than entering it of his own will, while the whole court is celebrating Claudius as the new king on the occasion of his marriage to Gertrude, "the imperial jointress to this warlike state" (1.2.9).² The setting of Claudius's entrance is visually created through a close-up of the crown on the base of old Hamlet's statue at the end of the previous scene, which transforms into the outline of the state hall's balcony; this architectural element symbolically frames the court and the courtiers, creating a microcosm for a self-fashioning of the passage of power in Denmark's elective monarchy. Claudius fashions himself as king with the consensus of the juridical body of the court, represented by Polonius, and fashions the court into his own body politic, the basis for his power and legitimacy as a sovereign.

Claudius's first actions are diplomatic: first he justifies his ascension to the throne in terms of a defence of the body politic against the external political threat represented by Fortinbras, who supposedly thinks that the state is "disjoint and out of frame" (1.2.20), by reinstating such a frame through writing (the letters he sends to old Norway through his ambassadors). Then, he also defends the body politic from possible internal threats by establishing a deep connection with his late brother and nominating Hamlet as his heir, his son, part of his own natural, as well as political, body: "think of us / as of a father, for let the world take note! You are the most immediate to our throne" (1.2.108-109). From this viewpoint, it appears as if Claudius had not deprived Hamlet of the throne, especially because of the elective quality of Denmark's monarchy; on the contrary, he favours his subsequent succession by publicly nominating him as the next king through a performative speech act in an official political context.

The film's crown-shaped balcony symbolically frames the court and the newly established body politic, while Hamlet tries to avoid such framing and escape notice by remaining inky-cloaked in a corner. He is, however, exhorted to engage in the celebration and enter the scene in order to be spatially included in the frame and at the

2 The term "jointress" refers to a widow who holds a jointure – a lifetime right in some property. As Yoshino, quoting Burton, points out, "[u]nder the prevailing law, a widow was given a dower, a one-third interest in the real property of her deceased husband," which at her death would pass to her male heir. Within this legal context, Hamlet was to inherit two thirds of his father's land. However, if his mother married within the quarantine period usually allowed widows to settle upon their inherited third, she could keep the whole property together with her new husband. This is one possible explanation for Gertrude's speedy marriage (Yoshino 2011, 194).

same time to contribute to it. His first words in response to Claudius's establishment of their connection identify him as a player with verbal signifiers, an attitude which he will also display in his search for an interpretation of reality and for an understanding of his own self. His answer to Claudius's "cousin," "A little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.65), and the following rejection of Claudius's act of adoption through the (political and family) pun "too much in the sun" show how he uses words as a pointed instrument to pierce the appearance of things and reveal his speculative nature. Hamlet detaches himself from the official context of the court by inserting a private sphere into a public event (Cook 2011, 113) and staging his counterposition to the current state of things through visual and verbal means. To his mother, who tries to convince him to abandon his mourning as well as his melancholic attitude towards the past in order to participate in the present events, significantly asking him to take in the visual spectacle upon display in its political meaning ("let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark," 1.2.69), he replies by articulating the contrast between appearance and reality which will constitute his quest in the course of the plot: "'Tis not alone my inky cloak [...] / [...] all forms, moods, shapes of grief, / That can denote me truly. These indeed 'seem,' / For they are actions that a man might play [...]" (1.2.77, 82-83). Through these words, Hamlet accuses the court of fashioning emotions, while they only heed "remembrance of ourselves" (1.2.7), as Claudius asserts at the opening of his speech. This discourse implicitly applies to the whole political context of the court, and points at the feigning attitude of the king's body natural that, as a consequence, taints the new body politic.

The expressions of grief can be feigned and become an in-character theatrical performance: "Clothes can be changed, gestures can be rehearsed. [...] even tears [...] are not markers of authenticity but the test of a great actor" (Assmann 2012, 41). In such critical perspective, there seems to be no proof for the authenticity of a feeling, as all its exterior manifestations can be performed and therefore manipulated. Hamlet denounces the insufficiency of language and likewise of visual signifiers and acting to express the inner dimension of the self, while at the same time denouncing the incapable mediatedness of his condition. Yet, he strongly reclaims his own authenticity, his essence beyond any kind of self-fashioning: "I know not seems (1.1.76)," "*But* I have that within which passes show" (1.1.85, my emphasis), that is, in Schechner's terms, that passes showing doing. He therefore appears to strive towards "the 'other' of the theatre stage," verbally introduced "through a series of obsessively repeated negations in five continuous lines [...] which] buil[d] up a positive affirmation" (Assmann 2012, 42). Hamlet's affirmations *ex negative* ("Tis *not* alone my inky cloak [...] / *Nor* customary suits of solemn black / *Nor* windy suspiration of forced breath / No, *nor* the fruitful river in the eye / *Nor* the dejected haviour of the visage," 1.2.77-81; my emphasis) deploy signifiers only to deplore their inadequacy and failure as signifiers. He, however, believes in the ultimate potency of an inner core, which he identifies as the centre of his individuality and which is here articulated as the presentation of an absence, a phantasmic presence that will haunt him and become the aim of his quest during the whole course of the plot.

