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## The Birth of the Subject out of the Spirit of the Play within the Play: The *Hamlet* Paradigm

When the play within the play starts its career in early modernity, it revolves about the modern subject as director, examiner, and judge of the play. Moreover, and vice versa, it produces this position: the ego as the centre of the world. Referring to *Hamlet* and its multiplied plays within the play, the chapter shows that this emergence of the modern subject takes place in a circle. The play within the play requires a position beyond the play from which the play can be initiated, directed, performed, examined, and judged. But, to achieve such a position (of a 'true interior', an ego beyond all masks and all show), it is necessary to gain knowledge and certainty about the interior, which can only be achieved by exteriorization of the interior, in other words, by playing (by acting in masks, in the world of show). Thus the effect of the play within the play is its pre-condition and vice versa. This chapter considers this circle in *Hamlet* as paradigm with reference, not only to an historical argument (the specific conditions on which the concept of the play within the play is constituted in early modernity), but also a systematic argument (the position of the ego, constituted as endless reflection, as the reference point and precondition of the play within the play). The other meaning of the circle, in which the emergence of the modern subject and the concept of the play within the play are connected, is the unification of producer (the ego bringing forth plays within plays as acts of self-reassurance) and product (the ego brought forth by plays within plays), and thus a purely immanent self-creation of the modern subject: it proceeds from the 'spirit' of the play within the play and no longer needs reassurance from a position of transcendence.

'It is a peculiarity of Shakespearean triumphalism,' Harold Bloom remarks, 'that the most original literary work in Western literature, perhaps in the world's literature, has now become so familiar that we seem to have read it before, even when we encounter it for the first time. *Hamlet* [...] remains both as familiar, and as original, as his play. [...] We hardly can think about ourselves without thinking about Hamlet, whether or not we are aware that we are recalling him.'<sup>1</sup>

If, in our awakenings to self-awareness, we have always been Hamlet, it is because we equate the subject in its ideal boundlessness and respective uniqueness with unending reflection, introversion, and an element of play-

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), pp. 404-05.

acting that is hard to pin down, in the sense that one can only be a person by playing one. The play-within-a-play patterns developed with virtuosity in the *Hamlet* drama bring these three constituents of the subject (self-reflection, inversion and play-acting) together. *Hamlet* becomes, as a paradigm for the play within the play, a paradigm of the subject.

The figure of Hamlet introduces itself with an ontological claim to an essence independent of both role models and behavioural models. This claim is conspicuously linked with the theme of grief that is raised at critical junctures in the plot; that is to say, at critical junctures in the play's redrawing of the self. The theme is presented without delay in the exposition of the conflict between Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet over proper and false ways of mourning Hamlet's father. Likewise, the evocation of grief or signs of grief becomes the subject of a debate that follows the Player's monologue on the grief of Hecuba, occasioning the play within the play in the narrower sense, which triggers certain crucial incidents in the plot: Gertrude urgently demands an interview with Hamlet, at which he kills Polonius; Claudius removes Hamlet from court with the intention of having him killed in England. Lastly, the final catastrophe, when all the protagonists except Fortinbras and Horatio meet their deaths, begins with the conflict between Laertes and Hamlet as to whose grief over Ophelia is the more authentic. In grief the subject is manifested as having experienced a fundamental loss that at the same time implies a loss of self.<sup>2</sup> The subject in mourning does not, in a sense, maintain possession of itself. It is therefore all the more astonishing that it is Hamlet's grief that moves him to lay claim to a self beyond and beneath the forms of appearance. The outward signs of mourning, Hamlet explains to his mother in their first scene – clothing, gestures, modes of behaviour – are mannerisms that could just as well be faked ('actions that a man might play'; I.ii.84)<sup>3</sup>, whereas he himself is unacquainted with appearances: 'I know not "seems"' (I.ii.76). He has rather 'that within which passeth show' (I.ii.85). Hamlet negatively introduces the ontological claim to a subjectivity beyond appearance. Obviously, such a subject cannot otherwise be delineated. Insofar as it is missing something, it experiences itself: this indeed constitutes the grief of the ego through the concrete content of the deficiency, in this case the death of the father.

