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"A Mirror Up To Nature":

Shakespeare's Mirror Metaphors

"מראה אל הטבע":

מטאפורות המראה של שייקספיר.

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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Objectives

William Shakespeare possessed an unrivalled fascination with the dramatic utility of mirror metaphors. There are forty-two of these "mirror" or "glass" instances in his plays. The significance of these mirror metaphors has been widely overlooked and when given due attention often misunderstood. A.D. Nuttall made it "a law of Shakespeare's art that he endlessly recycles ideas and never repeats himself," and this is true of the way Shakespeare meticulously adapted and revised his theatrical mirrors in a way that helps us visualise his creative thinking. Taken collectively, Shakespeare's mirrors show us the evolution of his dramatic philosophy. I believe we can see in these mirrors how he came upon what Harold Bloom called "a procedure for invoking inwardness", finding full expression in *Hamlet,* and then how he moved beyond that revolutionary moment in the plays that followed.

Shakespeare's early portraits were described by Bloom in the preface to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* as "caricatures" or "Marlovian cartoon", but Bloom understates their struggle with role. From Talbot's first mirror metaphor as he watches Salisbury die in *Henry VI Part One*, Shakespeare's characters grow increasingly alienated from their given personae. This method became more pronounced in opposition to Jonson's didactic idea that stage roles should reflect a morally unambiguous "humour", culminating in Hamlet's outright refusal to play his part. However, *Hamlet* could not be repeated and, in response to the play's deconstruction of theatre as a "mirror up to nature", Shakespeare had to reconstruct the *theatrum mundi* in the plays that followed, his characters, accepting their personae, playing out the thematic and philosophical concerns of the dramas they are trapped in. We can see this in the mirror metaphors that describe, for example, relativism in *Troilus and Cressida,* nihilism in *King*

Lear, transcendentalism in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or the illusion of existence in *The Winter's Tale.* It is, therefore, the argument of this thesis that *Hamlet* is the centre on which Shakespeare's dramatic career pivots and that this can be seen by tracking the evolution of his mirror metaphors and how they illuminate his thoughts on the "purpose of playing".

My contention that Shakespeare's mirrors show us a movement towards and beyond *Hamlet* was initiated by Debora Shuger's claim that "one would be hard-pressed to find any early modern English instance of mirroring used as a paradigm for modern, reflexive self-consciousness", arguing that "only in Montaigne does one find selfhood imagined as a recessed space (*arrière-boutique)* where one goes to be alone". Shuger further noted: "With the exception of Shakespeare's Richard II, no one looks in a mirror to find out what he looks like, to view himself – and Richard finds the result so unsatisfactory that he throws the mirror down and breaks it". In my reading, breaking the mirror shows the audience, on and off stage, Richard's inner torment and is a critical milestone on the way to writing *Hamlet,* where Richard's broken mirror is conceptually repeated in metaphor. Additionally, Richard's failure to see himself in the mirror engenders his metaphysical soliloquy in Pomfret Castle, a dramatic analogue of a Montaigne essay. I will argue that Richard's disgust at his failure to find his "substance" in the mirror reveals a philosophically more intriguing selfhood than that proposed in a Montaigne essay. As Slajov Žižek suggested, the lesson of *Richard II* is that "any identity is groundless". Hamlet's soliloquies and insistence that he can find himself likewise represent what we might now call an awkward attempt at recovering a Lacanian wholeness that the broken mirrors in *Hamlet* suggest is impossible.

The pursuit of the idea of self is initiated by Barnardo in the first line: "Who's there?" No one answers him, and the play itself is a dramatic response to his question. Rhodri Lewis argues that Hamlet recognises "the destructive blindness of Ciceronian moral philosophy", the way a man's life can only be judged by the role that he plays, but that unlike "Montaigne's optimistically circuitous individualism, [Hamlet] offers no viable alternative." Lewis concludes that "Hamlet is not thus a model of nascent subjectivity," nor "the first modern man, a dramatic laboratory for the invention of the human" since his soliloquies are "designed to *look like* they have some share in the Montaigne moment". However, I believe that *Hamlet* is a rejection of the solidity of Montaigne's type of individualism as much as it is a formal rejection of the *theatrum mundi* promoted by Jonson. Hamlet's subjectivity is characterised by assuming personae to evade the one that his father's ghost demands of him.