Branagh's Hamlet passively partakes in the celebrations for the new royal couple until their conclusion, and he also gives in to being called centerstage, almost as a prop in order to contribute to their climax, but then he remains in the state hall and

utters his first soliloquy. The state hall, the space of the individual's public dimension, becomes the cheval glass for his other, inner dimension, and this is enhanced by the fact that the walls are all mirrored. Once alone, Hamlet releases his emotional tension into words as he bends over the empty throne, a symbol of his current status (as he later confesses to Rosencrantz, "I lack advancement," 3.2.331).³ Actually, he seems to collapse over the throne, as if also releasing the physical tension which has sustained him up to that moment in the forced performance of his appointed role. While in this attitude, we glimpse his reflection in one of the mirrors surrounding the hall; he does not seem to be aware of this, however, and the camera soon shifts its focus on the whole room while he walks and gives vent to his resentments: "O that this too too sallied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129-132). Here Hamlet seems to be willing to transcend the ultimate human signifier, that is, his body. He seems to reject a phenomenological approach to the world, the experience of his own body in the world and of his body as the means to experience the world, because he sees it as tainted by corruption. One of the figures representing this corruption is his own mother, guilty of the perversion of love into mere eroticism. Hamlet, as well as his father's ghost, considers Gertrude's marriage incestuous,⁴ a behaviour that is aggravated by the apparently strong professions of love on the part of Gertrude towards old Hamlet when he was still alive (see 1.2.143-145), which once more points to the discrepancy between appearing and being: "she should hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" (1.2.143-145). Implicitly referring to this, Hamlet comments: "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! [...] That it should come to this: [...] Must I remember? [...] (Let me not think on 't – Frailty, thy name is Woman)" (1.2.133-134). In this first soliloquy, Hamlet already appears to be bent inwards, or rather attempting to turn his gaze inward, in order to investigate both his inner self (his feelings towards his mother's marriage) and society (the uses of this world).

The soliloquy concludes with a momentary renunciation of speech, as well as of action, on the part of Hamlet, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159), a stasis he will soon be released of by the arrival of Horatio, Barnardo and Marcellus. Hamlet's focus on himself, instead of being redirected back onto public life, in fact deepens when Branagh's Hamlet leads the group to his study in order to hear about the ghost's apparition. The study is located beyond one of the mirrored doors that open onto the state hall, so it represents a spatial entrance into Hamlet's mind.

3 "Rosencrantz: Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? [...] Hamlet: Sir, I lack advancement Rosencrantz: How can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark? Hamlet: Ay, sir, but while the grass grows [...]" (3.2.328-329, 331-335).

4 Claudius and Gertrude's marriage can be seen as following the practice of levirate, which could be found among the Scandinavians and allowed the brother of a deceased husband to marry his brother's widow in order to ensure the continuity of the family line (see Sadowski 2003, 113). However, there is a lot of controversy about this point of the Shakespearean plot: Sadowski remarks how Claudius's actions seem right-ful as they are accepted by the whole court there assembled and he would have been careful to avoid controversial topics in his first speech after the acquisition of power. Rosenblatt remarks instead how the practice of levirate purported to protect the inheritance in case of a still unborn child. As Hamlet is already an adult, Claudius preserves an inheritance he has actually stolen through the principle of widow inheritance, as illustrated in footnote 2 of the present article (see Rosenblatt 2006, 19).

Here, the walls are covered with books, and the room contains objects which are related to Hamlet's interests, such as a miniature theatre and a terrestrial globe, thus representing a visualisation of his personality before the plunge into melancholy of his "noble mind." He appears to have formerly possessed all the features of the Renaissance prince, "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword" and to have been "[t]he expectancy and rose of the fair state," as Ophelia later remarks (3.1.147-149). In the past, Hamlet was "a prince possessed of charm, intellectual grasp and aesthetic perceptivity" (King 2011, 32). All the paraphernalia in the room represent the attributes of the role he renounced to play; they seem to have been stored out of sight, relegated to the deepest recesses of Hamlet's mind, only to come to surface when properly stirred. They now emerge as distorted in a distorted context, and they envelop Hamlet in a claustrophobic dimension. As a matter of fact, in this scene, Hamlet's character as a scholar prevails: after learning about the ghost, he has the group exit through a secret door in the bookshelf, thus making them pass through books, almost engulfing them in a bookish dimension, and he prepares himself to the encounter with the ghost by consulting a volume whose engraving recalls Faustus's necromantic books of demon lore.