The courtly ideal of 'civility', of cultivated behaviour, as proposed by Baldassarre Castiglione in *The Courtier* (published 1508-16) and given a

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie', in *Sigmund Freud Studienausgabe*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich and others (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1974), III, pp. 193-212.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are taken from G.R. Hibbard's edition of the play (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

political concretisation by Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513), includes significant doses of 'play', 'show', and 'seeming'; that is, the art of concealing oneself, permitting no-one to see behind the mask, suppressing the emotions, controlling the body and its expressions, moulding oneself like a sculpture, all made to appear effortless, unforced, as 'natural grace' under competitive pressure. No-one is expected to say what his 'own' thoughts and feelings are, and each person expects similar treatment from his peers.<sup>4</sup> The reference point for this ubiquitous seeming is not, however, the construction of a personal identity, but rather that of a persona, that is of a mask.<sup>5</sup> The goal is social advancement, making the right moves in the game played consciously by all, without any claim being made to a self beyond or beneath the mask.

Hamlet is the figure that refuses to play the game, lays claim to an ego behind the mask, and makes reference to truth rather than to functionality in social intercourse. The refusal of the subject to play along in a world of seeming stands thus in a reciprocal relationship to grief, through which the subject has established itself as incorporating a fundamental lack. With all this, Hamlet is in the position of the melancholic as developed in the figure of Jacques in *As You Like It*, written immediately before *Hamlet*. The melancholic recognizes that life is a play – 'All the world's a stage', he says – but has no desire to act in it himself. In *As You Like It*, the conditions of possibility of this position are not discussed. We find ourselves in the Forest of Arden, that is, outside the social world, and Jacques, after the Duke's restoration to power, will not return to court with the other exiled lords. In *Hamlet*, the question of the conditions of possibility for the position of the melancholic is asked explicitly as a question of the possibility of maintaining the existence of a subject, a being beyond the social masks and roles assigned to each of us. This ego-essence is connected significantly with the notion of the particular, that is, of the entirely unique, that which is connected with the notion of the authentic, and never allows itself to become an instance of a general rule. Gertrude questions the occasion of Hamlet's grief and the grief itself as being 'particular' ('Why seems it so particular with thee?'; I.ii.75). It is in response to this that Hamlet lays claim to an essence beyond all seeming ('I know not "seems"'). But what is the basis of such an ego, and how can it be sure of itself?

The scenes with the ghost of Hamlet's father give the subject's claim to transcend 'show' a justification, although in a doubtful manner – a justification

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Klaus Reichert, 'Hamlets Falle. Das Paradox der Kultiviertheit', in his *Der fremde Shakespeare* (München, Wien: Hanser, 1998), pp. 57-86.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Stephen Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

tion by what is, after all, a ghost. The subject is called upon to restore the disturbed natural order ('Revenge his [i.e. the father's] foul and most unnatural murder'; I.v.25). On the other hand, he is not allowed to link his actions to a pre-existing natural order which, ideally, would have a secure metaphysical foundation. The subject is made rather to justify its actions through itself and its own moral responsibility. This occurs with the second command that has to be fulfilled in the restoration of order: 'Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught' (I.v.85-86). The subject is offered an elucidation of the occurrences at court that permits it to see beyond appearances, that is, beyond the show put on by the others. This fuels the subject's claim, based on a deficiency (that is, on grief), to an essence beyond all seeming. Since, however, the subject does not wish to dirty its hands in performing the actions the insight prescribes, it must initiate an investigation before carrying out its revenge. But this means that Hamlet must achieve certainty about the nature of the Ghost – first, as to whether it is a 'goblin damn'd' that hopes to destroy him;<sup>6</sup> then, whether it is telling him the truth when it claims that Claudius is his father's murderer and has had an adulterous relationship with Gertrude; and thirdly, whether he himself is capable of correctly understanding the behaviour and speech, the signs, that the others produce. On this last point he provides questionable proof. As his own words he cites, 'Adieu, adieu, remember me', which the Ghost had said to him (I.v.112). Is he here metonymically replacing the speaker with its audience? Or, if the words Hamlet writes are truly his own, must we accept the Ghost's speech and perhaps even the Ghost itself as mere delusion? Hamlet maintains that he swore 'Remember me', but until this point in the plot he has sworn nothing. Instead it is his companions who must take an oath, not to 'remember me', but rather not to betray Hamlet or his investigative techniques. Hamlet, who has claimed to know no seeming, to have that within, a subjective essence, which is beyond all show, announces to his comrades that he will 'put an antic disposition on' (I.v.179). This, however, means operating behind a mask, play-acting. Self-contradiction is inevitable. From this contradiction arises, with and through the tragedy of *Hamlet*, the configuration of the play within the play.

