ADMISSION: FIGURING THE EARLY MODERN THEATRE

by

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Abstract

Drawing from theories of the theatre that interrogate the master image/metaphor of theatre-as-life, my thesis “Admission: Figuring the Early Modern Theatre” develops a poetics of admission, or a theory of early modern theatrical form that takes into account its penchant for metatheatrical device and its obsession with the incorporation of strangers. What is a stranger? What might it mean to integrate the Other into the self and into society? The theatre stages a face-to-face encounter between two ostensible strangers—the performers and the audience. At the level of the medium, then, is an interest in the ways we come to know and let others in. The early modern stage was extremely interested in this process, self-consciously experimenting with, interrogating, and evaluating the tensions and possibilities inherent in the articulation of the human via live illusion. While the influx and management of strangers were growing concerns in the burgeoning metropolis of early modern London, the theatre became a sight to organize these concerns in a way that, perhaps unconsciously, returned them to their metaphysical origins.

My thesis examines several early modern characters that are strangers, or become strangers, within the communities of their respective play realities: the deposed King Richard II; the outcast Jewish money-lender, Shylock; the bastard son of Troy, Thersites; and the revenge tragedians and madmen, Hieronimo and Hamlet. These characters, I argue, double as constitutive elements of theatrical practice: the character that seems to pre-exist its live iteration; the actor who must embody a character; the audience who watches on the periphery; and the theatrical event as a whole, or the constructed world that recedes once the performance is over. The metatheatrical effect of these characters who double as strangers and theatrical practice is a stage whose illusions and performance conditions consistently render the process of becoming human—of being recognized and incorporated into new worlds—as a process of admission.
Lay Summary

The theatre stages a face-to-face encounter between two groups of strangers—performers and audience. At the level of the medium, then, is in interest in how we come to recognize and give access to others. My thesis is interested in this process of admission, arguing that live illusion asks us to consider what it means to belong to given worlds. I take as my laboratory and case study the early modern theatre. I examine several characters who function as strangers within their play worlds, and I examine how they also function as constituent elements of theatrical practice itself—the actor and the audience for example. By appearing both as strangers within the world of illusion and as properties of illusion-making, these early modern characters suggest that the process of becoming human—of being recognized and incorporated into new worlds—is a theatrical process of admission.
Preface

This dissertation contains original, independent, unpublished work by the author, Eve Preus.
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1 Introduction. Admitting Shakespeare

On May 22, 1934, Fritz Frankel gave Walter Benjamin 20 mg of mescaline subcutaneously in the thigh and then recorded his reactions. A “particular gesture” was made by Benjamin that sparked Frankel’s attention: “Subject lets his raised hands, which are not touching, glide from a distance very slowly over his face” (Benjamin, “Protocols” 12). Benjamin explained that his hands were drawing together the “ends of a net, but rather than it being a net just covering his head, it was a net covering the cosmos” (12). He then began a discourse on the net:

B[enjamin] proposes a variation on the seemingly insignificant Hamlet-question, to be or not to be: net or mantle, that is the question here. He explains that the net represents the night side and everything in existence that makes us shudder. “Shuddering,” he explains, ”is the shadow of the net upon the body. In shuddering, the skin imitates a network.” This explanation was connected to a shudder that traversed the test subject's body.¹ ("Protocols" 12)

Of course Benjamin’s hallucination here generates a philosophical musing that is more evocative than literal. My interest in that musing lies in what exactly it evokes

and how. Benjamin metaphorizes Hamlet’s “to be” as a net and “not to be” as a mantle\(^2\) in order to turn the gloomy prince’s existential dialectic into a felt human phenomenon: the experience of shuddering. To be or not to be, from the vantage point of the shudder, is not a question of comparison or contradiction, it is a question of boundary—both the boundary between what is endogenous and what is adventitious as well the boundary between what is felt and what is expressed. When we shudder\(^3\) the feeling of something that covers, enfolds and envelops (the mantle, or the “not to be” sense of disappearing) is coextensive with the feeling of something that catches, carries and lifts (the net, or the “to be” sense of aggregation).

Significantly, it is the skin that shudders, and by shuddering it imitates a network. Skin, that soft outer covering that keeps the wrong things out and the right things in, is the body’s fundamental threshold between the out-there-that-is-not-me and the in-here-that-is-me. Benjamin’s Netzwerk coalesces the net and the mantle into one system of mutual coordination where the body itself is implicated in the impossibility of its own project: contemplating not being while being. The shudder via the skin paradoxically reveals the possibility and even proximity of death\(^4\) (fear, horror) and the absolute immediacy of being alive (goosebumps, shivers).

\(^2\) The German word Mantel is more accurately translated as coat, or sometimes shell or cover, with an evocation of Weltenmantal, “or World-mantle, a concept related to the ‘world-soul’” (Thompson “Protocols” 14).

\(^3\) The German word Schauer is a cognate of "shower" which refers to either a sudden downpour or to anything that makes us tremble in coldness or fear.

\(^4\) In his 2006 translation of Benjamin’s 1972 posthumously published Über Hashish, Howard Eiland takes some poetic liberties by introducing the word “horror” as metonymy for shuddering: "Elaborating on the net, B proposes a variation on Hamlet’s rather anodyne question, ‘To be or not to be’: Net or mantle—that is the question. He explains that the net stands for the nocturnal side of existence and for everything that makes us shudder in horror. ‘Horror,’ he remarks, ‘is the shadow of the net on the body. In shuddering, the skin imitates the meshwork of a net.’ This explanation comes after a shudder has traveled over the test subject’s body” (93). The word horror does not occur in the original, although the sense of a darkness that produces a shuddering, I think, does evoke a certain terror. That said, the sense of
I’m invoking Benjamin’s entheogenic experience of Hamlet’s dialectic for a few reasons. The first is that it exemplifies embodied, phenomenological reasoning, and this thesis is very much indebted to a similar method of inquiry. As Stanton B. Garner astutely observes, “The phenomenological approach—with its twin perspective on the world as it is perceived and inhabited, and the emphasis on embodied subjectivity that has characterized the work of certain of its practitioners...is uniquely able to illuminate the stage’s experiential duality” (3). Inasmuch as the theatre is a spectacle experienced by objective witnesses, it is also a subjective space “bodied forth” by actors (3). The theatre, then, cannot help but be “phenomenal space,” or a space in which “the categories of subject and object give way to a relationship of mutual implication” (3). It would appear at first glance that Garner is merely reinscribing for the theatre the basic rhetorical situation of all cultural production—that essential, transactional model of communication, sender-message-channel-receiver, and the complicated palimpsests of mutuality that emerge synchronically in an art form’s given realization and diachronically in its reception over time. The difference in Garner’s theatrical phenomenology, however, is its “central preoccupation with the body as agent of theatrical experience” (5). But what is a body? Is it a material threshold that mediates between the out-there that is not me and the in-here that is me? Or is it system, irreducible to singular agency and mutually coordinate with mind and culture, that mediates how we shuddering as a kind of showering does not evoke this sense of horror as strongly, hence my preference for the Scott Thompson translation.
“remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments” (Tribble 94)?

These questions highlight the second reason I am invoking Benjamin’s shudder. The shudder is important not necessarily because it can be felt by a material body, but because it can generate the idea of the network; it is the image of this net-mantle that serves to organize Benjamin’s interpretation of Hamlet. Similarly, Garner’s theatrical, embodied phenomenology is important not because it can access relationships between real audiences and real actors in live time, but because it can generate the image of the dramatic text as “a blueprint for performance and a specific discipline of body, stage, and eye” (6). The shudder and the dramatic text, then, are embodied insofar as they are ideas that perceptually emerge and are therefore able to be read. What I find interesting about this kind of hermeneutics is its insistence on poesis, or the act of making, as an a priori principle for interpretation. Phenomenology allows these thinkers to create a body, or a

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5 I want to distinguish this thesis’s interest in the metaphor of the network—and my interrogation of theatrical embodiment as both material substrate and semiotic complex—from a systems-theory approach (from which Lynn Tribble’s quote here on cognitive ecologies derives), and specifically from Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. Benjamin’s body, and specifically his skin, is a net-mantle insofar as it is an investiture of entrapment; shuddering is a reflexive movement of the body and skin to throw off that which might hold it captive and disempower it. The network, in this sense, is a metaphor for the phenomenological experience of the body’s paradoxically bounded and expansive existence in space and time. In actor-network theory, the network similarly functions to breach the seemingly unbreachable split between subject and object (and past and present as Jonathan Gill Harris has argued in *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*) by revealing the interconnected relationships that make a system what it is. But where actor-network theory and recent work in cognitive ecology are interested in the polychronic interactions of human and non-human entities and contexts (the social, the natural, and the technological not being considered distinct), my interest in the network metaphor remains figural and rhetorical: what kind of work and thinking does the image of the network accomplish and make possible? To put another way, what kind of poetry does the network image elicit?

6 Even Garner observes that his method is unusual: “It may appear surprising to some that a study concerned with the phenomenological parameters of theatrical performance should conduct its investigation largely in reference to the dramatic text, that prescriptive artifact whose traditionally literary authority contemporary performance theory has sought to overthrow” (5).
complete organization of elements having the force of a real entity, and then from that body derive a poetics of form, or a theory of the creative principles informing its creation—in Garner’s case a poetics of theatre derived from the body of the play text that he imagines as embodied space; and in Benjamin’s case a poetics of existence derived from a re-imagination of his own body as a net-mantle, the mescaline injection serving to defamiliarize Benjamin from his physical body so that he can make it anew.

If such a method sounds recursive—creating an image so that the principles governing its creation may be derived—it’s because it is. W.J.T. Mitchell in his seminal text *Iconology* observes, “Any attempt to grasp ‘the idea of imagery’ is fated to wrestle with the problem of recursive thinking, for the very idea of an ‘idea’ is bound up with the notion of imagery” (5). The way to solve this problem is not necessarily to replace the word ‘idea’ with another word such as ‘concept,’ but to “allow the recursive problem full play” (5). For Mitchell, such an allowance would involve “attention to the way in which images (and ideas) double themselves: the way we depict the act of picturing, imagine the activity of imagination, figure the practice of figuration” (5). The way we imagine the activity of imagination depends a lot on what intellectual discipline we are in. For instance, verbal imagery belongs to literary studies, mental imagery to psychology and graphic imagery to art. In his genealogy of image families (graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal), Mitchell notes that perceptual images specifically, or those images derived from sensory data, “occupy a kind of border region where physiologists, neurologists, psychologists, art historians, and students of optics find themselves collaborating
with philosophers and literary critics” (10). It is in this border region where Garner’s play text and Benjamin’s shudder reside.

This is the region occupied by a number of strange creatures that haunt the border between physical and psychological accounts of imagery: the “species” or “sensible forms” which (according to Aristotle) emanate from objects and imprint themselves on the wax-like receptacles of our senses like a signet ring; the *fantasmata*, which are revived versions of those impressions called up by the imagination in the absence of the objects that originally stimulated them...and finally, those “appearances” which (in common parlance) intrude between ourselves and reality and which we so often refer to as “images”—from the image of a skilled actor, to those created for the products and personages by experts in advertising and propaganda.

(Mitchell 10)

Mitchell’s list of perceptual images here has its own intrusion of an image that generates the very kind of overlapping that he is interested in giving “full play.” The ghost, or that strange, haunting creature that hovers on the threshold of the physical and the mental, serves not only to typify the genealogies of these border-crossing, perceptual images, but also to figure the very practice of their figuration. Put another way, the figure of the ghost articulates a way of knowing an object that cannot be accounted for by perception alone. These images of “intermediate
agencies that stand between us and the objects we perceive" and the prevalence of these images across disciplines suggest that imagery is not merely signification, but a way of generating what we don’t know and organizing it into what we know (10).

The recursive relationship between image-production and hermeneutic method is at the heart of this thesis, both in the poetics I am attempting to create about the early modern theatre and in the intervention I wish to make in the critical scholarship on this theatre. Historically speaking, there is no English precedent for early modern London’s permanent commercial theatre venues. In conjunction with the canon of play texts that emerged quickly after these venues opened their doors, the early modern theatre presents itself to scholars as a perfect laboratory for historical and philosophical reflection. Stephen Greenblatt famously articulated the parameters of this project when he expressed a desire to recreate the past in his scholarship: “If I never believed the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them” (1). The last three decades of early modern theatre criticism can indeed be said to be attempts to recreate conversations with the stage and its component parts: its plays and playbooks, its actors and companies, its environs, and its

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7 Perhaps the best articulation of Shakespeare’s theater as a laboratory is Henry S. Turner’s _Shakespeare’s Double Helix_, a playful monograph that examines how science is in Shakespeare and Shakespeare is in science. Textually mimicking the recursive image of DNA’s double helix, two essays are entwined together: one is a reading of _Midsummer Night’s Dream_ that explores how Shakespeare, like a modern day geneticist, grafts new chimerical worlds and forms; the other is an examination of contemporary biotechnology, which also creates new forms through biological engineering. The chasm between science and poetry, Turner argues, is more illusory than reality: Elizabethan poetics and contemporary scientific method depend upon the same logics of mimesis. Both imagine the impossible and push the boundaries of what we consider human using very similar means: the stage-laboratory. This thesis is indebted to and influenced by Turner's exploration of image-production—particularly the metaphor of stage as laboratory and laboratory as stage—as the foundation upon which to build a poetics, as well the creative, hermeneutic method he employs to make that poetics—the grafting of each essay onto the other and the chimerical insights that result.
in institutional, political, and religious associations and affiliations. Early modern scholars of the theatre, like myself, are generously indebted to this work.\(^8\)

While I am also interested in creating a conversation, I am not, however, interested in creating that conversation by re-materializing the conditions of my topic’s past. Instead, I hope to move away from an explanation of the early modern stage as an archival site that scholars must place in relation to the materials of culture— theirs and ours. Like Garner, I think that early modern play texts are blueprints for performance and that these blueprints provide phenomenological insights about the anxieties governing the theatrical situation. Most importantly, the early modern theatre’s penchant for metatheatrical device reveals a stage that is uniquely interested in the possibilities of representation and the double valences commercial theatre affords. These include the mutually-implicating relationships between audience and performer, character and persona, actor and profession, and spectator and customer, to name only a few.

The conversation I aim to recreate will be between a character in a given play text and the operations of performance that “illuminate the play of possible actuality already posited by the dramatic text” (Garner 7); or in other words, between a character and the formal elements of the theatre that make it the theatre, such as the actor and the audience. I want to build this conversation by generating an image that I see as both haunting the border regions of image production within the embodied, intersubjective space of the theatrical event as well as an image that

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\(^8\) For a recent and comprehensive examination of the history, proponents, and legacies of New Historicism within the field of Shakespeare Studies, see Neema Parvini’s *Shakespeare and New Historicist Theory*. 
doubles as a figuration for a given character within a specific play reality. That image is the image of the stranger, or the Other that you do not know and do not let in.

This thesis imagines the ghostly image of the stranger as the doubled image of the character/performance objective, an image that is generated by what I am calling a poetics of admission. When I say “poetics of admission,” this is what I mean: as a way of coming to know ourselves and our surroundings and as a physical site of enacting that process, the theatre offers a schematic of inside and outside, of entrance and exit, of representation and reality that opens itself up to critiques of what it means to be allowed in, to be recognized, indeed to be included as “human.” If allowed in, what then? If poetics at its most broad application is a theory of how a work’s different elements come together to produce certain effects, then a theory of the early modern theatre, I contend, must simultaneously offer a poetics of admission, or how the theatre produces the effect that we can recognize and have access to human figures that we do not actually know. In Bridget Escolme’s articulation, how does Shakespeare’s stage “ask us to rethink the moments in the theatre and in the world when we ‘recognise’ another human being, when we think we know what someone else means” (17)? What will emerge from this poetics, I hope, is a heuristic of access and recognition that reveals and explains the subject/object displacements inherent in the theatrical event and specifically manipulated in the plays of this period. Part Two of this introduction will detail how I see the image of the stranger operating towards a poetics of admission; it will also develop more fully my methodology, which I see as both a compromise and an
intervention between two polemics within Shakespeare criticism: page versus stage criticism, or that disjuncture between text and performance studies. Part Three will outline the arguments of each chapter.

What I want to do now is return to Greenblatt and the New Historicists, whose work this thesis both depends upon for its insights and its mode of response. The next section, Part One, examines more fully the image of the net and the possibilities it affords early modern scholarship—which brings me to my final reason for introducing this thesis with an ostensibly non-sequitur anecdote by a Frankfurt School philosopher. In her insightful historicization of New Historicism, Catherine Belsey reveals a stylistic penchant of the theory’s advocates: “the inclusion of a substantial excerpt from another text, drawn from a different field of knowledge, non-fictional, contingent, an allusion to the ‘real’” (29). The extract, of course, draws parallels between its own method of inquiry and the method of the author. While my endeavors are not historicist, I appreciate this stylistic maneuver. My gesture here toward that style serves as an homage to my indebtedness to New Historicism and an explicit move toward a more figural content analysis. I hope that my contingent excerpt of Walter Benjamin’s hallucination will act as a starting point for the analysis of image production in early modern studies of theatricality and will suggest that, like Hamlet, perhaps one needs a spectral visitation to reveal the stranger in the other and in oneself.
1.1 The Critic: Knowing the Shudder

This thesis is indebted to and a response to the methods, assumptions, and metaphors that New Historicism uses to construct literary imagination and reception. In his foundational essay “New Historicism,” Louis Montrose describes the school’s cultural model as having “its origins in a cross between Geertzian and Foucauldian conceptual schemes” (401). Clifford Geertz’s foundational text *The Interpretation of Cultures* produced a symbolic anthropology in which humans functioned within “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms” (89). To get at these inherited concepts, Geertz’s coined a method of interpretive ethnography called “thick description.” Geertz’s ethnographic symbolism together with Foucault’s episteme, or that a priori condition of possibility that grounds all

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9 Arguably, much of early modern studies today can be characterized by scholars responding to, embellishing, denying, and subtending what was in its time a radical and much needed move away from the centralized subject and toward a politics of mediation. Several schools of thinking about Shakespeare’s stage have emerged or re-emerged in response to this politics. The recent turn to religion, with proponents such as Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti argues for a more historically-engaged interpretation of Reformation subjectivities. Linked to their critique is an explicit turn to questions of ethics, to what Shakespeare’s plays teach us about love or hospitality (Martha Nussbaum, Julia Reinhard Lupton). Historical phenomenologists have used New Historicist methodology to understand how these stages actually expressed emotional experience (Mary Floyd-Wilson, Elizabeth D. Harvey, Gail Kern Paster). In a similar vein, more performance-centered affect theorists have examined how Shakespeare as a dramatist created affect on these stages: Steven Mullaney’s “affective technologies” and Paul Yachnin’s “making publics” project, for instance, historicize the performance situation itself, both in its own terms and in terms of how those technologies informed a contemporary performance affect (see also Anthony Dawson, Bridgette Escolme, Nicholas Ridout). Another major response and extension of New Historicist methodology has been to move away from early modern subjects and to engage directly with objects. Ecocritical scholarship and its auxiliary “thing theory” take up the lives of the very materials in question, not simply the relations of those materials to each other (Gabriel Egan, Randall Martin, Paula Findlen, Vin Nardizzi). Cognitive theorists have also begun examining this stage in terms of new research on neurological embodiment (Bruce McConachie, F. Elizabeth Hart, Evelyn Tribble). Finally, queer theorists take a more polemical approach to New Historicist assumptions of time, arguing for a radical redefinition of history that does not take difference and alterity as its order of operations, but instead posits sameness and parallelism as central features that construct subjectivity (David Halperin, Medhavi Menon, Stephen Guy-Bray). Taken together, early modern criticism today is more dynamic and robust than it has ever been thanks to the foundational assumptions, methods, and metaphors of New Historicism.

10 See Foucault’s *The Order of Things* for a description and analysis of the episteme.
succeeding discourse, provided New Historicism with its critical lynchpin: a new way of describing the relationship between time and space. Foucault famously metaphorized this relationship in the image of a network: “We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (Of Other Spaces 22). New Historicist scholars produced readings of texts that diagnosed the historical subject as contiguously symbolic, as part of a broader network of cultural relationships, while treating that contiguity with synchronically “thick” descriptions of the various institutions and power relations that generated/influenced/parasited its condition.

There is perhaps no more fruitful place to examine the relationship of time and space as it historically emerges than on the stages of the past—theatre, that medium uniquely interested in manipulating the operations of time and space, and history, that subject curiously obsessed with the appearances and disappearances of space over time. Sure enough, some of the best New Historicist scholars took as their medium and muse Shakespeare. Often dubbed the father of New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt articulated the school’s theory of literary production and consumption in Shakespearean Negotiations. Fascinated in how dead authors seemed to speak to him through their living texts, Greenblatt presented a model of social energy and personal identity that is almost identical to Foucault’s network. In both the network metaphor and Greenblatt’s preferred metaphor “energy,” the circulation among seemingly oppositional though touching forces—the living and the dead, the spatial and the temporal, the producer and the receiver—generated
the material reality of the thing itself: Shakespeare’s stage. Not surprisingly, Greenblatt’s analysis encompassed not only Shakespearean play texts, but law books, theological tracts, and contemporary lectures of the period.

By pulling back from “the notion of artistic completeness” and “the celebration of a numinous literary authority,” Greenblatt’s analysis of Shakespeare eschewed theorizing the human subject as a supremely literary invention and a distinctly Shakespearean one at that (3). Instead, Greenblatt and his fellow New Historicists aimed to construct a fundamentally mediated human subject that appeared within a system of institutional relations that were constantly producing and reproducing it because, as Greenblatt articulated it, “there is no escape from contingency” (3). The paradox, of course, was that this method did situate itself as autonomous, as an external observer to “the myriad of boundaries that both constitute and separate cultural forms,” despite all its efforts and remonstrations that it wasn’t doing that, a uniquely theoretical version of the lady doth protest too much (Palmer 24).

The poetics of admission I am developing in this thesis derives from a similar understanding of my own critical position as uniquely dependent upon and mediated by a cultural tradition of which I am inextricably a part. That said, my focus on close-reading characters in terms of the effects of their play realities as opposed to reading the plays through the realities of their respective cultural institutions, is an attempt to speak to a blind spot I see in this kind of criticism: the images we use to situate our interpretations are images that are figured within the

11 See Greenblatt’s prequel to Shakespearean Negotiations, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare for a comprehensive analysis on the nature and structure of self-hood.
materials of observation themselves. I’d like to think that the joyfully paradoxical work the New Historicists were performing was something only the literary imagination could do: actively participating in the inversions and manipulations of subject and object figured by the corpus of texts or “body” we call the early modern theatre.

1.2 The Stranger: Developing a Poetics of Admission

The word stranger comes from the Old French estrangier which itself comes from the Latin extraneous: foreign, alien, external (OED). The stranger is external to a set of familiars, be it kin, parish, government, or country. In his famous 1908 essay “The Stranger,” Georg Simmel defines the stranger as a spatial paradox, whereby the “specific form of interaction” that the stranger inhabits is a simultaneous “nearness and remoteness” (402). In order to be perceived and identified as something from without, however, that something has to have already arrived within the system of which it has no ostensible part. But if it’s not within that order or exactly outside it, where is it? Richard Kearney distinguishes between the hermeneutic traditions of the Foreigner, the Other, and the Stranger by arguing that the stranger shows up in a different place than the other two. Kearney observes, “The place where we encounter the stranger is a threshold” (4). As Kearney notes:

It is not easy to read the Stranger. To cite Hamlet, “the face of another is like a book where men may read strange matters.” The Stranger occupies the threshold between the Other and the Foreigner. It is a
hinge that conceals and reveals, pointing outward and inward at the same time. Foreigner and Other are two faces of the Stranger, one turned toward us, the other turned away: the Foreigner is the Stranger we see; the Other is the Stranger we do not see. Two sides of the same visage—visible and invisible, inner and outer, immanent and transcendent. The stranger is double in that it is always similar and dissimilar in a play of unsettling ambivalence. (5)

I do not think it is an accident that Kearney cites Hamlet when describing the stranger. There is indeed a place of cultural production that is overtly, consistently, and aggressively trying to recreate and reproduce the paradoxical experience of being a stranger: the theatre, or that laboratory configuration of others acting as others and being watched by others acting as themselves, that threshold between the world we perceive and the world we imagine.  

The theatrical situation—in its most basic organization of players and audiences—is a closed system encounter between two groups of strangers, who, if not actual strangers to each other (for instance, the woman playing Gertrude might be my cousin), are strangers insofar as they inhabit different worlds with different expectations. Similarly, those players are playing characters who are also strangers to each other and to themselves. What the theatre brings to a meditation on the stranger is a topos that is at once cultural as well as psychological and perceptual:

12 For a comprehensive genealogy of the trope of the stranger, particularly its relevance to contemporary social thought and theory, see Vince Marotta’s *Theories of the Stranger: Debates on Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Cross-Cultural Encounters.*
how is the stranger constituted within the social dynamics of its performance conditions and how is the stranger constituted on the level of the character within the drama of the play? Most importantly, what and where are the confluences of these constitutions?

There are a few good reasons for locating answers to these questions within a specific historical moment and the plays that emerged within that moment. The first and most obvious reason is archival. This is the first large corpus of plays we have in modern English written for a purpose-built playhouse. London’s sixteenth century playhouses did what Western theatre arguably hadn’t done since the classical period: they produced an extraordinary amount of plays, playwrights, productions, and audiences in a very short amount of time. That is the definition of a laboratory: a specially designed room equipped for alchemy, for experimentation, for a variety of new Petri dish productions.13 The second reason is auxiliary to the first. Shakespeare’s plays are still performed today. We study Shakespeare and his moment because that moment was big and because we are still involved in recreating it. Something big that we keep reproducing is called culture: that ostensibly closed system of familiar things wherein that which is out of place most obviously, and most strangely appears. The early modern theatre is a ripe phenomenological arena to interrogate the experience and production of strangeness.14

13 Alan Read further notes in Theatre, Intimacy, & Engagement, “Laboratory, a word first used in England as Shakespeare was finishing The Tempest, had, after all, long described the labour of making things speak: labour, the work, of oratory, the eloquence of speech” (2).
14 In Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare, Jonathon Gil Harris addresses the recent vogue in early modern criticism for the strange: “Indeed, a recurrent strategy in scholarship on Renaissance
The third reason is the distinctive theatrical practices of the Elizabethan theatre that, as Robert Weimann has argued, are “marked by doubleness and contrariety” (3). Existing on the geographical threshold of the city of London and its Liberties as well as the European cultural threshold in its transition from oral and manuscript culture to print culture, Shakespeare’s stage was uniquely positioned as a “moment of differentiation and inclusion” between these binaries (Weimann 3). As Stephen Mullaney’s foundational text The Place of the Stage argues, the boundary between the official city of London and its Liberties, where the brothels, hospitals, lazar-houses, execution scaffolds, and prisons performed according to the logic of the threshold, variously contested and upheld the ideological authority of the city center. Mullaney observes, “Marginal spectacle was a complex variety of cultural performance, an equivocal way that premodern European cultures had of making sense of themselves, to themselves,” a way that “in all their complexity and ambivalence,” generated a “new forum for theatre” (31). This new forum for theatre created a new kind of dramaturgy—what Weimann has called the locus and platea of Elizabethan stage convention, where the locus signifies stability and decorum, realized theatrically in verisimilitude and linked to the space of writing (the author’s pen), and where the platea signifies flux and topsy-turvydom, realized theatrically in disguise, clowning, and disruptions of precise mimesis and linked to the place of performance (the actor’s voice) (181). The liminal, ambivalent play between the

material culture is to allege that its things are particularly worthy of attention because of their strangeness, at least to the palate of the modern literary and cultural historian” (2). While Harris’s critique is aimed at thing theory, I take his point. My own investigation of strangeness, therefore, is less interested in the theatre’s strange materials and more interested in putting pressure on how the experience of strangeness is generated.
contesting authorities of the city and its margins reflected the ambivalent play between the contesting authorities of textual and performative representations on the stage, giving the Elizabethan theatre, in Weimann’s culled phrase from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, a characteristic “bifold authority”—an authority that is remarkably similar to Kearney’s description of the stranger as “double in that it is always similar and dissimilar in a play of unsettling ambivalence” (5).

This dissertation is indebted to Mullaney's insightful interrogation of the threshold as physical space and performance condition for Shakespeare's stage as well as Weimann’s notion of a fundamental doubleness in Elizabethan stagecraft that likewise depends upon the logic of the limen. But where Mullaney was more concerned with the kinds of social identity and subjectivities that emerged in the spectacle of the threshold and Weimann with the stage’s ability to entertain a “double reference to the world-in-the-play and to playing-in-the-world,” I’m more interested in the image of the threshold itself and the opportunities it affords an epistemology of the stranger—that haunting, implicit figure that, I think, makes possible an articulation of Shakespeare’s stage as liminal (245). My aim throughout this thesis, then, is to perform the difficult task of reading how the stranger is figured on Shakespeare’s stage by locating it as the idea-image that conceals and reveals the double valence between a character’s identity and the operations of the theatre that construct it.

To understand the relationship between the stranger and admission, I’ll need to spend some time first surveying what admission means, as a concept and as an event. Admission has to do with what is allowed in and what is kept out. The OED
has a range of definitions for admission: “acceptance into or appointment to an office”; “acknowledgment of something as true or valid; concession of a fact; acceptance; approval”; “the process or fact of entering or being allowed to enter”; “access to an event, performance, exhibition.” Coming from the Latin *admissiōn-* which denotes being admitted to an interview or audience, the first uses of the Anglo-Norman word were in the fourteenth century in reference to being admitted into a benefice. By the sixteenth century, admission had come to refer to the action of approving a law. It was not until the eighteenth century when admission came to be associated with more secular entertainments such as concerts or performances. Coextensive with these definitions were definitions of admission that were more cognitive than spatial: acknowledgment, concession, approval. As early at the fifteenth century the word was used in this way, though often in conjunction with the word “acceptance” (OED). Acceptance, acknowledgment, access, concession, approval—admission denotes a host of psychological and material realities that share a simple supposition: that which is outside must be incorporated.

I’d like to posit this definition of admission that draws access and acknowledgment together: access to a given entity and acknowledgment that one uniquely belongs to it. As a transitive verb, admission can be performed by a subject and it can also take a direct object, making the interplay between subject and object productively ambiguous. A few examples: 1. I am admitted to a university: I am acknowledged by the university as having met a specific set of criteria and am given access to its resources. I am admitted into a performance: I am acknowledged by the theatre company as a paying audience member and am given access to the spectacle.
In both these cases, the self, as object, is being admitted by someone/thing else to something/place of which that someone/thing else is a part. 2. I admit I ate the last cookie. I admit I didn’t do the dishes. In these cases, the self, as subject, is admitting another version of the self, as object: I recognize the one-who-ate-the-last-cookie as myself, and I give that self access to the self-that-did-not-think-to-save-the-last-cookie-for-someone-else-and-ate-it. 3. I admit that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. I admit the excuse of time, of number and due course of things, which cannot in their huge and proper life be here presented. In these cases, the self is not the one being admitted, but instead the subject doing the admitting, while the implicit place of admission is the subject itself, or at least the horizon of what the subject knows, understands, or can imagine consciously: I acknowledge a fact and I allow it access to myself, to my consciousness where I hold all the other facts of the world.

The only other possible sentence construction would be a subject admitting an object that isn’t recognized as itself. But this isn’t really tenable, semantically speaking. For instance: The announcer admitted the musicians into the hall of fame. While the announcer may not be a musician herself and may have nothing to do with the committee that selects the list of nominees, she nonetheless represents the hall of fame and so functions as a constitutive part of it. What I want to emphasize in all of these examples is that admission must not only give a person, an idea, or a

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15 Whether or not remorse emerges from the two selves recognizing and partaking of one another is a question more for repentance and forgiveness than for admission, but it might explain why repentance and forgiveness seem to always require that the person admit that it was he in fact that did the act, not someone else.
truth *access* to a given person(s), institutions, or ideologies, it must do so in terms of acknowledging that person as representative or as part of itself.

While the word “admission” never occurs in Shakespeare’s plays, the word “admit” occurs 23 times and “admits” eight times. More often than not, “admit” connotes literal entrance or exit, as when Cleopatra responds to her servant’s announcement that there is a messenger from Caesar who has just arrived: “What, no more ceremony? See, my women,/Against the blown rose may they stop their nose/That kneel’d unto the buds. Admit him, sir” (3.13.38-40). Sometimes, however, the word “admit” gains traction and complexity through the course of a play. In *Henry V*, the chorus uses the word “admit” in the prologue and it does again in its penultimate speech when the play has nearly ended. The meaning of the word changes from a one-dimensional sense of “to let in”—“Admit me Chorus to this history” (Pro.32)—to the double sense of to let in and recognize: “Vouchsafe to those that have not read the story,/That I may prompt them: and of such as have,/I humbly pray them to admit the excuse/Of time, of numbers and due course of things,/Which cannot in their huge and proper life/Be here presented” (5.1-6). The chorus is saying, let in to your understanding of the story, dear audience, the due course of time and all the other things that cannot be represented here given theatrical constraints, but also recognize the excuse for their absence as theatrical constraint.

Perhaps the best example of admit and its dual sense of access and recognition comes from Hamlet’s famous exchange with Ophelia when he cleverly and cruelly admonishes her for returning his remembrances. Handing back the gifts
to Hamlet, Ophelia argues, “Their perfume lost,/Take these again, for to the noble mind/Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind” (3.1.98-100). Hamlet socratically replies, “Ha, ha! Are you honest” (3.1.102) and then “Are you fair?” (3.1.104) and then deduces “That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty” (3.1.106-107). Ophelia’s honesty should have nothing to do with her beauty in the same way the beauty of Hamlet’s gifts should not be diminished by the giver’s loss of integrity. “Admit” here rhetorically functions in the same way “allow” does, with a suggestion that beauty and honesty actually appear together all too often when they “should” not. Indeed, Ophelia responds, “Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?” (3.1.108-109). Hamlet agrees and contradicts his early sentiment: “Ay, truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once” (3.1.110-114). In Hamlet’s logic, beauty cannot recognize honesty as itself and so cannot give it access to itself—it can only turn it into its opposite, something bawdy and ugly. Honesty, however, can recognize beauty as itself, translating it “into its likeness.” Hamlet’s “paradox” is a paradox of admission: why can beauty not admit honesty while honesty can admit beauty? Hamlet is basically telling Ophelia, I used to love you because you were beautiful, not because you were honest, but beauty could never have given us full admission to each other. In fact, he treats her now as if she is a stranger, famously telling her to “Get thee to a nunn’ry” where she may, by being truly honest, access the beauty of God’s love and grace (3.1.120). Of course, the whole exchange is being
surreptitiously watched by Polonius and Claudius, creating a physical and spatial enactment of Hamlet’s philosophical musings on due access and right admission.

I think it’s significant that time bears out Hamlet’s paradoxical proof of honesty’s full admission and beauty’s failure. Fore grounding access and recognition as admission’s fundamental features reveals, I argue, an aporia, or internal paradox, that gets us closer to the threshold and the stranger in it. If recognition precedes access temporally, what is the logic of recognition that governs the stranger before that stranger is incorporated into the self or into the community? If recognition doesn’t precede access, then how did the stranger get assimilated in the first place?

To put the aporia more succinctly, how do I even recognize the stranger if they are not already a part of me? These questions of temporal ambiguity beg further questions of spatial ambiguity. If I am given access, does that not mean there is a place that I (or that which was admitted) am now in that I wasn’t in before? But if I am in a new place, where is the other place I used to be in? For instance, can I return to it, or has that place been converted completely into the place to which I have been absorbed? The ambiguities between when I became incorporated and where I came from before I was incorporated cannot be resolved because they depend upon a clear distinction between subject and object, a distinction admission as an event erases.