The encounter with the ghost introduces a metafictional dimension in which Hamlet is called to perform the role of the revenger.⁵ As Bell states, Shakespeare deliberately frames the modernity of his work "within an archaic kind of story (ultimately finding its model in Seneca), that of its probable source, a lost revenge tragedy, also by Kyd" (Bell 1998, 311), the so-called "ur-Hamlet." We may say that we assist here to Hamlet's struggle with the anxiety of influence against an imposed model which he is asked to repeat passively. His dead father appeals to him, as an "epistemic fragment in a collective message" (Howard 1998, 2), not as an individual in himself, but as part of his familial dimension. What matters is not only the deed of revenge, but the institution of the generational bond that this would imply (Kottman 2009, 56-57).

The ghost aims at imposing a specific script on Hamlet, which he unfolds like a parchment: "lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold" (1.5.5-6). He binds his son to the role of revenger: "so art thou [bound] to revenge when thou shalt hear" (1.5.8). Finding Hamlet "apt" (1.5.32), after revealing the details of his own "murder most foul" (1.5.27), he calls his son to action by asking "Remember me" (1.5.91), thus implicitly answering Hamlet's question in his soliloquy in the state hall, "Must I remember?" (1.2.143). Hamlet and the ghost are divided, however, by two different interpretations of the word 'remember.' Old Hamlet, the warrior king, intends it as a reconstitution of his body politic through the act of revenge, "re-member me:" the revenger is actually prevented from originating an action, tending toward re-acting, re-enacting and re-establishing the social relations of the dead person in a sort of testamentary act towards the will of the deceased (cf. Kastan 1987, 113; Bell 1998, 314). Hamlet, instead, engulfed in his speculations, understands the word 'remember' as referring to memory and remembrance: "remember me."

Hamlet's reaction is dictated by extreme passion and pain at the ghost's revelation. He still remains framed in his nature as a scholar, therefore inside his mind, his "dis-

5 As Kiséry underlines, the play's theatrical self-reflexivity can be interpreted in terms of "Shakespeare's and Hamlet's revision of older dramatic models, genres and styles of performance," in particular a performative engagement with the old role of the revenger (2016, 94).

tracted globe," as his ensuing tormented reflections demonstrate: "thy commandment all alone I shall live / within the *book* and *volume* of my brain / unmixed with baser matter [...] / [...] Now to my word. / It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.' / I have sworn it" (1.5.95-112, my emphasis). The last words of the ghost become Hamlet's cue for his subsequent entrance on the stage of Elsinore where he will try to perform them.

His first act will be to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.170). His apparent renunciation of form ("I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / all saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / that youth and observation copied there," 1.5.99-101) is immediately belied by his assuming of a form of his own devising. In order to disrupt appearances ("That one may smile and be a villain," 1.5.108) he will assume a role, an appearance. Actually, the word 'antic' does not refer to madness in Elizabethan English, but rather to a fantastic and absurd behaviour (King 2011, 38), involving baffling but at the same time keen mental leaps which point to the role of the fool, who is capable of piercing the veil of appearance (both in a visual and intellectual sense).

A meaningful blend of metatheatrical levels takes place from this moment of the plot onwards, which aptly leads to Hamlet's encounter with the players. Since he starts behaving according to his antic disposition, Hamlet becomes a case-study for all the other characters whose task is to pierce the veil of his appearance (his bodily and linguistic form) and find his centre, as Polonius says "[...] I will find / where truth is hid, though it were hid / within the centre" (2.2.154-156), recalling by his words the core Hamlet had laid claim to in 1.2.85.

The first player's passionate monologue of Pyrrhus's revenge engenders Hamlet's violent self-recrimination when he is once again alone in his study and underlines how the actor, "in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / [...] his whole function suiting with forms to his conceit" (2.2.487-488, 491-492). The murder of Priam becomes the surrogate of his pledge to the ghost, as while he is listening to the actor's monologue, he is transported imaginatively into the role of the revenger, in a "subjective response to an action he cannot bring himself to undertake" (King 2011, 60). Some critics have pointed out how this seems to contradict the former indictment on his part of the theatrical staging of feelings in his first dialogical exchange with his mother. As he remarks, the player has no personal cause for the grief he play-acts, but in my opinion this is precisely the point. Hamlet is trying to conceive an authentic expression of feelings; he does not wish to see the illusion dissolve after the final unmasking, but is on a quest for the inner core of the performance of one's own authentic self, "that which surpasses show[ing]" (see 1.1.85) towards being. However, when he decides to transpose his action into the action of the players, thus trying to reverse the effect he has just witnessed and reach an authentic expression of himself through acting, he frames himself even more into a mediated form: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.539-540).