The subject, with its claim to transcend seeming, can only experience and be aware of its subjectivity when it becomes apparent, that is, manifests itself in the world of seeming. The ego must simultaneously play-act and judge its own performance from the sidelines. This is precisely what Polonius suggests

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Greenblatt, 'Hamlet im Fegfeuer', *Zeitsprünge: Forschungen zur frühen Neuzeit*, 2 (1998), pp. 5-36.

to Reynaldo in Act II, scene 1, following the Ghost scene, as a method of acquiring relevant information about Laertes' conduct in Paris. The method employs the negation of negation. Reynaldo should express negative opinions of Laertes, and from the ways in which these are contradicted it will be possible to deduce the truth. Nor does Hamlet have any other method, but his goals are more far-reaching. He has to prove the ego-essence that is beyond all seeming, beyond all produced signs and masks, while simultaneously proving his interpretation of the events surrounding his father's death, an interpretation which along with his grief has occasioned his departure from operating behind masks in accordance with the rules of courtly role-playing. Hamlet's method similarly employs the figure of the negation of negation. He stages, on the foundation of an 'antic disposition', performances of negation that the others must then negate. Correspondingly, the ego whose foundations and apperception are thus based proves itself negated; that is, it proves that it in itself is fragmented. The subject can gain itself as 'particular', that is, unique and indivisible, only by dividing into two subjects, one that acts in self-staged productions and another offstage that judges the performances. It refracts others' masquerades through its own, then reflecting the consequent figures of refraction as its legal instance. Thus, the putative ego-essence, beyond all show, manifests itself as a process of reflection within the medium of the theatrical. Harold Bloom may have felt as much when he cited Richard Lanham's assessment that Hamlet's self-consciousness 'cannot be distinguished from the prince's theatricality'.<sup>7</sup> The subject, as manifested in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, is embedded in masquerades. It is so deeply nested in them that, Hamlet, for example, who has proclaimed that he will play at 'madness', is able in the fifth act to call upon his 'madness' as a defense when asking for Laertes' pardon. At the same time, the subject takes up a position beyond the play-acted representations, observing its own and others' acting in reality. But such duplication is the essence of theatre. It is therefore hardly surprising that Goethe, in his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, developed the conception of representative acting that gave shape to his dramatic and theatrical activities in Weimar with direct reference to *Hamlet*.<sup>8</sup> The actor, Goethe writes, must be always absorbed in his role, yet at the same time he must know and observe himself in the reality of acting.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 411.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. my 'Puppenspiel und Hamlet-Nachfolge: Wilhelm Meisters "Aufgabe" der theatralischen Sendung', in Bernhard Greiner, *Eine Art Wahnsinn: Dichtung im Horizont Kants. Studien zu Goethe und Kleist* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1994), pp. 29-41.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Goethe's rules for actors in his *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche. Vierzig Bände*, ed. by Hendrik Birus and others (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher

A subject based on such a foundation is not 'particular', e.g. not unique, a whole that behaves in response to the various masquerades in which it is embedded. It is split, 'dismembered' and also in need of remembering, one might say, with apologies to the ghost of Hamlet's father. With this kind of fragmentary self-justification and apperception, the subject is in a circuitous movement that cannot end. In the collisions of its masquerades with those of others, it becomes fragmented. To convey the semantic content of these reflections, it must undertake new proofs that it simultaneously observes and through which new fractures arise, again demanding new acts of judgment, and so on. Embedded in an unending chain of references, the ego flees ever deeper, itself becoming ghostly. Thus, the Ghost scene substantiates the subject, which had laid claim to a being beyond appearances, as an internally refracted processual unit of reflexivity without any possible end, a reflection taking place within the medium of theatre. The combination of its fragmented nature and its inconclusive reflexivity give the subject the ontological status of a 'dismembered ghost' that would have equally solid grounds for demanding – the question is only of whom – 'Remember me.'

After Hamlet, as a reaction to the Ghost's revelations, has announced his intention of assuming an 'antic disposition' and sworn his companions not to reveal that his actions may be concealing something beyond what they seem, it is impossible to decide whether or when Hamlet is play-acting both in the represented world in the events and speeches that follow and in the reality of the discourse (that is, for viewers and readers). From now on Hamlet defies definition. To gain insight into such a subject, one needs to apply Hamlet's own method of apperception: The viewer, or reader, must confront Hamlet's semantic masquerades with his own – his reading strategies; at the same time, he must step outside the semantic masquerades in which he nonetheless remains involved, and pass judgment on the resulting figures of refraction from a position offstage, in the wings. Thus he creates himself as a Hamlet-like subject. It is this persistence in establishing subjectivity on the other side of appearances, in the reality of discourse, that makes the ego-conception of *Hamlet* so utterly compelling.

The method of establishing and qualifying a subject that transcends all appearances through the staging of masquerades (generated by the subject on the basis of an 'antic disposition' and simultaneously performed and judged) is already in place and visible with initial effects before the professional actors appear in the *Hamlet* drama. Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude attempt in

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Klassiker Verlag, 1987-), XVIII: *Ästhetische Schriften 1771-1805*, ed. by Friedmar Apel (1998), pp. 857-83.

vain to arrive at a cogent interpretation of Hamlet's behaviour toward Ophelia. Hamlet is incomprehensible, precisely because as a subject beyond all show he can conceal himself, rather than revealing himself, in the masquerade. Why is a further exponentiation of play-acting (through the performance put on by the travelling players at Hamlet's request) necessary? With regard to the grounding of the ego as a process of inconclusive reflexivity in the medium of the theatrical, and with respect to the attempt to bring out the truth about the death of Hamlet's father within this structure, nothing new can be gained by the Players' performance. The chain of staged action and reaction, already well under way, can only become more complex. So the question necessarily arises whether the play-within-the-play/thematic forced by the Players' performance is yet another way of grounding and making sure of the subject, while at the same time suggesting a different way of dealing with the unexplained events that surround the death of Hamlet's father.

What impresses Hamlet so much about the First Player's presentation that he engages the troupe for a performance before the King and Queen? The answer seems clear. The actor, in his speech about Hecuba's mourning for Priam, puts himself so entirely into character – spanning two internal refractions, as he represents a narrator reporting how Dido reported the scene to Aeneas – that he manages to evoke in himself that grief of which he is speaking, even manifesting his feelings with an abundance of physical symptoms. Apparently, the Players are engaged because they are effective in this manner. They invite the expectation that their acting will elicit signs of Claudius' guilt or innocence. This way of reading the text is suggestive, but it ignores grave contradictions. The actor produced his emotional effect in himself, not in Hamlet, his audience, and whose fixation on this very theme had led him to demand this text from the actor. If Hamlet has shown no affect, how can he expect Claudius, who has good reason to control his expressions of emotion, to be moved by the play to the uncontrolled production of signs that would betray him? The actor's self-deluding performance has, however, produced a result in Hamlet; reflection on himself, and renewed resolve, stemming from his comparison of the actors' text and performance with his own situation. Hamlet offers a commentary immediately after the player's speech: 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I' (II.ii.538). That seems to be the effect he hopes the play within the play will achieve: not the production of signs whose content can only be conveyed in further semantic performances in a 'progressus ad infinitum', but rather the evocation, if not the creation, of a subject that possesses an essence beyond the performances on display and behaves as Hamlet has previously depicted. If one reads carefully, Hamlet describes