By posing these questions that interrogate the ambiguous temporal and spatial logic of admission, I aim to ultimately reveal that admission as a heuristic stakes itself along two major lines of inquiry: how beings enter new worlds and how beings become citizens of the worlds they are already in. The first is a metaphysical
inquiry, while the second is a political one. Importantly, both inquiries depend upon
the subject-object ambiguity that is constitutive of being a body in a “habitational
field,” or that field where you, as a body in space and time, experience the Other as
an object and yourself as a subject (Garner 100). I’d like to put Emmanuel Levinas’s
metaphysics in discussion with Jacques Derrida’s definition of politics to get a sense
of how the metaphysical and political being-body interact in terms of admission. As
Levinas observes, “In metaphysics a being is in relation with what it cannot absorb,
with what it cannot, in the etymological sense of the word, comprehend” (Totality
and Infinity 80). To comprehend comes from the Latin comprehendĕre, which
literally means “to seize.” At the heart of Levinas’s philosophy is an interrogation of
intersubjectivity, or a person’s encounter and connection with the Other. By
equating absorption with seizure, Levinas suggests that my being, metaphysically
speaking, is always in relation to this force that I cannot absorb or seize but that
simultaneously seems to seize me into being incorporated with it. While Levinas
claims to be developing a first philosophy, he is untraditionally neither metaphysical
nor logical in his claims, but rather ethical and phenomenological.16 Indeed,
Levinas’s most famous claim is that it is the “face to face” encounter that is at the
precognitive core of experience and that throughout conscious life remains its
“ultimate situation” (81).17

16 In his essay “Violence and metaphysics: an essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” Derrida
calls Levinas’s ethics “an Ethics of Ethics,” insofar as it is not trying to deduce moral rules but is more
interested in exploring the meaning and effects of intersubjectivity itself.
17 A useful distillation of Levinas’s unique metaphysics, I think, comes from the Stanford
Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “By metaphysics, Levinas means an event that repeats in the everyday,
but is not reducible to the existence conceived phenomenologically as the object of intentional
aiming or representation. This resistance to representation is due to the curious time structure of the
encounter called the face-to-face. It comes to pass in an instant that ‘interrupts’ intentional
Politically speaking, on the other hand, my being is schematized by my affiliations, which are more taxonomic than transcendent. The political organization of my being derives from the metaphysical speculations about it. As Derrida observes:

The concept of politics rarely announces itself without some sort of adherence of the State to the family, without what we call a schematic of filiation: stock, genus or species, sex (Geschlecht), blood, birth, nature, nation,—autochthonal or not, tellurian or not. This is once again the abysmal question of the physis, the question of being, the question of what appears in birth, in opening up, in nurturing or growing, in producing by being produced. Is that not life? (The Politics of Friendship viii)

Life, in other words, is a question of appearances described from the objective point of view of those watching others entering into a shared world, a world of creation and reproduction, a world of bodies. But the question of course is rhetorical. Without answering whether or not his list really is life, Derrida resolves, “That is how life is thought to reach recognition” (The Politics of Friendship viii). The implicit conclusion is that he—and perhaps no one—is able to answer what life is subjectively (or precognitively). What he does know is how life is comprehended: it

consciousness, in its alone or solipsistic quality. Thus, ‘meta-physical’ is approached in light of the phenomenology of consciousness and its ‘temporality’, but not in terms of a first or highest being or cause” (“Notes to Emanual Levinas”).

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is comprehended (or seized) through recognition. Derrida is careful enough not to overtly say who is doing the comprehension, leaving room for a Levinassian intersubjectivity that lies at the heart of life itself. It is the metaphysical recognition of life by the Other (whatever and wherever that Other is) that at once schematically places life into the world of species, family, State—that is, into politics.\textsuperscript{18}

If metaphysics is how beings belong to each other and politics is how they show up to one another, admission is the event that renders the two the same. So where does this leave the stranger, that being which is not fully incorporated but is somehow still recognizable? The figure of the stranger is the being on the threshold of belonging and appearing, pointing to what a given world cannot fully accept or see. The figure of the stranger “conceals and reveals, pointing outward and inward at the same time” (Kearney 5). That is, the figure of the stranger is the aporia in a poetics of admission, pointing to the temporal and spatial paradoxes that characterize the metaphysical and political dimensions of existing in a world already and always full of others.

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I began this introduction by situating this thesis’s interests and claims in relation to New Historicism, ultimately arguing that the implicit image of the network served to organize the school’s critical project. This gesture allowed me to situate my own recursive image—the stranger—in a similar, albeit explicit manner.

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\textsuperscript{18} And also into poetics, as Susan Stewart has argued in \textit{Poetry and the Fate of the Senses}, where “\textit{poiesis} as figuration relies on the senses of touching, seeing, and hearing that are central to the encounter with the presence of others, the encounter of recognition between persons” (3).
Given my project’s emphasis on the structure and nature of performance itself, I’d like to similarly position this thesis within the broader field of Shakespeare and performance studies. This thesis exists on a critical threshold of its own: stage-centered criticism and page-centered criticism, or performance studies and literary studies. The history of this divide began in the 1970s, with J.L. Styan’s *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* being one of the first articulations of the stage-centered approach. As James C. Bulman remarked in his introduction to the 1996 critical collection *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, “Ever since John Styan coined the phrase ‘the Shakespeare revolution’ twenty years ago to characterize the emergence of stage-centered criticism from traditional literary study, critics have wrestled with the idea that Shakespeare wrote *playscripts* whose potentials are best realized in performance” (1). Stage-centered scholarship sought to recreate the live history of the theatre via the imaginative implications found in the text; in this way, theatre history became as much the domain of literary analysis and English departments, as it did of performance analysis and Theatre departments. The problem, however, with this kind of reading of Shakespeare’s plays was a tendency to re-inscribe the authority of the author and the stability of the text onto the impossibly volatile, improvisatory, and ephemeral nature of actual performance. The “(unspoken) ideal (it was not, as yet, an ideology) of this stage-centered critical practice,” argues Barbara Hodgdon, “had to do with attempting to discern Shakespeare’s ‘intentions,’ with revealing the theatrical strategies traced out on the printed page” (2). By the 1980s, however, this tendency waned as stage-centered criticism began drawing more from multi-disciplinary
approaches to performance, specifically anthropology, sociology, and semiotics. Eventually stage-centered critics became performance critics and eventually performance criticism became a discipline itself—performance studies—spearheaded by heavyweights in the field such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan.

The emphasis on the limits of the text and the prominence of performance, however, didn’t proceed without its critics. Harry Berger, for instance, famously decried the privileging of the play-going experience to that of the readerly experience in *Imaginary Audition* (1989). By the 1990s, the publication of Bulman’s collection similarly served as a polemic against twenty years of what it still considered mostly essentializing stage-centered criticism. It would be another twenty years of developments in the field of Shakespeare and performance studies for an equally provocative, though less contentious, collection to stage its own retrospective. Hodgdon and Worthen’s *Blackwell Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* aimed more at cataloguing the variety and breadth of approaches to the relationship of Shakespeare and performance, two terms that had taken on a ubiquity of meaning by the turn of the twenty-first century. These approaches can be characterized by an investment in the interest of space and place, broadly conceived as “actual performance spaces, classroom theatres, or theatres of the mind’s eye” (2). The interest in Shakespeare and performance by the end of the twentieth century became an interest in the critical study of performance itself, what exactly it meant, and how to, as scholars, acknowledge performance as both an event and a subject of study with a real critical history.
The last decade or so of criticism in the field of Shakespeare and performance studies has been an elaboration of these strategies and heuristics, with texts that, I suggest, can be organized into four major veins: 1. studies on the historical and material conditions of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages and the kinds of cultures of play-going therein; 19 2. analyses of Shakespeare's plays in actual, live performances across cultures and across time; 20 3. studies of Shakespearean performances across different media; 21 4. more theoretically-inflected studies on the relationship of representation and performance; 22 and finally, anything by W.B. Worthen whose work on poetry and performance in the Shakespearean dramatic arts is foundational. 23 I situate my own work within the fourth category, insofar as I

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19 See, for example, Marketing the Bard: Shakespeare in Performance and Print 1660-1740, Don-John Dugas; This Wide and Universal Theatre: Shakespeare in Performance: Then and Now, David Bevington; Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance, eds. Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir; Playwright, Space, and Place in Early Modern Performance: Shakespeare and Company, Tim Fitzpatrick; Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance, Erika T. Lin; Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse, eds. Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper; and Unearthing Shakespeare: Embodied Performance and the Globe, Valerie Clayman Pye. While several of these titles also speak to contemporary performance cultures, they ground their observations within the material conditions of Shakespeare’s stage.


21 See, for example, Remaking Shakespeare: Performances Across Media, Genres and Cultures, eds. Pascale Aebischer et al and Shakespeare in Performance, eds. Eric C. Brown and Estelle Rivier. Both collections focus on adaptations of Shakespeare plays for the circus, cinema, musicals, documentary, and soap opera.

22 See Bridget Escolme’s Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self; Peter Holland’s Shakespeare, Memory and Performance; Douglas Bruster and Robert Weiman’s Shakespeare and the Power of Performance; and Barbara Hodgdon’s Shakespeare, Performance and the Archive. All of these works take a theoretical interest in the question of representation itself and the often invisible persistence of performance in and across time — archival, mnemonic, and characterological.

23 After Worthen’s canonical and highly influential Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance, he went on to publish several more tomes on the subject including, Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance, Drama: Between Poetry and Performance, and Shakespeare Performance Studies, his most recent synthesis of over a decade’s work examining the relationship between the dramatic performance and the literary play text. Worthen argues, “But a broader and more urgent Shakespeare Studies undertakes a different kind of inquiry, asking not how performance can interpret the text in light of its ways, means, and concerns, but how performance—in its ineluctably contemporary ways of using text, space, acting, audience, the entire ‘distribution of the sensible’—
am interested in how performance is structurally represented within the playscript. Inasmuch as my research is not of a materialist bent, I still do follow Ric Knowles’ model of the theatre in *Reading the Material Theatre*. The theatre for Knowles is “a triangular formation in which conditions of production, the performance text itself, and the conditions for its reception, operate mutually constitutive poles” (19). On the one hand there is the “performance text” composed of the script, *mise en scene*, design, actor’s bodies, and movement and gesture as they are reconstituted in text; on the other hand there are the “conditions of reception” such as the publicity/review discourse, front-of-house, auditorium, neighborhood, and the historical/cultural moment of reception; and finally there are the “conditions of production,” which include the actor, director, rehearsal process, stage and backstage architecture (19). My own performance analysis is located exclusively within the “performance text” angle of the triangle, whereby the actors (conditions of production) and audience members (conditions of reception) are imagined as occurring *within* the discourse of the play text itself.

While my approach to early modern plays is situated within this performance studies background, I am simultaneously guided by phenomenological theatre research and the insights of its major proponents such as Bruce Wilshire, Bert O. States, and Stanton B. Garner who focus on the plays themselves, usually as written works. My analysis of early modern plays draws from Garner’s dramatic text represents a genre of Shakespearean knowledge, framed in the distinctive idioms of the stage” (21). The epistemological question of the non-textual knowledge that performance produces is similarly at the center of my thesis’s concerns, although my approach does not seek answers in the analysis of live productions, the way Worthen’s does.
of “possible actuality” as well as Berger’s idea of “imaginary audition,” which
privileges how the reader, as opposed to the playgoer, follows the movements of
meaning and is able to imagine characters as “listening to and acting on themselves”
(75). Berger asks:

Why should I, poised at the crossroads between the generosity or
generativity of the text and the perceptual limits of the playgoer,
sacrifice the first pleasure for the second? Since there is much virtue
in If, why should I read a play as if I could only take in what I could
when actually watching it rather than pretending to watch a play that
contains everything I see in the text? (31)

Berger’s virtuous counterfactual argues that the process of reading a play is as much
a process of imagining its performance as going to the theatre; in fact it is a better
process because you can more adequately attend to the way the text contains
“conspicuous echoes, parallels, and similarities that encourage juxtapositions” (31).
I agree with Berger, although I’d like to rephrase his query for more
phenomenological purposes: “How can I, poised at the crossroads between the
generosity or generativity of the text and the perceptual limits of the playgoer,
understand the two in terms of each other?” By invoking the topos of stranger to
describe both the characters in the play texts as well as the perceptual limits of the
theatre, I will be able to reveal how the character doubles as himself and a
constitutive element of the play-going experience.
While my method is character analysis, I do not see this thesis as performing the kind of character analysis that governed Shakespeare studies up until the mid-twentieth century when the characters were “best understood as mimetic representation of imagined persons” (Yachnin and Slights 2-3). Nor do I do see my approach as an offshoot of poststructuralism, which, in its response to the thematic and linguistic analyses of the New Criticism, sought to reinvest the text with a notion of personhood, albeit persons that were socially determined and/or devoid of psychological interiority as we moderns know it. As Northrop Frye has observed, “In every play that Shakespeare wrote, the central character is always the theatre itself. Shakespeare is inexhaustibly curious about the ways in which people spend every moment of their lives, especially when they are with other people, throwing themselves into the dramatic roles that seem to be suggested by the group they are in” (Stratford Lecture 1). Frye argues that Shakespeare is interested in theatricality itself, or the ways in which we perform our lives for ourselves and for others. I agree with Frye, but as my poetics of admission suggests, I also think that the theatre is quite literally interested in what it means to show up as a person in the world, to be a character in a given world, insofar as that world stages the intersubjective phenomena of being. While my analysis of Shakespeare’s plays explores how the characters perform themselves—to other players, to the audience, and to themselves—I also examine how the conditions of performance perform them.

In summary, I understand my approach to be a hybrid between performance studies, which reads Shakespeare’s plays as best understood in terms of their performative value, and aesthetic phenomenology, which understands the work of
art as having the ability to take us somewhere else that is not entirely elsewhere but a “different kind of here” (States 4). As Bert O. States notes, a painting, for instance, “is a place of disclosure, not a place of reference. What is disclosed cannot be found elsewhere because it does not exist outside the painting” (4). Shakespeare’s plays disclose the figure of the stranger, the Other that we simultaneously know and do not know, that we let in but also keep out. This figure is not a direct reference to something that exists in the “real world”; rather, it uniquely emerges within the intersubjective, threshold space of the theatrical event, where questions of what is allowed in and what is kept out govern the production of illusion. That said, as Bruce Wilshire has observed, theatre is life-like as much as life is theatre-like. Theatre, as “an aesthetic detachment from daily living that reveals the ways we are involved in daily living,” cannot help but suggest that the ways we encounter the stranger in the “somewhere else” of the stage are not unlike the ways we encounter this figure in real life (Wilshire ix). I expect the metaphors of theatre as life and life as theatre to surface throughout this thesis in my discussion of the illusion that is the stranger, and I hope the reader will allow the tautology somewhat full play, in the hopes that what emerges is both an accident of what Lakoff and Johnson would call the “metaphors we live by” as well as a design that clarifies what it means to exist as subjects in a world with other people who experience us as objects. As Julia Reinhard Lupton articulates it, “Drama, moreover, is the medium that most insistently stages this contest between the one and the many: between the one life worth living and the many lives that circle, support, and subtend it” (2).
To clarify what I mean by a “hybrid approach,” I’d like to put into conversation Bridget Escolme, a stage-centered Shakespeare scholar and dramaturg, and Stanton B. Garner, a text-centered theatre phenomenologist, who, as I mentioned earlier, understands the dramatic text as blueprint for performance. Both, I think, conceive of the theatre’s place of disclosure as very similar, despite their different ways of getting there. In Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self, Escolme investigates how dramatic subjectivity is created during performance, focusing her study on the stage convention of direct address and clarifying her position as more philosophical than historical:

Though I do see talking to the audience as a key convention of Shakespeare’s theatre, I don’t want simply to take up the cry of the stage-centered critics of the 1970s and 1980s and argue that we can learn from Elizabethan and Jacobean staging conventions and conditions of production. I rather want to ask what it is possible for the human figure to mean when, pretending to be someone else, he or she addresses or acknowledges those who are not pretending—who are always, sometimes recalcitrantly, themselves. (5)

I think Escolme is asking a phenomenological question here. What “someone else” does the human enter into in the theatrical event? What is uniquely disclosed, and how is that disclosure essential to the production of illusion itself? Escolme contends that we have inherited a naturalistic theatre indebted to a Stanislavskian
method that does not allow for the possibility of a human to be produced within the theatrical situation itself. The naturalistic theatre of the nineteenth century redacted the actorly management of the audience’s engagement; an invisible fourth wall and a fully-formed capitalist industry sat its customers in a passive, voyeuristic black lit arena. Contemporary theatre critic Nicholas Ridout notes, “Much theatre history, including much influential work on Shakespeare’s theatre, views naturalism as the telos of modernizing developments in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, and thus views direct address as one set of rhetorical conventions that a modernising theatre seeks to eradicate” (71). Escolme describes this theatrical heritage as “ultimately an anti-theatrical set of assumptions about what theatre should be, as the dramatic subjectivities it produces are to be imagined by the actor as living outside the theatre in which they are produced” (13). An example of naturalistic theatre would be an actor preparing to play a serial killer and becoming the role most effectively by researching the psychology and motivations of real serial killers who live outside the live moment of theatrical illusion. As a result, illusion, the constitutive part of theatre as a medium, is denied access by the live characters that actually produce that illusion.

In an attempt to gain access to the kind of human created by live illusion, Escolme re-appropriates Stanislavski’s concept of objectives in actor training. An objective is what the actor asks from the person/thing whom he is playing: who/what am I actually trying to represent? What is my goal?24 Escolme introduces the idea of a “performance objective,” or what the actor asks of the theatrical

24 See also chapter seven, “Units and Objectives” in Constantin Stanislavski’s An Actor Prepares, pp. 111-126.
situation of which she is also part: how am I asking the audience to participate with me and my goal? Escolme reasons, “Shakespeare’s stage figures have another set of desires and interests, inseparable from those of the actor. They want the audience to listen to them, notice them, approve of their performance, ignore others on stage for their sake. The objectives of these figures are bound up with the fact that they know you’re there” (16). In order to be successful, the actor must manage the character she is being as well as manage the impression she is making on another group of people who are watching that character.

Escolme’s method sounds very similar to theatrical movements post-realism (Modernism, Expressionism, Futurism) that consistently tried to vitiate stage conventions that placed audiences outside the production of illusion, and arguably outside a capacity to know the manner in which they as subjects were complicit in the production of illusion. Antonin Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, for instance, imagined a theatre that could access the subconscious, non-linguistic instincts and emotions of its audiences by overwhelming and stunning them, with actors ritualistically dancing around the audience and with stage effects such as extremely loud sounds and lighting. Soon after the theatre of cruelty came Brecht’s epic theatre, which sought to hinder the audience from “simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious” (Willet 91). Both Artaud and Brecht wanted the audience to engage with theatricality itself, with theatre as capable of taking the audience somewhere else, but to a somewhere else that was the audience itself—in Artaud’s case the
subconscious mind and in Brecht’s case the critical mind. Both understood that by manipulating illusion—the formal language of the theatre—they could manipulate the audience. And both, like Escolme’s Shakespeare, were much more interested in the impressions their plays had on their audiences than with accurate mimetic representation.

Not surprisingly, this is the kind of theatre that Garner is most interested in as well: “Although the issues considered in this book are by no means exclusive to any single historical moment, Bodied Spaces focuses on drama produced between early 1950 (the year of Bertolt Brecht’s last plays and Beckett’s first) and 1993” (7). It’s almost as if Garner needs the twentieth century and its anti-naturalistic traditions of theatre praxis to be able to perform a phenomenology of the theatre. There is perhaps something about the kinds of illusions produced in this period that lend themselves to a rendering of the dramatic text as embodied space. By situating Escolme and Garner as scholars interested in the same place of theatrical disclosure, albeit in different historical periods, I aim to link that disclosure to my own poetics of admission. The human figure created from live illusion that Escolme wants to understand and the intersubjective body of dramatic space in which Garner is interested together speak to the stranger, or what I have been calling that paradoxically external element within an ostensibly closed system that reveals the aporia of what it means to arrive as a being in a world that precedes you. Both would agree, I think, that this stranger is located in the characterological dimension of the play, however differently they see that character manifest within the theatrical situation. This character—the most familiar, mimetic element in our
laboratory—enacts a performance objective that produces the illusion that nothing actually is strange through an active production of itself as a stranger.

It seems to me that what the intersubjective space of the theatre uniquely offers all of its participants, or at least tries very hard to, is an unmitigated phenomenological reduction: the double self manifest at the very point of contradiction. Kearney, a philosopher, calls this point of contradiction a threshold. Freud, a neurologist, calls it something more psychological—the uncanny. “It is because it is like us and yet not like us at all, hovering between the knowable and the unknowable,” Kearney notes, “that it strikes us as uncanny” (5). Mitchell, an art historian, points out that all these figurations of the border regions in perceptual thinking, no matter what discipline, can’t help but double themselves in an intrinsic recursion. My aim as a literary scholar is to situate this recursive, contradictory figure, this stranger, within the context of its play-textual emergence. Admission is my useful, if not lyrical, heuristic that will allow me to understand and articulate the early modern theatre as a space that examines the anxieties of being a character in a world governed by entrances and exits.

1.3 Character Analysis: Reading the Plays

The theatre as an art form stages the paradox between the life of belonging and the life of appearing, between the felt life and the watched life, figured in the very set up of player and audience. As I suggested earlier, the early modern theatre in particular was fascinated in the metaphysical and political possibilities of the human figure as created by live illusion. Shakespeare and his contemporaries consistently wrote
plays that manipulated and exposed the experiential duality of the theatrical situation. Indeed, as James L. Calderwood has remarked, “the dramatic art itself—its materials, its media of language and theater, its generic forms and conventions, its relationship to truth and the social order—is a dominant Shakespearean theme, perhaps his most abiding subject” (5). One need only think of the embedded magical worlds attended and watched over by characters within the already magical world of the play—Bohemia in A Winter’s Tale, the wooded Fairyland in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Prospero’s island in The Tempest; the embedded commentator on the play’s action, such as the Chorus in Henry V, the citizen-actor in Fletcher’s Knight of the Burning Pestle, or the Shakespearean wise fool who speaks outside of the confines of the play’s morality; the play-within-the-play device, masterfully rendered in Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and employed in several of Shakespeare’s plays including The Taming of the Shrew, Love’s Labour’s Lost, and Hamlet; or the shape-shifting and gender-bending antics of characters who use disguise to achieve their ends such as Viola in Twelfth Night, Rosalind in As You Like It, or the Duke in Measure for Measure, to name only a few. These self-conscious theatrical practices of the early modern stage consistently toyed with the implications of existing in a world that was both lived and performed, watched and experienced.

The five plays I have chosen to examine in this thesis are also exemplary of the early modern stage’s characteristic metatheatricality: Shakespeare’s Richard II (Chapter Two), The Merchant of Venice (Chapter Three), Troilus and Cressida (Chapter Four), and Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy which served as a prototype
for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Chapter Five). What each of these plays has in common is a character who in one way or another is not admitted into his play-reality, or in other words, is a stranger. Each chapter performs a close-reading of these characters (Richard II, Shylock, Thersites, and Hieronimo and Hamlet) in terms of one performative element of the theatre: the character, the actor, the audience, and the theatrical event as a whole, respectively. The link that I am developing between these characters as strangers on the threshold of their play realities and as ersatz elements of theatrical experience itself is not arbitrary. In all five examples, the character doubles as “himself” and as an essential element of theatrical figuration with the effect of highlighting an anxiety pertaining to admission, or to being let in and recognized. Significantly, the anxieties these characters stage are intrinsic to the anxieties that the theatre stages as medium, and they are different depending on the formal element.25

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25 Marotta makes an excellent observation regarding the gender-blind discussion of the stranger across disciplines: “Throughout my exploration of the stranger, there has been little work conducted on how the qualities of the stranger can be reconceptualised from a feminist perspective. Most of the work examined here assumes a gender-neutral and in some cases a gender-blind account of the stranger. Simmel, Park and Bauman make no attempt to distinguish the experience of women as strangers, whereas theories of the stranger have altogether ignored gender. It is not that women have not been studied as strangers or outsiders, rather what these studies adopt is an idea of the stranger that is already gender blind (Durbin, 2016; Prashizky and Remennick, 2012). In other words, they adopt a view of the ‘classical stranger’ that is already gendered. As a consequence, I will adopt the masculine pronoun when discussing the stranger, not because I want to exclude the experiences of women but to highlight the gender-blind approach adopted by various thinkers. There will be times however when the gendered dimension of the discourse on the stranger needs to be foregrounded to contest particular accounts of the stranger” (7).

It should be said that this thesis has also adopted a “gender neutral” account of the stranger, mostly because of its interest in the stranger as figural and spatial. That said, I do locate this stranger within a lived phenomenon—the embodied forms of characters on a stage/within the imagination—and I recognize that all of the characters I have chosen to examine are men. While I don’t intend to make the claim that early modern theatre situates the paradox of the stranger, metatheatrically and culturally, as a fundamentally masculine paradox, I don’t intend to make the opposite claim either—that this theatre is gender neutral in its claims to personhood that the stranger topos evokes. Arguably, there is something about the status of Richard’s, Shylock’s, Thersites’s, Hamlet’s, and Hieronimo’s masculinity that is, for lack of a better word, *strange*. I touch on this strangeness mostly
Chapter Two, “Disappearing Richard II: The Character Shadow,” argues that Shakespeare’s Richard II treats the performance element of character by presenting us with an iteration of an historical king who embodies the transhistorical nature of legend, but cannot dynamically function within his situation, ultimately tethered by the character he is and must become. Richard II, the perpetual character, is not given full recognition or access to his kingship—by his kinsmen and even by himself. In fact, he deposes himself, as if he already knows how fixed his fate really is, a uniquely Shakespearean take on the historical deposition. The character’s anxious question is usefully framed as am I permanent? Is the character the semiotic material from which the play’s language is derived, the interiority of the actor’s body, or the mimetic element par excellence? Most importantly, will this “character” last, or will its identity constantly change as new actors, new genres and new narratives take it up? My analysis of Richard as character, as a result, depends upon an interrogation of the shifting construction of identity within a framework of changeless fate.

Chapter Three, “Authenticating Shylock: The Actor’s Dilemma,” argues that the way The Merchant of Venice renders the production condition of actor is

in relation to Richard II and Thersites, but an argument could be made that all of these characters are far and near to their societies—and to their metatheatrical illusions—precisely insofar as they are far and near to the idea of how a man should be. Similarly, by choosing male characters as my case studies, I don’t mean to suggest that there are no female characters in the early modern canon of play texts who are strangers or who similarly function as constitutive elements of theatrical practice. Given that female characters were played by boys on the Elizabethan stage, the fundamental paradox of nearness and remoteness at the heart of the stranger relation was manifest explicitly in the very performance conditions. There are many, many avenues to take up in regards to the gendered nature of the stranger on the early modern stage. My hope is that the reader will entertain this thesis’s reading of the “classical stranger” on the early modern stage and what that reading accomplishes in terms of a poetics of admission, with an understanding that gendered readings are not only implicit but should be exploited by further research and interrogation that is not within the scope of this thesis’s project.
metatheatrically imagined through the character Shylock, the Jewish outsider who self-consciously performs his social identity while never authentically gaining access to the Christian system that others him. In fact, Shylock must perform a false contentedness to a forced conversion for the pleasure of his Christian audience. The actor’s anxious question can be articulated as *am I knowable?* Is the actor a distinct presence that is the conduit of a character, a presence subordinate to the presence of the illusion, or an image projected upon the fictive object? Maybe all of these? My analysis of Shylock as actor will depend upon a broader examination of the Judeo-Christian dialectic of acting for God the spectator’s pleasure and the theological and socioeconomic valences of authenticity that that dialectic imagines.

Chapter Four, “The Most Characteristic Thersites: Or, the Proper Audience” argues that *Troilus and Cressida*’s Thersites, a loud-mouthed, invective-spewing Statler and Waldorf figure, functions as a merciless *audience member* to the other characters’ transactions; within the text, then, there is an embedded condition of reception. Thersites, the tawdry audience member to the big boys of Troy, is never given access to the fictional world of legend or heroism. In fact, he repeatedly confines himself to the role of surly commentator. The audience is different every performance iteration, making it recognizable only on the level of function as opposed to composition. The audience as witness reproduces a history that keeps repeating if only because that history keeps being watched. How unique, then, is any audience given its function? The audience’s anxious question is *am I unique?* My analysis of Thersites as audience will depend upon an interrogation of observation as emulation and the paradoxical split consciousness that emulation produces.
Finally, Chapter Five, “Conclusions: Hieronimo’s and Hamlet’s Apocalypse: The Revelation of the Theatre” examines how Hamlet and Hieronimo function metatheatrically as the entire theatrical event, or that fundamental dynamic between two partners—player and audience—who engage in a playful relationship dependent upon an agreed upon illusion. After the nefarious murders of Hamlet’s father and Hieronimo’s son, both men become estranged from social life and its promises of eternity found in lineage. As famous early modern revenge tragedians consumed by infernal remembrances, each man appears to his respective courtly family as a madman, or the manifest singularity of an entire alternate universe. The madness of each is made coherent through the play-making practices of theatre itself: each man stages a play within the actual play for the purpose of taking revenge and revealing the truth. But their plays are only coherent to themselves, failing to both publically indict the perpetrators of the crimes or even get them to realize their guilt, precisely because the realness of the theatrical event being staged is not taken seriously by the audience. The anxious question that governs the articulation of the theatrical event as a whole, I argue, is *is this real?* Where chapters two, three and four make the case for Richard II, Shylock, and Thersites metatheatrically operating as the three main parts of theatrical figuration—the illusion of character, the actor performing that illusion, and the spectator watching and participating in it—this final chapter that concludes my poetics of admission situates Hamlet and Hieronimo, strangers on the threshold of social and physical existence, as encompassing all three at once in the private theatre of the mind—a
theatre that is the most real thing available to a subjective self and the furthest thing from real to an objective observer of that self.

Will I last? Who am I? Am I unique? Am I real? The character, the actor, the audience, and the theatrical event in these dramas each propose a fundamental paradox: each offers a material demonstration of the existential anxieties it elicits through a character who exists on the threshold of the play's world of belonging and appearances. My aim throughout this thesis is not to fix the emergence of the stranger onto specific early modern characters. Rather, it is to interrogate how the characterological dimension of the early modern theatre renders the experience of being admitted, perceptually and existentially, where the stranger emerges not in the failure to admit, but as the constitutive contradiction of admission itself.
2 Disappearing Richard II: The Character Shadow

“No all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.”

—Richard II (3.2.54-55)

If brevity is the soul of wit, then the opening to Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons is playfully on point: “Character has made a comeback” (Yachnin and Slights 1). Highlighting the marked lack of character criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century, Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights’s volume aims to recognize “the development in Shakespeare studies of what might be best termed a ‘new character criticism’” (1). But it’s not as if character ever left. What left was the idea of a unified, internally-consistent subject. The post-structuralist “case against the character” made cogent historical arguments against the possibility of an agential personhood existing in the early modern period as well as theoretical arguments against the possibility of that subject ever existing (3). The “comeback” of character criticism, then, refers to a renewed interest in asking what a character is exactly and why the study of Shakespeare’s plays has had such “a long and rich, if often vexed, relationship to the idea of character” (1). I’d like to think that the answers to these questions are simpler than they seem: because Shakespeare has a long, rich, and vexed relationship to the idea of character.

The word character comes from the Greek kharaktēr which means both a “stamp, impress, distinctive mark” as well as an “instrument for marking or graving,
An individual person who is a character is, by comparison, a distinctive sort or brand. In his essay “Personnage: History, Philology, Performance,” Andre Bourassa makes the case for a closer linkage of the English sense of *character* to the French *personnage*, which literally means both “mask” and “to lead and manage the mask,” from *personam agere* (to act, to manage) (85). Bourassa situates this bifold authority of *personnage* on the stage itself: “In fact, the relationship between the mask and its carrier was a subject of Hellenistic illustrations in which actors hold their mask in their hand and contemplate it as if to impregnate themselves with its character before wearing it” (86). In this etymology, the mask of personhood and the actor’s managing of that mask generate *character*.

Embedded in this three-part imagery of character—the ephemeral actor, her mask, and the enduring mark or impression generated from their communion—is a potential crisis of admission. A character depends on the productive admissibility of the mask to its carrier. Indeed, Bourassa’s metaphor is one of pregnancy: character is the invisible structure produced when the actor’s body is successfully impregnated by the mask. If character is the part of the image that lives on, then implicit in the metaphor linking character to embryo is a reproductive futurism, whereby the constant reproduction of the child represents the possible future iterations of the character. Another perhaps more helpful way to imagine character is as the third part generated between the friction, as opposed to union, of two organisms, where character is like the pearl that forms between an oyster’s mantle and a foreign body. Put this way, character is the pearl of performance. The pearl, of

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26 It should be noted that Shakespeare rarely uses the word character and when he does it mostly refers to the idea of an inscription, moral or otherwise (Bourassa 85).
course, will outlast the oyster. While the oyster and the parasite will ultimately die, it’s the inanimate pearl that will live on in the jewelry and pendants of well-dressed humans. Similarly, the character of a play—a Cleopatra, Falstaff, or Othello—will live on in cultural memory, to be taken up repeatedly in live performance, while the actor will retire after each performance along with the mask and the specific performance objectives she employed to become that character. Whether by means of metaphors of reproduction or production, union or intrusion, character is generated from the struggle to admit the persona into the person and vice versa, and when successful, becomes the most enduring part of the ephemeral theatrical event.

My purpose in breaking down the meaning of character into metaphors that depend upon a three-part arrangement is two-fold. The first is to suggest that character evokes the topos of the stranger, occupying the threshold between the mask of persona and the actor’s managing of that mask. The second reason I am interested in the metaphor of character as a three-part arrangement—actor, mask, and enduring entity produced from their relationship—is because I understand this metaphor and its execution within Shakespeare’s play *Richard II* to be critical in understanding the titular king’s seemingly deliberate fall from grace—not only in terms of his monarchical deposition, but also in terms of his more personal, and painful, loss of self. As Scott McMillin has observed, “The theatre is often taken to be the perfect place for Richard himself, on grounds that such a histrionic man belongs on a stage” (44). Indeed, in the famous deposition scene, Richard willingly gives up the crown in a theatrical display of grief and loss, a uniquely Shakespearean take on
Holinhed’s *Chronicles*. Where “Holinhed’s Richard is the mere victim of a treacherous ambush,” Shakespeare’s Richard “seems to betray himself by his capitulation to Bolingbroke” (Dawson and Yachnin 46). As McMillin continues, under the surface of this performative betrayal of oneself “is a desire to unravel the kingly role and to lose the broad audience of the nation in favor of the personal audience of oneself” (43). An existential desire, in other words, to understand his own character.

As Ernst Kantorowicz’s canonical text on medieval political theology *The King’s Two Bodies* has argued, “*The Tragedy of Richard II* is the tragedy of the King’s Two Bodies” (26) whereby the play continuously stages “the same cascading: from divine kingship to kingship’s ‘Name,’ and from the name to the naked misery of man” (27). The split that Richard allows himself to articulate between these two bodies—the ephemeral human on the one hand and the enduring, divine body politic on the other—happens only when he begins to take a much greater interest in his own inwardness, or the part of him that really is invisible. Arguably, what is truly invisible and permanent within Richard is not his kingship, which can be reduced to a name and exchanged by means of a material crown, but loss itself. Indeed, when Richard does hand over the crown to Bolingbroke, he tells him, “I must nothing be” (4.1.202) and “Now mark me how I will undo myself” (4.1.203). The metonymies Richard makes between hiddenness, loss, nothing, and undoing generate an empty, negative space that is paradoxically fully animate and overflowing with poetic expression. As James Winny has famously argued and in contradiction to Kantorowicz’s claims that Richard’s fall into nothingness is a
tragedy, “This consciousness is not tragic, for Richard finds in being nobody a
distinction which compensates for his ignominious loss of majesty” (58).

I’d like to think that something more complicated is happening with
Richard’s desire to be a nobody than a compensatory refusal to accept the loss of
divine kingship and an opportunistic chance to be lionized as a Poet King.

Contemporary critical scholarship on the play has consistently been interested in
the possibilities Richard’s “strange meditation on nothingness” affords, both
theatrically and metaphysically (McMillin 45). As Love observes, “Like Richard,
scholars of the play have been drawn to the productive and powerful possibilities of
negative space; and like Richard, they have filled this space—down to its most
impenetrable depths—with fantasies that animate these possibilities” (270). I’m not
interested, necessarily, in filling this negative space with theoretical possibilities;
rather, I’m interested in understanding the logic behind the theatrical construction
of an absence, a logic with which the play is itself obsessed, and which, I think,
reveals how a theatrical character is generated.