Branagh's Hamlet comes to this conclusion while focussing upon the model theatre in his study, which in this scene is strongly foregrounded, and underlines the connection between theatre and power. The camera focusses on Hamlet while he is playing with a model figure of a king center stage and makes it fall through the miniature trapdoor (in an anticipatory staging of the "mousetrap"): the close-up of the camera, however, focusses on Hamlet's face which appears framed by the theatrical structure, and is therefore also caught in the frame. His "action," or rather what he mistakenly

conceives of as such, remains in the sphere of theatrical illusion rather than political reality, and within his mind, which is framed by the theatre and at the same time extends to represent the theatre. As a matter of fact, during the staging of *The Mousetrap* for the court, Branagh's Hamlet impatiently ascends the stage to perform the final scene, thus replacing the actor. The final image of Branagh's Hamlet on stage has him extending his arms towards Claudius, while holding the vial of poison in his hand: the potentiality of this act of public indictment, however, is not actualized by the final killing of the culprit of the stereotypical revenge tragedy.⁶ Hamlet remains trapped inside his own architecture of words and does not perform his required role; he does not demonstrate anything, but gives himself away and prompts Claudius's reaction.

The Glass of Form

Branagh's Hamlet recites his "to be or not to be" soliloquy while watching himself in a two-way mirror and at the same time being watched on the other side by Polonius and Claudius. The mirror is the same one in which Hamlet's image is reflected when he first enters the scene, and it is precisely to that reflection that he is attracted. Hamlet walks slowly towards his image, while he resumes the debate on the desirability of death which he introduced in the first soliloquy, and which had started with his reflection (immediately overcome by the predominance of his physical presence). Now, instead, his reflection powerfully comes to the forefront as if crossing the frame of the mirror, plunging Hamlet within itself and himself. The camera slowly focusses upon Hamlet's image, and little by little excludes his right shoulder positioned in front of the mirror and indicating his physical presence in the room. Through a slow close-up sequence, the mirror's golden frame is also removed from the field of vision, creating an effect that is not noticed but felt as the image absorbs the viewer, together with Hamlet. Branagh subtly renders the power of the visual image and emphasizes its impact: as Sherwin asserts, the image generates the Medusa effect, that is, the hypnotic power of another's gaze; the Narcissus effect, that is "being swallowed (or drowned) in the image (that stares back)" (Sherwin 2011, 45); and the Pygmalion effect, that is, "bringing the image to life as an autonomous being" (Sherwin 2011, 45). In this scene, his reflection becomes Hamlet's reality (see Cook 2011, 129-130); even when Hamlet draws a dagger while considering "making quietus with a bare bodkin," our attention is not distracted from the reflection itself, not even by the vision of the point of the concrete dagger upon the mirror in a clever visual effect. This acts as a visual device that "plunge[s us] into Hamlet's interiority" (Cook 2011, 129-130) and is instrumental for Branagh's articulation of his Hamlet's inner dimension. We witness here the overcoming of the concept of fashioning one's own identity, intended as the imposition of a "distinctive personality [...] a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving" (Greenblatt 2012, 2) in order to reach the subject/self underlying such perceiving, in accordance with Arnold's stance that the soliloquies of the Elizabethan stage are "dialogues of the mind with itself" (1965, 591).

6 This image actually anticipates the subsequent image of Laertes in 4.5, who enters the palace at the head of an enraged mob and points his sword at Claudius with his arm extended, demanding him to account for his father's death. I wish to keep the legal verb "demanding" here.

Now Hamlet's reflection takes the scene; Hamlet is watched as well as enacted by his own reflection and he thereby becomes conscious of his own mind. The mirror, central both as artifact and metaphor in Elizabethan times, in this specific scene refracts many cultural aspects.

Although in the second half of the 16th century Venetian crystalline mirrors started to replace polished steel and tin mirrors in London, the latter remained widespread due to the high costs of the former. Therefore, the Elizabethans faced the inevitable distortion of images, notably those of the human face and form, as reflected by "concave or convex surfaces and metal reflectors such as tin and steel" (Hunt 2011, 5).⁷

Significantly, Branagh's Hamlet finds himself in a hall of mirrors, constantly accompanied and surrounded by reflections of himself, although we do not perceive them, given his focus on a specific one. Halls of mirrors were popular in 16th-century households: "The multiplication of incompatible gazes divides representation into smaller pieces, and the cohesion of the subject is sacrificed to the aggregate of disparate images. Man gets a piecemeal understanding of himself, he knows only bits of his singular experience and, as a fragment or shrunken image of a shattered mosaic, he loses his central and privileged position" (Melchior-Bonnet 2001, 225). The mirror in the film scene, therefore, becomes a resonant signifier of the uncertainties of self-formation, it is the artifact that Hamlet resorts to, in order to find that which passes show, remaining torn between his aspiration to discover individual selfhood and the material world. The staged contrast is between the concept of mirror as the presentation of exemplary images, whereby we have to conceive of the mirror as angled in order to reflect a paradigm man had to conform/shape himself to, and the image of the perceiving eye (see Shuger 2014, 26) intended as the first symptom of a new self-reflexive consciousness. Early modern selfhood was conceived of as relational more than reflexive, but Hamlet's reflection bends his relationality both towards himself and towards his world. The "to be or not to be" soliloquy leads Branagh's Hamlet to experience the psychological laceration deriving from the rejection of a stereotypical role in favour of the engendering of the tragic subject (see Belsey 1985). Very aptly, Branagh's Hamlet looks for himself in the frame of the mirror only to discard such a frame, and finally gain access to his inner self.