On observing Hamlet's antic disposition, Ophelia reconstructs the man she loves: "The glass of fashion… blasted with ecstasy". Figuratively, Hamlet as mirror to human nature is shattered so that he can stand outside (*ekstasis*) the play he is situated in. I contend that through Hamlet's ecstasy, Shakespeare inverted the defining features of tragedy detailed in Aristotle's *Poetics* and prioritised character over plot thus creating literature's first "modern, reflexive self-consciousness". Just as Richard's failure to see his inner self in the mirror showed the audience his inner torment, Hamlet's insistence on repeatedly questioning his role sets him beyond the planned action of the play and shows us a self-consciousness ambiguous of purpose. What makes Hamlet the first "model of nascent subjectivity" is this knowing search for selfhood as he switches personae: "For they are actions that a man might play; / But I have that within which passes show". The broken mirrors reflect his self-conscious struggle to break free the from the theatrical convention of role.

Read straight, Hamlet's instruction to the First Player seems to be an invocation of *theatrum mundi:* "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 own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”. I will argue that the choppy syntax and incoherent double hendiadys reveal Hamlet’s ennui at the trope, the linguistic slippage and failure to define turning it to parody. Lewis argues that Hamlet assumes the role of producer and it is one “that he does not play well, and whose declamatory force works to expose [its] own artificiality.” The tortured syntax of Hamlet’s observation is, like his philosophizing elsewhere, “designedly incoherent”, and intended to show that he is putting on a mask. However, an audience at The Globe would have recognized Hamlet’s advice as a destabilizing caricature of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour*: “And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror / As large as is the stage whereon we act / Where they shall see the time’s deformity / Anatomised in every nerve and sinew”. This direct reference to Jonson is key to understanding Hamlet’s sardonic tone. He has adopted the role of producer to “catch the conscience of the king” but it is, as Lewis argues, yet another persona that does not fit him. Moreover, the linguistic instability of the “mirror up to nature” must be recognized within its theatrical context: the performance of a play-within-a-play that inaccurately reflects the play it is set in. It portrays a murder of a king by a nephew not a brother, suggesting psychological projection, and includes a sympathetic reading of Gertrude’s betrayal, possibly inserted by Hamlet himself, in opposition to what he has been telling us in the outer play and will later tell his mother in the closet scene. Moreover, the First Player was possibly acted by Shakespeare himself, so we must imagine the playwright being told by his creation, Hamlet, how to play in a play where he refuses his part. The “mirror up to nature” in *Hamlet* draws attention to its own limitations and so, in the

Derridean sense, by deconstructing *theatrum mundi* with broken mirrors, Shakespeare indicates the impossibility of reflecting a human interior on stage and, by drawing attention to the fact, stages one.

I dwell on *Hamlet* because it shows how Shakespeare's mirrors can offer a new perspective on a play that one might assume had been looked at from every possible angle. I use "a mirror up to nature" as the title of my thesis since it is my argument that it functions as the pivotal moment in Shakespeare's dramatic writing. *Hamlet* embodied a concept of drama Shakespeare had been reaching towards since *Henry VI Part One.* After *Hamlet,* mirror metaphors show us characters reengaging their roles and battling their fates and, so doing, thematically mirroring the philosophical ideas at stake in the world of each play.

This dramatic response to *Hamlet* comes immediately in *Troilus and Cressida,* the mirror metaphors in that play reflecting the relativity of characters' personae while pillorying the idea of a Hamletian interior. The three lead characters predict their own future value as formulaic types: the bawd (Pandar), whore (Cressida) and jilted lover (Troilus). Shuger correctly argues that the "glass" that Ulysses holds up for Achilles "is not reflexive" but "relational" and goes on to argue that this proves Shakespeare did not use mirrors to create a "modern, reflexive self-consciousness" in any of his plays. I maintain that having used broken mirrors to create a "modern, reflexive, self-consciousness" in *Hamlet*, the mirrors in *Troilus and Cressida* are there to suggest the relativity of identity thereby reintroducing the construct of *theatrum mundi*. This surprising return of inescapable personae will result in Shakespearean tragedy. Again, mirror metaphors will show us what Shakespeare is trying to conjure. For example, the imagined resurrection of Cordelia with her breath on the mirror in *King Lear*, the sequence of reflections mirroring the fatalistic equivocation of the witches in *Macbeth,* or the mirror in *Antony and Cleopatra* showing Antony's enthusiasm for the transcendental scale of his persona leading to the

bathos of his botched suicide. And mirrors will continue to guide us as Shakespeare progresses to the redemptive magic of his final works.