What I want to suggest throughout the rest of this chapter is a way of reading
absence—variously articulated within the play as nothingness, shadowed void, or
undoing—that takes into account Richard’s status as a stranger within his play
reality as well as his self-conscious embodiment of one of the chief components of
dramatic practice: being a character. Richard is a stranger on two counts: first, his
ostensibly queer, effeminate personality that others him to the heterotemporal
orders of monarchical succession; second, his very real estrangement from the court
that reaches its final expression in his deposition and regicide. Richard begins the

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play as a strange king and ends the play as a completely estranged one. Perhaps due to his liminality, Richard is uniquely interested in the sources of identity that are invisible, that lie beyond representation. He is fascinated in the unperceivable, yet enduring sense of character that seems to emerge when the self admits the mask in the process of performance.

The next three sections will examine the three characters of Richard as I understand them—the stranger, the divine king, and the transcendent poet. The character of the stranger emerges when Richard wears the mask of kingship. In section one, I argue that the figure of the shadow is used to describe Richard’s characterization as a liminal stranger, who is both near and far from his society. I locate Richard’s absence as it is actually figured in the play and in scholarship on the play: over and over again, Richard is figured as a shadow. His overt theatricality is described in the play as shadow-like, and his latent homosexuality is figured by queer scholars as shadowy. My own critical move in this section is to put these two shadows in conversation by linking them to their shared critical foundation: time. Richard is a stranger insofar as he is out of time and fits more appropriately, as Judith Brown has argued, into queer aesthetics. The character that emerges when Richard wears the persona, or mask, of king is a stranger, a liminal shadowy presence unable to effectively govern because he is out of time with the orders that constitute that governance.

The second section looks at the character of the divine king. The play is about a struggle for power between Richard and Bolingbroke, a struggle, essentially, to inherit the character of divine king. While wearing the mask of king, Richard
becomes aware that the divine king is not the permanent entity created from the friction between his person and his kingly persona. The divine king precedes him, and as such, belongs more to history than to performance. Instead, the entity that emerges from this friction, as I argued in section one, is figured as a strange “nothing” within the play. In this section, then, I consider how the figure of a shadow that is out of time is actually generated within the imagery of the play to undo Richard the divine king. To do so, I suggest that we read King Richard’s nothingness in cosmographical terms, where Richard’s shadowed absence is like an eclipse. The historical King Richard II character’s crisis of admission into the future of his divine kingship is figured as occlusion within Shakespeare’s play, as a shift of positions between himself, the usurper Bolingbroke, and England caught in between. He is not really gone, he just appears to be gone. Indeed, his regicide will haunt all the future Henry’s. The purpose of this section is to provide a model—that I think the play’s meteorological imagery and interest in prophesy and forecasting explicitly elicits—for how Richard the historical king becomes undone, or, more accurately, is rendered a strange shadow.

Section three, then, examines the character of the Poet King, or the Richard who seems to be able to lyricize his own fall before it happens. Richard eventually becomes aware that the character—the permanent, invisible entity—that has actually emerged from wearing the mask of the king is ultimately a nothing and a nobody. In a remarkably metatheatrical move, Richard takes on the character of nothingness as a mask that he will wear as the persona he must become. The friction between Richard and the mask of nothingness produces lyric itself, the Poet King, or
that permanent entity that transcends the limits of tragedy and the prescriptions of history. The question, I think, that has pervaded scholarship on Richard II is why Richard seems to undo himself, as if it is part of some artistic, or even spiritual project of decreation, as opposed to simply the directives of fortune. Richard is constantly struggling against a divine cosmology and a classical model of tragedy that would each see him characterized as a fallen king. He responds by taking on this fallenness—again, figured in the play as void or nothingness—not as the character he must become, but as the mask he will wear to become the character he perhaps more truly is: an artist. Both poet and performance artist, Richard turns the horrors of fate and tragedy into something more beautiful than they otherwise would be. In all these ways, Richard of Bordeaux metatheatrically doubles as a character who must play a character.

The first character of Richard’s comes from tragedy, the second comes from history, and the third from art, or more specifically the uniquely Shakespearean art of poetry as theatre. At this point, I understand there will be a few metaphorical balls in the air: the metaphor of the shadow used to describe Richard’s characterization as a stranger who is out of time; the metaphor of the eclipse used to describe both the generation of this shadow in cosmographical, divine terms and how that generation disappears the character of divine king; and finally, the implicit metaphor of the theatre as world, whereby the Poet King theatrically and prophetically enacts his own kingly undoing, knowing that the poetry of that undoing will turn the impermanence of his two bodies into something truly permanent, truly able to be perceived by those who have not recognized or been
able to see him.

All three characterizations taken together, Richard’s “character” is the permanent entity produced between the mask of persona—the shadowed void of the fallen king—and the unique wearing of that mask in the world of the theatre: the Poet King. This chapter ultimately argues that the hysterical, theatrical Poet King is the parallax view of a deliberate, thoughtful character struggling through the recognition of his own paradoxical, indeed threshold existence within the body of the actor and within the cipher of time. What emerges in this struggle is an existential crisis of admission, where Richard’s character appears—to him, to others, and to us—as a nothing, a void. In order to admit that void, Richard takes it on as the character he must be. What appears is the permanent something of Shakespeare’s poetry; indeed, unlike any other play in the Shakespearean canon, Richard II is rendered entirely in verse, most of which comes out of Richard’s mouth.

Character, as I have and will be conceiving it throughout this chapter, is the permanent entity produced between the mask of persona that an actor must wear and the unique wearing of that persona in the world. If the terms by which Richard defines his sense of character keep shifting, I’d like to think it’s because that is exactly Richard’s struggle—trying to define who exactly he is when who he is simultaneously textual, performative, and a product of memory. If character is making a comeback, then King Richard II, the man who never really seemed to leave the Plantagenet throne, whose shadow haunted the succeeding Henry, might be the perfect place to understand the vexed and vexing relationship of the very idea of character and why it appears to be so inadmissible, on the stage and in our criticism.
This chapter argues that Richard’s anxiety about his own impermanence is ultimately a meditation on what it is to be a character, to dwell on the threshold between the visible and invisible and in that dwelling find a paradoxical something: a nothingness. My interest throughout this chapter will be in how Richard, the queer outsider, is figured as a strange shadow within the context of the play world as well as within the situation of the theatre as a character, and how that tension generates the first anxiety of admission this thesis is staging: what it means to be a permanent self subject to the vicissitudes of time and material disappearance.

2.1 Recognizing Richard: The Shadow

Who is Richard II? Perhaps the moment in the play that best illustrates Richard’s vexed relationship with his own subjectivity is his dialogue with the mirror in the deposition scene. Not only do Bolingbroke and Northumberland want Richard to give up his crown willingly and publically, but they also want him to read “These accusations and these grievous crimes/Committed by your person and your followers/Against the state and profit of this land” (4.1.221-224). Richard cannot do it. Rather than ravel out his “weaved-up follies,” he ravels out his weaved up sorrows, his watery dissolution against the rising and usurping “sun of Bolingbroke” (4.1.260). He then asks for a mirror, “That it may show me what a face I have/Since it is bankrupt of his majesty” (4.1.262-266). They give him the glass, and like an ancient Greek actor on the proscenium, Richard holds the mirror to his face and imbues himself with his kingly character:
Give me that glass and therein I will read.

No deeper wrinkles yet? Hath sorrow struck

So many blows upon this face of mine

And made no deeper wounds? Oh flattering glass,

Like to my followers in prosperity

Thou dost beguile me. Was this face the face

That every day under his household roof

Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face

That like the sun did make beholders wink?

Is this the face which faced so many follies,

That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?

A brittle glory shineth in this face.

As brittle as the glory is the face,

[Smashes the glass]

For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.

Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport,

How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face. (4.1.275-290)

The face Richard sees in the mirror reveals the mask he has been wearing—the persona of the king. In this way, the mirror acts an objective reflection of that which he has been subjectively wearing for others. Richard ostensibly wants to know if the face he sees in the mirror really is the mask of the king, though he never fully
describes that face as he sees it reflected. Instead, he models a method of Socratic hermeneutics in which each successive question seems to interpret the previous question as an answer in and of itself. The purpose of this method is to create a consistency of belief by unearthing inconsistencies through the process of dialectic examination. The dialectical struggle here is between the person and the persona: the earthly man of wrinkles and sorrow and the divine mask of the king. Richard’s performative conversation with the mirror-as-reflected-mask, however, is more hysterical than calmly dialectical—indeed, he fitfully smashes the mirror, as if its reflective answers only perpetuate a circular reasoning about his identity that he has been trying to, quite literally, break through. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, “The basic problem of the drama is that of the hystericization of a king, a process whereby a king loses the second, sublime body which makes him a king and is confronted with the void of his subjectivity outside the symbolic mandate-title ‘king’” (32). The mirror, in its revelation of the ephemeral human king with no “deeper wrinkles yet” hidden behind the mask of the divine king “that like the sun did make beholders wink,” shows Richard the void of his subjectivity—a void that

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27 Herbert Grabes has argued in The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance that between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the mirror metaphor shifted from a divine ideal to a more human consciousness. Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet has further ascribed this shift to the decline in investing mirrors with magical properties, a decline that reflected a more modern sense of subjectivity (The Mirror: A History). That said, Robert M. Schuler’s “Magic Mirrors in Richard II” makes a strong case for Richard’s explicitly magical use of the mirror in this scene. While the mirror reveals Richard’s subjectivity, and specifically his “anguished and courageous determination to confront his own moral being, his own demons,” it also serves as “a literal looking glass wielded ritualistically,” allowing Richard “to simulate Elizabethan mirror magic in a last effort to identify and indict Bolingbroke as demonic thief” (Schuler 152). See also Amy Cook’s analysis of Hamlet’s “mirror up to nature” for a cognitive reading of how we continue to make sense of mirrors across historical periods despite vastly different material referents (“Mirror | Mirror; Mirror | rorriM” in Shakespearean Neuroplay, pp. 43-63).
he parses out by means of logical deductions that only bring him closer and closer to his own destruction.

Bolingbroke certainly seems to think that the mirror shows Richard the void of his subjectivity. He responds to Richard’s dialectic on the form and undoing of his face with an important image: “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed/The shadow of your face” (4.1.291-292). In an amused retort, Richard replies, “Say that again./The shadow of my sorrow. Ha, let’s see” (4.1.291-292). The Socratic game is on. Richard has managed to pull Bolingbroke into his hyperbolic ruminations of self (a must, given how little the mirror seemed to play along), and Bolingbroke manages to provide a poetic, albeit—and in true Bolingbroke fashion—extremely reasonable explanation for Richard’s crisis of character. A shadow has no material reality. It is the area a light source cannot reach due to the obstruction of an object; whatever image is made is due to the perceptual absence of light rather than an existing, material form. Moreover, a shadow—specifically in Renaissance parlance—is also another word for “actor.” Bolingbroke seems to be telling Richard that the acting out of his sorrow quite literally shattered the reflected image of his face.

The double play on shadow here as both an actor and a delusive semblance allows Bolingbroke to make an implicit critique of Richard’s reign: as a vain, melodramatic king, he could never project an external image to the people that would garner respect and loyalty. Indeed, the historical king and Shakespeare’s king are both characterized by their courtliness and their expenditures on jewelry,

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28 Perhaps Puck’s epilogue in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the most famous Shakespearean example of *shadow* meaning actor: “If we shadows have offended/Think but this, and all is mended,/That you have but slumb’red here/While these visions did appear” (5.1.423).
textiles, paintings, and art. As Brown has noted, Richard of Bordeaux “is defined by his tastes in drink, in men, in gay apparel, in gorgeous surroundings, in jewels, in pretty words. Indeed, he is the superficial king, the king of glam” (287). To Bolingbroke, Richard’s existential dialog with himself is just another show.

But this glam king isn’t buying Bolingbroke’s interpretation, and he’s certainly not one to be deposed metaphysically as well as physically. “Tis very true,” he retorts, “my grief lies all within/And these external manners of laments/Are merely shadows to the unseen grief/That swells with silence in the tortured soul./There lies the substance” (4.1.294-298). Richard takes Bolingbroke’s shadow-void and fills it with substances unseen. It’s as if he is saying to Bolingbroke, I am not the vain, superficial king of nothingness you seem to think I am. Rather, I am a king of absolute substance, affective and aesthetic substance that you cannot see. Shadows, or “these external manners of laments,” are merely the artifacts of performance that have attempted—and failed—to fully impersonate the substance that “swells with silence” from within. The playful irony, of course, is that Richard has been performing his grief throughout the entire exchange. The King’s retort makes Bolingbroke’s implicitly antitheatrical critique of Richard explicit. Where Bolingbroke saw Richard’s histrionic performance as ruinous of his kingly character, Richard generalizes Bolingbroke’s critique to a critique of the theatre more broadly:

29 For one of the most comprehensive treatments of the historical King Richard II, see Nigel Saul’s Richard II. Saul notes that much of Richard’s interest in the arts was propagandistic: “If he was to reestablish his authority and power, Richard needed not only to build up support and win friends, but also do something more: to convince his subjects that he was mightier than he was. Around 1395 Richard commissioned a massive portrait of himself for Westminster Abbey, in which he was shown in an angelic and heavenly company” (238).
there is a difference between the inner, silent character and the performance strategies employed to make that character speak.

What have emerged in Richard’s performance are Platonic shadows: visible nothings that attempt but fail to represent real, invisible somethings. Yet, the question remains unanswered. Who is Richard? What invisible something does the mirror-reflected-as-mask beget in Richard now that the kingly identity is gone and the human one is drowning in its own tears? Bolingbroke asks again, “Are you contented to resign the crown?” (4.1.200). Richard responds with a perplexing staccato of double negatives that paradoxically—and poetically—render him a positive nothing: “Aye—no. No—aye, for I must nothing be,/Therefore no ‘no’, for I resign to thee” (4.1.199-200). Without the crown, Richard is a nothing, although the connotation is more existentially serious than a decline in status. As Brown argues,

Richard forgoes his place in history so that he may speak without the constrictions of identity: “Ay, no; no, ay: for I must nothing be,/Therefore no, no, for I resign to thee./Now mark me how I will undo myself” (4.1.200-202). To enter Richard II is to enter negative space, a queer cavity of undoing. Unkinged, undeced, unmanned, undone, Richard floats free of history, in all its baseness, and into the more fitting sovereignty of queer aesthetics. (288)

Brown is referring to a performance history that has overtly rendered Richard II homosexual as well as a contemporary direction within queer studies that examines
the relationship between desire and historical time. As Goran Stanivukovic has observed, “To say that homoeroticism resonates through Richard II, an early chronicle play, is also not to say anything new” (59). It was the twentieth century stage, specifically, that saw the queering of King Richard II. In their introduction to the Oxford edition of the play, Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin provide a comprehensive summary of the play’s productions from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. They reveal how the emphasis of the productions over the years consistently moved away from contemporary political analogies and toward the psychological dynamics of the characters: “Richard II locates its politics in the minds and bodies of the men that make that politics, and it reminds us again and again of the symbols and rituals that tend to bind the protagonists to courses of action that they would be better to avoid” (89). By the end of the twentieth-century, the psychology of the main character and the courses of action that he would be better to avoid were becoming more and more overtly queer. In 1951, Michael Redgrave performed Richard as a homosexual; in 1995, a woman, Fiona Shaw, played the poet king. Most recently, David Tennant played Richard II in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 production, in which Tennant passionately kisses his adored Aumerle in the scene just before his deposition. For a king “who so often in the past had been described as effeminate,” productions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries used the language and insights of queer identity politics to make explicit what arguably went without saying in earlier productions (Dawson 86).
When Brown says that Richard “floats free of history” and into “queer aesthetics,” however, she is saying something more complicated than that Richard is an aesthete with a penchant for male flatterers. She is saying there is something about Richard’s undoing that is less about the prescriptions of historical time and more about the way time renders identity itself, and specifically sexual identity.

Historicist methodology, with its emphasis on difference in sexual identity across time, privileges what Medhavi Menon has called “a compulsory heterotemporality in which chronology determines identity” (Unhistorical Shakespeare 1). Queer time or what Menon terms “homohistory,” aims to rethink two assumptions on queerness and queer theory: “The first is the idea that queerness has a historical start date. The second is that queerness is a synonym for embodied homosexuality” (2).\(^30\) Indeed, Menon adopts the image of the shadow to articulate the rhetorical expression of queerness in early modernity: “The shadowy nature of Renaissance (homo)sexuality, and its potentially corrupting influence, is distinctly reflected, I argue, by the textual use of an in-distinguishable metonymy, in which it is almost impossible to tell one trope and one sexuality from the partner that ‘[lies] alongside’ it” (Taint of Metonymy 660). Menon points out, for instance, that Richard’s crimes cannot be named and therefore remain “shadowy” precisely because they are sodomitical and outside the classificatory realm of language.

\(^30\) It is extremely difficult to find homosexuality in the early modern period given that the modern categories we have for it are incommensurable with the way it appeared and was defined. Sodomy, for instance, was used to denote a whole range of deviant acts from sexual debauchery to atheism. As Alan Bray has famously noted, homosexuality was defined relationally, “as part of a universal potential for disorder which lay alongside an equally universal order. It was part, in a word, of its shadow” (26).
There is something about the image of the shadow, I think, that is able to both describe the parts of Richard that are ineluctably invisible and to reveal the manner in which these invisible aspects actually show up. In undoing himself, Richard substantiates the void, a void which is made up of crimes which are never fully named in the play and, significantly, cannot be named by Richard himself. These crimes constitute a wrongness that is linked to queerness insofar as they reveal, in Brown’s terms, an “aesthetic” of undoing time itself, and in that undoing a generation of a negative space, which is, essentially, another name for a shadow.

In order to understand the invisible, shadowy nature of Richard’s undoing, I think it’s important to understand his manifest crimes, or the crimes with which he is actually accused. What is Richard’s error, or the “course of action” that conditions his fall? He manages the affairs of the state poorly, confiscating Bolingbroke’s rightful lands to fund an Irish war. Base flatterers who do not have the interests of the people in mind lead him. And his timing is generally poor: he prematurely ends a dual between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in order to ostensibly save both their lives, yet ultimately kills each man’s honour; and he arrives in Wales too late to gather and lead an army. They leave the day before he gets there, distrustful and weary.

As Northrop Frye has observed, “We are reminded here, as so often in Shakespeare, that successful action and successful timing are much the same thing” (65). It would seem the king’s incompetence hinges less on deliberate mismanagement and more on a “mental schedule” that is “so different from those of

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31 The play, for instance, never mentions or alludes to the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381.
32 Of course Richard’s motivations aren’t about saving both their lives. Mowbray is responsible for the Duke of Gloucester’s murder, a murder Bolingbroke knows Richard sanctioned.
people who advance one step at a time, like Bolingbroke” (Frye 65). Indeed, as the gardener’s famous indictment of Richard in Act III argues, the king was wasteful and idle and failed to trim and dress the garden that was England: “Oh what a pity is it/That he had not so trimmed and dressed his land/As we this garden!” (3.4.55-57). Arguably, the king was wasteful and idle because he did not manage time or his own desires in a way that becomes a king, namely one step at a time, pruning each “superfluous branch,” or enemy, one at a time (3.4.63). Interestingly, Frye also uses the imagery of shadows to describe this mental schedule that is so antithetical to chronological progression and its analog husbandry: “Bolingbroke lives in a world of substance and shadow: power is substantial to him, and Richard with his mirror has retreated to a world of shadows” (67).

Richard’s substance-less world of shadows evokes a temporal alterity that renders him idle and ultimately invisible. It is this alterity that conditions his strangeness, his queerness. Richard, the subjective person struggling to wear the objective mask of the king’s persona, floats free of history and hovers like the stranger on the threshold of being and becoming.

2.2 Desiring Access: The Divine King is Eclipsed

Given how readily the image of the shadow is employed by both Shakespeare and literary critics to describe King Richard’s otherness and his dissolution, I’d like to spend some more time looking at it as an act of figuration itself. What does the image of the shadow afford, and what kinds of triangular figurations produce it? A shadow is literally the darkness created from the interception of light by another
object (OED). Its existence is perceptual insofar as it is not a material reality, but an effect created by the relationship between three material things: a light source, an object upon which that light source is directed, and an object blocking the direct ray of the light source. The object upon which the light source is directed is darkened—that is, it becomes a shadow—as that light source is blocked.

One classic model of this triangular relationship that figures the shadow is a planetary eclipse. An eclipse is produced when one celestial body, for example the moon, obscures the light of another, namely the sun, generating a perceptual dark void. Celestial bodies, those perfect metronomes of time and order, are arguably the ideal template to think through the divine king Richard’s temporal alterity and shadowy existence.\textsuperscript{33} Richard II’s character emerges as a liminal stranger, I have

\textsuperscript{33} As Heninger has famously noted in his canonical text \textit{Cosmographical Glass: Renaissance Diagrams of the Universe}, “In the Renaissance the true cause of eclipses was generally known, and technical discussions explaining the mechanics of how one celestial body obscured the Sun’s light from another were easily available in such popular textbooks of astronomy as Sacroboso’s \textit{De sphaera} and Robert Recorde’s \textit{Castle of Knowledge}” (145). There is perhaps a good argument to be made regarding Richard II’s figurative rehearsal of the political upheavals taking place at the turn of the seventeenth century as Europe shifted from geocentrism to heliocentrism; although, the integrity of the eclipse figuration holds whether in a geocentric or a heliocentric universe. The seeming impossibility of Richard being fully extinguished as king—both in his own eyes and in Bolingbroke’s who knows he must “make a voyage to the Holy Land,/To wash this blood off from my guilty hand” (5.6.49-50)—might have as much to do with the instability of the divine body politic as it does to a hidden allegorical argument that the sun is the centre of the universe. It is an intriguing topic of debate within Shakespeare studies whether or not, or perhaps how much, Shakespeare accepted the heliocentric world view and/or alluded to it in his plays and poetry. As scientific historian Robert S. Westman has noted in \textit{The Astronomer’s Role in the Sixteenth Century: A Preliminary Study}, “Between 1543 and 1600, I can find no more than ten thinkers who choose to adopt the main claims of the heliocentric theory” (106); “These include: Thomas Digges and Thomas Hariot in England; Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei in Italy; Diego de Zuniga in Spain; Simon Stevin in the Low Countries; and, in Germany, the largest group—Georg Joachim Rheticus, Michael Maestlin, Christopher Rothmann, and Johannes Kepler” (136). Consequently, much debate about Shakespeare’s invocation of heliocentrism has revolved around his knowledge of Digges’ work. Peter Usher, for instance, is convinced that Shakespeare knew of and experimented with the perspective glass or perspective trunk: “These devices were in use at least by 1570, as reported by John Dee in that year and by Leonard and Thomas Digges in 1571 in Pantometria. In the Preface, Thomas Digges refers to his father’s ‘continual’ use of ‘proportional Glasses.’ It should be significant that Leonard Digges was the grandfather of another Leonard Digges, one of four writers who contributed dedicatory poems to Shakespeare’s Folio of 1623” (135). Ultimately, Usher argues, “Shakespeare showed great sensitivity
been arguing, because he is out of time. As Brown elaborates, "Richard is removed, one might say, from his lineage and from justice bound up in the enforcement of royal power. Instead, he finds his home in the disjuncture of time, the removal from one moment in time—the time of history—and into an unboundaried, shattered time, a time that plays across history and into the willing ears of those who would hear differently" (290). Indeed, the imagery of Shakespeare’s play overwhelming links this unboundaried, shattered time to planetary spheres and the watery transmutations that ensue when they disturb each other’s orbits. The question is, why is Richard out of time? This section argues he is out of time because he is being eclipsed by Bolingbroke.34

34 My impulse to consider the figuration of eclipse as it relates to Richard’s undoing draws from some significant astrometeorological metaphors within the play. Astrological predictions and readings of the heavens were intimately linked with the study of meteorology in the medieval and early modern periods. As Craig Martin has pointed out in Renaissance Meteorology: Pomponazzi to Descartes, "Renaissance forecasts were based on the reading of signs. These signs could be celestial in the case of astrometeorology, or terrestrial, based on, for example, the behavior of animals or the motions of the winds. Weather forecasting from signs, both astrometeorological and terrestrial, has its roots in antiquity" (11). We see an astrological prediction based on a combined astrometeorological and terrestrial forecast in Act II of the play. The Welsh captain predicts Richard II’s fall by witnessing meteors moving out of position: "’Tis thought the King is dead. We will not stay./The bay trees in our country are all withered,/And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven" (2.4.7-9). In the early modern period, meteors were thought to exist in the sublunary realm; as such, the study of meteors was a terrestrial study. By moving into the heavens, the Welshman’s meteors reflect the growing changes taking place in Renaissance cosmology. As Patrick J. Boner points out in Change and Continuity in Early Modern Cosmology, models of the universe were rapidly changing while still trying to stay continuous with their classical roots: "Aristotelian meteorology was deployed by astronomers to make sense of celestial mutability. By blurring the distinction between the celestial and terrestrial realms, they extended earthly physical processes into the heavens to explain comets and new stars" (3). The Welshman’s extension of earthly physical processes into the heavens is just one example in the play of how meteorological signs foretell cosmic truths: the divine king Richard will fall.

Perhaps even more significant than the Welshman’s augury is the amount of rain, water, cloud, and snow imagery in Shakespeare’s play and how that imagery is linked to Richard’s divine undoing. The transmutations of dew, rain, and snow occur within the Aristotelian middle region of the air—the same region in which comets and meteors exist—and are motivated by the exhalations and vapors of the sun’s thermal energy (Grant 610). Weather, and specifically the element of water, is throughout the play metaphorically linked to the dissolution of the king—both the watery transmutation of his power and the teary grief associated with it. Richard compares the crown to a “deep well” of which he is the heavy, grieving bucket (4.1.184); when Northumberland tells Richard
The triangulating oclusions produced between the Sun King Richard II, the usurping rival Bolingbroke, and the earthly garden of England's denizens caught in between mirror a celestial eclipse where the sun is eclipsed by a smaller, albeit strategically positioned sphere. In a theater called The Globe, no less, these oclusions take on theatrical valences: Richard's crisis of admission into the future of his divine kingship is theatrically rendered as a shift of positions. Indeed, at the very start of Shakespeare's play, the question of where to put the characters—and how long they are going to stay there—is critical. Instead of allowing a death (a "real" absence) to ensue in the dual between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Richard banishes Bolingbroke to another land for six years and Mowbray permanently. The men respond as follows:

**Boling:** Your will be done. This must my comfort be:

That sun that warms you here shall shine on me,

And those his golden beams to you here lent,

Shall point on me and gild my banishment. (1.2.148-156)

to read over his crimes, the king says he cannot because "Mine eyes are full of tears; I cannot see" (4.1.258). A few lines later, in perhaps one of the most famous lines of the play, the king exclaims, "O that I were a mockery king of snow;/Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,/To melt myself away in water drops!" (4.1.274-276). Renaissance meteorology considers "objects that are without their own substantial forms" (Martin 27). When Richard loses his own substantial form, Shakespeare uses the language of astrometeorology to predict it.

Bolingbroke knows he is still in the monarchial circuit. He can still exert influence and the sun will still shine on him, even if his orbit is farther away. He is still a rival for England. Mowbray, on the other hand, has been sentenced to full occlusion, not the least in part due to his involvement in Gloucester's murder. While Bolingbroke is out of sight, Richard seizes Hereford's land and goes away to Ireland. While Richard is gone, Bolingbroke makes his move to return, much to York's chagrin. York asks him, "Why have those banished and forbidden legs/Dared once to touch a dust of England's ground?.../Comest thou because the anointed King is hence?" (2.3.97-102). Bolingbroke responds, "As I was banished, I was banished Hereford;/But as I come, I come for Lancaster" (2.3.119-120). Positions have changed. Frye comments on the ambiguity of Bolingbroke's return in gravitational terms: "In the demoralized state of the nation a de facto power begins to gather around Bolingbroke, and he simply follows where it leads, neither a puppet of circumstance nor a deliberately unscrupulous usurper" (58).

Ostensibly, Bolingbroke returns to consummate a desire for the inheritance that is his home country. The model in this circuit of Girardian mimetic desire and rivalry is the earth/England and the object that forecloses access to that model is the law/the king.36 In order for Hereford to get his land, he must occlude the

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36 In A Theater of Envy, Rene Girard famously argues that desire is always mimetic, always born out of an interaction among individuals. Girard develops an erotic triangle that schematizes the way these individuals interact; the three points on the Girardian triangle are the subject, the model, and
law/the king; in that occlusion, “power begins to gather” around Bolingbroke.

Immediately after Bolingbrook returns, he starts acting like the king, ordering the deaths of Bushy and Green and gathering an army. He is occluding Richard, the sun king, and putting himself within the shadow of that occlusion, for safety and for tactical advantage. Even Richard understands the cosmographical metaphor. While chiding Aumerle for warning him of Bolingbroke’s growing strength, Richard uses the metaphor of occlusion to argue for his own eventual resurgence:

Discomfortable cousin, knowest thou not
That when the searching eye of heaven is hid
Behind the globe and lights the lower world
Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen
In murders and in outrage boldly here.
But when from under this terrestrial ball
He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines

The object, where the subject fixes his admiring attention on the model because the model is exactly what he doesn’t have. Each point on the triangle contributes to the emergence of the other as a rival. According to a Girardian model of rivalry and desire, the model in Shakespeare’s play would be England, the object King Richard and the subject Bolingbroke. In the pursuit of the model, the object is distinguished.

The problem with Girard’s erotic triangle is that it assumes each side is equilateral and that there are no racial, gendered, or class hierarchies at play among participants. In Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick updates Girard’s equilateral, ahistorical triangle by pointing out that the subject and object in nearly all of his literary examples are men, and the model is always a woman. She argues that the Girardian triangle is itself a register for delineating the very relationships of patriarchal power and meaning that it attempts to disambiguate. Sedgwick then develops a case for homosocial desire as figured by a non-equilateral, historically contingent triangle that more adequately explains why there is such a discontinuity between male homosociality and male homosexuality: two men (subject and object) need an empty cipher of a woman (the model) to make possible the love they have for one another. Applying this formulation to Richard II, the crown—synecdoche for the husbandry of the Eden that is England—is the cipher that enables a homosocial desire, indeed a nationalistic fraternity, to express itself.
And darts his light through every guilty hole
Then murders, treasons and detested sins,
The cloak of night being plucked from off their backs,
Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?
So when this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke,
Who all this while hath reveled in the night
Whilst we were wandering with the antipodes
Shall see is rising in our throne the east
His treasons will sit blushing in his face,
Not able to endure the sight of day,
But self-affrighted tremble at his sin. (3.2.36-53)

Richards’ prophecy, of course, never happens, perhaps because he doesn’t understand how fully he has been eclipsed. Bolingbroke is not simply a meddlesome cloud that will dissipate when the Sun returns. Bolingbroke is another force of gravity, capable of obstructing the king and denying him access to his country.

The word eclipse comes from the Greek ekleipsis, meaning “to forsake its accustomed place, to fail to appear” (OED). Anne Carson notes that the experience of totality produced by an eclipse has historically and mythologically created an “instant feeling of wrongness” and yet a simultaneous desire to make love, perhaps because of the sudden sense of abandonment: “Drastic analogies abound in the literature of totality; also typical at this blasted moment, to turn to thoughts of kissing and marrying. Many mythological explanations of eclipse involve copulation
or the hope of it” (150). Unquestionably, a majority of the romantic love rhetoric in Shakespeare’s play is between a man and his England, figured as both physical land and its people, just as that land is abandoning him. Consider Gaunt’s famous death bed speech to the England he loves: “This royal throne of kings...This other Eden, demiparadise/This fortress built by nature for herself” (2.1.45-47); Bolingbroke’s mournful parting with his country when he is banished by Richard: “Then, England’s ground, farewell; sweet soil, adieu./My mother, and my nurse, that bears me yet!” (1.3.321-322); and Richard’s emotional arrival in his long-lost Wales to an empty shore where an army has deserted him: “So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,—/And do thee favors with my royal hands” (3.2.10-11). In the 2012 British television film adaptation of Richard II, the The Hollow Crown, Bolingbroke and Richard each fall to the ground and kiss the earth in these scenes. Clearly, the producers also turned to thoughts of kissing.

Carson is particularly interested in how the activation of eros in the experience of totality “calls for three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes in between,” an activation that typifies the structural movement of eclipse (16). Throughout Eros the Bittersweet and Decreation, Carson traces this circuitry of desire and displacement in her readings of Sappho, Longus, and Homer:

We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle and we may be tempted, with post-

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37 See, for instance, Annie Dillard’s classic essay “Total Eclipse,” in which she notes that “Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him” (6-7).
Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see it in the radical constitution of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationships, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. (16)

The erotic triangle as a “circuit of possible relationships” evokes the circular movements of three points that, at some period, interfere in each other’s paths, as opposed to all staying in the same circuit like mechanical rabbits on a greyhound racing ring: one point, at some point, comes in between the other two. The implicit model of triangular circuitry in Carson’s erotic figurations of desire is an elliptical one. Indeed, Bolingbroke as that which comes between England and Richard connects and yet also separates England from Richard, who becomes the illuminating absence—the shadowed Sun King no less—whose “hidden” presence allows Bolingbroke to touch and yet not quite touch England. Furthermore, what makes Carson’s erotic triangle so applicable to the triangular machinations of desire for the crown is in how the triangle is “formed by their perception of one another, and in the gaps in that perception. It is an image of the distances between them”
(13). An eclipse, of course, is the image of the distances between three points rendered linearly—at least perceptually. If Richard is “a negative space, a queer cavity of undoing.” I’d like to think it is because the linear, historical orders that deconstruct his kingship have closed the distance between Bolingbroke and England, and the theatrical orders that construct how he wears that persona of divine king have closed the distance between himself and the role he must play. What emerges in both cases is nothing: an irradiating absence whose presence is demanded by the very forces that constitute it.

I’d like to move away for a moment from Richard’s elliptical occlusion as divine king and explore another paradoxically embodied absence as it is developed and interrogated by Richard’s queen. Specifically, I’d like to look more closely at the queen’s analysis of the “nothing” that is her grief. My point in doing so will be to emphasize that at the heart of the elliptical figuration of undoing that generates a positive absence is an interest in the production of illusion itself—or in other words, an interest in the theatre and how it produces the positive nothing that is a character. The elliptical figuration of desire that I have mapped on to Richard, Bolingbroke, and England—whereby, in the pursuit of England by Bolingbroke, Richard the king emerges as a shadow—can be mapped onto that other triangle that

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38 It is an image that imagines the forsaking of three dimensional space into two dimensional space. Arguably, it is also an image that usefully describes how the theatre as a three-dimensional spatial art is rendered as script, or the two dimensional space of the poetic line, and vise versa. As Henry S. Turner has noted in The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts, “This book takes as its point of departure the deceptively obvious premiss that the English drama of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries must be considered above all as a highly spatialized mode of representation performed in the public theatres and not simply as an artefact of print” (2). It is the contention of this chapter, and this thesis more broadly, that figures found within the poetic line reflect the theatrical process itself. In Richard’s case, there is an almost prophetic awareness of the performance objectives that constitute a character as being productively eclipsed by the totality of the character rendered in verse.
this chapter has been pursuing: the person, the mask of persona, and the character that emerges. Put another way, the very way Richard becomes undone as a king, I think, simulates the way an illusion of character is generated on stage. The shadow as an illusion of “something that is nothing” is generated from the ostensibly totalizing relationship between two other somethings; similarly, only when “something” stands in front of, or masks, another “something,” another persona, does the illusion of character emerge. This illusion is itself invisible, a nothing, an absence, and yet it is the very thing that allows the mask and the persona to “touch, not touching.” I think it is the queen who early on in the play articulates the play’s logic of elliptical undoing and its emergent shadows. The queen’s analysis of the “nothing” that is her grief sets the proverbial stage for how Richard will take on the nothingness of his character as a mask in its own right.