exactly this as the hoped-for effect of the Players' performance: 'guilty creatures' will be compelled to 'proclaim their malefactions' (II.ii.578, 581), which presupposes a moral subject: 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' (II.ii.593-94). Hamlet is aiming for a subject that does more than function in masquerades, for a moral ego that reflects on itself when confronted with represented performances. Hamlet has postulated such an ego with reference to himself ('I have that within which passeth show'). The attempt to make sure of this subjectivity has shunted him on to the track of inconclusive reflexivity in the medium of the theatrical on which he himself threatens to become a 'dismembered ghost', while at the same time threatening never to achieve any certainty with regard to the actions of others. Thus, one can name two functions and attainments of the plays within the play, as developed in *Hamlet*. On the one hand, they serve to reassure the originator, actor, and observer of the play of the existence of his ego – postulated as given – beyond and beneath all appearances. On the other, raised essentially to plays within plays within plays, they should evoke, or even create, this ego in their audience.

The Players' play within the play seems, by virtue of its complex teleology, to be entirely dedicated to the former function, yet it fulfills only the latter. The scene presents so many levels of play-acting and corresponding interpretative contexts that the formation of meaningful signs 'betraying' Claudius can no more be mastered than can their possible readings. Suffice it to name a few of these levels. The play within the play duplicates and predicates itself with a pantomime, the dumb show. Claudius does not react to the dumb show, which reprises the entire plot, a king's murder and his widow's marriage to the murderer. However, he does react to the spoken play, in which it is not the King, but the Queen, that takes the leading role. In addition, Hamlet announces that he has inserted a speech of his own, though the particular passage cannot be readily identified. It is everywhere and nowhere. Hamlet proceeds to offer nonstop commentary, not only on the play itself, but also on the Players' acting skills and the meaning of the performance (referring to it, for example, as *The Mousetrap*). The performance immediately following the dumb show is largely taken up by the complexity of 'the Queen's fidelity', featuring, among other things, the Player Queen's scandalous statement that, by giving herself to her second husband, she will kill the first.<sup>10</sup> The regicide is mentioned only briefly, yet it is not the Queen's reactions to

<sup>10</sup> 'A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed' (III.ii.172-73). The double meaning of these words is stressed by Anselm Haverkamp, *Hamlet: Hypothek der Macht* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2004), p. 49.

the play, but those of Claudius that are supposed to be put to the test. Lastly, the piece does not reflect the murder as described by the Ghost. The murderer in the play within the play is not the brother, but the nephew of the King. Thus, the play appears to refer not only to the death of Hamlet's father, but also to a possible future murder of Claudius by Hamlet. Hamlet has commissioned the performance. Through his addition to the text, it becomes his own. In the frame play's presentation of a play for the King and Queen, he plays along, yet maintains at all times the perspective of an outsider observing the play and its audience. As end-effect of the piece and its performance, Hamlet seems to have achieved the desired certainty about Claudius. But such certainty should be followed by an act of revenge that becomes conspicuous by its absence. At first it fails because Hamlet misinterprets Claudius's posture as a token of deep prayerfulness, but he later fails repeatedly to carry it out; as, for example, when Claudius questions him about Polonius's whereabouts and sends him to England, acting clearly not as a repentant sinner, but as a conspirator with evil intentions. Meanwhile, the play within the play does not have the hoped-for effect of eliciting unambiguous signs. Claudius's reaction on leaving the performance is ambiguous: it may be a confession of guilt, or possibly a reaction to a clear threat of murder. At the same time, it is the only appropriate reaction to a play generating meaning that has spiraled out of control.