Branagh's clever staging of this scene is in line with the focus of Elizabethan tragedy on the contradictions in a culture's consensual view of reality, which can be considered to extend to the struggle for the emergence of a new perception of the individual self. Wilson argues for an increase in subjective personal identity at the core of many profound Renaissance cultural conflicts, in particular those related to the collision of feeling as an individual within unfeeling larger orders (see Wilson 2003, 308-309). The motif of the mirror in this scene pierces performative tenets in that it posits the self as simultaneously the actor and the audience for his own self and is based on the threshold quality of dramatic performance, which reveals the limits of definition of the staged object (be it the community or, as in this case, the self [see Fiorato 2016,

7 Moreover, distorting mirrors which fostered imaginative play were also widespread at the time, such as the ones whose effect is reproduced in the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors." This painting is often quoted in connection with Hamlet as a Janus-like image for the Renaissance; it actually represents an ekphrastic moment for Hamlet, who comes to embody "the conflict between heroic fantasies and mortal abjection" (Wilson 2003, 319).

10 and Mullaney 1988, 31]). Within this context, the soliloquy (the privileged form for the expression of the character's interiority) is haunted by repressed discontinuities in the sanctioned image of a unified subjectivity (see Belsey 1985, 44), and calls for the capacity of the emergent subject to reflect upon its own being.

Branagh's Hamlet's encounter with his own reflection allows him to overcome the Cartesian separation of the subject from the world through his immersion into the being he wants to know and, as it has already been mentioned, his relational identity with that world. As Sherwin observes, Cartesian rationality advocated a rejection of the visual baroque world of the senses in favour of an optical order based on timeless and placeless geometrical order which fostered the interior search for clear and distinct ideas (Sherwin 2011, 30). This is symbolized in Branagh's setting by the geometrical pavement of the state hall which seems to engulf Hamlet in its inner logic and which acts in a complementary relationship to the crown-shaped balcony. The embodied mind, however, in its possibility of transcendence, allows for an attunement to things and others beyond it and comes close to the perception of a meaning that exceeds the limits of (early modern) representation (cf. Sherwin 2011, 32).

Hamlet immerses himself into his own self as experiencing subject (see Summers 2013, 26) and once again elaborates on the lack of correspondence between intention and action: "the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, / and enterprises of great pitch and moment [...] / lose the name of action" (3.1.83-85, 87). His words underline the fear of the continuation of the dreams that trouble him, as he has previously confessed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which here find definite expression: "Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, / The insolence of office and the spurns / That patient merit of th'unworthy takes" (3.1.70-73). This is what is rotten in the court of Denmark and what torments Hamlet.

During the soliloquy, Hamlet is watched by his own reflection; the *enargeia* of this visual encounter originates an ekphrastic experience, that leads him to the encounter with his double. The double is a symbol of man's fears of the complexities of the self, in particular of the articulation of the ego (see Rank [1914] 2012, 16) and represents the repressed: it usually appears as an image which is very similar to the protagonist, as if "stolen from a mirror" (Rank 2012, 17) and it often emerges precisely through a mirror. Hamlet's encounter with his double does not lead to an objectification of the conflict but to an even deeper plunge into himself, and at the same time refracts parts of his own self onto the other characters. We actually see a projection of Hamlet onto Claudius, who is positioned on the other side of the mirror: "In looks, dress and manner they are twins as well as mighty opposites" (Crowl 2014, 80-81), but most importantly, the two seem to present a communion of mind. It is precisely before this scene that Claudius, prompted by Polonius's remark about the discrepancy between appearance and reality ("Tis too much proved that with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself," 3.1.46-48), relates the issue to his own conduct: "O, 'tis too true, / How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" (3.1.49-50).