Long before Richard becomes a mournful nothing in the deposition scene the Queen has already discussed with Bushy the substance and meaning of the “heavy nothing” that is her grief and its imaginary, albeit foreboding, shadows: “Yet again methinks/Some unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune’s womb/Is coming towards me, and my inward soul/With nothing trembles; at some thing it grieves,/More than with parting from my lord the king” (2.2.9-13). The Queen’s play on nothing and something is not lost on her confidant. To calm her down, Bushy tells her that her grief is “nothing”:

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39 I do not want to suggest that there is a one to one correlation between the politically rivalrous triangle of Bolingbroke, England, and Richard and the theatrical triangle of mask, persona, and character. Rather, I am suggesting that the triangles operate the same insofar as the production of illusion is concerned.
Bushy: Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;
For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects;
Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon
Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry
Distinguish form: so your sweet majesty,
Looking awry upon your lord's departure,
Find shapes of grief, more than himself, to wail;
Which, look'd on as it is, is nought but shadows
Of what it is not. Then, thrice-gracious queen,
More than your lord's departure weep not: more's not seen;
Or if it be, 'tis with false sorrow's eye,
Which for things true weeps things imaginary. (2.2.14-27)

Most readings of Richard II gloss Bushy's "perspectives" as referring to anamorphic perspective paintings such as Holbein's The Ambassadors or the distorted portrait of Edward VI by William Scrots (Shickman 218). In these paintings, you must look at the picture from an acute angle in order to see another image; that is, "eyed awry" they "distinguish form." Bushy tries to tell the queen that her grief is like an anamorphic painting which suggests images that are "not so." This is not a bad tactic for a man who makes his living as an advisor who enables the king to see the state's affairs more clearly. But if Bushy's advising abilities are as good as his metaphorical
ones, Richard is in trouble. While Bushy is trying to tell the queen that her sorrow distorts the truth, that seeing through tears creates fractured, imaginary falsehoods, his metaphor seems to suggest just the opposite as well: “so your sweet majesty,/Looking awry upon your lord's departure,/Find shapes of grief, more than himself, to wail;/Which, look'd on as it is, is nought but shadows/Of what it is not.”

Looked on directly, Richard’s situation is full of immaterial shadows of “what it is not,” while looked at awry, it is full of grief. If the anamorphic perspective holds true, viewing the matter obliquely and with tears is, paradoxically, the only way to see the truth—a misplaced prophesy that becomes altogether too true for Richard later on in the play.

Where Bushy exceeded his figurative intentions, the Queen’s retort teases them out and purposefully lingers on a productive paradox: the nothing that is something.

Queen: It may be so; but yet my inward soul

   Persuades me it is otherwise: howe'er it be,

I cannot but be sad; so heavy sad

   As, though on thinking on no thought I think,

   Makes me with heavy nothing faint and shrink.

Bushy: 'Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady.

Queen: 'Tis nothing less: conceit is still derived
From some forefather grief; mine is not so,

For nothing had begot my something grief;

Or something hath the nothing that I grieve:

'Tis in reversion that I do possess;

But what it is, that is not yet known; what

I cannot name; 'tis nameless woe, I wot. (2.2.28-40)

The queen knows that nothing is not nothing. It is something, something capable of begetting. She seems to be able to perceive the orders of generation and admission at play in the production of an absence, or the invisible something that is her grief. She does not see the shadow as partaking in a kaleidoscope of perceptual confusions, but rather as being constitutive of the very something that she is trying to identify: “For nothing had begot my something grief; Or something hath the nothing that I grieve: ‘Tis in reversion that I do possess.” Reversion here connotes the legal sense of “the return of an estate to the original owner,” but it also suggests the broader sense of its etymological root reversīō, “the act of returning or coming around again” (OED). The queen’s shadowy grief is not inherited in a linear model of forefather succession; rather it is inherited cyclically, from something that appeared gone but has come around again, mirroring the cyclical movement of eclipse.

The queen’s response to Bushy’s mollification of her grief fixates on its incoherence and makes it coherent with a dialectic of nothing and something that foreshadows, even prophesizes, Richard’s own dissolution into nothingness and at the same time explains how it happens. Richard of Bordeaux isn’t really gone; he is
simply caught and eclipsed in the perceptual absences generated from the friction between the prescriptions of historical destiny—Bolingbroke will be the next king—and the affordances of theatrical illusion-making—being overshadowed and then becoming a shadow. At the heart of the play's interest in absence is an interest in the production of illusion, and specifically the production of illusion that is Richard’s character—the eclipsed king. The queen seems to know this well before even Richard does.

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If Richard’s queer, temporal alterity undid him in the eyes of a world who couldn’t perceive him differently, what I have suggested throughout this section is a way of reading that temporality in a way that explains why they couldn’t see him. Richard’s access to his crown and recognition as king—what I have been calling his admission into the future of his kingship—is not taken away from him, per se. The triangulation of desire for the crown eclipses King Richard, and the prophecies laid upon that black-out reveal that the future of the body politic depends upon an ability to understand the way illusion is actually produced: not by being eyed awry, but by dwelling on the invisible somethings that emerge when domains of influence—mask and persona—move into each other’s localities. The enduring entity of Richard’s character as king is, ironically, an illusion: a positive nothing, an absence that, like all of Mitchell’s perceptual images, exists on the threshold of being and becoming.
2.3 Admitting the Absence: The Poet King

I have been arguing that the figuration of absence throughout *Richard II* is central to the play’s understanding of character. Richard’s character—the “permanent” entity that comes from the friction between the person and the mask of persona—can be understood as a shadow, where nothingness emerges both as perceptual occlusion and the paradoxical substance of that friction. I argued in the first section that this shadow generated Richard’s queerness, or the out-of-timeness that conditions his fall and that also makes him timeless as a character; section two examined how Richard’s character as deposed king was rendered elliptically, suggesting that the illusion of character is like an occluded “nothing.” My aim in this final section is to think through Richard’s paradoxically positive absence, his nothingness, in terms of his identity as a theatrical character, the Poet King, seemingly conscious that the dissolution of his kingliness and his subjective self will become, and indeed already is, a work of art.

While history’s narrative demands Richard’s deposition and death, Richard’s investment in how that plays out theatrically to an audience of spectators makes Shakespeare’s play fundamentally metatheatrical. Jeremy Lopez notes, “Much of the work of *Richard II* criticism from Johnson to the early twentieth century involved finding a critical vocabulary that would allow students of the play to see Shakespeare’s characterization of Richard and his casual handling of historical detail as evidence of an artistic project that was commensurate with the play’s frequently glorious poetic language” (103). That critical vocabulary, from Samuel Johnson to William Butler Yeats, turned Richard into the Poet King, the ineffectual monarch
who managed to turn his blunders into what Harold Bloom has called “an extraordinary aesthetic dignity, both lyrical and dramatic” (Shakespeare’s Richard II 3). That dignity, even while subverted by the rival Bolingbroke, still manages to have “the more effective power” (Frye 667).

Richard seems to know that he is both a real king that exists in the present and the past and will be deposed, as well as a work of art over which death has no hold “when in eternal lines to Time” he will grow (Shakespeare Sonnet 18.12). He knows this when he all too easily gives up the fight for the crown upon hearing news of Bolingbroke’s armed arrival, famously telling his men, “For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground/And tell sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.155-156). He is only too ready to lyricize his own fall before it happens. He knows this when he sits in Pomfret’s prison, alone with his thoughts:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world,
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself
I cannot do it. Yet I’ll hammer’t out.
My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still breeding thoughts,
And these same thoughts people this little world
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented. (5.5.1-11)

Here we have another triangle: the brain, the soul, and the thoughts their union creates. Richard tries to populate his lonely world through his imagination, but just like the world, his mind is filled with a multitude of discontented people:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king.
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king.
Then am I kinged again, and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. (5.5.30-37)

Whether Richard is sitting upon the ground ready to give up or talking to himself in a dark prison, he is trying to construct desire for himself, a self that all alone experiences its own totality as nothing: “But whate’er I be/Nor I nor any man that but man is/With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased/With being nothing” (5.5.38-41). The triangulation within Richard’s mind undoes him, disappears him entirely, returns him to an absence. This process of undoing is both existential and aesthetic. In his 2001 production of Richard II at the American Repertory Theatre, Director Robert Woodruff describes Richard’s project of existential undoing as
purposeful and creative: “I'm now attracted to Richard II as a play about an artist, a man who continually reinvents himself. The text is traditionally treated as a struggle for power between Richard and Bolingbroke, but that doesn’t excite me. I see Richard as a man who deliberately undermines his own power, who understands that the ultimate artistic act is to destroy his own work, and with it his self” (Woodruff).

Richard’s art “work” is the poetry he is able to make out of his situation. Indeed, it is that poetry that undoes him—both in its very figurations that render him a nothing and in its performances that render him hysterical and histrionic. But what exactly about his situation is Richard aestheticizing? Just after Richard argues that every man can only be contented once he is content to be nothing, he hears music playing in the distance, albeit music that is off beat, or out of time. In these final moments before he dies, realizing that he really is out of time, Richard aestheticizes time itself.

For now hath time made me his numb’ring clock.
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
Whereto my finger, like a dial’s point,
Is pointing still in cleansing them from tears.
Now, sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
Are clamorous groans which strike upon my heart,
Which is the bell. So sighs, and tears, and groans
Show minutes, times, and hours. But my time
Runs posting on in Bolingbroke's proud joy,
While I stand fooling here, his jack of the clock. (5.5.50-60)

In Richard’s extended metaphor, both time and Bolingbroke, whom time favors, play him: the former turns him into a clock that measures the hours by expressions of sadness, while the latter makes him a fool for that sadness, a silly jack of that clock. In both cases, Richard’s character’s fate is objectified and mocked by Richard the poet who ventriloquizes time and his usurper. Richard’s metaphor of clock-time here is ultimately a metaphor for fate, that unavoidable wheel of fortune that determines one’s destiny. The relationship between Richard’s lyricism and Richard’s fate is one of mutual dependency. Fate and lyric share the same time signature, or the same temporal paradox, depending on how you look at it. Lyric is characterized by the expression of a spontaneous outflowing of feeling, and yet it nonetheless comes out in perfect rhythm and meter; fate is characterized by that which is predetermined, and yet it always seems to respond so well to new inputs. Behind both, of course, is the imperative of performance, which is sprezzatura: the effort of practice is revealed in the effortlessness of what is finally shown.

The distinctive mark, then, of both fate and lyric is the *mask of performance that is the wearing of it*—that struggle to incorporate acting with being and to produce from that struggle the effortless appearance of character. Fate acts out the lives of mutable humans by wearing the mask of inalterability; lyric acts out volatile feeling by wearing the mask of metrical feet. Richard’s poetic and fatalistic project of
decreation, if it may be called a project, is the wearing of the mask that is the fallen king. His task is to effortlessly become this mask. But how do imbue your acting self with the mask of nothingness? How do you become a something that must be a nothing? You turn that process—life or fate or time or whatever it is that makes us turn from something into nothing—into poetry. You turn it into metaphors that make a future absence permanent insofar as they will be taken up again and again by future iterations of “somethings”: the next actor to take on the mask of Richard’s persona. For what is the theatre itself but a constant reversion of something into nothing into something again, spirits that melt into thin air, as Prospero would call them, but then reconstitute again for the next performance? And what is the invisibly permanent thing that gives them life? Character: “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (Shakespeare Sonnet 18.13-14). Richard plays his character of fallen king as a mask itself, and by doing so becomes the more permanent, the more ineluctably invisible character of the Poet King who truly does float free of history and into the ears of those who know how to hear differently.

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Richard II is the organizing principle for the “formal and ideological dimensions” of the play as a whole, a play which dramatizes the wheel of fortune in a way only a play can: by hinging that fortune on the invisible, on that hidden pearl of performance that is becoming a character (Yachnin and Sights 6). I began this chapter wanting to understand why Richard became so wrong and why he deposed himself, believing that there was not an easy causal relationship between the two,
despite what tragedy would want to suggest. I wanted to know why he was so often cast as homosexual in contemporary productions. I wanted to understand Richard's strangeness, his inadmissibility into the future of his kingship, and his paradoxical, shadowy presence within the event that is the history play. Finally, I wanted to understand his poetry that reified his sense of loss, his nothingness in a way that almost seemed to predict it as well. Richard became a nothing in every iteration of self—the grieving man, the fallen king, and the dramatic poet—because a nothing, unlike a something, lasts precisely because it cannot be reduced any further. And this is exactly what a character is—the thing that lasts, the thing that is in time and yet out of time within the ephemeral world of the theatrical event.
3 Authenticating Shylock: The Actor’s Dilemma

“I am not bound to please thee with my answers.”

—Shylock (4.1.65)

The title page to William Shakespeare’s first quarto of The Merchant of Venice reads, “The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice. With the extreame crueltie of Shylock the Jewe towards the said Merchant, in cutting a just pound of his fleshe and the obtaining of Portia by the choyse of three chests.” Although the titular character is Antonio the merchant, the title piece reveals the agency and centrality of the play’s villain, Shylock. While the play was unpopular in its own time and received little if any productions for nearly 150 years, it is now—along with Hamlet—the most often performed play in Shakespeare’s canon, not in the least part due to the complex character that is Shylock (Mahood 42).

Arguably, it was the nineteenth century’s romantic fascination with the exotic Other that enabled Shylock to be seen as more than a stock villain or comedic stereotype. Edmund Kean’s famous 1814 portrayal of Shylock at Drury Lane convinced spectators that he “indeed suffered,” as M.M. Mahood notes: “The collapse of this intelligent and vulnerable being was horrible to watch” (44). Since then, theatrical productions and scholarly criticism of The Merchant of Venice have remained fascinated in Shylock’s tragic portrayal. Shylock is no obvious Machiavel the way, for instance, Christopher Marlowe’s famous Jew in The Jew of Malta seems to be. Akin to classical tragic heroes, Shylock’s motivations appear to come from sources of love and honor—protecting his family and his traditions—as well as
places of legitimate pain. Shylock the Jew has been oppressed by a Christian
hegemony that has deported, killed, and abused his people for centuries. Half-way
through the play, Shylock makes these injustices explicit: Antonio “hath disgraced
me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains,
scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies;
and what's his reason? I am a Jew” (3.1.45-50). Shylock’s arguments and appeals for
justice appear to come less from a place of unmitigated spite and more from a place
of righteous indignation, an appeal to the Christian order to be evaluated as a
human being and not as a Jew: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” (3.1.56). An appeal
for recognition as a human being. An appeal for just access as that being. Access and
recognition taken together is what I have been calling admission. Shylock’s tragedy
in this play, if it is indeed a tragedy, is a crisis of admission, where Shylock functions
as the quintessential Other, the stranger who resides inside and outside of society
simultaneously.

I am not the first person to identify Shylock as a stranger. Leslie A. Fielder’s
1972 The Stranger in Shakespeare examined the archetype of the Jew as a
“borderline figure, who defines the limits of the human” (15). As a money-lending
Jew, Shylock exists as a cultural and spiritual outsider to the Christian socio-
economic order, yet he is instrumental to its functioning; in this way he skirts the
borders of access and recognition within this order. As opposed to Kearney’s
heuristic of the stranger functioning as a phenomenological hermeneutics of the self,
Fielder identifies the stranger as a villainous archetype upon which the public
mythologies of Elizabethans (and their modern descendants, albeit in different
ways) depended. In his reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, Fiedler reveals Shylock to be a vengeful, cannibalistic monster—with associative valences to that other English monster, the Puritan— that Shakespeare had in mind long before a few centuries of history made that reading untenable if not utterly queasy. A few decades after Fiedler’s analysis, Shylock’s stranger status is still critical to the play’s interpretation. Janet Adelman’s 2008 *Blood Relations*, a comprehensive analysis of the figure of the converted Jew in Shakespeare’s play and the concomitant queasiness that underpins the play’s reception and criticism, is similarly interested in the villainous role assigned to the Jew. As Adelman argues, “the spectacle of the Jewish convert to Christianity requires the desperate remedies of a proto-racism and a contradictory desire that the Jew continue at all costs to play the bloody role assigned to him by the Christian” (36). Even as recently as Marianne Novy’s 2013 *Shakespeare & Outsiders* with its first chapter devoted to “*The Merchant of Venice* and its Pressured Conversions,” Shylock the Jew is “the character whose outsider status might be considered the clearest in Shakespeare” (17).

My addition to this conversation of Shylock as outsider is to link his role of stranger to his function as an actor within the drama itself, revealing how each begets the other and speaks to a poetics of admission the play is staging. I think,

40 In “Shylock’s Tribe,” Stephen Orgel argues, “Shylock can be seen as a kind of Puritan” (46). In his analysis of Shylock’s uncharacteristically English name, he concludes, “So one way to play Shylock ‘authentically’ would be as one of the Puritan moneylenders of Shakespeare’s London, for whom the Old Testament rhetoric would be entirely in character, and the Jewishness a moral comment on the profession” (45).

41 Fiedler observes, “The final and irrevocable redemption of Shylock, however, was the inadvertent achievement of the greatest anti-Semite of all time, who did not appear until the twentieth century was almost three decades old. Since Hitler’s ‘final solution’ to the terror which cues the uneasy laughter of *The Merchant of Venice*, it has seemed immoral to question the process by which Shylock has been converted from a false-nosed, red-wigged monster (his hair the color of Judas’s), half spook and half clown, into a sympathetic victim” (98).
perhaps, what is equally significant in the “bloody role” assigned to Shylock is not the blood, or the ancestral relations at the center of Christianity that subsume the Jew, but the assignment itself: he must perform this role. Shylock has to constantly play two parts to live a whole life: one for his Christian audience, and another for himself and his daughter, or us, as is the case when he speaks in direct address to the live audience about his personal feelings. In one such potential direct address, he exclaims after looking upon Antonio, “How like a fawning publican he looks! I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.33-34). His survival within this social world depends upon his dissimilation, his ability to perform approval and amity toward his Christian audience while at the same time feeling so much disapproval and angst toward them in his heart. In other words, his survival depends upon his ability to be a good actor.

In the first part of this chapter, I will examine how Shylock’s forced conversion demands him to feign an acceptance that is insincere, reducing his compliance to mere theatre. By theatre, or theatricality, I mean the “experiential duality” inherent in playing a part—that disjuncture between the acting self and the self that is represented. Shylock’s tragedy, I argue, is the discovery of a moral law that situates acting as both the crime and the solution to the incorporation, or admission, into society—a uniquely Shakespearean take on antitheatricalism. In the second section, I ground Shylock’s stranger’s tragedy in a discussion of the actor more broadly, specifically the actor as a construct of Judeo-Christian consciousness, whereby God functions as spectator. I examine how two opposing models of acting are embodied and articulated by Shylock and the Christians’ two opposing models of
theological and economic value. This section locates how exactly Shylock’s authentication fails by taking a closer look at Portia’s mercantile—and theatrical—logic of mercy and Antonio’s proto-capitalism, arguing that each frames Shylock’s fundamental possession of himself and his capital as inauthentic precisely because it does not please God the watcher of men. Finally, in part three I bring these economic models of spiritual authenticity to a discussion of the actor as labourer, arguing that the actor as both a commodity and a seller of that commodity exposes an affective shame intrinsic to the social situation that the theatre stages: how to be a “real” person behind the political masks of identity, or an individual within the obliterating collective. This shame is revealed, I think, both in Shylock’s confrontation of himself by himself in the famous trial scene as well as the anxieties that have plagued *The Merchant of Venice*’s production and reception on stage and in the classroom. My hope is that by linking Shylock’s theo-political and economic stranger status to his metatheatrical function as an actor within the play world, I can exemplify how the practices of the theatre as a medium double back on the metaphysical questions of admission that the play—and this thesis—is staging.

Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait provide a detailed introduction to the history and definitions of “theatricality” in their 2003 collection of essays under the same name. Aware how indistinct the relationships between performance, ritual, theatre as activity and theatre as stage can and have become, they define their topic as “the idea of theatricality in its various manifestations throughout many periods” (3). This is helpful insofar as it is generous. By resisting “the apparent need to stipulate one meaning for theatricality,” Davis and Postlewait are able to explore a
whole domain of human behavior—namely, people acting as other people and other things—as it appears across cultures and as it becomes institutionalized. The anthropological turn in theatre scholarship of the twentieth century, under the influence of thinkers such as Bakhtin and Turner, has sought to explicitly provide an all-encompassing idea of theatre, performance, and culture. “Theatricality” has become the theoretical by which “histrionic practice and an interpretive idea of human behaviour” are wed (94).

I will similarly be employing theatricality in this way in my analysis of Shylock—both as a functional, mediated practice and a metaphor for human behavior and relationships more broadly. I will be examining the concepts of labor and authenticity with the assumption that they are like two prongs on the theatricality pitchfork, the former the functional, mediated practice and the latter the metaphor for how humans are or should be. My interest throughout this chapter will be in how Shylock, the money-lending, Jewish outsider, is figured as a stranger within the context of the play world as well as an actor within the situation of the theatre and how that tension generates the second anxiety of admission this thesis is staging: what it means to be an authentic individual in the maddening crowd.

3.1 Shylock’s Crisis of Admission: Theatricality as a Moral Wrong

After Shylock’s forced conversion in the famous trial scene of The Merchant of Venice, Judge Balthazar (the cross-dressed Portia) asks, “Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?” (4.1.389). Shylock responds, “I am content.” (4.1.390). Is he truly content? No, of course not. But he does have to say the right lines or things
could get much worse for him than they already are. Half of his goods have just been confiscated and the other half promised to his betraying daughter and her Christian husband upon Shylock’s death. I’ve always considered these three words, “I am content,” to be the punctum of the play’s possible interpretive trajectories, dramaturgically and conceptually. I’m not alone. Critical scholarship of the past several decades has generally conceded that Shylock’s statement suggests a pitiful submission to what Harry Berger has called a brutal Christian “mercifixion” (70). Barbara K. Lewalski has argued that Shylock’s penultimate line is a numbing recognition of the “logic which demands his conversion,” albeit a logic “he finds too painful to admit explicitly” (341). Whether Shylock recognizes, as the Christians would hope, that the purpose of the law is to reveal to him his own sinfulness or whether he recognizes that the law’s tables have turned on him unjustly, the performative result is the same: “acknowledgement that he can no longer make his stand” (341).

Lawrence Danson, on the other hand, interprets Shylock’s laconic resignation as less of a recognition of the logic that demands his conversion and more of a “profound weariness” in light of that “successive weakening we have observed in him since his first bold appearance” in the play, suggesting that the brevity of that submission could only be accomplished because Shylock is unable to say more (168). Similarly interested in Shylock’s sudden inability to speak, Stanley Cavell suggests Shylock’s “I am content” is more penetrating than mere fatigue: Shylock is “spiritually disabled, without recognizable emotion or comprehension, not even angry or contemptuous” (222). In a play that is permeated with discourse on the
importance of speech acts, Shylock’s sudden reduction to a “creature without the right to speak” suggests that the disavowal of his bond is as much about rejection as it is about submission (223). As Cavell puts it, “The Merchant of Venice, most single-mindedly among Shakespeare’s works, displays, to the point of caricature, the fact that the failure to be known (hence eventually to know another) is not fundamentally a matter of ignorance (an epistemological lack) but a gesture of rejection (a moral stance)” (221). Janet Adelman has argued that this complex gesture of ignorance and rejection is constitutive of the Christian conversion of the Jew. Despite Shakespeare’s attempt at humanizing Shylock, the spectacle of his conversion and his ostensible contentment serve to assuage the anxiety inherent in Judeo-Christian blood relations (38). As Adelman argues:

Both Catholics and Protestants of various stripes were fond of accusing one another of Judaizing; but what if the Jew was there, in the Christian, not through some inadmissible excess or residue but constitutively, at the heart of his Christianity? The converso is a haunting figure in part, I think, because the Jew-as-stranger has the potential to recall Christianity to its own internal alien; converted or not, he can become a figure for the disowned other within the self.

(13)
For Adelman, Shylock’s conversion reveals not what the Christian has rejected, but what the Christian has disowned within itself and therefore cannot recognize and acknowledge.

At stake, I think, in the critical discussion of Shylock’s famous speech act is not whether it is sincere or not, but whether Shylock—and his Christian converters—are aware of how absolutely insincere it really is. While Cavell and Adelman would agree that Shylock becomes a caricature to secure Jewish difference and Christian priority, I’m not so sure they would agree that Shylock is conscious of this fact. Adelman’s important historicist and psychoanalytic reading of race and Jewish conversion is not as concerned with the performative gymnastics required of a complex character who must say “I am content” and not mean it. Cavell, on the other hand, a philosopher of aesthetics and value, is much more fascinated in the dramaturgical effect of Shylock’s implausible satisfaction, finding in himself an affective resonance: “I have never satisfied myself about the ending of The Merchant of Venice, reading it or attending it” (222). It is also clear that Cavell takes Shylock’s humanizing seriously and understands him to be a tragic figure, concluding his interpretation of Shylock as a man “becoming drained of the effort to continue assuming, to the extent he has ever assumed, participation in the human” (230). The difference between Cavell and Adelman’s Shylock—and I think between most readings of Shylock in this scene—is that one is conscious and the other isn’t, one is tragic and the other isn’t.

Cavell’s reading of Shylock’s tragic ending implicitly references Albert Camus’s articulation of the relationship between consciousness and tragedy. In his
meditation on Sisyphus, the mythological hero who is punished by the gods to eternally roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down again and again, Camus argues, “If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?” (2). Indeed, at every step throughout Shakespeare’s play and most evocatively throughout the trial scene, egged on by Portia’s Balthazar, Shylock’s hope of getting his bond and enacting revenge upon his Christian relations uphold him. Arguably, it is only when he becomes conscious of the litigious set-up, of the elaborate punishment that is to be his forced, theatrical conversion that he—wearied, submissive, and spiritually disabled—says, “I am content” and his torture truly begins. But Shakespeare forecloses our view of the tortured, conscious Sisyphus-Shylock. Shylock falls ill just after saying he is well and leaves the stage never to come back again: “I pray you give me leave to go from hence; I am not well” (4.1.391-392). The fifth act shenanigans of his Christian relations remain only haunted by the tragedy of the future torture of a man who has just become fully conscious of the absolute inexorability of his situation.

Camus’s purpose in linking consciousness to tragedy, interestingly enough, is to interrogate what it means for a human to be truly content, famously ending his essay, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (3). Humans, those absurdly insignificant mortal things so uniquely capable of positing meaning and yet unable to keep themselves from suffering under that meaning, can be happy only when they realize that their lives, metaphorized as the burden of the rock, are theirs: “Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows
that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (3). Clearly Shylock’s rock is also still rolling, but do we, like Camus, really imagine him happy when he leaves the stage not feeling well? Does Shylock suddenly become content because he realizes that his oppression and this punishment by means of conversion are his life, and that nothing—not even a cleverly crafted revenge—can extricate himself from it?

I don’t think that Cavell imagines Shylock to be authentically content at the end of the trial scene the way Camus imagines Sisyphus to be—a man who reaches a perfect disillusionment with God, and so is able to stop hoping for rescue as well as stop fighting for justice, essentially a man who extricates himself from the vicissitudes of desire. Such a reading of Shylock’s speech act would make his contentment sincere; he has accepted his conversion because he has suddenly become disillusioned with his Jehovah and ceases desiring a more perfect world. Shylock’s disillusionment would seem to demonstrate the validity of a Christian conversion and a Jewish scapegoating even more, as it negates Shylock’s God by reifying the Jew’s due burden.42 I too, like Cavell and most modern audiences of Shakespeare’s most performed play, am unsatisfied with Shylock’s exit. As Julia Reinhard Lupton observes, “The play’s answer to the modern Jew, namely to convert Shylock to Christianity at the end of the play and thus bring him into the loving circle of nations, has been felt by even the most typologically-committed

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42 See also Rene Girard’s A Theatre of Envy, where he argues that there are two possible interpretations of Shylock: one which scapegoats him and another which reveals the process of scapegoating itself, pp. 248-250.
critics as a strained and painful one” (133).43 We seem to intuitively register that Shylock is not happy. We know he is not within the loving circle of nations, if the machinations of his Christian relations are any measure. Shylock’s speech act must be a lie, a performance generated from a moment of consciousness whose desire is twofold: to protect itself from just the sort of torture Sisyphus endures and to prevent his audience from becoming aware that that is what he is doing. As Berger notes, Shylock’s contentment may “read as a conspicuous refusal to betray true feelings to the enemies who fill the courtroom” (71). By dissembling to these enemies, Shylock’s interiority remains intact, remains unconverted. While Shylock’s “I am content” signals the beginning of his awareness of his tragedy, it simultaneously tries to foreclose its possibility by pretending it isn’t tragic.

It’s important to note that Camus, however, never says Sisyphus is happy; he says one must imagine him happy. The difference is phenomenological: that difference between the place of subjective embodiment—Shylock’s lived reality—and the objective imagination of that embodiment—Portia’s, Antonio’s, the live audience’s, and even Shylock’s image of Shylock. An actor, of course, is both: a real, subjective body in time and space putting on the objective illusion of a character. Moreover, a good actor, as Hamlet famously argues, suits “the action to the word, the word to the action” (3.2.18-19), advice that “implies a temperance in the delivery that is ultimately aimed at putting the actor, as a real stranger, at home in the unreal world of the play” (States 120). Good acting is when the worlds of subject

43 Lupton’s essay “Exegesis, Mimesis, and the Future of Humanism in The Merchant of Venice” does a remarkable job historicizing the humanist interpretations of Shylock since the Romantics that have sought to substantiate Shylock’s claims to a common humanity.
and object merge into one. This is of course what Shylock’s conversion is all about, making him “at home in the unreal world” of Portia’s theatre disguised as Law. The metatheatricality of the scene is not just painful to watch, it’s difficult to decipher. When Shylock says “I am content,” he is playing the role of an actor who is both the subjective man Shylock, the Jewish plaintiff at court, and the objective character he must now become, the contented converso who agrees with the court’s verdict. That the two must come together is simultaneously Shylock’s success and his tragedy: success because he has authenticated himself to this unreal world and tragedy because he has done so by being inauthentic.

I think a particularly useful articulation of tragedy in terms of a character’s authentication (as opposed to an Aristotelian catharsis which focuses on the audience’s experience of itself watching tragic figures) comes from twentieth century playwright Arthur Miller. In *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Miller defines tragedy as “the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” (1168). Miller continues with his syllogism:

Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The discovery of the moral law,

44 Indeed, the master metaphor of drama-as-life suggests that good living is similar: to be in the world well is to be of the world. As James L. Calderwood observes in *Shakespearean Metadrama*, “Everyone knows that Shakespeare fairly early got onto the master metaphor of life-as-drama and used it extensively to illuminate the experiences of his characters” (5).
which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the
discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity.
The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human
personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the
condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love
and creative instinct. (4)

Shylock is a man with a total compulsion to evaluate himself justly. Shylock’s
demand for his pound of flesh is a demand steeped in a desire for authenticity: to be
evaluated and witnessed as a Jew who is justly owed, and in that deliverance of what
is owed him, a Jew whose Law-abiding Jehovah is consequently more genuine than
the Christian’s God who deals in mercy. He will have his one pound of Antonio’s
flesh because that pound represents that he should be rewarded because he is right:
“By my soul I swear/There is no power in the tongue of man/To alter me. I stay here
on my bond” (4.1.236-238). His destruction in the attempt to evaluate himself justly
by enacting revenge upon Antonio—“If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his
humility? Revenge” (3.1.53-54)—posits a wrong or evil in his environment:
theatricality itself. Shylock’s demise in the attempt to get his bond, I argue, posits the
theatre as the evil ultimately responsible for that demise because it is responsible
for his own inauthenticity: his acting content for an audience who demands that
illusion. By theatre, I am referring to Portia’s theatre of mercy specifically, a theatre
that I will examine more closely in the next section. What I want to establish here is
that Shylock is forced into performing a certain role in this theatre—that of
contented converso. By acting content within a context that, through its very theatrical inauthenticity—Portia herself is pretending to be a real judge—forces Shylock to play along, Shylock exposes Portia’s theatre of mercy as fundamental to his destruction. If we follow Miller, the enlightenment of Shylock’s tragedy consists of the discovery of a moral law: the dissimulation inherent in public life is the wrong that “suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct.”

Ironically, the ideal of authenticity that is constitutive of Shylock’s tragedy mirrors the ethical ideal espoused by critics of the theatre from Plato to Augustine to Nietzsche. This “antitheatrical prejudice” as Jonas Barish has coined it, is suspicious of the theatre precisely because of its mimetic faculty. “The search for authenticity,” Barish argues, “involves a denial of theater, because the theater itself is a denial of reality” (451). Man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly is

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45 Tanya Pollard notes that early modern antitheatricalists were largely “religious figures, particularly preachers,” and very often Puritan (xvi). John Northbrooke, John Rainolds, and William Pryne, for instance, were all connected with puritanism; in his 1577 diatribe against the stage “A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with Other Idle Pastimes” (ironically structured as a theatrical dialogue), preacher John Northbrooke argues, “Truly you may see what multitudes are gathered together at those plays, of all sorts, to the great displeasure of almighty God, and danger of their souls, for that they learn nothing thereby, but that which is fleshy and carnal” (Pollard 5). Yet other antitheatricalist pamphleteers such as Stephen Gosson who wrote Schoole of Abuse and Philip Stubbes who wrote The Anatomie of Abuses were not Puritan—indeed Gosson was a former stage actor. Both of these tracts, and many others like them in this period, argued that plays took “advantage of their verbal power and aesthetic pleasure in order to seduce viewers into vice” (Pollard 20). Similar sentiments are found in Rousseau and Nietzsche in later centuries. In Lettre a d’Alembert, for instance, Rousseau famously argues that a theatre should not be built in Geneva because it would be detrimental to the moral, political, and economic fabric of the town (Maslan 77). Rousseau’s tract warned against playwrights, actors, and hedonistic theatre-goers “who might attempt to impose the corruption of a theatrical, and theatricalized, society upon them” (Ravel 183). Nietzsche similarly considered the theatre an imposition, albeit one that imposes itself over other art forms. As Martin Puchner has noted, “Nietzsche’s analysis of Greek tragedy contained the impossible projection of a theater without script, without an audience, and most importantly, without individual and individualized actors” (Stage Fright 3). For Plato, Tertullian, Prynne, Gosson, Stubbes, Rousseau, Nietzsche and so many others, the theatre as an art form could not achieve a pure, organic coherence so long as it actually existed in real time and space, with real actors, audiences, and societies who were all just too susceptible to transgression. Representation could stay honest so long as no one or no thing actually represented anything else to anyone else.
analogous to this search for authenticity. Shylock’s search for authenticity is a search for the expression of his own creative instinct, a search for that which is original in him, is not mimetic: it is his creative revenge strategy against Antonio that is just such an expression of authenticity.

This revenge strategy, however, is of course theatrical in its own right. Staged in a courtroom with audience-like jurors and judge, Shylock performs the roles of Businessman, Jew, Revenger, and betrayed Father all at once. The distinction between the kind of playing Shylock brings to the courtroom and the kind of playing Portia demands of him is not simply the difference between authenticity and dissimulation. It’s a difference between two kinds of actors: one who seems to be in possession of his own characterization and the other whose characterization is under the possession of someone else. Tied up, then, in the discussion of Shylock’s demise—indeed in the very discussion of the morality upon which his conversion has been either denounced or applauded over the years—is what Knowles calls the “conditions of production,” or that pole of the performance triangle that is concerned with the actor, the director, and the working conditions between them (i.e. as opposed to the “performance text” or the “conditions of reception”) (19). In physically staging the tragedy of a man who is trying to be authentic, the most obvious antagonist to that authenticity is the actor himself, his performance, and the fictive (and not so fictive) economic, political, and social hierarchies that are built upon that performance.

Shylock’s function within the play as a mediator of economic exchange, therefore, is no coincidence to the nature of his tragedy, but rather essential to it.
The critique of himself as a just man and his demise as a just man depend upon the unique relationship of his labor to those that consume it. Salesmen and moneylenders have long been associated with the protean nature of the actor and actors with the inauthenticity of salesmen. There is something wrong about their labor. As Nicholas Ridout argues, “One can easily indulge in the fantasy that the poet, the painter, or the composer, whose work is accomplished in your absence, might simply create art for its own sake. It is much harder to keep this delusion intact in the presence of workers who are doing their work in your presence” (27). The salesman, the usurer, and the actor have not created their products. Leave that to designers and to nature. The performances they cultivate to exchange and sell their products are suspect precisely because they are several degrees removed from the original source.