Not all of Shakespeare's plays have mirror passages and, therefore, saying something about Shakespeare's development based on his mirror metaphors is necessarily incomplete. For example, the fact that no mirrors help us with Falstaff and the absence of a mirror in *Othello* to show us Iago's enthusiasm for the persona of Machiavel clearly deprives us of evidence. However, the absences do not limit the conclusions that we can draw from the arc of mirror metaphors we have. Shakespeare's mirrors tell us something critical about the plays they are situated in and constitute a distinct motif in his writing that will give us a new perspective on each play and allow us a tantalising glimpse at the elusive thinking of the playwright as he adapted his dramatic technique.

Critical Background

Philippa Kelly, Herbert Grabes and Maurice A. Hunt have written substantial works on mirrors in Shakespeare's drama. Kelly offers a description of the arrival of mirrors in Elizabethan England from Venice and their popularity as the new-fangled toy of the merchant class that helps contextualize mirrors in Shakespeare's time. It is my belief, however, that a New Historicist approach to mirrors is limited in what it can tell us about how the device functions as dramatic metaphor. Grabes, by counting the numerous times that Shakespeare uses mirrors in the context of the literature of Early Modern Europe, highlights the importance of the trope to the playwright. However, Grabes tells us there is "nothing extraordinary" in Hamlet's advice to the First Player, a scene that I believe is pivotal to understanding not only that play but the totality of Shakespeare's dramatic works. Hunt gives an account of the way mirrors are used in a handful of Shakespeare's plays. His insights on the way that mirrors work between plays encouraged intertextuality in my chronological reading.

Against the backdrop of recent scholarship on Shakespeare's use of mirrors, come the hundreds of essays on different themes and subjects written by scholars representing the range of modern cultural theory and referencing, most often in passing, mirror passages. As my argument is based on the idea that these mirrors can help construct a new way of looking at Shakespeare's development through shifting modes of characterisation, the rest of the critical background to this dissertation involves as broad a possible reading of Shakespearean criticism outside of specifically mirror-oriented research. In the bibliography, I have collected some of the most important general works as well as articles and essays. Having said that, it is my contention that the importance of Shakespeare's mirrors has been overlooked in the many centuries of

Shakespeare criticism. This thesis is an attempt to correct that oversight, and to show what a critical tool these mirror metaphors are to reading Shakespearean drama.

Methodology

Cultural theory has imprisoned itself in what Paul Ricoeur described as the "hermeneutics of suspicion," and yet, if there is one thing Shakespeare teaches us, it is to be suspicious. Marjorie Garber argued in *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers* the "uncanny" way Shakespeare is always called upon to lend authority to any cultural theorist's attack on canonical authority. This is what Slavoj Žižek implies when he half-jokes that *Richard II* "proves beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan". In this way, Shakespeare lends himself to all strands of twentieth century critical theory, so that John Harris claimed: "it is less that Shakespeare's texts can be deconstructed… than that they are already gleefully self-deconstructing artefacts." My approach is an amalgam of a formalist critical reading of the mirror metaphors as they occur in the text of the plays with an attempt to explain the effect on characterisation this technique produces. This is a new type of formalism since it seeks to describe the way Shakespeare achieved the very thing that formalism was arguing against: the psychological interior of Shakespeare's characters.

The distinction between formalism's emphasis on text and its consequent repudiation of other forms of external cultural theory is rejected. Lacanian psychoanalysis, for example, can cast light on the most interesting aspect of Shakespeare's work, his characters, while a formalist reading of Shakespeare's mirror metaphors can describe how this effect was produced. Michael Bristol has challenged the formalist rejection of Shakespeare's characters as psychological portraits, arguing that L.C. Knights and his cadre ignored the significance of Shakespeare's drama as an embodied art form, where characters can be imagined as real people in the same way that "we think of real people as conceptual characters". Reintroducing the idea of Shakespeare's works as dramatic art

is central to this thesis, as his mirror metaphors do far more work when placed on stage and within the humanist context of *theatrum mundi:* "a mirror up to nature".

