

**THE FACE OF A VILLAIN: STORYING WHITE VIOLENCE THROUGH
MINIATURES, MIRRORS, AND THE STAGE IN *THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET***

by

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the “storying” of white violence that occurs through Shakespearean tragedy. A term introduced by Gina Starbanket and Dallas Hunt to describe the ways in which “narratives, or spoken and written accounts, come alive and function as important political tools” (*Storying Violence* 23-24), the storying of white violence carries significant implications for how we conceive of both criminality and whiteness today. I offer early modern drama, and Shakespearean tragedy in particular, as a critical piece in the storying of white violence that continues to render whiteness invisible and illegible in our contemporary moment. This thesis focuses on Shakespeare’s storying of violence through *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. I contend that the play engages in a construction of whiteness that is crucially reliant on the intersection of visual and verbal representation, what I describe here as a visual epistemology mediated by language. Importantly, *Hamlet* registers not only the storying of white violence but also its disruption, moments of visual crisis and incoherence in the overarching narrative of white supremacy. Such moments of disruption, I argue, occur through the presence of miniatures, mirrors, and theatrical representation in the play. Analyzing these modes of representation alongside a historicized discussion of early modern visual culture, I show how *Hamlet* puts forward an understanding of criminal whiteness as deviant, the distorted reflection of whiteness that is, at the same time, assumed to be—and, indeed, set down as—the fundamental nature of Black bodies and being.

Lay Summary

The stories we tell ourselves about violence matter. They say something about the ways in which we approach ourselves, the people around us, and the world at large, and they carry real, material implications for how we choose to live our lives. This thesis engages with early modern tragedy as a form of story-telling that shaped and continues to shape contemporary notions of criminality and whiteness. Examining the diverse representations of whiteness that occur through miniatures, mirrors, and the theatre in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, I trace the ways in which whiteness becomes meaningful, as well as moments when the white body fails to live up to expectation. I offer such moments of failure as an invitation to revise the tragedy of exceptional white violence that permeates *Hamlet* and persists in the kind of narratives we tell ourselves about crime and race today.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Camilla Lopez.

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Acknowledgements

Common-placing refers to the antiquated practise, popular in the early modern period, of compiling notes, proverbs, letters, and sundry scraps of knowledge for one's present use and future edification. This thesis began and ends as something of a commonplace book, brimming with the metaphorical pages of wisdom, guidance, and care from an entire community.

My earnest thanks to Dennis Britton, whose early modern seminar complicated my relationship to the Bard in the best ways possible. I am deeply grateful for the paradox of Dennis's generous, incisive feedback—for championing my work always and for challenging me to think critically, think again, and communicate well. My warm thanks to Patricia Badir for her enthusiastic support and for the delicate, delightful balance of critical thoughtfulness and unencumbered joy that she brings to, and inspires in, every conversation. A special thank you to Christine Kim for teaching me to think about footnotes and for introducing me to the invaluable, life-changing work of Christina Sharpe and Dionne Brand, whose labour undergirds so much of this thesis. My thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) whose support through the Canada Graduate Scholarship – Master's Program carried me through the writing of this thesis.

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for those in the wake

INTRODUCTION

White Violence on the News

On May 31, 2020, Americans tuning in to the news channel listened as National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien responded to the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis: "When this happens in America, those—those—those bad apples who give all our law enforcement, who are great Americans, a bad name, they're going to be prosecuted . . . we got a few bad apples."¹ Now a recurring phrase in accounts of police misconduct, the notion of the "bad apple" posits white violence as exceptional, a deviation from the essential place and function of whiteness. One of the earliest recorded forms of the proverb, however, makes the incongruous claim that "a rotten apple quickly infects its neighbour."² It is striking and not a little ironic that the warning issued by the original proverb alerts listeners not to an isolated, anomalous corruption, as O'Brien's usage suggests, but rather to the threat of contagion, the pervasive, potentially universal corruption of members within a group. I highlight O'Brien's misuse of the "rotten apple" proverb to make a point about language, about how language can (and does) perpetuate the invisibility of whiteness—in this case, the concealment of widespread acts of white violence—through the twin narratives of exceptionality and erasure. O'Brien's comment that Derek Chauvin was one of a "few bad apples" not only renders Chauvin's offence exceptional but also erases, in that very act, the history of pervasive, persistent white state violence in North America.

Now consider, for a moment, a second news narrative. On April 5, 1994, a group of three Black men robbed a café in Toronto, then fatally shot one of its patrons. For the next two weeks, the incident appeared on the front pages of prominent local newspapers, with widespread

¹ Robert O'Brien, interview with Jake Tapper, *State of the Union*, CNN, 31 May 2020.