In addition to creating a diversity of signs that cannot be unambiguously determined, the play within the play also fulfills the second function. That is, it evokes in Claudius as its audience (and likewise in Gertrude, although I will not discuss her case further here) an ego beyond all masquerade. This subject announces its presence when Claudius leaves the performance instead of interacting with the Hamlet-generated piece viewed by Hamlet and Horatio that could be entitled *Performing a Play about Regicide for a Regicide Audience*. This subject is evidenced by Claudius's monologue as he prepares himself for prayer. This evoked ego behind the mask can only be perceived by the signs it emits, as was true for the ego-being claimed by Hamlet from the beginning. These, however, can never be conclusively determined, as Hamlet's misinterpretation of the seemingly praying Claudius shows. Reading such signs demands new semantic performances in which the interpreting ego, as presented, would experience itself as being further alienated from itself and embedded in an endless self-reflexive process. So both achievements of the play within the play (self-knowledge in its founder, actor, and observer, and the evocation of an ego in the audience) remain under the spell of this structure. Each launch of a play within the play necessitates further plays.

But is it also possible to escape the influence of the infinitely parthenogenetic plays within plays? The fifth act of the play puts this question centre stage. The answer it gives is that it is possible to break the spell of the plays within plays, if both achievements can be combined in a single figure. That is demonstrated by Hamlet in Act V. The new quality that Hamlet gains resolves the great hermeneutic riddle of the piece, how the Hamlet of the fifth act can be linked with the Hamlet of Acts I-IV, where he appears as the modern subject in whom the world is centred, where he is expected to 'set right' [the time] that is 'out of joint' (I.v.197, 196).<sup>11</sup>

The juxtaposition of the two attainments of the play within the play continues to proceed from the theme of grief, now in the conflict between Laertes and Hamlet as to who can display the deeper grief over the dead Ophelia. Hamlet has pursued the semantic performances that serve to assure him of his subjectivity by assuming an 'antic disposition' on the very field where dissimulation is least expected, that of love. His play-acting has destroyed, among others, Ophelia. He was an actor in, as well as observer of, this play, and Laertes' grief over Ophelia confronts him once more with the signs that his performance has evoked. When he rejects Laertes' grief in favour of his own, his argument is weak, purely quantitative. His 'quantity of love' exceeds that of 'forty thousand brothers' (V.i.260, 259). Hamlet lends substance to his grief with an emphatic first-person declaration, and this immediately after Laertes has marked him as the guilty party:

What is he whose grief

Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow

Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand

Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,

Hamlet the Dane (V.i.244-48)

Thus, the play within the play that Hamlet once played with his and Ophelia's love has not only put him on track to apperception of his putative subjectivity, but has also evoked in him – when Laertes puts him in the position of the audience at his own play – a subject that confesses its guilt. This is what Hamlet once expected from the performance by the Players, but he could not be sure of its effect on others, that is, on Claudius as its intended

<sup>11</sup> For two totally different interpretations of this, see Verena Olejniczak Lobstien, 'Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: Apologie der "Innerlichkeit"', in her *Skeptische Phantasie: Eine andere Geschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Literatur* (München: Fink, 1999), pp. 102-26, and Aloida Assmann, "'Let it be': Kontingenz und Ordnung in Schicksalsvorstellungen bei Chaucer, Boethius und Shakespeare', in *Kontingenz*, ed. by Gerhart von Graevenitz and Odo Marquard (München: Fink, 1998), pp. 225-44.