From this moment onwards, the two engage in a battle of wits: Claudius is able to pierce Hamlet's innermost dimension, deeper than Polonius who, however, notices "how pregnant sometimes his replies are" (2.2.205-206) and that "Though this must be madness yet there is / method in't" (2.2.202-203). Claudius understands that Ham-

let is not mad but dangerous for himself and his purposes, and consequently decides to send him to England: "[...] what he spake [...] / Was not like madness. There's something in his soul / Over which melancholy sits on brood / And I do doubt the batch and disclose / will be some danger" (3.1.162-166). Paraphrasing Polonius when he said that "to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (2.2.92-93), in order to understand Hamlet's state of mind, one has to share it. Claudius's final remark after the nunnery scene acts as an implicit recognition of Hamlet as his own mighty opposite, his mental double: "Madness in *great ones* must not unwatched go" (3.1.188, my emphasis).⁸ Actually, when, after the performance of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet believes Claudius is praying in the chapel, the latter is instead reflecting how "My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent / And like a man to double business bound / I stand in pause where I shall first begin / And both neglect" (3.3.40-44). Claudius cannot pray (he cannot act) as he lacks repentance and is still bound to the achievements of his corruption (the appearance he has set), and the murder of Hamlet he has presumably already orchestrated ("My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (3.4.97)); like Hamlet, he cannot make being and appearing coincide. It also has to be remarked that Claudius is the only other character apart from Hamlet that the audience hears in soliloquy and he is as lucid and pitiless as Hamlet in the analysis of his own conscience (see Bevington 1968, 5; Kittredge 2008, xi).

After this confrontation scene in front of the mirror, Branagh's Hamlet plans to present the same kind of experience, that is, a plunge within one's self, to Claudius through another kind of mirror: his *Mousetrap*. With regard to this, it has to be remarked how Hamlet's professed conception of the purpose of art is "to hold a mirror up to nature:" this art of the mirror should mimetically reflect the universal principles at the heart of human temporal existence (nature⁹). However, it should also "show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image" (3.2.22-23), therefore it points to an ideal kind of mirror, showing paradigmatic exempla (in this case, Claudius's guilt). This kind of mirror is actually a blend of mental spaces, in which Hamlet creates what cannot be seen. As Cook observes, it is formed by "a flat, perfect mirror that can show us what we cannot see without its aid, a convex mirror that manipulates diffuse information such that it captures not what is there but what exactly it is angled toward, and the angler or holder deciding where to look, what to reflect" (Cook 2010, 58). The responsibility for judging rests upon the person reflected. "This assessment takes the form of a dialogue with the duplicate, granting the image access to an unseen truth" (Cook 2010, 78). Hamlet creates the conditions for the encounter between Claudius and his unconscious, but fails in the hoped for consequences of such an action as Claudius rejects to acknowledge this image.

8 The quality of Claudius and Hamlet as doubles is strengthened by the player's speech about Priamus's death, where Pyrrhus acts both as the image of the avenging son and of the father's murderer, and in the *Mousetrap*, where Lucianus acts both as an image of Claudius, the murderer of the king, but also as the image of Hamlet, the nephew of the king (see Kastan 1987, 197).

9 As King asserts, "Nature is an inclusive term for an ordered, intelligible set of absolute principles – moral, psychological, social, aesthetic, religious and metaphysical – understood by common consent to be universal" (King 2011, 80).

Ophelia and the Projection of Hamlet's Form

In Branagh's *Hamlet*, the arrival of Ophelia on the "to be or not to be" scene interrupts Hamlet's self-absorption. Up to this moment, we were inside Hamlet's mind, entrapped in his reflection(s), then Ophelia's noise upon her entrance (akin to *Macbeth's* knocking on the castle's gate in the porter's scene [see De Quincey 2006]) takes both Hamlet and the viewer back to reality. As Hamlet turns towards Ophelia, the camera quickly refocusses from the mirror image to the real man, and Hamlet's troubled ego is restored to the scene.

Upon realizing their encounter is being observed, Hamlet reacts in the rage of his fury by pushing Ophelia against the mirrored door, that of his soliloquy and the same one behind which Claudius and Polonius are standing. Hamlet verbally abuses Ophelia and projects upon her his disillusionment with Gertrude, denouncing once again the failed correspondence between being and appearing, seemingly forcing her to enter her own unconscious dimension in order to be proved right, but also making her the transposed person for his confrontation scene with Claudius (the second one, once again indirect). This is the second time that Ophelia has been invested with Hamlet's madness in a sort of transfer, and this will leave emotional and psychological scars that will lead her to her own fall into (real) madness. After the violence of this scene, she collapses on the ground, right onto the threshold of the now opened mirrored door which was the theatre of this confrontation scene; her posture as well as her lamentation of the overthrow of Hamlet's noble mind tragically prefigures her subsequent soliloquy in madness in front of the same mirror. It is significantly behind the same door that Branagh's Ophelia, in a straightjacket, will be detained in a padded room, according to 19th-century procedures for the treatment of insanity, Ophelia drowns in emotional and psychological devastation. Her madness allows her the freedom to speak freely of her desires and sadness, liberating herself from the gender constrictions of her linguistic and bodily expression, the constriction of forms, and in this as well she becomes a counterpoint to Hamlet.