Historically speaking, there has been a long and “pernicious” association in the Western tradition between actors and Jews: “The workings of what we may term hard-line, fundamentalist anti-theatricalism may perhaps be further clarified by comparing it with old-style antisemitism. The historical connection between them, indeed, goes way back to a day when Jews and actors were lumped together as undesirable members of society, like prostitutes” (Barish 464). Prostitutes, Jews, and actors. Inauthentic. Fake. Theatrical. It’s almost as if Shakespeare was purposely trying to create the perfect political, economic, and aesthetic ogre for his audience. The character Shylock embodies the trifecta of Elizabethan social indictment: a dissembling actor, a usurious moneylender, and a Jew. He is profoundly undesirable. Shylock, however, by virtue of being a character within a theatrical situation,
doubles as a constitutive element of that figuration—the actor who must play an actor. In so doing, the play works out the very wrong it posits in the only way a play can: *by acting.*

In the context of *The Merchant of Venice,* being a good actor is actually worth quite a bit. Shakespeare’s play is riddled with characters trying to be better actors. Portia’s suitors are judged as much on their performance of love as on their choice of the correct casket, the former being the greater signifier of the men’s poverty of skill. Bassanio’s and Gratiano’s performances of husband are bitterly staked against their performances of upright citizen, and as their treatments of the rings Portia and Nerissa give them suggests, they are not capable of performing both well. Antonio’s Christ-like performance of humble acquiescence to the Law of the Father never fully reaches a level of genuine atonement; sure he gives of himself for the happy marriage of Portia and Bassanio, but it’s questionable whether that marriage will actually be happy. The means do not make the ends. Even Portia, chameleon of form par excellence, rightly understands that a good performance is only as good as its audience: “I think/The Nightingale, if she should sing by day/When every goose is cackling, would be thought/No better a musician than the wren” (5.1.103-106). This is a deeply personal observation on the power of performance strategies from a talented woman who must try and be heard through the cackling of society men.

While Shylock’s Christian brethren are eager to play their parts, they transcend nothing but their own machinations whose results were already a given. That is, their performances do not posit acting itself as problematic or wrong, but simply as part of the process of achieving and manipulating power within a
theatricalized society. It is Shylock’s onslaught against their performative world of power that forces what Miller calls a “total examination of the ‘unchangeable’ environment”: the theatre. What is the theatre exactly? Is it a microcosm of social order or cosmic order, or perhaps both? What does it ask of its participants? What is the relationship between everyday life and the theatre? Between commercial exchange and the theatre? Shylock’s tragedy is an ironic burlesque of what it means to be authentic, but arguably the only kind of authenticity achievable given the doubling realities of the play world, and arguably, the doubling realities of “real” life. If we must imagine Shylock happy, like Sisyphus, perhaps it’s because that is the exclusive task of any audience (or society) that takes the playing of a character (or another citizen) at face value. It’s just that we’re not—and seldom ever are—at face value in this play, and that’s the point; rather, we’re in a Chekhovian world of theatrical subtext where inauthenticity strategically generates a pathos that is conscious of its own dissimulation.

Sisyphus, of course, conquered his punishment by denying the existence of the gods who ordered it. He took on the role he was forced to play and by acting it perfectly became free from its artifice, became authenticated to it. By becoming his part completely, Sisyphus became at home in the unreal world of his punishment. The same, however, cannot be said of Shylock. While Shylock, too, takes on the role he is forced to play and acts it perfectly, he never becomes free from its artifice. Shylock’s refusal to betray his true feelings after his conversion—anger, sadness, grief—keeps his interiority intact, yes, but it’s an interiority that conflicts with the happiness he must feign, a conflict that literally makes him unwell. His
contentedness is a strategy that does not authenticate himself to the Christian universe, but rather distances himself from it further by dividing himself in two: the Shylock who dissembles to survive and the Shylock who really isn’t happy, who is silent and sick. The enemy is still very much there. One must imagine Shylock to be, if not a less capable actor than Sisyphus, perhaps one of a very different order.

In the next section, I’d like to examine what order that might be. To do so, I move away from the physical theatre of the trial scene and move into the theatre of the mind. I want to examine the actor as a construct of Judeo-Christian consciousness. On a basic level, you become an actor when you realize you are being watched, that you are not just a subject experiencing your reality, but an object in the reality of others, specifically others who are expecting something from your behaviour. Both Christianity and Judaism imagine a God in the heavens who is omniscient, who can see and know your behavior (and arguably your thoughts), and who wants to be pleased by that behaviour. Embedded in the consciousness of both the Jew and the Christian merchants of Venice, then, is an awareness of themselves as objects in the world being watched—and judged—by a higher power. In their respective theologies, the world is akin to a theatre upon which they act, with God being the audience watching them that they aim to please.

Nonetheless, Antonio and Shylock have very different senses of how they are to act for God’s pleasure. Given that both men are merchants and are intimately bound up in the exchange of goods for profit, we might interrogate this distinction more specifically: how do the economic practices of each merchant seek to please God? Ultimately, I argue that Antonio imagines himself as a dispossessed instrument
of God’s pleasure, and he plays out that lack of possession by being dispossessed from the teleology of his economic practices. Shylock, on the other hand, acts as a self-possessed co-creator of God’s pleasure and his economic practices likewise instrumentalize this dynamic. The theatrical practices these men articulate via their economic practices ultimately take the guise of a theological polemic, whereby mercy and justice signify the mercantile-like exchanges among humans that God watches and oversees. Where this first section set up Shylock’s tragedy as that of the paradoxical stranger on the threshold of the Christian’s world of belonging who tried to authenticate himself to his otherness by staging his own theatre of justice within their theatre of mercy, the next section locates how exactly that authentication fails by examining Portia’s theatre of mercy and Antonio’s proto-capitalism. I argue that each situates Shylock’s possession of himself and his capital as inauthentic precisely because it does not please God the spectator as they imagine Him.

### 3.2 Recognizing the Actor: A Theo-politics of Possession and Authenticity

Shakespeare’s play situates two disparate economic outlooks constitutive of Europe’s nascent capitalism within a theological polemic that doubles as a metatheatrical polemic on acting. In other words, the economic models to which Shylock and the Christians subscribe are also models of theatrical performance, but they only appear us such within the valences of theological debate: namely, mercy versus justice. In their examination of the economic morality of the play, “Universal Shylockery,” Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy point out the etymological link
between merchant and mercy. Mercy "is derived from *merches*, that is, from the same root as *merchant*, meaning 'payment,' 'recompense,' and 'revenue.' What is *revenu* in talk of mercy is mercantile revenue. Christianity is the spiritualization of the originally material" (4). Morality always comes back to contractual relationships, to making things bind, to making bonds. Shylock is the mortar for an architecture of desire that could not hold without him. He lends the money, the mediation, to make possible the contracts among Bassanio, Portia, and Antonio, but he never crosses the threshold into their world—until, of course, he is forcibly converted, albeit theatrically converted, into that world.

The economic theft of Shylock’s goods and his non-consensual conversion are, significantly, accomplished and justified by Portia’s theatrical moral code, emblematized by her theology of mercy:

> But mercy is above this sceptered sway.  
> It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
> It is an attribute to God himself,  
> And earthly power doth then show likest God’s  
> When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this:  
> That in the course of justice, none of us  
> Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,  
> And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
> The deeds of mercy. (4.1.189-198)
Portia’s famous speech on the quality of mercy is as much a litigious warning to
Shylock as it is a theatrical foretelling: in the course of justice, Shylock, don’t expect
salvation. Salvation, from the Latin salvere, meaning “to save,” connotes an
economic strategy for the rendering of God’s reconciliation: to keep something from
being lost or wasted. Portia associates Shylock’s desire for justice with being lost or
wasted to God. Prayer, or supplication to God, which “doth teach us all to render the
deeds of mercy,” is the spiritualization of the originally material way to exchange
reciprocities in pursuit of fairness, namely requests to one another directly. The
prayerful desire for mercy/payment galvanizes fair distribution by means of God’s
invisible hand, a sort of supply and demand logic that generates equilibrium.

Mercy, however, is not merely economic practice, according to Portia; rather,
it is “an attribute to God himself.” According to the Christians, to manifest mercy in
one’s economic exchanges with one’s fellow man is to manifest God. Of course, to
manifest God is also to manifest the condition of humankind before an egregious fall
from paradise: “And God said, Let vs make man in our Image, after our likenesse:
and let them haue dominion ouer the fish of the sea, and ouer the foule of the aire,
and ouer the cattell, and ouer all the earth, and ouer euery creeping thing that
creepeth vpon the earth” (KJV, Gen. 1. 26). Mercy, then, is the hermeneutical attempt
by the Christians to imagine what means of human exchange here in a fallen earth
most pleases God, insofar as God ultimately wants to see himself in humanity again.

We are getting closer, I think, to the kind of spectator the Christians imagine
God to be: God is pleased in how they act towards one another insofar as God sees
himself in their performances. The logic is circular, but that's arguably what makes it so useful in terms of signaling a model of theatrical practice: we can know who we are to play insofar as we know that we are to manifest the audience, God, and we know how to manifest that audience, God, because He is happy when He sees himself in us. The missing piece that makes the model of theatrical practice coherent is the invisible hand of mercy that renders God as both spectator and transcendent director of humans. The prayer for mercy, or the direct communication with God the watcher of men to be kind and compassionate to their behaviors on earth, teaches “us all to render the deeds of mercy,” or to be kind and compassionate to one another. In other words, the practice of mercy is what allows Christians to recognize what God wants and to be recognized by God. Mercy, in effect, is the theoretical—and fundamentally mercantile insofar as it yields the revenue of salvation—lynchpin that makes sense of a Christian consciousness that can justify God as both spectator in heaven and director on earth.

46 The link between the audience and mercy is similarly invoked in Prospero’s epilogue to the audience in The Tempest: “Now I want/Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,/And my ending is despair,/Unless I be relieved by prayer,/Which pierces so that it assaults/Mercy itself, and frees all faults./As from crimes would pardoned be,/Let your indulgence set me free” (Epilogue.14-20). In this epilogue, Prospero asks the god-like audience to release him from the fallen, illusory world of the theatre through their “indulgence,” a metaphor for both their pleasure/applause and the ability to remit sins. If we follow the metaphor through, the sin or “fault” of Prospero is the onus of having to play for God’s/the audience’s pleasure in the first place—recognition of the fallen human condition that requires a conscious performance as opposed to an unconscious authenticity. The petition, or prayer, to the audience for mercy and clemency is “that same prayer” that teaches “us all to render the deeds of mercy”—indeed Prospero’s main argument that he should be released from the theater is that he has been merciful himself and “pardoned the deceiver,” namely Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian, and Caliban, the ones who had tried to undo him (Epilogue.7). Mercy, in Prospero’s epilogue, is similarly a theological motif that doubles as a theatrical practice that renders the audience as both watcher and director of action: I have been directed by your pleasure of me and so have been pleasurable, so please, be pleased by me. The economic valences are also implicit: pay me with your pleasure as I’ve paid you with my pleasing performance.
By “director” I do not mean the modern sense of a theatrical or even cinematic director who manages the actors, plot, and scene development of a given production. Rather, I mean the very literal sense of one who “directs, rules or guides; one that has authority over another” (OED). God has this authority, but it is Portia who acts as interpreter of that authority and then ultimately surrogate for it. This is important because she is acting herself. Dressed as Balthazar and playacting the part of a judge allow Portia to direct the scene exactly as she wants. The irony of course is that the moral code of mercy she espouses and the theatrical gaze of God it enacts is actually her gaze. I will return to what this gaze accomplishes more explicitly in the final section of this chapter. What I’d like to do now, without losing track of the comparison, is examine the relationships between Shylock’s theology of justice, his model of theatrical performance, and the economic figurations that make sense of each.

If Portia’s mercy is the mercantile logic of human exchange that justifies the pleasure of God as both explicit spectator and implicit director, then what exactly is Shylock’s economic model of exchange that I argue also serves as a model for theatrical practice? One of the most contentious theological debates in the play is between Antonio and Shylock and it tellingly involves the reproduction of bodies, or the materialization as opposed to spiritualization of the creative instinct. In a

47 As John Astington notes in Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time: The Art of Stage Playing, “Extended rehearsal periods under the supervision of a director developed only in the later nineteenth-century theatre, and even then they were something of a luxury...Searching and original work on text and character simultaneously with attention to an ensemble style, overseen by one guiding artistic intelligence, the kind of approach practised at the Royal Shakespeare Company, for example, from about 1960 onwards, stems from such experimental nineteenth-century practice as that pioneered by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, and, notably, Konstantin Stanislavski” (140).
sophisticated justification of his own practice of usury, Shylock retells the biblical parable of Jacob and the flocks. Jacob, after spending years in service to Laban asks to finally go back to his homeland. Laban, seeing what a loss that would be, suggests he pay him some wages to stay instead. Jacob counteroffers this:

Thou shalt not give me any thing; if thou wilt doe this thing for mee, I will againe feed and keepe thy flocke. I will passe through all thy flocke to day, remouing from thence all the speckled and spotted cattell: and all the browne cattell among the sheepe, and the spotted and speckled among the goates, and of such shalbe my hire. So shall my righteousnesse answere for mee in time to come, when it shall come for my hire, before thy face: every one that is not speckled and spotted amongst the goates, and browne amongst the sheepe, that shalbe counted stollen with me. (KJV, Gen. 30. 31-33)

Jacob then proceeds to use his husbandry to fix the game in his favour, mating all the strongest ewes that are spotted. Shylock loves this parable. After retelling the story to Antonio, he concludes, “This was a way to thrive, and he was blest:/And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not” (1.3.85-86). The Christian Antonio is not convinced. He replies, “This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for/A thing not in his power to bring to pass/But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven” (1.3.86-88).

Shylock’s hermeneutics figure humans as blest not insofar as they are able to be swayed by an invisible telos, but instead in how careful, productive, and thrifty
they are with what they have been given. The raw material of the world is a blessing only insofar as you fashion it. The pleasure God the audience takes in your performance on the theatre of earth is in how well you have manipulated the resources of that theatre toward yours (and implicitly God’s) success. In this way, God is less like an invisible director and much more like an impresario, the Philip Henslowe of the stage who finances and organizes the production but ultimately leaves it up the actors to pull everything together.

More importantly, justice, for Shylock’s Jacob, does not work under the logic of an eye for an eye, where the loss of one thing finds its equilibrium in the loss of another.48 While the eye for an eye law concerns punishment, Laban understands payment in similar terms: he will pay Jacob the equivalent of his labor in wages. Jacob redistributes these equivalencies in his favor by first taking away Laban’s authority over distributing them and second by removing the symbolic medium of wage payment and replacing it with the material objects themselves: the ewes and rams. In this way, just payment for Shylock’s Jacob is not rendered by a top-down authority, but is rendered by Jacob’s actual performance. What Jacob earns will depend on how good his performance is, not that he merely showed up. Likewise, how much God the spectator-impresario will profit—pleasure-wise and otherwise—will also depend on how good Jacob’s performance is. Indeed, God makes Jacob the father of all the tribes of Israel, he likes his performance so much.

48 "Breach, for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him againe" (KJV, Lev. 24. 20).
So far, I have been suggesting that mercy and justice are applied by Portia and Shylock as fundamentally economic arrangements that achieve coherence in theatrical models of being whereby God functions as spectator. What I’d like to do now is look more closely at the economic models to which Antonio and Shylock actually ascribe and situate those models within Europe’s nascent capitalism. What I hope to reveal by doing so is twofold: first, how each merchant authenticates himself to his economic practices; and second, how that authentication doubles back on the spiritual conflict staged in the Jacob polemic. The biggest difference between the two merchants, I think, comes down to the way they understand possession, where possession signals both the act of actually holding on to something and the act of appearing to others to hold on to something. The conflict between both Jacobs is precisely this conflict between actually possessing wealth and appearing to God the audience in the possession of that wealth. Both Jacobs possess material wealth and so God’s favour, but Shylock’s Jacob does not dissemble his agency in the accumulation of that wealth, whereas Antonio’s Jacob denies he has any agency at all. The conflict, then, is a conflict about the production of illusion in the acting self. Does the actor possess and influence his own characterization (Shylock) or is the actor merely an aeolian harp of resonance whereby the character merely comes to be (Antonio)? To get at some answers I want to take a brief excursion into how each merchant understands possession—in terms of the self, in term of their capital, and in terms of their broader socio-political moment of nascent capitalism—and then map those valences back onto the Jacob parable, revealing, I hope, two models of an actor’s authenticity within the Judeo-Christian drama of God the watcher of men.
The Merchant of Venice begins with a meditation on possession itself, albeit self-possession. The Merchant Antonio laments, “In sooth I know not why I am so sad....such a want-wit sadness makes of me/That I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.1-6). When it comes to thinking about himself, Antonio is dispossessed and pessimistic, but when it comes to thinking about his economic capital, he is unusually optimistic: “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted/Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate/Upon the fortune of this present year:/Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad” (1.1.41-44). Antonio’s material goods have no real value yet. All his wealth is potential, trapped overseas on ships yet to reach portage, threatened by pirates and tempests, yet this does not seem to be a problem for him. How is it that a self-possessed man has come to feel less assured of that self than of merchandise whose recuperation and value he only partially possesses? The merchant of Venice is a good early modern businessman with a diversified portfolio: his chips are in several pots. Yet in terms of the dispossession of himself, the “much ado” to know himself, Antonio seems to have put all of himself into one pot. Arguably, this is something someone in love does, someone content to stop gambling on affections and invest in one potential paramour.

Bassanio, Antonio’s source of affection and dispossession, has a complementary set of economic and romantic problems. His “faint means” and prodigious debt are exceeded only by his love of a certain gentlewoman Portia, whose class is well out of his societal reach (1.1.125). To broker both, Bassanio plans to woo the lady and in marriage pay off the debt. In order to get the lady, however, he must first have some capital. This is where Antonio comes in, the
optimistic venture capitalist who also happens to be, to use a gambling term, “all in” for Bassanio. The merchant Antonio, whom Bassanio owes “the most in money and in love,” has enough credit to become just such capital (1.1.131). In terms of Sedgwick’s model of homosocial desire, if Antonio can get Portia for Bassanio, then Antonio has Bassanio.49

What makes The Merchant of Venice particularly interesting is that the triangular geometry in this economics of desire and possession doesn’t quite work. There’s a fourth player needed. Antonio can’t get Portia for Bassanio without the money lender Shylock. In the first case, all his capital is merely promise. In the second, Portia has no real power under the law to circumvent Antonio’s or her father’s economic agency. Shylock the Jewish outsider must provide the material means for the so far immaterial love unions of his Christian relations. Shylock’s admission into this threesome is only partial: while he is recognized as a necessary and functional part of its circuitry, he is denied access to its results. Portia will get to be with the man she loves, while retaining her autonomy and capital; Antonio will prove his love to Bassanio who will then remain forever in his debt and service; and Bassanio will achieve economic solvency while simultaneously gaining social acumen through his marriage and fraternal solidarity with the leading businessman of Venice. It’s a win, win, win. Except for Shylock. Should Shylock’s money be returned to him plus a little interest, he will not have gained any greater access to

49 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. See also Janet Adelman’s reading of homosocial desire and Antonio’s sadness in “Male Bonding in Shakespeare’s Comedies” in Shakespeare’s Rough Magic, pp. 73–103.
this society, any greater possession of its network of reciprocities. Shylock knows this. When Antonio asks for the ducats, Shylock takes the ripe opportunity to remind Antonio just how much Antonio has abused and dispossessed him:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my monies and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help: (1.3.98-106)

Shylock makes it a point to tell Antonio that the causes for which he has been treated cruelly—namely, his Jewishness and his wealth earned from usury—are unjustified because both are his. Much in the same way Antonio entered the play with a meditation on the relationship between identity and possession, so too does Shylock make a similar gesture here in his first physical entrance in the play. But unlike Antonio, Shylock knows exactly who he is—a Jewish Venetian businessman who suffers precisely because he is a Jewish businessman. Where Antonio’s lack of self-possession, or self-knowledge, mirrored his tenuous possession of his material
wealth and his love relations, Shylock’s firm possession of who he is mirrors the firm possession he feels towards his economic practices and his familial relations.

The two merchants’ disparate ideologies on the relationship between self-possession and possession of capital can be further linked to their broader socioeconomic moment: capitalism. The fact that Antonio is willing to exchange economic reciprocities with the Jewish stranger is not lost on Shylock who interrogates and then exposes Antonio’s request as the proto-capitalist negotiation it really is—that is, much more about the accumulation of capital and the creation of a competitive marketplace than about gift-exchange. Shylock sets up Antonio’s history of cruelty toward who he is in order to dramatize what should take place between two such enemies when one seeks the other’s favours. Shylock continues:

Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
'Shylock, we would have monies:' you say so;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: monies is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say
'Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’ Or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this:

'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurn’d me such a day, another time
You call’d me dog: and for these courtesies
I’ll lend you thus much monies’? (1.3.107-120)

I don’t think it is a coincidence that Shylock’s description of himself from the vantage point of Antonio is “a stranger cur over your threshold” that Antonio thoughtlessly kicks aside. By describing himself as an abused stranger who exists on the threshold of Antonio’s world of power, Shylock is able to comically and ironically dramatize a convivial scenario between the two where what’s at stake in its reconciliatory success is Christianity’s version of recognizing and admitting the sinner: mercy. And given the mercantile root at the heart of mercy, what is also at stake is a model of economic exchange. The Jew must have mercy on the Christian’s need and not hold against him his past wrongs in order for the two to genuinely exchange reciprocities, and more specifically, actual money. If Antonio understands the implications of Shylock’s dramatic re-enactment correctly, then by agreeing to accept Shylock’s bond, he would also be agreeing that the Jew is capable of mercy—a capability that would not only put Shylock’s “stranger cur” status in question, but would demand his access and recognition within the powerful circles of the Christian merchants. After all, would he not be one of them, then?

Realizing the dramatic set-up, Antonio counteroffers: “lend it rather to thine enemy,/Who if he break, thou mayst better face/Exact the penalty” (1.3.127-129). In
this way, Antonio keeps the Jew his enemy. But how exactly do you give to the enemy? What kind of oxymoronic philosophy of giving is Antonio suggesting when he asks a man to give to the one person that man wants to destroy? Antonio is suggesting a model of capitalist enterprise in which the means of production—in this case Shylock’s monetary “gift”—operate entirely for profit. In Antonio’s suggested economy, the purpose of a transaction is to create competition by determining the prices at which goods and services are exchanged. In market capitalism, it shouldn’t matter that transactions occur among enemies; if anything, the competition would make the system more robust. Ironically, this is a model of economic exchange linked to Jewish financial practice. Jewish custom prohibited usury among Jews; one could only take interest from strangers. Shylock’s counterfactual dramatic dialog between himself and Antonio, therefore, playfully reveals that the Christian is as much about self-preservation as the Jew, if not more so. Antonio’s response to Shylock reflects a broader early modern response to Jews as dangerous harbingers of capitalism itself.

50 “Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it” (King James Bible, Deut. 23.20).
51 The Renaissance was a period of profound economic transition in Europe from manorial enclaves governed by lords who were in turn governed by the King and by God to democratic publics governed by markets. While mercantile capitalism definitely existed in the Arab world and other ancient trading empires, economic historians widely agree that Venice in particular was the mainspring of modern capitalism, not the least of which was due to abolishing social strictures on usury. Yet as Gil Harris has observed, “Antonio’s trade interests, and his argosies, lead ineluctably away from Venice: Shylock reports that he has ventures abroad in Tripolis, Mexico, the Indies, and England (1.3.15-17)—sites which lead one to conclude Shylock must be more northern European than Mediterranean (Sick Economies 72). The Venice of Shakespeare’s play, then, functions more symbolically as the origin of capitalism than historically as the place where Shylock and Antonio are actually located. Indeed, many scholars have argued for a reading of Shylock “against the background of English history” and have, according to Walter Cohen, “justifiably seen Shylock, and especially his lending habits, as the embodiment of capitalism. The last third of the sixteenth century witnessed a sequence of denunciations of the spread of usury. In The Speculation of Usurie, published during the
moneylender was needed both to facilitate European capitalism and to stand in for its fundamental corruption, so too does the dispossessed Antonio need the self-possessed Jewish Shylock to facilitate his economic interests and to stand in for the corruption of them simultaneously.

I have been comparing the disparate ways Shylock and Antonio possess themselves and their capital as well as the ways they come to make exchanges with one another as enemies in order to reveal how this socio-economic set-up ultimately takes on theological and theatrical valences in the debate the two men have about Jacob: Antonio can dissemble his proto-capitalist philosophies under the guise of being moved by transcendent, spectacular laws. Indeed, Antonio espouses a proto-capitalist policy of economic transaction among strangers, even enemies, that maintains the distance of those relations for the adequate perpetuation of the system—the unequivocal belief in the value of his ship’s goods governs their absolute distribution. Similarly, he espouses a model of relationship to God in the Jacob parable that maintains the distance of God and man through a similar unequivocal belief that the value of heaven governs the conscious and unconscious

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year Shakespeare’s play may first have been performed, Thomas Bell expresses a typical sense of outrage. 'Now, now is nothing more frequent with the rich men of this world, than to writhe about the neckes of their poore neighbours, and to impouerish them with the filthie lucre of Usurie.' Behind this fear lay the transition to capitalism: the rise of banking; the increasing need for credit in industrial enterprises; and the growing threat of indebtedness facing both aristocratic landlords and, above all, small, independent producers, who could easily decline to working-class status...” (767-768). The fear behind the transition to capitalism very often pointed its trembling finger at the Jew, whose increasing presence in England corresponded to the growth of capitalism throughout Europe and whose influence was often at its center. Most significantly, in the early days of undeveloped capitalism, the perceived threat of the Jew was not that he sought wealth or gain, “only that he did all this openly, not thinking it wrong, and that he scrupulously and mercilessly looked after his business interests” (Sombart 96). As such, the Jew was “regarded as the representative of an economic outlook”—an outlook that was threatening precisely because it was open, self-possessed, and did not dissemble (96).
behaviors of good men. To be authentic in one’s economic transactions with one’s fellow men and with one’s God is to be led, to use Adam Smith’s famous term, by an invisible hand.

Adam Smith, one of the first political economists, argued in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “The rich...are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society” (215).52 It is fascinating to see just how much Antonio’s late sixteenth-century socio-economic logic mirrors one of the first articulations of free-market capitalism, a philosophy that would later be used to justify laissez-faire economic policies. The central ideology—and irony—behind the philosophy of ungoverned, authentic self-interest is that it actually is governed by something beyond the management of humans: an invisible circulating power that generates the telos of the relations. It is this invisible circulating power that Antonio reasons comes from God the spectator—the “hand of heaven” that both watches and determines the performances.

Shylock, on the other hand, espouses a philosophy of economic circulation that is absolutely dependent on human agency and manipulation. He does not dissemble his economic practices, nor does he assume that God the spectator is

52 Smith probably knew of, and arguably borrowed, the invisible hand metaphor from *Macbeth*, the protagonist himself a paragon of self-interest. Having killed the Scottish king for his own ascendency, Macbeth is soon caught in a downward spiral of murderous acts in order to cover his tracks. In Act III, Macbeth urges his wife not to inquire into the details of these acts, specifically the order to kill Banquo: “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,/Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeing night,/Scarce up the tender eye of pitiful day;/And with thy bloody and invisible hand/Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/Which keeps me pale” (3.2.47-52). It’s unclear, however, whether Smith had read *The Merchant of Venice* or not.
managing those practices in any explicit way. Instead, he embraces a model of relationship to God that purposefully uses the materials of the world to make a better performance. Like Jacob, he will fix the litigious game toward his own profit by exacting one pound of flesh from Antonio's body, simultaneously achieving his and God’s desires: revenge upon the spiritual and cultural enemy. To be an authentic actor for Shylock is to actively create the performance that is your world for the pleasure that is God the spectator; authenticity is the capacity to fully possess and occupy the role(s) you are playing as your own creations and the exchanges made in the name of those roles as yours as well. For Antonio, to be authentic is to perform a world that already precedes him for the pleasure of God the spectator who knows and determines what will happen; authenticity is the capacity to enter into and occupy a fully complete role, but one that cannot take personal ownership of the inevitable exchanges made in the name of that predetermined role.

Both Portia and Antonio situate Shylock’s willingness to be publically open and to publically own, so to speak, the nature of his wealth and the nature of his person as ultimately displeasurable to God the watcher and director of men; Shylock cannot authentically gain God’s spectator approval because he assumes he is in control of it. And yet Portia and Antonio each betray their indictments of Shylock by revealing a paradox in their own versions of right theatricality: Portia’s circular logic of God’s merciful salvation to which sinners must yield is achieved only by paradoxically standing in for God herself, and Antonio’s dispossessed acquiescence to the will of God is achieved only by paradoxically participating in economic
exchanges that benefit him. If “the Jew-as-stranger has the potential to recall Christianity to its own internal alien,” I’d like to think that that internal alien is the even stranger consciousness that someone up there is watching you and you must improvise your world toward his pleasure. Shylock, as “a figure for the disowned other within the self,” is simultaneously the figure of the disowned actor within the Christian imaginary of authenticity.

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Implicit in the metaphor of human as actor is another master metaphor: the world as a theatre. The two men’s ethics of authenticity stage concomitant ethics of admission: are you recognized and given access by how well you live in the world or how well you let the world live through you? Indeed, Antonio famously espouses a *theatrum mundi* view of everyday life: “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano/A stage, where every man must play a part/And mine a sad one” (1.1.77-79), but unlike Shylock, he seems incapable of playing more than one part on it. The ethical repudiations of the early church fathers and later philosophers had everything to do with an inability to accept this commensurability between the stage and the world as a legitimate “critical concept,” as Alan Read argues in *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance:*

To understand everyday life not just as lived daily experience, that is talking, walking, dwelling, cooking and reading, but as a critical concept which derives from these quotidian practices, provides a perspective from which to understand theatre. Everyday life is after
all the habitual world which would appear to differ most greatly from theatre. (ix)

Read argues that everyday life is infused by the theatrical; the boundaries between the real and the theatrical, he contends, become much more interesting than those boundaries defining theatrical practice and theory. I agree, but I think the obscure boundaries between the real and the theatrical might more accurately be described as boundaries between presence and mediation. The “habitual world” and the stage, I argue, attain their greatest metaphorical symmetry not in the theatre as home, as Read imagines, but in the theatre as business, and specifically the actor as worker, where the presence of the actor is always mediated by the fact that he or she is working for the audience’s pleasure. In the next section, I’d like to look more closely at the boundary between the real and the theatrical in terms of the actor as worker. The muddy boundaries between mercy and mercantile revenue that

53 For an innovative, epistemological reading of the conflict between reality-in-itself and the perception of reality as experienced by early moderns amidst rapid historical, theological, and technological change, see Robert N. Watson’s Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance, especially his chapter on transubstantiation, “Chapter Two: Theology, Semiotics, and Literature,” pp. 36-73. Watson observes that each contested way of understanding transubstantiation in the period implied “a particular phenomenology. Is the reality fully present out there in the living material substances, does it acquire its full reality only in us, or are we always limited to signals from that reality that remind us of a lost presence that we can hope to regain only by miracle? Can we (like angels) hold the essence of a thing, vital or otherwise, without fully participating in its material substance? Whether the Communion can be good enough if Christ is not physically present in the Host is largely the same question as whether our communion with natural reality can be good enough if we cannot ever incorporate, encompass, comprehend the things in themselves, rather than just virtual representations of them in our sensory and cognitive arrays” (38). Arguably, the phenomenological questions that underlie the early modern theological polemic of transubstantiation are similarly played out in the theatrical question of the actor’s presence.
orchestrate the conversational give-over of Shylock’s revenue to the Christians are mirrored in the muddy boundaries between being and working that the theatre as a commercial art form orchestrates. Significantly, at the threshold of each is a live body. While Shylock’s lack of access to Antonio’s world depends upon an oppositional theo-political poetics of authenticity, those politics are defined within a commercial relationship—a relationship, I argue, that stakes its term of access in the body itself and the Judeo-Christian shame than attends that body. Shame is a particular way of coming to know and possess the self. In a play obsessed with the possession of things and others, it makes sense, I think, that by the end of *The Merchant of Venice* almost every character is in some way or another ashamed, including the audience.

### 3.3 Given Access: The Actor as Shameful Labourer

The trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most metatheatrical scenes in all of Shakespeare. Trials in general are almost perfect analogs of the theatrical situation: lawyers representing defendant-characters and being judged by a jury-audience on their ability to adequately represent the motives and behaviors of their characters. What becomes clear in a trial is the value of jury approval over lawyer responsibility. That is, inasmuch as the lawyer is representing and working for her client, what she is really doing is working for the approval of the jury. The same of course can be said of the commercial theatre; it is more concerned with spectator pleasure than actor responsibility. Actors are servants of the audience’s pleasure, and their labor is what produces that pleasure. Paying money for another’s work is
one thing. I buy a painting, a house, a meal, though I am seldom in the presence of
the artist, the architect, or the chef while they made it. Paying money for the
pleasure of *watching* another work for you is quite another thing. Ridout points out:

The prostitute who is both seller and commodity is emblematic of
modern capitalism for Benjamin, because she makes visible the nature
of the underlying economy. The moment you recognize the actor in
similar terms, a certain awkwardness or embarrassment comes into
the relationship. (27)

The comparison of prostitute-client to performer-audience exposes the reality of the
economic situation that underlies both. The prostitute and the actor are *working*. At
stake in the comparison between them as both seller and commodity is the body
itself, and more specifically, the pleasure another’s body can afford. Antonio is both
the seller of a bond and the bond itself; in this way he is like the actor, working for
Shylock’s pleasure—indeed, it was Shylock’s idea to make Antonio’s body his bond.
Shylock wants the bond that is Antonio’s body regardless of the fact that it has no
exchange value because the value of Antonio’s body is the scopophilic pleasure it
will bring to Shylock watching its destruction.

Even the Duke does not understand why Shylock, the supposedly greedy Jew,
would want a piece of Antonio’s useless body. At the beginning of the trial scene, the
Duke asks Shylock what he could possibly gain from “this poor merchant’s flesh”
(4.1.23) to which Shylock answers, “I’ll not answer that! But say it is my humour. Is
it answered?” (4.1.41-42). What Shylock stands to gain is just that: his humour, a uniquely early modern double entendre for both his fixation of character and his whim, each of which would give him pleasure at having bought Antonio’s pain. It is clear that Shylock’s justification of his humour is Antonio’s punishment, not anything specifically wrong Antonio did. As Critchely and McCarthy explain “punishment is a corporeal payment for a criminal act and has nothing to do with something as ethereal as responsibility. The point is that the punishment of the criminal gives pleasure to the punisher” (4). Indeed, Shylock’s humour is his point:

What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
Some that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others when the bagpipe sings i’the nose
Cannot contain their urine: for affection
Masters oft passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rendered
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a woolen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended:

So can I give no reason, nor I will not,

More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing

I bear Antonio, that I follow thus

A losing suit against him. Are you answered? (4.1.52-59)

Aversion has no real cause or justification, only effects. As Kenneth Gross argues, “In the ‘gaping pig’ speech, Shylock says nothing about Jews or Christians, or even humans in general, only ‘some men’” (67). Some hate pigs and some cats; some piss when they hear a bagpipe. The point is, every man hates something and the experience of that something causes him to become offensive even while the first offense was put upon him. The speech is certainly a parody (taking offense at offense), but it is significantly a parody about all men’s bankrupt moral self-accounting. Therein is the bite. Shylock’s “strange apparent cruelty” (4.1.21) is embarrassing for the whole court because it makes visible the underlying nature of the law’s ethical foundation: that punishment is about the punisher’s pleasure, not the citizenry’s responsibility.

Shylock’s cruelty also makes visible the underlying nature of the commercial theatre, which is arguably schadenfreude: the continuation of the show depends upon the audience’s pleasure, not the actor’s authority. Antonio’s body, as commodity and seller of that commodity, serves Shylock’s pleasure insofar as the theatre that is being staged here is Shylock’s revenge theatre, with Shylock as audience and Antonio as performer of due justice. That said, Antonio turns his
victimization into a Christ-like performance of sacrifice for the greater good of Bassanio’s solvency and marriage. When Bassanio attempts to stand in for Antonio—“The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,/Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood” (4.1.112-113)—Antonio does not allow it. He responds to Bassanio with a speech that implicitly references the polemic he had earlier with Shylock on the parable of the sheep:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.
You cannot be better employed, Bassanio,
Than to live still and write mine epitaph. (4.1.114-118)

Antonio as the wether is a castrated ram, a useless beast that the shepherd culls from the flock; as a piece of poor fruit, he is similarly culled early from the harvest. In both metaphors, Antonio’s death will be “swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven,” thereby confirming and authenticating himself to the Christian God who watches and directs his life. In this way, Antonio plays his role like a good method actor, bound to a character and a script that cannot be improvised upon or changed according to a more dynamic relationship with the audience; Shylock is not to be convinced otherwise and Bassanio is not to take Antonio’s place. Antonio turns Shylock’s revenge theatre, where he is to play the dispossessed victim and Shylock
the possessed punisher, into a cosmic theatre where he, like Christ, serves for God in order to redeem his friends.