² "Apple," n., sense P.2. (OED).

coverage on radio and television.³ Scot Wortley, John Hagan, and Ross Macmillan provide a representative sample of headlines circulated during those two weeks:

The Just Desserts shooting provoked headlines of “Urban Terrorism” (Toronto Star 1994a). The press proclaimed that the crime was committed “In Cold Blood” (Toronto Sun 1994a) and that suspects had showed “No Mercy” to their victims (Stewart 1994a). The Just Desserts incident was also said to represent the fact that criminals were “Getting More Vicious” (Stewart 1994a) and that a new type of criminal activity, involving the “Lowest of the Low,” was sweeping the city (Lamberti 1994).⁴

Several of these headlines emphasize the inhumanity of the offenders, their seeming lack of pity and excess of brutality. The papers warn of a foreign incursion into Toronto, using plague-like language that contrasts starkly with O’Brien’s image of contained white state violence. Indeed, the minimal damage conveyed in O’Brien’s phrase, “a few bad apples,” provides a startling comparison to the unchecked outbreak of terrorism described in these stories. In their extensive survey of the news coverage, Wortley et al. conclude that the prevailing narrative of the Just Desserts shooting “portrayed the event as both a tragedy and a social crisis.”⁵ The message of this news narrative is clear: white life matters, and Black violence, if left unchecked, will overrun the city.

Important questions emerge around O’Brien’s framing of police violence and the shockingly disparate narrative of the Just Desserts shooting. What kind of stories do we tell ourselves about violence? How do these stories work, when do they differ, and what do they do to our experience of other people and the world at large? This thesis interrogates what Gina Starbanket and Dallas Hunt describe as the “storying” of violence, that is, the ways in which “narratives, or spoken and written accounts, come alive and function as important political

³ See Wortley et al.

⁴ Wortley et al., 642.

⁵ Ibid, 645.

tools.”⁶ Drawing from feminist and Indigenous work, Starbanket and Hunt make the case for the “power of story-telling relative to lived experience”—in this instance, the real, material ways in which the stories we (re)produce about violence impact our ways of seeing and acting toward one another.⁷

I am interested in the storying of white violence that occurs through Shakespearean tragedy. My choice to reach back into the centuries-old archive of early modern drama will, perhaps, come as less of a surprise when we consider the extent of the English bard’s grip on our society to this day. At the time of writing, folks around the globe are gathering to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s First Folio, commemorating the playwright’s work with a fresh proliferation of performances, workshops, and fairs. So long as Shakespeare’s plays continue to be read, taught, and acted on our stages and in our classrooms, the responsibility falls on each of us to engage continually, thoughtfully, and critically with his work. By attending to the storying of white violence in Shakespeare’s tragedies, I do not wish to suggest a causal relationship between early modern theatre and contemporary violence but instead, to demonstrate the provocative ways in which early modern approaches to thinking, seeing, and reading white violence might be put in dialogue with the present. While my project acknowledges and, indeed, foregrounds the importance of historical specificity in analysing early modern narratives of white violence, I suggest that a contextualized discussion of Shakespeare’s plays does not distance the seventeenth-century bard from our own century, but will in fact bring him closer in significant, startling, and at times quite troubling ways.

One example of the generative possibilities of a dialogue between Shakespeare and the present is Dionne Brand’s remarkable essay “Brownman Tiger.” A shrewd, unequivocal critique

⁶ See Starbanket and Hunt, 23-24.

⁷ Ibid, 24.

on representations of white and Black violence in the public imagination, Brand's essay responds directly to the Just Desserts incident and its reception by the media. Defying the vast majority of headlines on the topic, Brand opens her essay not with remorseless terrorists or vicious lowlifes, but with Black youth, "boys and girls" (59). One of the culprits is reimagined as a twelve-year-old boy named Tiger, "full of hope" until he learns that "the only options he had were superstar or criminal . . . until he is in the doorway of some café like Just Desserts in Toronto about to scare some people so that they are more scared than he" (62). Brand goes on to juxtapose local attitudes toward Tiger and his peer Brownman with the "white rapists and murderers" of the city:

For Brownman and Tiger, no week-long, sympathetic, emotional, tragedian rumination on their mental state—were they "distressed," like the white man who killed a two-year-old girl, saying he was going to make her mother suffer forever? (You could swear they were talking about Macbeth or King Lear.) For them the hasty liberal judgement that no matter what, their crime was "brutal" and "heinous" and could never be understood. (70)

In her comparison Brand captures the strain of tragic drama running through, and reserved for, contemporary stories of white violence. "You could swear they were talking about Macbeth or King Lear," Brand plainly observes in a parenthetical remark at the climax of her discussion (70). That a reflection on real acts of white violence gestures to literature, and particularly to Shakespearean tragedy, is a point worth dwelling on. Brand's allusion to Macbeth and King Lear exposes the element of fiction-making implicit in reports of white violence, that is, the deliberate casting of criminal offenders as characters in a play, complete with recognizable tropes and a conventional plotline.⁸ Crucially, for the white offender, the plotline is inevitably tragic: the "boy next door gone unaccountably and sadly wrong," whose wedding pictures are "plastered all over

⁸ As Wortley et al. observe, news narratives often mimic schematic storytelling by providing "easily identified central characters" and narratives that follow familiar "comic, romantic, and tragic forms."

the newspapers, showing what a normal life [he] led” (70). Here, in all respects, is a tragic hero, likeable in his origins and full of lost potential.