Yet, a rigorous analysis of these mirror metaphors must be anchored in the text and I will adopt certain formalist poses, for instance, T.S. Eliot's insistence that "the full meaning of any one of his plays is not in itself alone, but in that play in the order in which it was written, and in its relation to all of Shakespeare's other plays earlier and later: we must know all of Shakespeare's work in order to know any of it". I also sympathise with Wilson Knight's view that Shakespeare's work makes up one poem and that his plays "from *Julius Caesar* to *The Tempest* (about 1611) follow a significant sequence, an 'evolutionary progress'". I adopt this idea with three amendments: the first, as already stated, is that Shakespeare's theatrical works must be read not as a poem but as drama; the second, as far as an analysis of mirror metaphors is concerned, Shakespeare's plays function as a single body of work from the beginning of *Henry VI Part One* to the end of *The Tempest*; the third is that Shakespeare's evolution as a playwright can be split into two parts, the plays that precede and include *Hamlet* and those that follow. I will also argue against the way Wilson Knight focuses on how Shakespeare's characters function, instead using a formalist analysis of Shakespeare's mirror metaphors to show how his characters emerge from a fundamental tension with that function. This is what I term "Escaping Role, Finding Identity" up to and including *Hamlet* and "Embracing Persona, Battling Fate" in the plays that follow.

I hope to rehabilitate, with this synthesis of formalist and character-based criticism, the perennial perception in Shakespeare criticism that his powers of characterisation are unique. I believe his mirror metaphors show us how he achieved an ever-shifting but creatively unrivalled drama. An early Marxist critic like György Lukács admitted seeing in *Romeo and Juliet* a

"precisely individual love here which breaks through the bounds of feudal family enmities". Or as the Frankfurt School Marxist, Theodor Adorno, put it: "in Shakespeare the social antagonisms are visible everywhere, but they manifest themselves primarily in individuals". Even Marxists, then, acknowledge the power of Shakespeare's characters as individuals.

As early as 1725, Alexander Pope wrote: "Every single character in Shakespeare is as much an Individual as those in Life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike". German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel rediscovered this peculiarity, describing Shakespeare's greatest characters as "free artists of their own selves". Of course, Romantic Shelley said of Hamlet: "He confuses his external body with his inner self, as if he were nothing but a spirit". In his lectures on *Hamlet*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge called for a new "character criticism" to handle the enigmatic prince. More recently, Margereta de Grazia convincingly argues *Hamlet* should be placed in the context of its time as a story about "the unhappy plight of an early modern prince who believes himself to have been dispossessed of his birthright", and yet this does not diminish the unique power of Hamlet's individual response to his circumstances. In the early 20th century, A.C. Bradley remarked in *Shakespearean Tragedy* that "the centre of [Shakespearean] tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action". Northrop Frye argued, in the late twentieth century, that Shakespeare's characters "are so vivid that we often think of them as detachable from the play, like real people". Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, wrote that Shakespeare created "personages so artful as to seem totally natural". It is from this tradition of giving Shakespeare's characters primacy that I will analyse the impact of his mirrors. Indeed, I believe that his mirrors will show us *how* he arrived at writing characters that seem "like real people" and "totally natural". Shakespeare's mirrors show us a conscious, evolving and rigorously

worked upon technique that he adapted to write characters that give us the impression that they can be separated from the plays they figure in.

The uneven distribution of mirror metaphors across Shakespeare's plays makes a chronology safer to determine. I am not going to include the mirror metaphors in the plays following *The Tempest* since both *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* have significant authorship complications and neither contribute significantly to our understanding of the evolution of Shakespearean drama. What ultimately shadows my critical reading will be the Bloomian feeling that Shakespeare "invented the human", but I will show that this is not a single effect, like Shuger's "modern, reflexive self-consciousness", it is an ever-shifting consideration of what theatre could do that Shakespeare's changing mirrors clearly reflect.