With regard to this, in 2.1.75-81 and 84-97, Ophelia reported to her father the first manifestation of Hamlet's antic disposition and, given the fact that it was a silent encounter, she performed his madness, physically embodying it in a sort of projected image. In particular, "Ophelia attempted to draw a verbal picture of Hamlet, who himself looks as if he wants to draw Ophelia" (Meek 2009, 93) in a *mise-en-abyme* of superimpositions of roles and appearances.¹⁰ Ophelia "does not know how to interpret the thing she is describing. [...] Therefore] Hamlet remains an ambiguous collection of signs" (ibid., 92), in line with the issue of appearance vs. being and Hamlet's indictment of the failure of signifiers.¹¹

10 Hamlet seems to synaesthetically probe the correspondence between appearing and being by touching Ophelia's face, that is, her form. This action is echoed by the first words he addresses her with after his soliloquy: "are you honest? Are you fair?" (3.1.102, 104).

11 With regard to this, it has to be mentioned that before the encounter with Ophelia, Hamlet is described to Claudius through his letter to Ophelia, therefore through words, or rather "words, words, words," (2.2.189) which instead of clarifying his behavior, render it even more ambiguous, denouncing the fact that he cannot be contained / framed by signifiers.

Yorick's Form

Hamlet's pretended madness functions as a metatheatrical device, a typical element of the revenge tragedy, instrumental to divert suspicion and increase the suspense. In *Hamlet* it problematizes this function as it arouses suspicion and merges with the protagonist's melancholic expression of his anguish, his "antic disposition." These aspects, which counter the dramatic coherence of the standard revenge plot, open the space of tragedy, and engage with larger questions of human identity and destiny (Bell 1998, 314). Coherently, it is the court's fool that Branagh's Hamlet confronts in the gravedigger's scene in 5.1, when he will be pulled once again into his own reflection, reaching deeper insights.

The gravedigger acts as a sort of alter ego for Hamlet from multiple perspectives: he proves capable of clever puns in his speech and, moreover, he discusses the meaning of "acting" presenting it as divided into acting, doing and performing, such specification determined by the presence – or lack of – an underlying intention. His reflection is connected to the suicide case for which his service has been required but it addresses the issue of the performance of will, in a clear echo with Hamlet's previous soliloquies. In particular, the gravedigger underlines how "*to perform* is both medial, standing between act and do, and formative, at the public edge where the act opens into a sensory and social world where it is subject to immediate interpretation and judgment" (Rayner 1994, 32). The gravedigger is the character that most directly confronts human mortality but remains unaffected by it, therefore he acts as a sort of prop for Hamlet's final reflections. While excavating the grave, he puts the skulls he extracts from the ground on the border of the void, creating a sort of macabre audience whose empty gazes are directed outwards, towards the approaching Hamlet, in a sort of counterpoint to the mirrored hall of the palace in the previous scenes. Hamlet stops on the verge of the rectangular space of the grave, which appears as a sort of negative specular image of the mirror of his "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Here Hamlet contemplates the skull of Yorick, the court fool he used to know in his infancy. The camera focusses on Hamlet while he fixes his gaze on the skull and holds it at the same level with his own gaze; then, in the course of Hamlet's monologue, it inverts the perspective twice and focuses on Hamlet's eyes, thus presenting the gaze of the dead staring at the living.¹² Yorick becomes the symbol of the mirror and, actually, he almost hypnotizes Hamlet into the contemplation of his void orbits, the seat of the mirrors that were once his eyes but that here emerge as the presentation of their absence, a negative construction which parallels Hamlet's initial quest for the core of his own self through a negation of outer appearance. "Through deceased Yorick's eyes, we contemplate a Hamlet whose conflicted Shakespearean psychology has been entered through images no less than words" (Cook 2011, 159). This image has become Hamlet's cultural meme, and it is usually significantly connected with the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, of which it actually is a negative reflection (in a visual sense).

Through Yorick, "a fellow of infinite jest," (5.1.175) Hamlet literally touches "the quintessence of dust," man's final performance. He experiences the disjuncture between form and substance as the persons who once animated the skulls of the scene come to life through his words and his visual imagination. The irreducible and grotesque factual-

12 See Cook: "we have been momentarily afforded the vantage of the dead" (2011, 150).

ity of the bones transcends their stories and aspirations revealing the grotesque nature of man's joys and ambitions: "Death puts the question 'what is real?' in its irreducible form and in the end uncovers all appearances" (Mack 1968, 63), all forms. As a matter of fact, "Yorick's skull gives us not information, but spectacle, not knowledge but acknowledgement, the mirror held up to nature" (Cartwright 1991, 130).¹³ Hamlet does not gain insight, but a state of suspension between the grasped and the ungrasped in his experience of the self, akin to his "to be and not to be." Hamlet seems to remain "distracted" here, his mind pulled between his inquiry into "what a piece of work is man!",¹⁴ and the "quintessence of dust" he visually confronts in the graveyard.