audience. The subjective essence claimed by Hamlet beyond and beneath all appearances is present both as a creative force (bringing forth plays within plays as acts of self-reassurance) and as a created product (brought forth by the plays within plays). Such a unification of producer and product is an act of self-creation of a subject whose character is purely immanent – it proceeds from the 'spirit' of the play within the play – and no longer needs reassurance from a position of transcendence. An ego that has brought itself forth in this manner and has reassured itself of its self-generated semantic performances – as unending reflection in the medium of the theatrical – can allow all transcendence to rest on it alone. It has no need to involve itself in questions of providence; it does not need to play at destiny. Hamlet's speech 'Let be' (V.ii.170) and his apparent recognition and transfer of loyalty to a world of providence is the utterance of an ego that has created itself and bears no trace of transcendence. So the subject purifies, through its speech, transcendence of all immanence,<sup>12</sup> proving in the process that transcendence is the absolute Other of the purely immanent self-creation of the subject out of the spirit of the play within the play. This feeds the expectation that the self-negation of this ego – insofar as Hamlet anticipates his probable death – creates *ex negativo* an opening into the transcendent world as a metamorphosis that takes its evidence from the perfect immanence of this ego's self-creation.

The two attainments of the play within the play through which the subject creates itself are brought together in the realisation of the dramatic discourse – that is, not primarily in the represented world, but rather in the reality of the here and now of each performance or reading of the piece. For it is the order of the drama that links the producer and product aspects of the Hamlet subject: it confronts Hamlet, who is the subject of plays within plays, a subject that must first make sure of itself, thrusting itself into a course of inconclusive reflexivity. The drama confronts this Hamlet with the Hamlet as audience at his own performances that call forth in him a subjective essence beyond all appearances, an emphatic first-person declaration of the recognition of guilt. The drama *Hamlet* achieves, in its discursive reality here and now, the self-creation of the ego – the Hamlet-subject as a process of inconclusive reflexivity in the medium of the theatrical that we all are. It lends this act, as the absolute Other of transcendence, its aura *ex negativo*. This makes the 'birth' of the modern subject in *Hamlet* so compelling that we feel we

<sup>12</sup> This argument is stressed in Walter Benjamin's remarks on baroque allegory; see his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), I, p. 246.

have always known it: the self-creation of the subject out of the spirit and matter of the play within the play.

*Yifen Beus*

## Self-Reflexivity in the Play within the Play and its Cross-Genre Manifestation

The play within the play is often used as a form of irony and can be disguised as a simple performance within the play itself, a character masquerading as another character, a character pretending to be out of his mind, or a complex fusion of theatrical realities. All these forms of the play within the play carry a paradoxical significance in theory and practice and rely on a self-conscious writing process on the playwright's part and the self-reflexive aspect of the performance itself. This paper concerns the theoretical development of self-reflexivity in the play within the play and focuses its examination on early discussions that greatly influenced the poetics of 'modern' drama, namely German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel's concept and definition of Romantic irony. It will also discuss the cross-genre application of the play within the play that functions similarly in painting, drama and cinema by drawing examples from Diego Velázquez, Ludwig Tieck and Terry Gilliam.

The play within the play is often used by playwrights to reveal the workings of dramatic irony and the very nature of drama. It may come in a variety of guises: (i) a simple performance within the play itself, as in Ludwig Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater* or *Puss in Boots*;<sup>1</sup> (ii) a character masquerading him/herself as another character, as in Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio*;<sup>2</sup> (iii) a character pretending to be 'beside' his/her usual self, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; or (iv) a complex fusion of theatrical realities, as in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.<sup>3</sup> All these forms of the play within the play carry a paradoxical significance in theory and practice and rely on a self-conscious writing process on the playwright's part and the self-reflexive aspect of the performance itself. Thus, it is meta-drama, so to speak. This is by no means a new concept. In fact, self-reflexivity can be regarded as a marking of modernity in art and literature. This chapter examines the theoretical development of self-reflexivity in the play within the play, focusing on early debates that greatly influenced the poetics of 'modern' drama, namely

<sup>1</sup> In *Schriften*, 12 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> In *Théâtre complet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> In *Naked Masks: Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello* (New York: Meridian Books, 1952).