If the play ended here—with Shylock manipulating the game like his Jacob and receiving his pound of flesh, and Antonio being swayed by the game like his Jacob and mercifully giving of himself for Bassanio—then we’d have a fairly ambiguous, even ecumenical, portrait of the relationships between acting in the world, God’s spectating of that world, and working for others in the world. To each his own. But the play doesn’t end there. In fact, just after Antonio asks Bassanio to write his epitaph, Nerissa enters disguised as a lawyer’s clerk. The tables are about to turn. Shylock, the pleasure-seeking audience member to Antonio’s forced performance of due justice, is about to become the actor for an audience of Christians who, ironically, want to sway that hand pretty directly in their favour. The way they do this is two-fold: by shaming Shylock and by forcing his dissimulation. First, they force him to recognize the inherent cruelty (or that underlying foundation) that attends the consummation of a body for no purpose but one’s humour; and then in a clever eye-for-an-eye reversal, they turn him into an actor who must be swayed by their direction. By taking Shylock’s scopophilic pleasure from him and turning their eyes upon him and his body, the Christians stage a scene in which Shylock is now working for their pleasure. It is in that reversal of roles that Shylock is returned to his own body: he physically becomes ill. Most significantly, Shylock’s sudden experience of himself by himself, viscerally no less, happens by way of becoming an actor: you become an actor when you become aware that someone is watching you and expecting something from you in that gaze.
Of course, it’s not as if Shylock wasn’t already aware of himself in this way, imagining his life in terms of God’s spectatorship. The difference here is that Portia has taken over Jehovah’s gaze. Where justice in the court was to proceed according to the gaze of a law-abiding God, Shylock felt no shame as that justice continued on its inevitable path. It’s only when Portia takes over the court and has it run according to her gaze, which is the gaze of a mercy-inclined God, does Shylock realize he is no longer an actor for an audience he has hitherto imagined. What’s worse, Shylock’s desire for that audience in his mind is outing publically. And it is that outing of his mind’s desire for a certain kind of spectatorship that returns him to himself, returns him to a realization that he must act differently, and more importantly, that that acting will not be authentic.

Ridout fleshes out the relationships of the actor and the audience and of being watched and feeling shame with a personal anecdote on attending the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2000 production of Richard II. At one point in the production, Richard II/Samuel West looks Ridout in the eye when delivering his lines. Ridout comments that when he was young and Brechtian, he was “all for eye contact” (70). Yet when Samuel West really does look at him, Ridout finds it “embarrassing.” Why? Ridout does not know how to respond to West. Does he smile? Does he make no expression? And is it West with whom he should be communicating or is it Richard II? By looking Ridout in the eye, West exposes Ridout’s excitement: “To find oneself communicating this excitement to another person, and, what’s worse, to a stranger who is strangely familiar, is to have one’s desire outing” (88). The theatre invites and produces a desire it can’t ever satiate: a
desire to participate with another without actually having to participate. An onanistic desire that, once revealed as such, can no longer experience that desire:

The Theatre invites and produces this desire and then, in the reverse gaze which is perhaps the key signifier of its ontological distinction from film and television, betrays it, dumping you back where you are, in your seat, to nurse the shame of having your desire thus exposed. (88).

Ridout feels shame because he is suddenly looked at by one who is strange. He expects the actor/character Samuel West/Richard II to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, and in that disjuncture, Ridout suddenly becomes self-conscious of where he is and what he is doing.54 Similarly, in the trial scene, the court, or “the stranger who is strangely familiar” to Shylock, looks back at him, and Shylock, “the stranger who is strangely familiar” to the court looks back at it. “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” (4.1.34). In that moment of simultaneous recognition and impasse, Shylock names it: he will not, like “some men,” “yield to such inevitable shame/As to offend, himself being offended” (4.1.56-58). Gross points out that the Folio version of the line has no comma and reads, “As to offend himself being offended.” Gross concludes that Shylock “implicitly acknowledges something of his own shame, humiliation, and terror in this scene” (69). It’s a complex

54 Ridout’s description of shame as an experience of the self by the self is taken directly from Silvan Tomkins. Known as the father of affect theory, Tomkins’ four volume book *Affect, Imagery, and Consciousness* explores in extensive detail the positive and negative affects that motivate humans and how cognition affects these biologically-based emotive systems.
acknowledgment. At the same time as Shylock is rhetorically refusing shame in the eyes of justice and demanding his bond, Shylock is also admitting that shame is inevitable. If Shylock recognizes what the court really is—a Christian mafia aimed to make him lose—he offends *himself being offended*. If Shylock recognizes what he really is—a man with a powerful desire for revenge—he offends *himself being offended*. In the first case, by admitting the court into his concept of self, he becomes, as Gratiano later calls him, a “damned, inexecrable dog,” and he is ashamed (4.1.127). In the second case, by admitting his own motivations, he recognizes that they might actually be cruel and selfish, and he is ashamed. Shylock’s desire is being outed. Indeed, the entire fourth act trial scene can be described as an almost tediously long exposure of Shylock’s desires for the purpose of profoundly shaming him. Portia, disguised as Doctor Balthazar, takes a long time agreeing with “the Jew’s” right to his bond forcing Shylock into what A.R. Braunmuller calls “a louder and louder insistence on the bond” (xliii).

Portia: Why then, thus it is:
You must prepare your bosom for his knife.

Shylock: O noble judge, O excellent young man!

Portia: For the intent and purpose of the law
Hath full relation to the penalty
Which here appeareth due upon the bond.

Shylock: ’Tis very true. O wise and upright judge,
How much more elder art thou than thy looks! (4.1.240-247)
And then shortly later:

Portia: A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine,

The court awards it, and the law doth give it.

Shylock: Most rightful judge!

Portia: And you must cut his flesh from off his breast;

The law allows it, and the court awards it.

Shylock: Most learned judge! A sentence: come, prepare.

(4.1.295-300)

Other glosses of the line reveal Shylock's almost gratuitous enthusiasm for cutting up Antonio: "Most learned judge! A sentence! Come, prepare!" But to whom exactly is Shylock talking? Who is supposed to prepare? Antonio? Himself? Both? I prefer the subtler syntax of the colon in the New Cambridge Edition: "A sentence: come, prepare." It is almost like what God privately said to Jacob perhaps, before Jacob took his offer to Laban. Come, prepare Jacob, and you will escape. Shylock's desire is about to be consummated. A desire that has spiritual, cosmic relevance. Portia has teased him into a frenzy of excitement, a joyful belief that his rights, indeed his personhood has been recognized and given access to the law, under—and this is critical—his own terms, which of course being a man who is acting for God, are God's terms. When she then suddenly takes the bait away—"Tarry a little, there is something else" (4.1.301)—when she uses equivocation to deny Shylock's bond,
something she had planned on doing from the start, Shylock quickly realizes the
trick, sobers up, and retorts, “I take this offer then. Pay the bond thrice/And let the
Christian go” (4.1.313-314). But it’s too late. The mercy—and the revenue at its
root—that he did not show Antonio will now not be shown to him.

By linking Ridout’s shame to Shylock’s shaming, I have attempted to reveal the
crisis of admission and recognition at the heart of the spectator-actor
relationship staged in the trial scene. The reason Ridout feels ashamed is because he
recognizes that there is perhaps something dishonorable about the conduct of a
spectator: paying for the pleasure to watch someone else’s body perform for you.
The real underlying economy of prostitution and the theatre, arguably, is that both
consume bodies for non-productive profits. Portia attempts to shame Shylock with a
similar gesture—namely, by getting him to recognize that it is dishonorable and
shameful to consume Antonio’s body for his own pleasure. For both Ridout and
Shylock, however, that shaming only works when they are admitted as players in
their own productions, exposed and incorporated in the reverse gaze of the stage,
each no longer spectators to a show governed by their private humours but instead
players having to negotiate how exactly to play their new parts. The shame they
experience—the self absorbed in its own fantasies now uncomfortably returned to
the self revealed as producer of those fantasies—comes from the simultaneity of
becoming a player and recognizing the underlying foundation of playing itself: that
it is made of bodies working for someone else’s gratification. I’m not sure Ridout
would articulate his own shame as coming from an obligation to perform for
Richard II/Samuel West’s pleasures, but I think that his anxiety of not knowing how
to act comes from an awareness first and foremost that he *must now act*. And that is exactly what happens to Shylock. He *must now act*. And not for God’s justice but for the Christians’ pleasure. And it’s his body and his goods now that will be consumed.

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I have said some ostensibly contradictory things in this analysis. On the one hand, I have suggested that Shylock is a proponent of a conservative ethic of authenticity that figures constancy and order as key characteristics—hence his unwillingness to be converted in his heart. On the other hand, I have argued that Shylock is a chameleon-like master of performance, able to manipulate his identity for his advantage. The first is a philosophy of identity, the second a philosophy of work. Where the two oppose each other rhetorically, they meet in practice: the theatre.

Shylock, Portia, and Antontio have a special need for the theatre. It is perhaps, in the words of Read, “the last human venue” capable of recreating their mutual crises: individual humans that must please a divine spectator through the way they act towards their collective species, economically and socially. The theatre demands intimacy through, paradoxically, distance: an audience witnessing moving bodies. And it achieves that intimacy precisely in the shift from the objective to the subjective:

If the day ever dawned when men became truly able to live “in themselves,” like Rousseau’s imagined savages, if the dangers of theatricality ever ceased to threaten us in our daily lives, then perhaps
our special need for the theatre as an art form might also vanish: it would no longer confront us with an account of our own truth struggling against our own falsity. (Barish 477)

These are some of the last few sentences of Barish's nearly five-hundred page tome. I'm struck most by the shift of pronoun—from the objective “men” to the subjective “our.” The antitheatrical prejudice speaks to a fundamental metaphysical anxiety: am I knowable—to myself, to others, to God—by what I do or by who I am, and what exactly is the difference? It is a prejudice that aims at something concrete—a stage, an actor, an audience—and reveals in that aim that something far more intangible is being attacked. Can we ever mutually recognize one another? Can we ever be given access to another’s reality? Will we ever really be known and understood in our singularity?

When West looked at Ridout, I doubt he saw Ridout in his singularity—that is, one man in a nice suit looking back at him. Rather, he saw the whole audience. Similarly, when Portia examines Shylock, she is not looking at Shylock the man in front of her with a real life and a real right to the law. She is looking at the Jewish race. The court’s reverse gaze outs Shylock’s pleasure in punishing Antonio and simultaneously shames not him, but all of his people, in that outing. Ridout and Shylock assume the potency of their own singularity over the multitude of which they are actually a part. Moreover, they assume that the face-to-face encounter—one face actually seeing another face—is the phenomenological tool by which selves are returned to themselves and become singular again. Shame, of course, would
have to follow. Someone is actually seeing me. I am returned to myself, and as the psychological story goes, I don’t like what I see.

But the tragedy of The Merchant of Venice isn’t that Shylock finally sees himself in greater accuracy—Sophocles’s Oedipus gouging his eyes out or Camus’s Sisyphus content to carry his burden. Rather, the tragedy is that he assumes others have seen him, when they haven’t. Not unlike an actor on stage who might think the audience has seen him, when they’ve really just seen the illusion of his performance. The commercial theatre only makes explicit what is always already the case in all symbolically mediated relationships: there is something between us that simultaneously facilitates and indeed entitles me to see you and you not to see me. Shylock, the actor, emerges not exclusively in the failure to admit the Jewish Other, but as the constitutive contradiction of performance itself: authenticity is a production.
The Most Characteristic Thersites: Or, the Proper Audience

"I will see you hanged like clotpoles ere I come any more to your tents. I will keep where there is wit stirring and leave the faction of fools."

—Thersites (2.1.105-107)

By taking the stranger as my access point into the twentieth-century critical tradition on human subjectivity and the theatre as the cultural laboratory in which this subjectivity is articulated, I have been able to assume the legitimacy of separation, or division, as a fundamental characteristic of the social self. If the stranger is the external element within a closed system, then a discussion of the stranger, at its most basic articulation, opens up a discussion of fracture within a supposed unity. Herbert Blau's seminal tome on the audience is interested in just this division. A continuation of his phenomenological work on the theatre, The Audience finds its essence of theatre not in the organic community that supposedly evolves from the performative, but in the original splitting of the self that the performative reenacts. Influenced by Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories of fractured subjectivity and Artaud’s theatre of cruelty that sought to repair the breach, Blau argues that “Both assume an ‘original splitting’ (derichement), a suicidal bias through which at every moment we constitute the world” (10). For theatre scholar Blau, the suicidal bias that constitutes the world is fundamental to how we understand the theatrical event, and more specifically the audience:
It is the original splitting that has to be kept in mind in reconceiving the nature of the audience, *who-is-there mirrored there*, including the pitiful victim and escaped outlaw whose sublimations doubled over in performance both expose and disguise the fault. What is being played out, then, is not the image of an original unity but the mysterious rupture of social identity in the moment of emergence. (10)

The audience and the performer do not constitute a unity that repairs or even mediates social identity (i.e. through the virtual, sensorial realities of hearing but not being heard or seeing and not being seen). Rather, they constitute a separation that reifies the heart of social identity itself. As Guy Debord famously articulated it in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle” (25).

Critical to Blau’s notion of the audience is that it “is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire...it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed” (25). This consciousness is the demand that something be set apart in order to be seen. Or, as Blau puts it in his characteristically evocative association of witnessing and understanding: “To be the audience remains the burden of those who understand” (11).55 Using this notion of the audience as a

55 In “Understanding in the Elizabethan Theatres,” William West notes that the “understanders” in the Elizabethan playhouses were quite literally the ones standing under the stage in the pit; they were the “common people” who were more often than not charged with not understanding. West argues the understanders, however, “are those most fully absorbed into the environment of the theater, not set above it to see and be seen but immersed in it indistinctly” (114).
consciousness within the theatrical event that both marks a fundamental separation and carries the burden of understanding that separation, I aim to posit the character of Thersites in Shakespeare’s famously unclassifiable play *Troilus and Cressida* as just such a consciousness.

Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* is one of his most difficult plays to characterize in terms of genre and pathos. Indeed, it was left out of the table of contents in the First Folio, but placed in between the histories and the tragedies, after *Henry VIII* and *Coriolanus*. The story Shakespeare creates is not altogether tragic; it is not preoccupied with historical accuracy; and it is not comically uplifting. The play opens in Troy in the middle of the war—just as it does in Homer’s *Iliad*—with the Greeks camping out on the “Dardan plains” and both sides ready and waiting to prove their worth in the chances of battle: “Now expectation, tickling skittish spirits/On one and other side, Trojan and Greek,/Sets all on hazard” (Prologue. 20-22). But do they ever really prove themselves? As many critics have observed, Shakespeare’s classical heroes are more content to engage in lengthy rhetorical musings than in actual battles.\(^5\)\(^6\) Indeed, *Troilus and Cressida* presents its audience with a mythological topos of lifeless heroes who do little more than preen, argue, and yearn. These are men and women who, in the words of the “scurrilous”

\(^5\) See, for instance, Joseph Navitsky’s “Scurrilous Jests and Retaliatory Abuse in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*,” in which he links the persistent staging of verbal as opposed to physical violence in the play to “late Tudor polemical warfare” (3). Nova Myhill’s “Who Hears in Shakespeare? Auditory worlds on Stage and Screen,” also documents the ways in which hearing and overhearing become the focal points of action in the play. She argues that the play’s use of over-hearing as a substitute for physical action leaves the live “theater audience unable to fully access any perspective except perhaps that of the cynical and extremely biased Thersites. The authority of the early modern theater audience as interpreter is subject to question, since hearing and interpretation are presented as being available only as subjective experiences open to manipulation, misunderstanding, and omission” (163).
Thersites, are empty nuts “with no kernel” (2.1.93). The wits of Achilles, Ulysses, Hector, Troilus, and Cressida lay outside them, in the humor that comes, as Henri Bergson famously observed, in “the absence of feeling” (4). We aren’t supposed to feel pity or admiration for these talking heads and cowardly warriors. By vitiating the epic and affective value of these Trojan legends, Shakespeare offers his audience the only thing they have left to feel: laughter.

The anonymous writer of the 1609 epistolary introduction to the play agrees: “Amongst all there is none more witty than this.” It’s an odd observation given there is nothing overtly comical in the play. While the writer was no doubt trying to sell more copies of a play that had hitherto little (if any) performance history and therefore few examples of popular reception from which to draw, the play does asks something of its audience that a more overt Shakespearean comedy also does: it asks the audience to be aware of itself as an audience, to perceive itself and the activity of perception as it enacts a perspectival omniscience within the fury of confusions, misidentifications, and burlesques of boys pretending to be women pretending to be boys, or men with the heads of donkeys pretending to still be men. The audience is “impelled to make distinctions about what has always obsessed the theatre”: that ambiguous space between what is real and what is appearance, that “referential gap that confuses this and that” (Blau 27). But it’s not the confusion

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57 While the play’s 1603 entry in the official minute-book of the Stationers’ Company reads “The book of Troilus and Cresseda as yt is acted by my lo: Chamberlens Men,” there is controversy over how true it is that the play was never performed and if untrue, where it was performed (Dawson 6). Andrew Griffen has argued that the play must have been performed at the Globe—as opposed to the Inns of Court—because Pandar’s epilogue explicitly addresses his “Brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade” (5.11.49): “If the speech is effective because it speaks to the imagined presence of prostitutes and bawds in the audience, doesn’t their imagined presence suggest the type of audience one might find in the pit at a public theatre in Southwark?” (13).
between this and that that is humorous in *Troilus and Cressida*; rather it's the assurance these heroes seem to possess regarding their own legitimacy, even as they appear to be bloated clichés just for show, acutely aware, and much too sure, of the roles they have to fulfill. The referential gap here that confuses this and that is not a mimetic gap, but a historical one: the ambiguous space between the past and the present. The play needs the audience to act as omniscient witness not to the synchronic material on the stage, but to the diachronic matter that stage is calling forth—Homer's epic, Chaucer's romance, and the erotic and political practices of the Jacobean present. Thersites sees this, and is the only one “whose sublimations doubled over in performance both expose and disguise the fault,” the one who is tasked with the “burden” of understanding who they really are (Blau 10-11).

It's just that “who they really are,” according to Thersites, is terrible. Thersites abusively derides both sides of the licentious quarrel of Helen's abduction in the characteristic manner of the “railing buffoon” (Goldsmith 71). Drawn from Homer’s Thersites, Shakespeare’s cynical fool has a “sarcastic tongue that knows no measure and is careless of the person on whom it jests” (72). Thersites is not attached to the outcomes of war. More importantly, he is inadmissible to its strategies and efforts. As a result, he reduces all these martial efforts and strategies to one common denominator: lechery. This chapter argues that Thersites-as-audience is denied access because his relationship to spectating polarizes both the emulous function of participatory, competitive observation as well as the universalizing ideal that there exists something sacred beyond the appearance of things. In a play that is obsessed with looking and being looked at, it is Thersites
who manages to emancipate himself from the quarrelsome history that keeps repeating because he turns that history into a comedy show that he can laugh at.

In the next section of this chapter, I aim to clarify the topography of Troilus and Cressida's literary emergences from Rome to England in order to reveal how those emergences constitute shifts in literary genre. My purpose here is to link the shifts in genre with shifts in audience function. In section two, I will examine how Thersites acts as the metatheatrical, inadmissible audience in the play, revealing both the play’s “wit” and its antitheatrical understanding of the Troy Legend. In section three, I gesture toward the relationship between history and audience. The audience members are the ones upon whom Pandarus, as syphilitic epilogue, bequeaths both the play and his diseases, and so they are the ones responsible for keeping the story alive. It’s just that, instead of the applause Prospero begs for, Pandarus expects only “groans” (5.11.46). Is this all that we have left to say of a rotten history that keeps repeating? An inarticulate Artaudian moan? And if so, does that cruelty bring us closer to the “inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue” (Artaud 80)? Or does it simply mark our fundamental dispossession from a past and its ideals that are no longer tenable? My interest throughout this chapter will be in how Thersites, the railing fool, is figured as a stranger within the context of the play world and as the audience within the situation of the theatre, and how the tension between the two generates the third anxiety of admission this thesis is staging: what it means to be unique within a world that keeps repeating.
4.1 Recognizing the Proper Audience: From Romance to Satire

Originally part of the Matter of Troy, the character Troilus is the youngest son of King Priam, and Cressida is the daughter of a traitor to the Greeks. They are minor characters in the drama of Troy, with Helen, Paris, Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses tending to take up the Homeric stage. It took Chaucer in the fourteenth century to give the lovers their English due. In medieval romantic tradition, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* “created a new type of courtly narrative” by its “fusion of epic action and Ovidian sentiment” (Barron 21). Less concerned with the machinations and divinations of endless war, *Troilus and Criseyde* is about love, and more importantly, about love’s betrayals.

It is important to note that Chaucer did not invent the tragic lovers Troilus and Criseyde. As James M. Dean and Harriet Spiegle note in their recent Broadview edition of *Troilus and Criseyde*:

> Because medieval romance looks to the past, it is indebted to literary tradition. Chaucer adapts, even sometimes translates, several major literary works in *Troilus and Criseyde*, most centrally Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, composed in the Italian vernacular. Boccaccio derived his story from the much longer *Historia destructionis Troiae* (History of Troy's Destruction) written in Latin by the Italian writer

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58 As Robert Miola has noted, “Shakespeare encountered Homer indirectly in Latin recollections by Vergil, Horace, Ovid and others, in English translations, in handbooks and mythographies, in derivative poems and plays, in descendant traditions, and in plentiful allusions,” while scenes from Chapman’s *Iliad* specifically supplied “the comical and tragical satire *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1608)” (102).

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Guido delle Colonne (1287). Guido’s Historia, in turn, is a prose summary of Benoit de Saint-Maure’s Roman de Troie, originally rendered in French octosyllabic couplets (about 1160). (xix)

In all of these source texts, the pair emerges and speaks loudly against a rumbling background of war. Arguably, the difference between Chaucer’s version and his continental precursors is a greater sympathy toward Criseyde’s infidelity. The intelligence of her epistolary prose, for example, and the space given to it in Chaucer’s poem make Criseyde less archetypal and more dimensional. As John Ganim has argued, Criseyde “is one of the most extensive attempts by a male author of the Middle Ages to represent the consciousness of a woman” (234). Not that these human dimensions or sympathies were much taken up after Chaucer. In Robert Henryson’s fifteenth century Scottish poem “The Testament of Cresseid,” Cresseid is rejected by Diomed, becomes a prostitute to the Greek camp, and eventually a leper. Cresseid dies tragically, and her cast off lover Troilus engraves the following subscription on her tomb in golden letters: "Lo, fair ladyis, Cresseid of Troy the toun./Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid/Under this stane, lait lipper, lyis deid" (607-609). As Bryon Lee Grigsby has pointed out, there was a “moral connection between leprosy and sin” in the Middle Ages: “Even the medical community advanced the notion that lepers are falsifiers and deceivers who have the potential to threaten the community” (53). Henryson indeed is not shy about his lesson, ending his poem with an imperative for all women: “Ming not your lufe with fals deceptioun” (line 613).
Chaucer, Henryson, Boccaccio and Benoit recompose the Matter of Troy into the matter of their own culture and ideals, namely Medieval Europe. Epic becomes romance, and with it comes a new morality. A critical distinction between the two genres concerns the nature of the hero. In his foundational study of English Medieval romance, William Barron argues that in epic or myth, “the hero is superior in kind to other men and their environment, since he is a divine being,” whereas in romance, “the hero is superior to other men in degree...and to his environment by virtue of his superlative, even supernatural, abilities” (2). Realism, then, would be a hero who is superior to no man but whose personal qualities are nonetheless worthy of admiration. Romance, however, “is not satisfied with the trappings of realism but strives for the conviction that that world it projects has existed in some past golden age, or will be in some millennia to come, or might be if men were more faithful to their ideals than experience suggests them capable of being” (Barron 4).

Only a hero who is superlative in degree, though still fundamentally human, can expose the failure of ideals fought against a reality of positive experience and still suggest the greater potency of those ideals. Medieval romantic hero Troilus needs his mythic past of Troy in order to make his fourteenth and fifteenth century reality worth more than its flaws, worth more than what it is “capable of being.” What romance adds to folk-tale, then, is a vision of what could be. Troilus and Criseyde, for both Chaucer and Henryson, could have been so great together, if only—if only Troilus wasn’t so foolish, if only Criseyde wasn’t so false. But they could have been so great precisely because they were so great.
Chaucer pulled two minor figures from the Matter of Rome to create a Middle English poem in which society, female bankruptcy, and male, selfless chivalry all contribute to high tragic romance. I’m interested in what kind of genre emerges, then, when just such a romance is adapted into a commercial play. What happens to the golden age of Troy, that world from which Brutus, descendent of Aeneas and founder of that great sceptered isle Britain, is employed to give authority to live bodies on a stage with a live audience who knows only too well what happens? If Shakespeare’s play is drawing from a failed romantic ideal, does this failure become the new golden age in which to measure the new iteration? And if so, how could that possibly bode well for these legends? Shakespeare inherited a cast of characters who had lived all over Europe, as historical figures, poetic tropes, and cultural icons. While Shakespeare no doubt used Troy to establish himself as a legitimate seventeenth-century English playwright, the mechanism of that legitimation is similarly a shift of genre. Shakespeare’s play follows the general arch of Chaucer’s tale, but it is definitely not a romance. The drama of the titular characters takes up less than half of the play; while Troilus and Cressida pine, promise, consummate, and ultimately fail each other, the Trojan and Greek camps are meanwhile having a lot of fun debating amongst themselves various philosophical concepts of degree, honour, and value. More importantly, while the men are very busily not fighting, Thersites is spewing caustic invectives at all of them. Just who is our hero? What kind of story is being presented here?

No other play in Shakespeare’s oeuvre has confounded critical categorization—in its own day and in ours—as much as Troilus and Cressida. At the
end of the nineteenth century, F.S. Boas famously coined it one of Shakespeare’s “problem plays,” a critical epithet further taken up by Tillyard in the mid-twentieth century and still used today in Shakespearean criticism, along with All’s Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure. The “problem” with these plays is extrinsic, not intrinsic. There’s nothing ostensibly problem-causing within the component parts of the plays themselves—plot, character, verse, and affect all generally cohere. Rather, the plays do not fit into an easy category when considering Shakespeare’s plays as a whole—histories, comedies, and tragedies.

The problem first arose in 1609 when the play was published with the anonymous epistle calling it a comedy. Of course we don’t get anything typical of a Shakespearean comedy in Troilus: no fifth act weddings, no love requited, “no feeling the release or joy” that would be the expected response (Barker 21). In fact, the play ends with Pandarus bequeathing his diseases onto the audience. It is possible that the play is a satire, but could not overtly be called a satire in its day given the Bishops’ Ban of 1599 on poetic satire. However, satire as a genre generally includes “the hope of reform” (Marvick 41). What makes Shakespeare’s Troilus so remarkable is that it leaves us with no hope that anything will or can change for the better. Cressida is going to deceive because she is a woman; Hector is going to die because of pride; men will serve no woman’s honor, no higher power, save their own intellectual egos and physical needs; everyone is diseased, everyone will suffer, and everyone will continue to suffer. While comedy, as opposed to tragedy or

59 See F.S. Boas’s Shakespeare and his Predecessors, pp. 344-408, and E.M.W. Tillyard’s Shakespeare’s Problem Plays.
history, seems a far closer approximation to what is going on in *Troilus*, the
classification is at best unsatisfactory and at worst entirely missing the point.

The Trojan legend, arguably, is the one story in the canon of English
literature that requires the author to justify his right to even tell it. As Timothy
Arner points out, “Whereas the Arthurian legend seems to be available to writers
who wish to invent new episodes or reformulate established narratives, the Troy
story necessitates that an author justify his literary project by showing appropriate
deferece to the other poetic texts in the Trojan tradition...No other story in English
literature requires such a claim” (2). If the purpose of appropriating and
transforming the Troy legend is to establish authorship and if establishing that
authorship creates a new genre of poetic expression, then the quality of that poetic
expression must be the quality that sets the author apart, that removes him or her
from the endless citationality of narrative retellings. Or, as Coleridge put it, *Troilus
and Cressida* “is Shakespeare’s most characteristic creation” (171).

In his comprehensive introduction to the play, Anthony Dawson follows up
Coleridge’s nineteenth century remark by bringing into the conversation the poet’s
continental contemporary, German poet Heinrich Heine, noting, “Heine was also
fully alert to the play’s dazzling uniqueness: ‘We can acknowledge its great
excellence only in general terms; for a detailed judgment we should need the help of
that new aesthetics which has yet to be written.’” (5). Heine was probably right; in
terms of its performance and reception, *Troilus and Cressida* did not come into its
own until the twentieth century: “What was for historical reasons difficult to discern
during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has, in the wake of cataclysmic wars
and modernist aesthetics, opened once more” (5). Entirely rewritten and refigured as a classical tragedy by Dryden in the seventeenth century, nearly forgotten and seldom staged in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, the play experienced a major renaissance on the twentieth century stage. Gretchen Minton details the variety and breadth of these performances:

it has been set in a number of different periods, from the Crimean War to the American Civil War to World War I; props have included dead horses, plexiglass sheets hosed down with blood, and human blowup dolls; settings have ranged from stem baths to sand pits to Hollywood; Pandarus has been played as a drag queen, Ajax as a head-banger, and Thersites has been dressed in every way imaginable (even at one point wearing kitchen utensils). (114)

Is the reason the play was taken up again with so much energy in the twentieth century simply a shift in aesthetics, a new way of seeing the world that made “the edgy incongruity of marrying romance to satire or heroism to bombast” finally tenable (Dawson 5)? Moreover, if Heine and Coleridge are correct, can the distinctiveness of Troilus and Cressida only be appreciated and understood, and by extension the true quality of its author, once the audience has cultivated this aesthetics?

On the one hand, we have a literary lineage of authorship that is generated and reproduced by means of a literary legend of Troy that is itself peopled by
characters who exist in a paradoxical nexus of historical belatedness and mythic futurism: the result is citationality at the level of the text, wherein the author and the story repeat ad infinitum, albeit with differences and variations. On the other hand, we have a critical apparatus that is incapable of categorizing Shakespeare’s play precisely because the ways in which the play is most itself, in which it breaks free from that literary citationality, are not the ways in which criticism is able to retrospectively imagine distinctiveness without making claims of ghostly aesthetics that invisibly haunt the past and wait for their future moment to become flesh.

Finally, we also have a performance history that suggests failure, albeit up until three hundred years after the play was first staged, when the audience’s lack of resonance with Troy provided the necessary psychology for Troilus and Cressida to be interesting again. This last point is critical. As Minton explains, “the play’s efficacy is so dependent upon a prior knowledge of the Troy legend, but this is a knowledge that contemporary audiences cannot be assumed to possess” (114). Since a Jacobean audience’s prior knowledge of the Troy legend generates the play’s efficacy, Minton concludes that the main point of the play is lost in modern productions: “Though the awareness of origins and of the drama’s relationship to prior traditions is the obsessive interest of Troilus and Cressida, it is an interest that is often ignored on stage today” (114).

In his close reading of the mercantile language of the play, C.C. Barfoot argues that the performance anxieties the characters exhibit can also be understood as commercial anxieties: the characters do not know their value. Or more precisely, the
characters value themselves considerably higher than any audience—Jacobian or modern, knowledgeable of the Troy legend or not—would:

However, the essential irony of the play is that the proper audience for it is not likely to be taken in by the Homeric glamour that the heroes themselves are so affected by, nor to be impressed by their self-proclaimed virtues and their mutual backslapping... Every character in Troilus and Cressida is too secure in the belief that present and future audiences, browbeaten perhaps by the streams of favorable epithets, will evaluate them at their own estimation.60 [49]

At stake in this question of the play’s efficacy is “the proper audience.” Putting together Minton’s and Barfoot’s ostensibly disparate claims of the characters’ anxieties and the audience’s most effective reception of those anxieties, the proper audience is one who both knows the legend well as well as one who is not likely to be taken in by the romance and glamour of that legend.

The proper audience must be Thersites.

As Dorothy and Samuel Tannenbaum remark in their mid-twentieth century, concise bibliography of the play, “The characters, almost without exception, are said to have been drawn without Shakspere’s usual geniality and sympathy, except (perhaps)—amazingly—the shrewd-thinking, keen-seeing and sharp-speaking Thersites” (vii). Harry Berger agrees, although with more hesitation: “I think

60 Harry Berger makes a similar comment: the atmosphere of the play world is like “a Hollywood night club” (130).
Shakespeare intends us to move toward agreement with Thersites, but to do so unwillingly, to feel or discover that this was not the only possible perspective, merely the one to which we seem—a little reluctantly—to find ourselves disposed” (130). We turn to Thersites because he is the most distinctive voice in the play; he is the voice that signals a marked shift in genre from epic and romance to a black comedy that we find ourselves, however reluctantly, not only disposed to, but hermeneutically inclined. The only way to put the kernel back in these empty shells of characters is to laugh at them.

If Thersites is the proper audience, indeed the metatheatrical signpost that unwaveringly signals the interpretive valences of these unheroic heroes, why does everyone in the play see him as such a social pariah? While Thersites is a “privileged man,” or a classic Elizabethan licensed fool, and is subject to no man, serving the Greek camp “voluntary”\(^{61}\) (2.1.86), Nestor nonetheless calls him a “slave” (1.3.194) and Ulysses calls him Ajax’s “fool” (2.3.82). It’s almost as if the Greek authorities cannot find a place in their hierarchical world of degree and patriarchal ownership for a caustic cynic who serves for the sake and pleasure of railing. Why does Shakespeare give us a character that is so inadmissible and offensive to these ancestral authorities and yet simultaneously the only one who is able to use his capacity as witness to speak truth to that power? Indeed, Thersites’ capacity as witness is made possible by his wit, that distinctive mental faculty that can see through sophistry and artifice. As Robert H. Bell observes, “Thersites offends everyone. No Shakespearean character—not Iago, Edmund, or Richard III—is more

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\(^{61}\) Achilles does point out that Thersites’s “last service was sufferance—twas not voluntary; no man is beaten voluntary. Ajax was here the voluntary and you as under an impress” (2.1.86–89).
uniformly maligned” (96). But unlike all of these villains, we do find ourselves, however unenthusiastically, taking Thersites’s caustic, self-avowed omniscient perspective as our own.

4.2 Admitting Thersites: Spectacular Legitimacy

Before Thersites even comes on stage, he is described by old Nester as “A slave whose gall coins slanders like a mint” (1.3.194). Thersites’s final words before he exits the play reveal how he sees himself: “I love bastards! I am bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind, bastard in valour, in everything illegitimate” (5.8.6-8). The emphasis on Thersites’s social illegitimacy in the introduction and conclusion of his character is critical to how he is treated not only within the play but within scholarship. As Peter Hyland notes, “Within the play and throughout the critical history of the play, the general tendency has been to silence Thersites. The voice of Thersites should be heeded, because it reflects the real and impotent mass of the dispossessed whose voices are never heard” (1). Hyland situates Thersites as the classic subaltern, who represents “all those who are deprived of social identity, who are excluded and abused by the established hierarchy” (3). What an analysis of Thersites offers, then, is a presentist perspective on the ways in which the politically powerful use their rhetoric and authority to mystify and silence the people on whom their power depends.

James O’Rourke takes Hyland’s critique one step further by linking Thersites to his Trojan analogue, Cassandra: “while he curses those who ‘war for a placket,’ she tells her brothers that ‘Our firebrand brother, Paris, burns us all’ (2.2.10)” (142).
The link between the slave and the woman is no coincidence. Both lie outside the Symbolic Order and as such can tell the truth that those caught within it cannot hear—that “classic Hegelian master-slave relation,” O’Rourke notes, whereby “the master claims prestige, but it is the repressed term, the Other, that carries the truth” (142). In a war that is essentially about the anxieties of patriarchal lineage and male ego, Thersites’s feminization is critical to his othering. A slave, a bastard, and a railing woman, Thersites has no access, no admission to this world of male posturing and hierarchical one-upmanship. But like Shylock, it’s not as if he wants access.