Proposed Chapters

Introduction: Mirrors in Early Modern England

Putting Shakespeare's mirrors in their historical and cultural context, with reference both to mirrors as object and theatrical trope. This chapter shows the limitations of a New Historicist and Cultural Materialist approach. It also considers the scarcity and simplicity of the mirrors used by Shakespeare's rival playwrights.

Chapter One: Struggling with Role, Finding Identity.

Looking in Shakespeare's mirrors, we see his characters beginning to struggle to escape the role they are given, just as Shakespeare begins his struggle to escape the influence of his precursor, Christopher Marlowe. Starting with Talbot who as the true "mirror to all martial men" cannot see his own death in the example Salisbury provides him, Shakespeare's mirrors will show us the lessons the playwright taught himself on the way to writing *Hamlet.* These early mirrors show characters trapped in the drama of civil war, give us the image of an illegitimate king, kindle the beginnings of self-awareness in *Richard III,* the notion of identity as relative in the comedies *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew,* and *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream where individuality emerges in opposition to another or other characters. Mirrors show us the projected vanity of the flattering glass in *Love's Labour's Lost.* The attempt to discover selfhood during the deposition scene in *Richard II.* The complex exemplary image of Hotspur in *Henry IV Part One* that prefigures Ophelia's speech about Hamlet. The mirrors that show Hal playing and, by doing so, becoming Henry V. The rhetorical flattering glass that instigates a new self-image for Brutus that Cassius hopes will push him to action in *Julius Caesar* and, finally, Rosalind's mirror that shows her producing the play that she is starring in: *As You Like It*.

Chapter Two: "A Mirror Up to Nature".

At the centre of Shakespeare's writing and, therefore, of this thesis, are the broken mirror metaphors in *Hamlet:* a culmination of Shakespeare's exorcism of Marlowe and a definitive repost to Jonson. In my reading, *Hamlet* functions as the end point of Shakespeare's characters' struggle against role. What Shakespeare writes after *Hamlet* is in response to it, in the sense that his characters, from then on, have to accept and engage their personae. *Hamlet's* achievement is that it so perfects a drama that Shakespeare had been experimenting with, he is forced to go in a radically new direction.

Chapter Three: Engaging Persona, Battling Fate.

Shakespeare's mirrors show us characters engaging their persona even as they battle against the fate that is a result of their role in the world of the play. From the relational mirrors of *Troilus and Cressida* that overturn the *Hamlet* moment, to Viola's understanding that she must deny herself and play her part to save the comedy she is in *(Twelfth Night),* to the hypocrisy and self-regard of Angelo employed to impose the law on Vienna in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare uses mirrors to emphasize playing over inwardness, thereby creating a new type of dramatic consciousness. This leads us to the bitterness that Shakespeare evokes in the reconstructed *theatrum mundi* in *Timon of Athens* to *King Lear* where the old man must endure his role so that, in the end, only the illusion of hope, as imagined in Cordelia's breath on a mirror, can offer any chance of personal salvation, to the mirror that reveals to Macbeth the relentless fate that taking on his role has subjected him to, to Mark Antony's over-identification with his persona as doomed lover. The mirrors in Shakespeare's final plays, the so-called "Romances", continue this sense of disillusionment but lead us to improbable resolutions that suggest that playing itself is redemptive. This redemptive spirit allows Marina to escape the brothel and for Pericles to be reunited with his wife and daughter, for Cymbeline to be saved, and for Perdita to marry her prince. Shakespeare's troubled relationship with the *theatrum mundi* is put to rest with Miranda's mirror in *The Tempest,* a play that resuscitates and resolves the diabolic energy of Marlowe's *Faustus.* Shakespeare asks his audience for redemption as he renounces the dramatic magic of the "mirror up to nature".

Conclusion

William Shakespeare's theatrical mirrors clearly show us the evolution of Shakespeare's writing, the way he thought about character and drama, and the way his plays can be read as responding to each other in a gradual process that leads from *Henry VI Part One,* through *Hamlet* and the great tragedies to the redemptive romances and the final allegory of the playwright in *The Tempest.* The arc these mirrors set up is unmistakeable and has been surprisingly overlooked. I hope to demonstrate the profound impact that this analysis of Shakespeare's mirrors has on the way we read his dramatic works both singularly and collectively, giving us an invaluable insight into the way Shakespeare thought about and developed his writing.

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