The Final Displacement of Form

Hamlet is later shown in his study, where he tells Horatio about the discovery of Claudius's plot of having him murdered in England: in the room, a small mirror leans against the bookshelf on the floor, but pervades it with its implied presence. As a matter of fact, it is precisely while he is in his study that Hamlet receives Claudius's invitation to a fencing duel. Branagh's Hamlet's painfully emotional reaction seems to point to an awareness on his part that this is actually Claudius's mirror-Mousetrap in their battle between mighty opposites: in this scene, Branagh transports the viewer into Hamlet's inner dimension, precisely at the moment when he renounces appearance. In his premonitory words: "how ill is all here about my heart" (5.2.190) we notice how he "feels" death. The phenomenological unity of his personality seems to be restored, overcoming his initial attitude against his own "sullied flesh" and he seems here to accept his own mortality. Horatio still remarks the intellectual quality of Hamlet's foreboding, "If your mind dislike anything, obey it," but Hamlet by now has renounced the envisioning of plots and performance of scripts; as he proclaims, "The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes. Let be" (5.2.200-201). His first action in the state hall will in fact be the discarding of his revenger's madness: "Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet [...] His madness" (5.2.211, 215). Facing Laertes, he seems to embody Polonius's words to his son in 1.3.77: "To thy own self be true" and to let his own self enter the scene, finally deprived of forms.

Hamlet's final confrontation with Claudius can be seen as a repetition of the confrontation scene in front of the mirror, where Hamlet had (un)consciously pointed his dagger at him. Therefore, it seems that Branagh's Hamlet's action is triggered or even performed by his own reflected image of the soliloquy, the only one who is able to pierce forms. The encounter with one's own double, i.e. one's own inner turmoil, often leads to death (Rank 2012, 76). Actually, the final denouement takes place when Hamlet is in a liminal position between life and death (cf. Cutolo 2016, 207-226), having been mortally wounded by Laertes who then reveals to him Claudius's conspiracy. It is from this liminal position that Hamlet kills Claudius and asserts his au-

13 See also Wilson: "the entire play may be aptly described as a skull set on stage confronting the audience with the most perplexing facts human beings have to assimilate as we commit ourselves to choices and efforts. Death, the great 'common' equalizer, mocks Hamlet's aspirations" (2003, 327).

14 This specifically applies to the scene version of the 1623 folio, which reports a predominantly interrogative punctuation (see King 2011, 56): "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason? How infinite in Faculty? In *Form* and moving how express and admirable?" (2.2.269-271, my emphasis).

tonomous line of action, free from any imposed role, his own act of will, as he actually kills Claudius to avenge his own death, no longer his father's. Branagh's Hamlet dies in the state hall, and his last words are twofold: on the one hand, he sanctions Fortinbras's ascension to power, finally uttering a performative political speech act in Denmark's elective monarchy, and uniting his private and public role. On the other hand, by asking Horatio to report what has happened correctly, he actually asks for a narrativization of his story. He thus reveals the world of the revenge tragedy as a human world, and appeals to tragic art to show ideals in collision with real things (see Wilson 2003, 305 and 317). In his concluding words, Horatio reveals revenge for what it is: he tells Fortinbras "How these things came about: so shall you hear / Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, / And, in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' heads" (5.2.364-367). He therefore overcomes the tradition of the revenge tragedy and leaves the scene to the perspective of subsequent authors, such as Shakespeare and Branagh, who will actually present Hamlet correctly as "the glass of fashion[ing] and the mould of form" (3.1.152).

The mirrored state hall finally seems to collapse upon itself. Lost in its own narcissistic image, the Danish court has fallen prey to an unavoidable entropic process. The glass is shattered by Fortinbras, who enters an empty political space from its core, the royal quarters, and immediately appropriates it by seating himself on the empty throne, while a crown is posited upon his head. Interestingly, the enthroned Fortinbras is spatially located in a specular way with regard to Hamlet's first seating in the hall in act 1 when the latter was exhorted to take part in the celebrations and enter the frame of power, thus actualizing the connection between the two characters.¹⁵

The work ends with Fortinbras's tribute to Hamlet in the form of military honours and a solemn funeral. This is functional to sanction the official passage of the body politic, but, it also seems to sanction the emergence of the tragic subject: as Yeats observed, "Why should we honour those who die on the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself" (Yeats 1937, 63).

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¹⁵ Shakespeare might have shared the contemporary conviction that the Norwegian Castle of Cronenburg was opposite Elsinore (as the most famous traveller of the time, Moryson, reported), while in fact it was fairly remote (see Sjögren 2002, 70). By imagining a hostile Norway just on the other side of the narrow strait, Shakespeare created a situation of imminent danger, but, mostly, an implied affinity between Hamlet and Fortinbras, mirroring each other in their role as revengers, as it is staged in this final image of Branagh's film.

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