In an aside probably spoken to the audience, Thersites aphorizes the whole of the *Iliad*, “Here is such patchery, such juggling, and such knavery: all the argument is a whore and a cuckold—a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed death upon” (2.3.63-65). Thersites’s general criticism of this world is that it is peopled by hypocrites who use their mythic pasts to take advantage of one another for their own overweening aims. For the most part, he is right: Ulysses uses his revered authority as commander to puppeteer Ajax and Achilles against one another; Achilles uses his status as the best Greek warrior to take advantage of the rules of combat and murder a resting Hector; Hector uses his well-earned soldier’s honour to disregard the warnings of his wife, his sister, and his father, but ultimately proves only a venal appetite for shiny things—he chases after a Greek in “sumptuous armor” to claim as a trophy, weakening himself when Achilles and the Myrmidons draw near (5.6.26). These legends are at worst frivolous hypocrites, and at best, ordinary humans. In fact, Thersites’s rhetoric is constantly reducing
them to human bodies, and not just bodies, but diseased bodies. When he first comes on stage, Thersites is lost in a meditation on the Greek general Agamemnon while Ajax calls for him, presumably on the other side of the stage.

Ajax: Thersites!

Thersites: Agamemnon, how if he had boils—full, all over, generally?

Ajax: Thersites!

Thersites: And those boils did run—say so—did not the general run then, were not that a botchy core?

Ajax: Dog!

Thersites: Then would come some matter from him, I see none now.

(2.1.1-7)

According to Thersites, the most substantial thing about Agamemnon is counterfactual, puss-filled boils. Thersites's insult is potty humour married to parody (pretending to be a pundit, in a burlesque which echoes the Greek camp's symposium in the previous act), where the low brow of the former tethers the smartness of the latter and a new referent is imagined: a body of suppurating sores. Again, all is reduced to the lowest common denominator. Reasoning by puns is definitely the domain of the Shakespearean fool, but no fool in Shakespeare's ouvre is this bitter. While Ajax continues to yell at him and make demands, Thersites eventually curses him too: “I would thou didst itch from head to foot and I had the scratching of thee: I would make thee the loathsomest scab in Greece” (2.1.22-25).
Over and over again, Thersites undermines these Greek and Trojan heroes by reimagining them as diseased bodies whose agency lies more in the viruses and bacteria that overtake them than the valour they’ve undeservedly inherited.

Shakespeare’s Thersites is the dispossessed voice that in turn tries to dispossess the hegemony, manifest in both the political authority of these heroes as well as the mythology that buttresses them. As Griffin notes, criticism of the play has generally agreed that it is “historiographically nihilistic,” and that Shakespeare was purposely undermining “historiographical practices which worked to glorify England, London, Elizabeth I and James I by imagining epic Trojan roots and ancestors” (3).62 Thersites is the most crucial part of this project of abrading England’s mythic inheritance. His implicit critique of England’s rotten present, cynically deduced from the diseased, rottenness of its Trojan ancestors, has everything to do with the instability of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Steven Mullaney explains, “in the space of a single generation, from 1530-1560, there were no fewer than five official state religions, five different and competing monotheisms, incompatible versions of the one god, the one faith, the one truth, the one absolute...One of the results was a lasting sense of unsettlement; another was a lasting cynicism” (71).63 While Thersites is the most overt cynic of the play because

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63 For a smart reading of the play that links its Jacobean cynicism to a more specific historical event, see Heather James’s Shakespeare’s Troy: Drama, Politics, and the Translation of Empire: “The rage mimicked and generated by the play has its roots in the disillusionments of the late Elizabethan period, following the spectacular fall of the earl of Essex, whose ambition and chivalric virtue find their reflection in Achilles and Hector, respectively” (91). Eric Mallin also notes that George Chapman’s translation of the Iliad, published four years before Troilus and Cressida was written, was
he situates himself outside of its intrigues, the other characters nonetheless still do 
betray an abiding sense of pessimism. Putting Thersites aside for a moment, I’d like 
to look at the kind of pessimism the main characters employ in order to reveal how 
Thersites’s self-aware cynicism functions as an ironic, fashioned critique of the 
unconscious pessimism of the player-fools he berates.

We see, for instance, a precocious cynicism in the lovers Troilus and Cressida 
and their priest/pimp Pandarus before the railing Thersites even comes on stage to 
extplicitly reveal it. Troilus and Pandarus open the play discussing how to get 
Cressida, the delicious piece of cake that she is:

Troilus: Have I not tarried?
Pandarus: Ay, the grinding; but you must tarry the bolting.

Troilus: Have I not tarried?
Pandarus: Ay, the bolting; but you must tarry the leavening.

Troilus: Still have I tarried. (1.1.17-21)

Troilus leaves, Cressida enters, and now Pandarus uses his persuasive skills on 
Cressida:

Cressida: What sneaking fellow comes yonder?

*Enter Troilus [and passes across the stage]*

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inscribed to Robert Devereux, explicitly linking the earl with the mythic Achilles: "to the Most 
Honored now living Instance of the Achilleian vertues eternized by divine Homere, the Earl of Essex" 
(149).
Pandarus: Where? Yonder? That’s Deiphobus. ‘Tis Troilus! There’s a man, niece, hem? Brave Troilus, the prince of chivalry!

Cressida: Peace, for shame, peace!

Pandarus: Mark him, note him. O brave Troilus! Look well upon him, niece. Look how his sword is bloodied, and his helm more hacked than Hector’s—and how he looks, and how he goes. O admirable youth! (1.2.229-37)

Arguably, a bloody sword and dented helm prove one a good husband by proving one a good fighter. Cressida seems to take the hint and figures she must play a little harder to get for a warrior to love and keep her. Once Pandarus leaves his cousin, she gives her first and only soliloquy in the play, a perfect sonnet on her love for Troilus and on the art of being won:

Words, vows, gifts, tears, and love’s full sacrifice
He offers in another’s enterprise;
But more in Troilus thousandfold I see
Than in the glass of Pandar’s praise may be.
Yet hold I off. Women are angels wooing;
Things won are done, joy’s soul lies in the doing. (1.2.287-292)

Chaucer’s threesome is two hundred years grown up: these three know what they want and what they are doing. Sneaking Troilus wants the girl at the least possible
cost and effort; broker Pandarus knows how to get each lover to buy in; and clever Cressida sees through the men's machinations and plays her part for her own security. While the romantic medieval distance between the lovers is similarly enacted on Shakespeare's stage, it is not your typical courtly love. Troilus is not performing honorable, chivalric deeds to prove that he is worthy of his lady's favor. He doesn't even write her a lovely Chaucerian letter. He merely walks across the stage as himself, a bit of nice meat turning on the spit. This is business. Pandarus sells Troilus's chivalry to Cressida, Cressida bargains it down ("Peace, for shame, peace!") and Troilus waits for the signature to seal the deal. For *Troilus and Cressida* to be a tragedy, these three would have to be blind to the products of their own transactions. But business never works like that. And it is obvious these characters don't either.

The Jacobean cynicism of Shakespeare's epic heroes is revealed not only by their loss of faith in courtly love—explicitly rendered by their mercantile pursuits of one another's affection—but by their loss of faith in the chivalric ideals of honour and duty. After Cressida's speech, the play moves to the Greek camp, where Agamemnon, Nestor, and Ulysses partake in a platonic symposium on the importance of martial hierarchy and its associated ecological and cosmic laws. The Greek camp is suffering; their best man Achilles refuses to fight, preferring to dally in his tent with his lover Patroclus. The war is dragging on, and the leaders need a

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64 In fact, the only letter written by one of the lovers in the play is from Cressida, but it is delivered when it is already much too late. Just as Troilus is armed and heading into battle to confront his usurper Diomedes, he receives her letter. He reads it, tears it up and famously bemoans, "Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart./Th'effect doth operate another way" (5.3.107-108). Perhaps if these lovers had wooed each other by words, the effect might have operated the right way.
solution. It is here that Ulysses gives one of the most famous speeches in the Shakespearean canon, his long speech on degree. The speech was made iconic in no small measure by Tillyard’s 1942 text *The Elizabethan World Picture*, which understood Elizabethan spiritual, social, and political thought in terms of the Great Chain of Being, a cosmic doctrine in which all things relate and cohere effectively only insofar as they exist in proper hierarchy, degree, and deference to one another. As Ulysses observes, “Take but degree away, untune that string,/And hark what discord follows: each thing meets/In mere oppugnancy” (1.3.109-11). Eric Mallin observes that the loss of degree in the Greek camp can be understood as a critique of the loss of degree in its contemporary analogue, the Elizabethan court. Throughout Elizabeth’s court were competing factions of noblemen, and the virgin queen made, upheld and played these factions against each other. “Designed to restrain disorder,” Elizabeth’s political policy of factionalism employed the medieval chivalric trope of protecting a woman’s honour for the ultimate purpose of advancing the commercial and martial power of the country: the virgin queen as the damsel England (Mallin 147). It’s just that men at court, as opposed to men at war, are not knights. They are gentlemen. As Helen Cooper notes, “By the time Shakespeare died, to behave like a knight was an anachronism, a reversion to romance, rather than a living ideal” (44).

In the same way Troilus, Pandarus and Cressida know they are part of a tenuous business transaction that might ultimately not come through, Ulysses (and Hector in the Trojan court) is similarly aware that he is not dealing with a bunch of knights who still believe in “the concept of defending a woman’s honor” (Mallin 161). The difference between a knight and a gentlemen is action: a knight goes to
battle, a gentlemen does his battle through speech. The characters in *Troilus and Cressida* are far more content to talk about war—why they are there, for what and for whom, why things are going wrong, and how to fix them—then to actually fight. Indeed, Ulysses’s attack on Achilles’s inaction corresponds to Thersites’s attack on Agamemnon, whose potential boils possess more performance than his person. If we are to carry Mallin’s analogy through, Elizabethan factionalism, while intended to promote order at court, actually fueled disorder, and the match that lit that fuel was emulation: “Emulation at Elizabeth’s court was a method of advancement: imitate your fellow courtiers so completely as to make him obsolete” (Mallin 151).65 The problem is, emulation produces an assembly line of “indistinguishable persons” (151). The patriarchal violence that ensues when men fight for nothing but to be a copy of the man before him is a uniquely sixteenth and seventeenth century problem and arguably the beginnings of an articulation of what it means to be modern: knights who now must be gentlemen, but with no concrete object to serve.

Thersites “brings the heroes up to date” and cuts them “down to life size” by withdrawing himself from the emulous factions, situating himself as a bastard observer to the quarrel, with no stakes in the outcome but an audience’s pleasure (Berger 130). He manifests their latent cynicism in his speech and in his figures of speech. But why he feels the need to do this is still unclear. Is it simply because he is the oppressed subaltern who must bitterly inveigh against the oppressors? Maybe. But the characters themselves seem to possess a similarly cynical awareness of their own hypocrisy conditioned by an awareness of how untenable their chivalric virtues

65 The words “emulous” and “emulation” are used a hefty eight times in the play, by Nestor, Ulysses, Diomedes, Hector and Thersites alike (Shakespeare Concordance).
are in the new mercantilism. Is it because this is simply his function as the provocative fool who exposes the folly of human nature? Perhaps. Rather than merely tearing down the old, Thersites does seem to make something out of the debris. According to Griffin, “the play produces a characteristically humanist ‘politic history’—derived from a logic of exemplarity and proverbiality—according to which early modern London might find in Troy a particularly perverse ancestor” (3). Humanist historiography demands “the story of universal truths grounded in individual human action rather than in the impersonal forces of a cultural *gestalt*” (7). In other words, the project of humanist historiography is to define a through-line of human nature. Thersites does seem to constantly provide just such a through-line; it’s just that that human nature is “at best banal and at worst pathological” (7). Moreover, is it new to say that human nature is dreadful? Is this Thersites’ ultimate purpose?

I don’t think the project of *Troilus and Cressida* is to debunk humanity entirely; nor do I think Thersites’s lack of admission into this humanity is mostly due to a tokenist oppression or to being repurposed as a stock character fool, a la commedia dell’arte. The loss of degree that Ulysses articulates might more accurately be described as the loss of discernment, and discernment is as much a political problem as an aesthetic one. Like so many of Shakespeare’s plays, the play is partly speaking to the contemporary, and partly exploring “the nature and limits of his medium” (Berger 135). We can even slightly rephrase that: *Troilus and Cressida* is speaking to the political and erotic practices of the seventeenth century by means of the aesthetic limits of the theatre. The link between the limits of the
theatre and the limits of society is not arbitrary. In fact, it echoes Thersites’s chief criticism: these men and women are players in the spectacle of love and honour, more performance than substance. Rather than Troilus and Cressida being an example of humanist history with Thersites as the chief witness and narrative executioner (a sort pre-Howard Zinn A People’s History, but of Britain), I think Mallin comes closest to an approximation of what is going on: “The Shakespearean emulation of the Troy story is a profoundly deforming project of literature reading history” (152). But what exactly is the difference between history and literature, given that both are so often rendered narratively? By “history,” I don’t think Mallin means a chronological series of factual events; rather, it is the stories that compose how a given culture sees itself. And by “literature,” he is referring to the aesthetic medium that is the play text and its imaginary audition. What makes Shakespeare’s theatrically mimetic rendition of politically emulous factions so potent—and so deforming—is precisely because the medium formally generates the poetics of success that the politics imply: “as the nobility enacts an increasingly hostile drama of imitative gesture and stratagem, the Shakespearean theater implicates itself in this historical context by emulating it—simultaneously articulating and debasing the cultural referent” (Mallin 152). Troilus and Cressida’s reading of political history—past and present—through the aesthetic medium of the theatre has fundamentally deformed that history, crippling how it can proceed, precisely because it has turned that history into a spectacle.

Debord’s famous Marxist critique of spectacular society, Society of the Spectacle, argued that modernity was characterized by the devolution of authentic
life into mere representation. In one of the axiomatic fragments that constitute his text, Debord delineates the origin of this devolution:

The origin of the spectacle lies in the world's loss of unity...The spectacle divides the world into two parts, one of which is held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world. The spectacle is simply the common language that bridges this division. Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness.

(Axiom 29)

For Debord, the spectacle is three things simultaneously: the sign itself composed of signifier (representation) and signified (real world), the platonic ideal to which the sign defers (the superior world), and the semiotic method, or language, that bridges the division. Debord’s spectacle connotes both a vision of truth as non-separation and a manifestation of social reality that is almost parasitic in its contamination of that unity. Arguably, it is *Troilus and Cressida’s* self-conscious spectacularization of the legends of Troy that parasitically contaminates the unifying and ordering vision of classical inheritance. But how exactly? And how is Thersites as a spectator complicit in this project?

Debord’s critique of the spectacle sets in opposition authentic human life and the mimetic representation of that human life. In his sketch of Debord’s logic in *The
Emancipated Spectator, Jacques Rancière places The Society of the Spectacle within the tradition of antitheatrical criticism that situates its critique of society on "the paradox of the spectator" (2). Rancière argues:

This paradox is easily formulated: there is no theatre without a spectator... But according to the accusers, being a spectator is bad for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act. (2)

The anxiety of the audience, as articulated in the paradox of the spectator, is that it can't do anything to stop, change, or redeem what it witnesses. We definitely see this with Thersites, who revels in his lack of agency in changing the events of history—not only in how he takes pleasure in critiquing all the other players on stage, but also in how he refuses to be sucked into battle in his final scene on stage. The spectator is passive while the performers are active. But it's not as if the other characters within Shakespeare's play are exactly active. The play gives us automatons with all the appearance of life and functionality, but with very little felt life within them or between each other. We see this most vividly in the Greek camp's lengthy debate on the value of degree and the Trojan camp's equally lengthy debate
on the value of value. The more they contemplate the war, the less they seem to actively participate it in a meaningful way. Berger notes that even the Prologue is “Brusque, impersonal, and indifferent,” coming forward “simply to expedite the performance” and that beyond his function as exposition, “he and the audience have nothing to do with each other” (125). These epic heroes have become inactive bystanders to their own spectacular histories, unable to influence them or even participate in them in a full, embodied way. In effect, they are contemplating their own spectacular natures and the performative activities that seem to stand just beyond them. As Rancière explains, "What human beings contemplate in the spectacle is the activity they have been robbed of; it is their own essence become alien, turned against them, organizing a collective world whose reality is that dispossession" (7). This collective world of dispossession is the witness and the interpretation of what is witnessed made into equivalencies, such that what characterizes that equivalency is a fundamental split or division: myself and my alien self equals one self of fundamental dispossession.

By turning the history and the legends of Troy into spectacles, Shakespeare creates a collective world that is dispossession—for Jacobean and contemporary audiences alike, for Thersites who metatheatrically rails against this meta-spectacle, and for the characters within the spectacle whose realities are much more often mediated by what they see than what they do. Indeed, when Troilus sees Cressida betraying him in the scene set up so spectacularly, with him and Ulysses as audience behind a fourth wall spying on her and Diomed, he concludes:
This she? No, this is Diomed’s Cressida.
If beauty have a soul this is not she,
If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonious,
If sanctimony be the gods’ delight,
If there be rule in unity itself,
This is not she. O madness of discourse
That cause sets up with and against itself—
Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt! This is and is not Cressid. (5.2.135-145)

As a spectator, Troilus’s ideal of Cressida is shattered by this new spectacle. As a
spectacle, Cressid fulfills Debord’s three characteristics: she is a sign of disunity and
contradiction, composed of the adulterer (the representation) and his lover (the real
world); she is the platonic ideal to which that sign defers (the chaste, true Cressida);
and finally, she is literally the language, the poetry that bridges the division. The
male poet must turn the image of the female body into verse so he can actually
possess it, but it is his very aestheticization which belies possession. Spectator
Troilus finds in this show a profound self-dispossession—“Within my soul there
doth conduce a fight”—that makes him both incapable of knowing what is really real
and incapable of acting to change it (5.2.146). He never thinks to go up to the tent to
find out what is going on or even to chivalrously protect Cressida from Diomedes
when he sees his advances. Troilus’s ignorance and passivity are crucial to how he
constitutes what is more important than Cressida’s infidelity: the collective world of dispossession that has robbed him of his hitherto direct access to the gods when Cressida was real and true, when she wasn’t just a show. According to the antitheatricalist paradox of the spectator, it is Troilus and his fellow heroes who are the real spectators, incapacitated, dispossessed, unable to act and held “in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals” (Rancière 2).

Thersites, then, is the spectator of the spectators.

What makes Thersites relationship to viewing significantly different than the other men of Troy is precisely that he challenges the opposition between viewing and acting. In the kaleidoscopic scene in which Troilus and Ulysses spy on Diomedes and Cressida, Thersites voyeuristically spies on all four with the enthusiasm of a spectator watching a brutal bear-baiting, calling out the next maneuver in the sport with joyful anticipation: “Now the pledge, now, now, now!” he exclaims right before Cressida transfers her pledge to Troilus onto Diomed (5.2.64). Thersites is not a spectator like Troilus, watching in repressed, passive anguish what has been denied him. What I find most fascinating about Thersites’s spectatorship is that it is part schadenfreude and part critique, and the two are more often than not inseparable. His pleasure comes not just from a perverse joy that what is happening is not happening to him, but in his critical interpretation of what is happening: all is

66 For an interesting geometric reading of this scene, see “Shakespeare by Numbers: Mathematical Crisis in Troilus and Cressida” by Edward Wilson-Lee: “Troilus fears that Cressida’s betrayal betokens not simply a breakdown in interpersonal trust, but a failure of all moral and physical concepts that are grounded in the idea of the unit; this fear is grounded in destabilizations of the unit that were a common part of classical and early modern mathematical thought” (451).
lechery. In the same scene he exclaims, “How the devil Luxury with his fat rump and potato finger tickles these together. Fry, lechery, fry!” (5.2.55-56). I wouldn’t call this dispossession or passivity, or even inactivity.

Indeed, even though Thersites rails against the hypocritical histrionics of these heroes, he does so in a surprisingly anti-antitheatrical way. As Laura Levin has pointed out, antitheatricalist tracts of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods “appear to revolve around the anxiety that there is no such thing as a stable identity” (83). The magical personation of a boy playing a woman, a common citizen playing a king, or a Jacobean playing a Trojan was dangerous because it “challenged the fixed notions of identity underlying Renaissance notions of the self, and revealed them to be little more than arbitrary constructions” (Chalk 84). Thersites doesn’t seem to object to these characters because they are unfixed, unstable selves. Rather, he objects to them precisely because they are such fixed selves: namely, ignoramuses. By spectating on spectatorship, Thersites invites a kind of emancipation, or relief from the paradox of the spectator that the other characters only seem to keep re-deploying.

In fact, as Darrly Chalk has argued, if there is any character in Shakespeare’s play who seems to consistently reinscribe antitheatrical logic it is Ulysses, whose famous speech on degree forwards “a strikingly similar argument to that of Gosson” (93). Ulysses derides the play-acting of Patroclus as Agamemnon, but specifically in terms of the lesser taking on the power of the former, the spectacular usurpation being “chaos, when degree is suffocate” (1.3.126). Ulysses speech here to the Greek council has received much critical attention, partly because it generates its critique
of the theatre via the theatre, and partly because it functions as a subtle critique of
the Greek leaders themselves, parodying their parody to parody them again. In both
cases, the irony is unmistakable. While Ulysses narrates the story of Patroclus’s
play-acting as if he were the audience, it’s clear that in the reenactment, Ulysses is a
player in both senses of the word—he is on stage and he is intimately involved in
the game. I make this point because I want to emphasize that Thersites’s similar
inversions of spectatorship and playacting (he too parodies Agamemnon for the
pleasure of Patroclus and Achilles in Act III) are different insofar as he does not have
a stake in the same way Ulysses does. The spectator distance he takes from
the lecherous war allows Thersites to both chide the chameleon-like players who
quarrel for a placket and simultaneously place them on his level as
fundamentally illegitimate. It’s precisely this combined effect of distancing and then
leveling that makes Thersites’s spectatorship so emancipating.

Indeed, Rancière’s main aim in *The Emancipated Spectator* is to challenge the
dichotomies of viewing and acting, activity and passivity, collective and individual,
and image and reality, arguing that this set of oppositions “in fact composes a rather
intricate dramaturgy of sin and redemption” whereby the theatre “assigns itself the
mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring to spectators
ownership of their consciousness and their activity” (7). Rancière evocatively links
this dramaturgy to another institution with which we are quite familiar: school. “It is
the very logic,” he argues, “of the pedagogical relationship: the role assigned to the
schoolmaster in that relationship is to abolish the distance between his knowledge
and the ignorance of the ignoramus” (8). The anxiety of the ignoramus in this model
of pedagogy is akin to the anxiety of the audience: what don’t I know and how will I know it? The student/spectator not only does not know what the teacher/performer knows, but “she does not know what she does not know or how to know it” (8). This model of pedagogy divorces the pupil from her own capacity to understand. Of course she is not entirely ignorant, of course there are many things she has discovered and learned through the human processes of sense perception and evaluation, but what she lacks and “what the pupil will always lack until she becomes a schoolmistress herself, is knowledge of ignorance—a knowledge of the exact distance separating knowledge from ignorance” (9).

This distance is predicated on the assumption that ignorance is not a lesser form of knowledge, but that ignorance and knowledge are opposites. The “radical gulf” separating the teacher from the student is a separation of two positions, characterized as two intelligences: “one that knows what ignorance consists in and one that does not” (9). As Rancière points out, “The first thing it teaches her is her own inability” (9). Only when the pupil believes her own inability will she be able to confirm the presupposition that supposed that inability in the first place: “the inequality of intelligence” (9). Thersites’s biggest critique of the men and women of Troy is that they are empty-headed and empty-witted, commanded by animal instinct as opposed to intelligence. Like a harsh pedagogue, he assumes that the distance between himself and these legends is due to a fundamental inequality of intelligence. Thersites is definitely trying to teach these heroes their own inabilitys. After railing on Ajax he says to Achilles, “E’en so; a great deal of your wit too lies in
your sinews, or else there be liars” (2.1.64). Surprised as much by the ostention as the lesson itself, Achilles retorts, “What, with me too, Thersites?” (2.1.94).

And yet, at the same time as Thersites seems to be inscribing a fundamental difference of wit between himself and the players of Troy, he nonetheless does try to bridge the distance between his intelligence and theirs, albeit in an inverted way. Proudly proclaiming himself bastard in everything illegitimate, Thersites almost seems to wish that the legends of Troy would meet him at this level and admit their own illegitimacy. What we see happening in Shakespeare’s play, then, is a burlesque of antitheatrical logic via its analog, pedagogical logic: Thersites situates himself as the mean, deriding schoolmaster to a bunch of school children, mediating the distance between himself and them by inverting its oppositional valences. This is important: Thersites does not seek to obliterate the opposition itself—only the values for which those oppositions stand. Rancière continues, “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positives” (13).

The relationship between Thersites as emancipated spectator and Thersites as pedagogue becomes more interesting when we consider that Thersites is not just a spectator: he is also a performer for the live audience, teaching and translating the action for them in several direct addresses. In this way, Shakespeare creates a complex character who is both a spectator and a pedagogue on spectating. Rancière
links "theatrical reformers," or those artists of the theatre who want to teach the truth about societal ills to their audiences, with "stultifying pedagogues" inasmuch as both reify a supposed "gulf" between spectator/performer and student/teacher (12). By identifying Thersites as both an emancipated spectator who closes this gulf between himself and the legends of Troy and a theatrical reformer attempting to teach the live audience of spectators what the play is actually about, I aim to reveal just the kind of paradox this thesis has been staging throughout: Thersites lies on the threshold, on the gulf, of belonging to one world and appearing to another, pointing to what each given world cannot fully see or accept. Only the stranger can occupy this dual, paradoxical space. Thersites as the metatheatrical audience member embedded in a live performance embodies, I think, the very distance Rancière is exposing as constitutive of both the logic of theatre and education. A self-proclaimed illegitimate bastard redistributing the structure of his domination by actively spectating on the spectacular dispossession of the heroes of Troy and simultaneously teaching the spectators of the spectators how to spectate is, in my opinion, a genius—if not deforming—critique of antitheatricalist logic.

I think that it is not insignificant that Mallin uses the word "deforming" to describe the play’s project. The only time the play references explicit deformation is in the description of Thersites in its list of characters who is labeled “a deformed and scurrilous Greek.” While we don’t get any direct reference to Thersites’s deformity in Shakespeare’s play, we do know that his epic equivalent was described in detail in Homer’s Iliad: “But he the filthiest fellow was of all that had deserts/In Troy’s brave siege: he was squint-eyd and lame of either foote,/So crooke-backt that
he had no breast, sharpe-headed. Where did shoote/(Here and there sperst) thin mossie haire” (Book II, lines 186-189). Homer does not give us the rank or parentage of this warrior, the way he does for every other character in the *Iliad*. Instead, he uses the voice of the crippled Thersites to insert a critique of the aristocratic code. Thersites rails against Agamemnon for his greed and for the inequality among ranks:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Atrides, why complaintst thou now? What would thou more of us?} \\
\text{Thy tents are full of brasse and dames: the choice of all are thine—} \\
\text{With whom we must present thee first when any townes resign} \\
\text{To our invasion. Wanst thou then (besides all this) more gold} \\
\text{From Troy’s knights to redeeme their sonnes, whom to be dearly sold} \\
\text{I or some other Greeke must take? Or wouldst thou yet againe} \\
\text{Force from some other Lord his prise to sooth the lusts that raigne} \\
\text{In thy encroaching appetite? It fits no Prince to be} \\
\text{A Prince of ill and governe us, or leade our progenie} \\
\text{By rape to ruine. O base Greeks, deserving infamie} \\
\text{And ils eternal! Greekish girls, not Greekes ye are!}
\end{align*}
\]

(Book II, lines 194-204)

The speech is eloquent and piercing. Odysseus, seeing a potential revolt from the men, strikes Thersites down, making him cry in humiliation. The Achaean men then proceed to mock Thersites and say of Odysseus, “Author of Counsels, great/In
ordering armies, how most well this act became his heate/To beat from Councell
this rude fool!” (Book II, Lines 237-239). Yet even while the warriors scorn him,
Thersites’s words cannot be unsaid; they sound out as an example of one of the first
critiques of the aristocratic code and first explicit calls for equality in the Western
canon. Siep Stuurmaan notes, “By the very act of speaking up, Thersites claims a
voice for the commoners. His violent harangue against Agamemnon creates a brief
moment of ‘discursive equality’ between the great king and a commoner. Homer
reinforces the effect by giving Thersites a good speech, despite his unfavorable
portrayal of the protester” (177). Indeed, the disparity between the actual look of
Thersites’s mouth and what comes out of it couldn’t be more immense.

Thersites’s theatrical emergence is a complex reversal and substantiation of
his epic conditions. Shakespeare’s Thersites is not referred to as crippled or ugly, by
himself or any other character in the play; moreover, his railing is not rhetorically
eloquent—it is spiteful and ad hominem. But Shakespeare’s Thersites is definitely
interested in inequality and reformation, although he demonstrates that interest in a
much more effective way than Homer’s fool. Schoolmistress Thersites reverses and
thus redeems the big mistake Homer’s Thersites made: putting himself on stage
when he should have sat back and put the others on stage. Thersites translates the
defformation of himself onto the myth itself, using the critique of inequality to
reform history precisely by undermining it.

I argued at the beginning of this section that Thersites is a slave, a bastard “in
everything illegitimate” (5.8.8). Ostensibly, it is Thersites who is the most
dispossessed character, the one who lacks admission into the lived realities of his
soldier compatriots. I think what becomes clear in a reading of this “problem play” is how Thersites signals both a kind of emancipated and controlled spectatorship simultaneously. Sure, Thersites knows what is going to happen, the way children know every song, every piece of dialog in their favorite movies, and so cannot do much to change the course of events. But the other characters know what is going to happen too: in the famous “wedding” scene of Troilus and Cressida, Troilus vows, “As truth’s authentic author to be cried/’As true as Troilus’ shall crown up the verse/And sanctify the numbers” (3.2.161-163) and Cressida responds, “Prophet may you be!/If I be false or swerve a hair from truth,...Yea, let them say to stick the heart of falsehood,‘/As false as Cressid’” (3.2.163-164...175-176). Before they even consummate their union, the lovers know what stereotypes myth will make of them. Yet while the lovers know this proverbial truth about their futures, they don’t seem to be enjoying the suspense in getting there the way that Thersites does. Thersites’s critique of mimesis is not that it takes us away from the real, sacred substance of life, but that it is the rotten method of a terrible history that keeps repeating, keeps copying itself like a virus, becoming more and more diseased in the next iteration. You can’t free yourself from that. But you can turn it into a comedy show that both humors yourself and that signals—and even attempts to control—how that other spectator, the live audience member, is to make meaning from all the historical debris.
4.3 Accessing History: The Endogenous Witness from Outside

I began this chapter with Blau’s notion of an inherent split that constitutes the phenomenology of the spectacle, a split that is localized in the audience/spectator. While I don’t think Blau would agree with Debord’s wholesale attack on the spectacle as lobotomizing and anesthetizing, I do think *The Audience* is perhaps an inverted rendering of the same problem—making sense of the structure of society via the structure of the spectacle and finding in the coherencies something paradoxically endogenous and external to both: the spectator. That is, inasmuch as Blau is primarily concerned with mapping modernity’s unique cultural logics of performance—much like Debord is interested in delineating the logic of Marxist alienation as revealed in modern spectacular culture—he is influenced by Turner and Schechner’s performance theories that seek to link primitive ritual to modern theatre in the hopes of recruiting universal truths. For Debord, the truth of twentieth century spectatorship is dispossession. For Blau, it is division. And for both thinkers, what precedes and structures that dispossession and division is a primary coherence—the authentic, pre-industrial self; the primitive sacred.

Indeed, there is a sense that the question that governs Thersites’s critique is “Where does all this come from?” In order to answer that question—lechery, lewdness—he must materialize diseased conditions that are otherwise invisible. Jonathan Gil Harris observes, “Disease and their causes are contradictorily (dare one say problematically?) figured in Shakespeare’s problem play; its illnesses are

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67 In another evocative postulate on the nature of spectacular society, Debord links the spectacle to history itself: “But the spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, its use of time. It is the historical movement in which we are caught” (Axiom 11).
indeterminately humoral and ontological, endogenous and invasive” (88). Harris links this battle between “residual humoral and emergent invasive models of illness” with a broader question of value, particularly economic value: “The questions with which both Troilus and Cressida and mercantilist writing grapple are these: are the origins of disease and value endogenous or are they external?” (88). That is, is value intrinsic to the object or does an object acquire value only in relation to an external system? Similarly, does disease develop inside the body due to its inherent corruption, or can you catch it in the atmosphere? The play is asking the same questions about historical value. Are the origins of historical value endogenous or external? Does history invade our present or does it infect us already? Is the task to become cognizant of the nightmare we are already in or to brace ourselves from the creeping intrusions of an authority that is more virus than humour? “If history,” Blau asserts, “remains the nightmare from which we are trying to awaken, perhaps it’s because in the unbalancing wheel of modernity, rocked to hallucination by contingency, we’ve managed to neutralize history” (16). To neutralize literally means to render ineffective. Thersites’s project as railing audience-critic definitely renders the men of Troy, and by extension the historical valence of a shared ancestry, ineffective. But rather than just being a purposefully satirical take on the similarly hallucinatory contingencies of the early modern period, Troilus and Cressida posits, through Thersites, that historical value—like disease in the body, economic value in society, and the spectator in the theatre—is paradoxically endogenous and external.

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There is a scene in Shakespeare’s play with which I want to close. At the beginning of Act III, Pandarus enters the stage looking for Lord Paris and meets a servant instead. The stage notes remark “Music sounds within.” The two engage in a comedic exchange wherein the servant continuously misunderstands Pandarus’s meaning.

Pandarus: What music is this?
Servant: I do but partly know sir: it is music in parts.
Pandarus: Know you the musicians?
Servant: Wholly, sir.
Pandarus: Who play they to?
Servant: To the hearers, sir.
Pandarus: At whose pleasure, friend?
Servant: At mine sir, and theirs that love music.
Pandarus: Command I mean, friend.
Servant: Who shall I command, sir?
Pandarus: Friend, we understand not one another. I am too courtly and thou too cunning. At whose request do these men play? (3.1.16-27)

The misunderstanding revolves around the natural function of an audience, in this case over-hearers as opposed to spectator-patrons. Is the audience the one who derives pleasure from what is experienced or the one who requests what is experienced? And are these two different things? It is possible to take pleasure in a
performance that isn’t for you. I imagine nearby neighbors listening to a concert in
the park in the comfort of their home, or a couple of roommates illegally
downloading a movie to watch together on a Saturday night. The conflict in these
instances as well as in the misunderstanding between Pandarus and the servant is a
socio-economic one. Pandarus does not accept that an audience who has not
purchased the music by means of its patronage could actually be an audience. The
radical democratization that the servant makes of the audience—that it is composed
primarily of those that who are pleased by the performers—echoes Thersites’s
spectator pleasure. To whom do the players of *Troilus and Cressida* play? To all
those that love making ribaldry of a pathetic, forsworn tragedy.

Thersites, the cynical witness to a history that paradoxically alienates him
and integrates him into it, metatheatrically enacts the commercial theatre’s
spectator’s relationship to viewership, where pleasure is prime and patronage is
passé. In a play that is obsessed with looking and being looked at, Thersites is not
simply denied access because he is the subaltern. He is denied access because he
satirizes the emulous factions of heroes who hypocritically fight for appearances in
the name of universal values. Thersites absorbs antitheatricalist logic and the
paradox of the spectator in order to exploit it: he is the priggish schoolmaster who
takes delight in his pupils’ ignorance, who reifies the distance between himself and
his lessers by reducing them to nothing. He is Miss Trunchbull, but without the
institutional assurance of impunity. Thersites is the collective dispossession of
history, emerging endogenously and externally in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and
Cressida, who signals the fundamental theatricality of the Matter of Troy as well as the fault-line, the split intrinsic in social identity that the theatrical event rehearses.
5 CONCLUSIONS. Hieronimo’s and Hamlet’s Apocalypse: The Revelation of the Theatre

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t”

—Polonius (2.2.23-24)

Throughout this dissertation I have been arguing for the metatheatrical rendering of the theatrical event within Shakespeare’s plays, as figured by a given character who doubles as an inadmissible stranger and as a given component of that event. The poetics, or theory of form, that I am creating is one in which the theatre reproduces the anxieties phenomenologically and existentially felt in the ‘real’ world, while not attempting to substitute for that real, lived world. The metonymic equivalencies I am making between these strangers and these theatrical components serve to, on the one hand, emphasize just how much the formal elements of theatre are the elements of “everyday life” (human bodies, time, distance, etc.) with the conclusion that any formal analysis of a given theatre must take into account the implicit metaphorical valences of these elements; and on the other hand, make the somewhat lyrical inference that the theatrical event itself reveals the aporia of trying to belong and appear to others in a world in which we already at once belong and appear. In our trying to know and integrate with the other, we reveal the anxious contradiction of being separated from it in the first place.

The specific anxieties manifest differently in the articulation of each theatrical element. The character’s anxious question is am I permanent? My analysis of Richard as character, as a result, depended upon an interrogation of the shifting,
occlusive construction of nothingness within a framework of immutable fate. The actor’s anxious aporia is who am I? My analysis of Shylock as actor, therefore, depended upon a examination of the theo-political dialectic of authenticity staged between the two merchants of Venice. The anxious question that governs the audience’s articulation is am I unique? My analysis of Thersites, consequently, depended upon an interrogation of emulation and historical iteration, and the paradoxically endogenous and exogenous spectator that emerges from each. All of these characters hovered on the threshold of the world of appearances and the world of belonging. Their crises consistently led back to questions of what it meant to be recognized and to be allowed in, to what it meant to be admitted. As such, they all had a special need for the theatre precisely because the possibilities it afforded as an art form potentiated the shape and nature of their predicaments.

Arguably, two characters in the early modern dramatic canon who have the greatest need for the theatre are Thomas Kyd’s Hieronimo in The Spanish Tragedy and Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet. Both have become strangers within their respective royal courts, and both use the theatre to uncover and expose the falsity of those who have estranged them. Where I made the case for Richard II, Shylock, and Thersites metatheatrically operating as the three main parts of theatrical figuration—the illusion of character, the actor performing that illusion, and the spectator watching and participating in it—I want to make an argument for Hamlet and Hieronimo, strangers on the threshold of social and physical existence, as encompassing all three at once. Hamlet and Hieronimo are metatheatrically the whole theatrical event. I follow Vicki Ann Cremona’s lead in defining the theatrical
event: “To mark an event as theatrical, the distinction from other kind of doings might be more important than its content. The distinction is twofold: on the one hand there is someone who does something in a different way than in regular life; on the other hand, there is also someone who sees and acknowledges this difference... Theatre becomes theatre by being an event, in which two partners engage in a playful relationship” (11). The two partners, of course, are engaging in a playful relationship dependent upon an agreed upon illusion. The anxious question that governs the articulation of the theatrical event, then, is is this/am I real? What makes Hieronimo and Hamlet so fascinating is that they seem to be producing their theatre and agreeing upon its illusions within their own minds, complicating just what is real and what isn't in each play world.

As arguably the two most famous revenge heroes of the early modern period, Hamlet and Hieronimo stand on the thresholds of this world and the next, of belonging and exclusion. Hamlet begins with a grieving prince, dressed in “nighted color,” who has only recently become estranged to his courtly family and the crown that was to be his inheritance (1.2.70). Hamlet’s father is dead, murdered by his usurping uncle, Claudius, so that Claudius could marry Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude. While The Spanish Tragedy does not begin with a similarly outcast and grieving figure (nor does it begin within any clear protagonist), it eventually settles on the grieved-and-suddenly-estranged-from-the-Spanish-court Knight Marshal Hieronimo as the play’s ultimate protagonist and tragic hero. Midway through the play, the son of Hieronimo, Horatio, is murdered by Portuguese Prince Balthazar (with the aid of the Spanish King’s nephew, Lorenzo) for the purposes of marrying the Spanish
Princess Bel-Imperia and consolidating Portuguese and Spanish power—Horatio was Bel-Imperia’s lover and so stood in the way of these royal machinations. Wronged and consequently alienated by their communities, Hamlet and Hieronimo famously lose faith in humanity and question what it means to exist. As his ruminations and behavior throughout the play suggest, Hamlet distrusts his mother, his uncle, his friends, the very integrity of humanity. For Hamlet, woman’s name is “frailty” (1.2.150) and man is “a piece of work,” a “quintessence of dust” (2.2.32). The social world has lost all delight for him, as he meditates on the threshold of staying in it or leaving it entirely—“To be or not to be” (3.1.64). Similarly, Hieronimo’s grief turns into wild madness, and he too ponders the poniard or the rope, the finality of which would at least lead him to meet the eternal judge who could provide the necessary “justice for Horatio’s death” (3.12.13).

Yet each man chooses life, and he chooses life so that he can revenge the life of someone he loved. Revenge for both men is articulated theatrically and takes on the revelatory, apocalyptic function of exposing falsity and admitting the truth. And yet, revenge also seems to fail because it greatly exceeds its aims. The endings of *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* are apocalyptic bloodbaths: everyone dies, not just the supposed guilty, and the guilty don’t really admit to anything in the process. The critical tension in both plays is between the hidden theatre of the mind, manifest in the intense remembrances of the dead, and the public theatre of revenge that attempts to make that hiddenness real and coherent. This tension is similar to the tension between the play as written object that corresponds to the mind of the author and the play as performance that corresponds to its live iteration. The
achievement of access and recognition—admission—for Hamlet’s and Hieronimo’s ghostly remembrances that hover between this world and the next is what each man needs to become “a prouder monarch/That ever sat under the crown of Spain” and Denmark (Addition 5:4.4.10-11). For the estranged Hamlet and Hieronimo, this admission is achieved by metatheatrically embodying the whole theatrical event—text and performance, production of illusion and participation in that illusion.

5.1 Recognizing Memory: Staging Revenge

Deemed mad by the other characters within their respective play worlds, the last few hundred years of criticism, and even at times by themselves, Hamlet and Hieronimo hold within themselves an alternate universe in which they serve as character, actor and spectator to a reality no one else can fully experience or fully penetrate. This reality has most often been associated with the griever’s memory. As John Kerrigan notes, ”Receding into the privacy of memory, Hamlet excludes the audience from knowledge of ’that within which passes show’; and, in the process, he wins for himself a depth and secrecy of character utterly unlike anything to be found in Greek tragedy” (Remembrance 106-107). Zakariah Long associates this private inwardness of memory with the otherworldly: when revengers “are in the throes of painful reminiscences, many speak as though they are suffering a form of otherworldly torment” (154). While this torment is not unlike another Renaissance trope—the Petrarchan pathos for instance—Long notes:

What distinguishes revenge tragedy is the metaphysical seriousness
with which it invests this familiar sentiment. Subject to involuntary, invasive, and irresistible reminiscences from within and oppressive reminders from without, revengers genuinely perceive glimmers of the otherworld in their surroundings. In this sense, revengers experience infernal memory not only as a psychological but an ecological event—an example of the imbrication of interior and exterior worlds that has become the focus of recent critical work on the early modern mind-body. (154)

Long’s essay is an incisive, well-evidenced articulation of the relationship between revengers and memory, a relationship that has been well explored by theorists on memory and remembrance. Long’s contribution to the discussion of the early modern revenger’s mnemonic experience is to identify that experience as “infernal,” ultimately asking two fundamental questions of the plays: why are Hamlet and Hieronimo, “as case studies of infernal memory,” so inexorably tormented by the memories of a dead father and a dead son, in manners that suggests otherworldly punishment; and why are the plays so explicitly concerned with the otherworld that is the afterlife (155)? The Spanish Tragedy begins in a syncretistic underworld,

where the ghost of recently slain Don Andrea, a Spanish nobleman and soldier, resides in a Catholic purgatory limbo because the classical gods—Pluto and Proserpine—do not know what part of the underworld in which to place him. 

*Hamlet* similarly begins with a ghost, but this time one caught in a real Purgatory limbo: Hamlet’s father’s spirit who is “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night/And for the day confined to fast in fires/Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purged away” (1.5.15-18). The protagonists of the plays suffer otherworldly remembrances while at the same time each play “associates infernal memory with a different otherworld,” Tartarus and Purgatory (154). The two plays’ heuristic of infernal memory can be understood as uniquely early modern, Long observes: “Ultimately, I argue that the existential context for infernal memory is the early modern dilemma of feeling caught between worlds, whether Classical or Christian, Protestant or Catholic, material or spiritual” (155-156).

I’d like to extend this “dilemma of feeling caught between worlds” to the theatrical situation itself. I think there is something about infernal memory that not only suggests the political and religious turmoil of the period, but also the nature of these men’s relationship to the theatre. Both Hamlet and Hieronimo are playwrights and actors in their own right, staging plays within the larger play world for vengeful purposes that have little to do with spectator pleasure, although they use the latter impulse to accomplish the former. Hamlet adapts and translates an Italian play of the time—*The Murder of Gonzago*—into a piece called *The Mousetrap* that will famously “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.634), and he also serves as “chorus” to the play in performance (3.2.269). Hieronimo adapts his own play he wrote in his
youth—*Solimon and Perseda*—into a piece that will ultimately kill Lorenzo and Balthazar, and he also performs the murderer’s role within the play. What they each accomplish is twofold: theatre and revelation. King Claudius who killed Hamlet’s father and Lorenzo and Balthazar who killed Hieronimo’s son will be exposed and punished.

Another word for revelation is apocalypse from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις, meaning “to uncover, disclose” (OED). For Hieronimo and Hamlet, theatre and apocalypse are the same thing: each serves as a revelation of the truth and each imagines that revelation in terms of the creation of a new world. The purpose of Hieronimo’s and Hamlet’s theatre, or their art, is to manifest their private, infernal memories into a form that makes them socially coherent. At least that’s the impulse: to reorder creation into a vision that incorporates and justifies what has been lost—a son, a father, a lineage, a home—while simultaneously indicting the failure of justice and the powers that be to adequately do so themselves. The problem is, the latter doesn’t exactly happen. The audiences of both plays do not experience the intended indictment: Gertrude does not feel remorseful, Claudius does not confess, and the Kings of Spain and Portugal do not even understand Hieronimo’s play, much less feel culpable in the death of Horatio. This failure to engage in an agreed upon illusion between players and audience is purposeful on both men’s parts: the theatrical event they stage is *about them and for them.*

*The Mousetrap* and *Solimon and Perseda* cohere only insofar as they are mimetic representations of private—and personal—wish-fulfillments: what they uncover is the space inside the mind of the dreamer who created them. The story of
Hamlet’s *The Mousetrap*, and the dumb show preceding it, is essentially the story of what happened to King Hamlet, with the added flavor of a son’s righteous anger: the player king and queen express lengthy affections for one another while the queen exclaims, “In second husband let me be accurst” and promises never to remarry (3.2.202). After their avowals of love, the king sleeps and Lucianus, the nephew to the king, slips poison in his ear and kills him—exactly how the ghost of Hamlet’s father says he was killed. Midpoint in the play, Hamlet asks his mother “how you like this play?” and she famously retorts, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (3.2.253-254). So far, the play hasn’t exactly worked to catch Gertrude’s conscience and so hasn’t revealed anything about her guilt. The king fares differently. After witnessing the poisoning, he stands up to stop the play and in the next scene goes to confession. But Claudius admits after his attempt to purge himself through prayer that his repentant words are not backed by a repentant heart: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;/Words without thoughts never heaven go” (3.3.102-103). Where Gertrude denies any mimetic coherence between herself and the player queen and so any blame in the events of King Hamlet’s death, Claudius too ultimately denies blame when he fails to bring his guilty conscious to full deliverance; in fact, his next kingly maneuvers are to try and kill Hamlet.

*The Mousetrap* uncovers and reveals by means of the new, theatrical world, but it doesn’t achieve anything close to punishment or retribution because its spectators do not identify with the actors and the story in the way Hamlet imagines. In fact, the only one who seems to be completely engrossed and identified with the play is Hamlet himself—arguably, this is the happiest the gloomy prince has been
since his father died, naughtily teasing Ophelia throughout *The Mousetrap* and then punning and toying with his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when the play is over. Hamlet writes, directs, plays chorus to, and spectates a play that serves, at best, to reveal his own desires for a world he’d rather live in—one in which his aggrieved mother never remarries and the murderer of his father is wracked with a guilty conscience—rather than reveal the guilt of the ones upon whom he seeks revenge.69

If *The Mousetrap* somewhat baffled its audience, Hieronimo’s *Solimon and Perseda* completely confounds them. The story of *Solimon and Perseda* is effectively the as-yet-to-be finished story of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Perseda, like Bel-imperia, is already betrothed to Erastus the knight of Rhodes, but Solimon, just like Balthazar, fancies her and conspires to have his bashaw kill her husband (Horatio or Don Andrea in the comparison). Perseda then kills Solimon and, to escape the bashaw’s tyranny, kills herself too. Hieronimo doles out the rightful parts to his players and adds an extra prescription:

> Each one of us must act his part
> In unknown languages,
> That it may breed the more variety.

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69 As Alfred Mollin points out, demonstrating how the *Mousetrap* actually works to catch the conscience of a king has been a famous critical problem in Shakespeare criticism, although “we have the word of Hamlet and Horatio for its success” (357). Focusing, as critics have, “on rendering Claudius’ emotional reaction to the spoken play both psychologically plausible and consistent with the text, these theorists have lost sight of Hamlet’s purpose in staging the Mousetrap: evoking from Claudius a sign of his guilt” (358).
As you, my lord, in Latin, I in Greek,
You in Italian; and for because I know
That Bel-imperia hath practiced the French,
In courtly French shall all her phrases be. (4.1.172-178)

Bel-imperia, already in on the murderous plan, gets the meaning and responds, “You mean to try my cunning then, Hieronimo,” punning on the word “cunning” as both skill in language as well as skill in artifice (4.1.179). Hieronimo’s creative revenge strategy works by exploiting the operations of theatrical practice itself: he is able to murder the men who murdered his son by “confusing the distinction between feigning actor and real victim” (West 224). Balthazar follows Bel-imperia’s remark, protesting “But this will be a mere confusion,/And hardly shall we all be understood,” to which Hieronimo quickly retorts, “It must be so, for the conclusion/Shall prove the invention and all was good” (4.1.180-184).

Both men are right: it is mere confusion and the conclusion really does prove Hieronimo’s invention. After the play is over and the King exclaims it was “bravely done” (4.4.68), Hieronimo stands amongst the dead bodies and reveals that they are not acting: “Haply you think—but bootless are your thoughts—That this is fabulously counterfeit” (4.4.76-77). Then in seventy-nine detailed lines, Hieronimo explains the reason he has committed these murders, the development of his revenge strategy, and how it was enacted before their very eyes. He even pulls out the corpse of his son Horatio and exclaims, “See here my show, look on this spectacle./Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end” (4.4.89-90). The poetic
metonymies of dead body, spectacle, and affective finality completely elude the Viceroy and the King. The symbolic pinnacle of government, these men are so bureaucratically inculcated in the semiotics of absolute reference— one thing is this and another thing is that— that the poetic gymnastics Hieronimo’s play demands of their cognition is beyond what they can accomplish. A body cannot be a spectacle. A show cannot be real. The King’s men grab Hieronimo and the King yells at him, “Speak, traitor; damned, bloody murder, speak!/ For now I have thee I will make thee speak— /Why hast thou done this undeserving deed?” (4.4.163-165). The Viceroy modulates the kings cry with a similar trumpeting, “Why has thou murdered my Balthazar?” (4.4.166). Are the King and Viceroy deaf? Have they not just heard seventy-nine lines of explanation, one of the longest speeches in the entire canon of early modern drama? Have they not just seen the dead, rotting body of Horatio? Solimon and Perseda succeeds insofar as it reveals a father’s love and actualizes his dream of just retribution, but not insofar as it reveals the just guilt of Lorenzo and Balthazar—at least in the eyes of their theatre’s main spectators, their fathers.70

If theatre “becomes theatre by being an event, in which two partners engage in a playful relationship,” Hamlet’s Mousetrap and Hieronimo’s Solimon and Perseda are theatrical events only for them. The playful relationship being staged here is between the world of the play and the real world, but only Hamlet and Heironimo are aware of it. As conscious constructors of these play worlds, both men are fully in

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70 Of course, Don Andrea, the spectator and chorus of the real-life “play” in which Hieronimo is actually participating, exclaims “these are spectacles to please my soul” and proceeds to place every character who has died within their respective places in the underworld (4.5.12). He leads Hieronimo to “where Orpheus plays,/ Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days”— Orpheus, the legendary Greek poet, musician, and prophet who delights the gods with the beauty of his art (4.5.23). In this way, Andrea acts as the eternal tribunal of the fallen world, enacting justice in an ethically and politically discriminating way, a way that was denied to Hieronimo.
on the playful relationship: Hamlet will catch the real guilt of the real King and Hieronimo will kill the real murderers of his real son. For both revenge tragedians, the theatrical realization of their revenge strategies work insofar as they render the illusion of theatre as, paradoxically, revelation. But it’s a personal, private revelation precisely because both productions fail in the ultimate coherence of any theatrical event: making a clear, agreed-upon relationship between the performers of that illusion and those watching it. Their scripts belie that agreement and as a result confusion ensues.71

5.2 Accessing Revelation: The Apocalypse Can’t be Scripted

What strikes me most about Hamlet and Hieronimo, then, is in just how much their failure of theatre is a failure of scripted theatre. Where the scripts of The Mousetrap and Solimon and Perseda intentionally serve only their creators, it is the improvisatory aftermath of the plays that actually reveal and revenge the truth. In the case of Hamlet, it is at the end of the play during the famous—and similarly spectacular—duel between Laertes and Hamlet when the events and their motivations begin to become revealed: King Claudius killed King Hamlet and is now

71 As a co-revenger of Horatio’s death, Bel-imperia is also aware of the covert relationship being staged between the world of the play and the real world. Indeed, Bel-imperia uses the play-within-a-play as a cover to kill herself, an act of which Hieronimo was not aware and did not script, making him a spectator to the play as much as the nobility. That said, her improvisation on the script does not manage to confuse Hieronimo. In his confession to the King and Viceroy, Hieronimo quickly interprets her maneuver and discloses it to the other spectators: “For though the story saith she should have died,/Yet I of kindness, and of care to her,/Did otherwise determine of her end;/But love of him whom they did hate too much/Did urge her resolution to be such” (4.4.141-145). While Bel-imperia’s improvised theatrical illusion of death is likewise rendered as real-life revelation, it’s not the same kind of personal and private revelation of Hieronimo’s, precisely because spectator Hieronimo immediately makes it coherent and understands it. Whether or not Bel-imperia really killed herself out of love for Horatio, we’ll never know. But I’m reluctant to put her theatrical event in the company of playwrights Hieronimo and Hamlet, who, I think uniquely, and maybe purposefully, fail at making their revelations coherent to their audiences.
also responsible for Laertes’, Hamlet’s and Gertrude’s deaths, in his own privately scripted performance gone awry. Act V is the real apocalypse of *Hamlet* where everyone dies, albeit in impromptu ways.\(^{72}\) If revelation and retribution truly occur, they can’t be scripted. Similarly, it is the moment *after* the play *Solimon and Perseda* is over when the kings demand Hieronimo re-confess everything in an unscripted, improvisatory way that the nature of the deaths becomes revealed to them. As Richard Proudfoot notes, “Modern performers of *The Spanish Tragedy* (like their Elizabethan forebears, if we can trust the evidence of half-a-century of parody) must face the question how far the play can be taken straight and where, if at all, it can be allowed to burlesque itself” (75). This moment of complete misprision when the nobility ask Hieronimo to confess after he has spent so long confessing seems particularly suited for farcical, improvisational delivery. Indeed, one of the major rules of improvisational theatre is “don’t negate and don’t ask questions.” Hieronimo does not say back to the King “Um, didn’t I just tell you?” but instead accelerates the drama of bafflement by agreeing with the King’s ignorant paroxysms:

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\(^{72}\) For a book-length study on apocalyptic narratives in Shakespearean cinematic adaptations, see *Apocalyptic Shakespeare: Essays on Visions of Chaos and Revelation in Recent Film Adaptations*. See also R.M. Christofides’ *Shakespeare and the Apocalypse: Visions of Doom from Early Modern Tragedy to Popular Culture* for a post-structural linguistics reading of apocalypse. Christofides argues that apocalypses always fail precisely because they speak to that which exists outside of language; any attempt to linguistically stage them, then, produces deferral, not revelation. As such, they symbolically take on the narrative crisis in post-structural theory: the apocalypse is present in the imagination only insofar as it is absent. See also Derrida’s ”No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” in which he argues that apocalypse takes on the function of the Logos, an absolute referent for metaphysical presence that provides universal meaning, but that ultimately can’t be accessed. My own interest in the theatrical apocalypses of these early modern tragedians takes insights from these post-structural, presentist theories, but ultimately aims to situate revelation not within language but within the figuration the theatre, or bodies performing illusions to other bodies.
Indeed,

Thou may'st torment me, as his wretched son

Hath done in murdering my Horatio,

But never shalt thou force me to reveal

The thing which I have vowed inviolate.

And therefore in despite of all thy threats,

Pleased with their deaths, and eased with their revenge,

First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart.

[He bites out his tongue] (4.4.184-190)

What exactly is the thing that he has vowed “inviolate”? Hasn’t Hieronimo just explained all the ways he has been violated and all the ways he has chosen to violate back? What remains pure here? In his essay, “‘But this will be a mere confusion’: Real and Represented Confusions on the Elizabethan Stage,” William West pinpoints this scene as the ultimate moment of confusion for all parties within the theatre:

Hieronimo’s self-mutilation, he insists, preserves his secret “inviolate” (about the only thing onstage that is inviolate at this point) and he dies with it unspoken. But what is this secret? Nothing that an offstage audience knows, either. In fact, it does not even seem to make sense; Hieronimo has already revealed Horatio’s murder, his revenge on the killers Lorenzo and Balthazar, Bel-Imperia’s part in it, and everything else. To this point the audience has heard nothing of any vow, and so
it shares in the confusion with which Hieronimo leaves his reluctant represented audience. The secret he takes with him he takes from us as well. (231)

It’s almost as if Hieronimo makes up a secret to render the bewilderment of the King and Duke coherent. Lacking the scripted feel of the post-play confession, this improvisation on Hieronimo’s part manages to both reveal the truth of the murders better than his prepared speech, yet at the same time it accelerates the drama of chaos, confusing even the live audience. Similarly, Act V of *Hamlet* reveals while it confuses. Everyone is dying and none of it seems to be planned: Gertrude drinks out of the wrong cup, Laertes gets stabbed with the poisoned poniard meant for Hamlet, and Claudius is force fed his own poison. And yet, it is in this chaos that the truth begins to be revealed: Laertes’ dying words to Hamlet reveal his and Claudius’s plan to kill Hamlet, ultimately condemning the king and mending the ruin with his almost-brother-in-law: “He is justly served/It is a poison tempered by himself./Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,/Nor thine on me” (5.2.306-310). Even while it’s unclear to the spectators of the duel who is to blame for all the sudden deaths, they nonetheless sense the truth and all yell out “Treason! Treason!” suspecting that the deaths are indeed foul and treasonous (5.2.302). The problem is, everyone still might think it’s all Hamlet’s fault. It will be up to Horatio, a surrogate for the audience, to tell Hamlet’s story and the full events that actually conspired in order to clear Hamlet’s reputation: Hamlet begs, “O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,/Things standing
thus unknown, shall live behind me! / If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity a while, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story” (5.2.323-328). None of this is scripted beforehand by Hamlet. The “chaotic destructiveness of revenge” seems to need a theatre inclined toward its audience as improvisatory participants as opposed to passive spectators (Neill 112). For both The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet, revelation of the truth and, more importantly, the apocalyptic possibility of due punishment, comes by process of improvisatory accumulation, not scripted fantasy.

The dichotomy between written theatre and what Weimann has called “presentational” theatre is one in which Hamlet as a playwright and director is particularly concerned.73 When giving directions to his players before The Mousetrap opens, Hamlet wants to make sure that the clowns “whose job in the company was to provide physical and verbal humor, both within the fiction of the play and as the leader of the ‘jig’ performed afterwards” (Tribble 606), speak no more than is set down for them. For there be of them, that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that’s villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (3.2.40-47)

73 For an elaboration of Weimann’s distinction “between presentation—the performant function—and representation, the rendering of imaginary events and characters” see Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice, pp. 79-108 (21).
As Lyn Tribble notes, “Here the tensions between presentational improvisation and the text of the play are made explicit” (606). Hamlet does not want the clown to exceed his written prescriptions. In fact, Hamlet generally denigrates the kinds of theatrical audiences that take pleasure in “a jig or a tale of bawdry” (2.2.525). Of course, early modern play-going itself was on the threshold of two other important worlds: the world of the “self-contained fictional dramatic representation” as recorded in the written script and the world of the “collaborative social dynamic between performer and audience” as generated in the live action of the play (607). The latter was most clearly localized in the function of the clown who was given full reign of the stage after the play ended and “who presided over the jig, which often spread out to encompass the audience, sometimes with disorderly results” (607). To prefer the jig over a player’s soliloquy is a bit like preferring coffee hour after church over the pastor’s homily. For an intellectual like Hamlet, such a preference is objectionable.

Hieronimo’s Solimon and Perseda’s use of multiple languages has a similar purpose of forcing the players not to exceed their own lines precisely because they can’t understand what the other players are saying. As Tribble notes, it’s unclear how much of the actual script in early modern productions was memorized verbatim and how much was improvised using the “languaging strategies” of presentational theatre: “The ideal of exact recall is a classic example of written

\[74\] The play reimagines the biblical Tower of Babel, whose similar purpose was to destroy the ambitions of the sons of Shem by confounding “their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (KJV, Gen. 11.7). In the same way the sons of Shem sought a name without respecting the name of God, the sons of Portugal and Spain are guilty of seeking a name without honouring the names of those within the kingdom’s ecology.
language bias; it has no meaning in a culture without technologies of reproduction, including printing and audio and video recording” (599). Instead, players probably played off each other’s cues, words, and remembrances, as well as the audience’s feedback, creating a theatrical event that was always-being-created as opposed to one which authentically referenced the written word. Hieronimo controls and stymies this improvisatory function of theatre by forcing his characters to speak in tongues that inhibit them from understanding and authentically playing off one another. Both Hamlet and Hieronimo exploit the theatre’s scripted characteristics to enact and contain their revenge strategies. The paradox, of course, is that while they imagine fidelity to the play script to be the source of revelation, it remains a private revelation in which their audiences do not fully partake. It’s only when their play-dreams are over and the collaborations with their audiences begin that revelation and revenge become symbiotically coherent.

What Hamlet and Hieronimo offer a poetics of admission on the early modern theatre is a heuristic of access and recognition that puts the idea of the play itself into question: what is the play? Who has access to it? The writers and performers? The audience? How do we recognize what the play is? Put another way, from where does the truth, or revelation, of the play come? The script or the performance? Hamlet’s and Hieronimo’s private dreams of revenge metatheatrically embody the conflict inherent in the early modern theatrical event: theater as both written object and improvised live action. The play, of course, is always both a thing and action. Neither is more real than the other, and yet each contends to be the more legitimate. As liminal strangers in their real play worlds, Hamlet and
Hieronimo simultaneously embody the liminality of the theatrical event as both a world that belongs to the minds of authors and a world that belongs to the breaths of living people.

5.3 Admitting Hamlet: On the Archetype

I began this dissertation by making a case for a compromise between stage-centered criticism/performance studies and page-centered criticism/literary studies, and so I find it fitting to end with an analysis of two of the most famous characters in the early modern dramatic canon who, I think, embody this very divide. My thesis has ultimately situated this divide within the world of the image itself, or the larger unifying category that I understand as behind both the artistic articulation and the criticism of that articulation. I have called this image the stranger and the rendering of it admission. Given how much the early modern period was “a crucial moment of cultural transformation, inaugurating the modern dichotomies of drama between poetry and performance,” Shakespeare studies in particular has been a fruitful source for interrogating just where and how these confluences between the work of poetry and the work of performance can and do occur (Worthen, Drama 196).

Arguably, my insistence that we can read within the plays a poetic image that does the work of performing live bodies and the work of how to interpret those bodies is a kind of criticism not unlike archetypal literary criticism, which dates back to the 1930s with Maud Bodkin’s Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, but really gained popularity in the 1950s with Northrop Frye. Frye’s Fearful Symmetry led to the
wide-scale reinterpretation of William Blake’s poetry, most notably his articulation of Blake’s understanding and use of the archetype. According to Frye, Blake’s poetry was a poetry which consisted almost entirely in the articulation of archetypes. By an archetype I mean an element in a work of literature, whether a character, an image, a narrative formula or an idea, which can be assimilated to a larger unifying category. The existence of such a category depends on the existence of a unified conception of art...
Theories of poetry and of archetypes seem to belong to criticism rather than to poetry itself, and when I speak of Blake’s treatment of the archetype I imply that Blake is a poet of unique interest to critics like ourselves. (522-523)

I’m not suggesting that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had a unified conception of theatrical practice that was rendered archetypically in their plays. Rather, I am saying that the limits and affordances of the new commercial theatre did render a kind of archetypical figuration to the characters in the plays of this period, if only because the playwrights were so self-consciously interested in the possibilities of the medium itself. Moreover, it is just these figurations, I think, that—as Frye contends about Blake—make the early modern period of unique interest to critics. The theory of the stranger and the poetics of admission on Shakespeare’s stage belong to criticism not to that stage itself. Shakespeare’s stage is of interest to critics because its poetry belongs also to the poetry of criticism itself.
My purpose in invoking Frye is not to reinscribe the archetype for literary studies, but rather to interrogate just what the relationship between criticism and literary imagination is, which, I think, is at the heart of Frye’s meditations on Blake and at the heart of this thesis. I’d like to quote Frye at length on this relationship because, even some seventy years later, his insights remain foundational to the study (and teaching) of literature:

If criticism is more than aggregated commentary, literature must be somewhat more than an aggregate of poems and plays and novels: it must possess some kind of total form which criticism can in some measure grasp and expound. It is on this question that the possibility of literary archetypes depends. If there is no total structure of literature, and no intelligible form to criticism as a whole, then there is no such thing as an archetype. The only organizing principle so far discovered in literature is chronology, and consequently all our larger critical categories are concerned with sources and direct transmission. But every student of literature has, whether consciously or not, picked up thousands of resemblances, analogies, and parallels in his reading where there is no question of direct transmission. If there are no archetypes, then these must be merely private associations, and the connections among them must be arbitrary and fanciful. But if criticism makes sense, and literature makes sense, then
the mental processes of the cultivated reader may be found to make sense too. (523)

For Frye, the question of whether criticism and literature are aggregates or forms is crucial because the answer fundamentally informs how one goes about doing literary criticism. Do we catalogue influences or do we develop some other systematic form that is itself an “intelligible structure of knowledge” (204)? Developing a poetics of the creative principles and effects that inform early modern drama has been my attempt to do the latter. The difference between archetypes and poetics, interestingly, is that they are inversions of one another: where the archetype forms the foundation upon which patterns may be drawn and copied, poetics derives and articulates the patterns of a given literary technique and imagination. Inasmuch as my project is a poetics, I can’t help but feel that perhaps Frye’s archetype is my own recursive image that haunts this thesis’ critical-imaginative project.

For instance, I began with the mental processes of Walter Benjamin who used the figure of Hamlet and his archetypical, existential dialectic to make sense of his own confounding hallucination. I then introduced the mental processes of Kearney’s phenomenological reading of the Stranger archetype, which, he suggested, exists on the threshold. Kearney also seemed to need Hamlet: “It is not easy to read the Stranger. To cite Hamlet, the face of another is ‘like a book where men may read strange matters’” (5). Indeed, as Worthen has pointed out, the imagery of reading and writing suffuses Shakespeare’s most famous play: “Books
and writing provide an essential metaphor for consciousness and character—

Hamlet vows to wipe ‘all trivial fond records, all saws of books’ from the ‘book and volume’ of his brain (1.5.103)” (Drama 95).75 The accumulation of facts and events that constitutes one’s memory and character is comparable to the accumulation of facts and stories that make up a book. The problem is, Hamlet never said the face of another is “like a book where men may read strange matters.” Lady Macbeth did. Indeed, she said it to her husband in reference to his clearly startled and bewitched expression—he had just received a hefty prophecy from some creepy witches. The line comes after her famous “unsex me” soliloquy in which she asks the spirits that “tend on mortal thoughts” to “Stop up the access and passage to remorse,/That no compunctious visitings of nature/Shake my fell purpose” (1.5.34-36). When she sees the compunctious visitings of nature on her husband’s face, she tells him to stop looking so weird, otherwise people will know something is up: “To beguile the time,/Look like the time” (1.5.54-55). The quote not only has nothing to do with Hamlet, it has nothing to do with the inherent inability to fully read and know another person; in fact it means just the opposite. Macbeth’s looks give him away.

How could Kearney get this wrong? How could the editors not catch it?

I think the better question is, why did Kearney associate it with Hamlet?

Similarly, why does Benjamin associate his sensation of shuddering with Hamlet?76

In both instances, the use of Hamlet makes sense, even while it doesn’t make sense.

For what exactly is Hamlet as an archetype? He is the Stranger par excellence. That

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75 See also James A. Knapp’s Shakespeare and the Power of the Face for a discussion of the interstices between the language of the self and the language of the face.

76 As L. C. Knights famously observed in An Approach to “Hamlet,” “more than with any other play, critics are in danger of finding reflected what they bring with them” (11).
figure who exists on the thresholds of madness and sanity, shuddering and horror, thinking and acting, being and not being, poetry and performance, script and improvisation. Hamlet is arguably the most fundamental Western archetype for the experience of life-altering liminality. He symbolically organizes the mental processes at work in criticism, and simultaneously serves as an imaginative source upon which criticism can speak. To speak of *Hamlet* is to explore the recursive relationship between literary imagination and critical imagination and how each seeks coherence in a form.

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I lose track of time a lot. I’ve never really kept a clock in my house. And I’ve always enjoyed situations or events in life that reflect back to me a sense of order that is non-chronological or atemporal in some way. I think a lot of people who like literature and the arts are like this. There’s something about both artistic practice itself and the consumption of others’ artistic practices that make time feel, well, a little stranger: the focused flow one gets into when deep in creative process (writing, dancing, cooking, playing music, acting), when time feels like it has disappeared as an organizing principle of consciousness. The similar depth of immersion one experiences when reading a good novel or watching an engrossing play or film, where the experience of oneself for a few hours on a couch can feel like the birth and death of several generations—time doesn’t disappear so much as shift velocity. Central these experiences, I think, is a loosening of self and a relaxing into the spontaneity of a present and a future one cannot foresee or measure, whether that is through accessing one’s own imagination or another’s.
Admission, as I have been conceiving it, similarly stakes itself along this strange phenomena of the experience of time, as both a sequential, narrative pattern and a moment where that pattern falls in on itself. We give the Other access once we’ve recognized them, and so, on the one hand, admission reveals a tidy sequential narrative of recognition followed by access. On the other hand, it’s unclear how we recognize the Other in the first place if we don’t have some sort of access to them. The image of the stranger on the threshold of recognition and access somewhat solves this paradox by making it concrete, but it’s not quite enough. As I noted in the introduction, Bridget Escolme articulated a similar interest in this problem of recognition and access through time, within an art form and within the world: how do “play texts written four hundred years ago” get us “to rethink the moments in the theatre and in the world when we ‘recognise’ another human being, when we think we know what someone else means” (17). I’ve been arguing that those play texts get us to rethink those moments by actually staging crises of admission—of appearing and belonging to others—via the affordances of theatrical practice itself. We recognize the estranged images of Richard II, Shylock, Thersites, Hamlet and Hieronimo because the plays ask us to recognize the process of imagination in which all are rendered: theatrical illusion, or the character-actor-audience network that makes up the theatrical event. And they ask us to recognize that process as a process that is as much about an art form that has the capacity to stage a world of entrances and exits, as it is about the real worlds in which we exist as characters on the thresholds of competing realities: you on the couch, knowing and not knowing
that you are watching a movie; you dancing to the music, knowing and not knowing the moves.
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