The incongruities laid out by Brand in this passage are worth spending more time with. In the particular storying of white violence that concerns her, the white offender emerges holistically, as a man with mental as well as emotional capacities, whose “distressed” state implies foreign interference, a departure from his natural constitution. By contrast, Brownman and Tiger are afforded no personality. They appear simply in the form of the crime they have committed—“brutal,” which is to say, “of or belonging to brutes,” “coarsely cruel, savage, fierce,” “inhuman.” Brand’s comparison also foregrounds a contrast in narrative time. For Brownman and Tiger, the verdict is immediate, unqualified, and based on the premise of incomprehensibility: “Why try to understand what cannot be understood?” Responses to the white man’s crime, on the other hand, involve seven days of “rumination.” The term is a provocative one. Signifying intense periods of lengthy contemplation but also the literal act of chewing, the word *rumination* evokes the image of cows consuming their cud, a task which typically takes eight hours and a total of 30,000 chews per day. I belabor diction and definition because I want to lay emphasis on the drawn-out processes of reading and storying white violence that Brand is critiquing in her essay. Brownman and Tiger receive a sentence. The white offender receives a story—indeed, five acts of tragedy, which he will most likely spend in soliloquy (and we in rumination). Brand’s move to expose the fictions implicit in public perceptions of white violence thus highlights the materializing power of narrative, how, to recall Starbuck and Hunt, stories “come alive and function as important political tools.” Moreover, the inclusion of Shakespeare in Brand’s essay issues a challenge for early modernists to reassess the legacy of that playwright’s much-beloved tragedies and to consider the ways in which this

genre has significantly shaped and may continue to shape our understanding of white violence today.

White Violence in Early Modern Drama

What has Shakespeare to do with white violence? If the playwright's dramatic oeuvre offers any kind of suggestion, with its sheer volume of white murderers, rapists, insurgents, and villainous heads of state, the answer may well be everything. Despite this, the topic of white violence in Shakespeare's plays and in early modern drama at large has received a notable dearth of critical attention. Surveying scholarship on the revenge tragedy, Ian Smith observes the silence around the "question of white violence . . . partly because the villainous acts performed and avenged are construed as private interactions, the result of a contemptable yet individual aberration, the unfortunate, even unnatural, behavior of just one person." It is an odd omission, this failure, both intentional and otherwise, to notice white violence in a genre so well-known for its indulgent displays of "spectacular and multiple acts of violence."⁹ To contend that whiteness does not factor in these plays, or that white violence against other whites in early modern drama should not be considered in terms of race ("I don't see a white murderer, I only see a murderer") assumes that whiteness existed and continues to exist as an essential, fixed category. Such a claim only reinforces, in Yancy's words, the status of whiteness "as given, as natural, as simply a site of being human."¹⁰ Ironically, the tendency to construe white violence as exceptional in early modern tragedy only confirms the fact that whiteness does matter, that the question of what does and does not constitute whiteness lies at the very heart of these plays.

⁹ See Simkin, 5. Putting early modern tragedy in dialogue with contemporary film, Simkin observes the "affinity between the frequently explicit and inventive violence of early modern tragedy (especially revenge tragedies) and the graphic violence that finds its way into a number of different genres of popular film" (4).

¹⁰ Yancy, 45.

Writing in conversation with Ian Smith, David Sterling Brown recently described tragedy as a “white genre that depicts racial whiteness as tragic, as a catastrophic construct.”¹¹ Cognizant of the urgent, ongoing need to interrogate narratives of white violence, I turn to Shakespearean tragedy as a significant literary, cultural, and political force in mediating acts of white violence. Specifically, my thesis takes up *The Tragedy of Hamlet* as a play directly concerned with representations of the white criminal. By centering my analysis on a tragedy not traditionally associated with “race,” I heed Brown’s call to “talk about race, especially whiteness.”¹² Brown’s main contention in *Shakespeare’s White Others*, that acts of white-on-white violence in the playwright’s oeuvre are themselves racial conflicts fraught with questions of ideal whiteness, serves as an important ground for my thesis. Focusing on the *intra*racial colour-line that distinguished ideal whiteness from the less-than-ideal white other, Brown argues that Shakespeare’s plays functioned to define, deny, and police whiteness across somatically white characters and always in dialogue with tropes of blackness. This latter point is a crucial one. As Brown contends, tragedy is a “prime dramatic site for examining whiteness and the white other *because it is consumed by representations of blackness*” (emphasis mine). To speak of race in these plays is to speak of whiteness, not as distinct from a framework of Black criminality but as emerging from and dependent upon that very framework.

My thesis extends Smith’s and Brown’s insights by investigating criminal whiteness as the cause of representational crisis across multiple sites of representation, from visual objects in an early modern context to ekphrastic narration and theatrical performance. I situate my thesis at the intersection of whiteness studies, Black studies, and early modern studies of race and visual

¹¹ See Brown, *Shakespeare’s White Others* (Cambridge UP, 2023), 9.

¹² Brown, “Code Black: Whiteness and Unmanliness in *Hamlet*,” in *Hamlet: The State of Play*, eds. Sonia Massai and Lucy Munro (The Arden Shakespeare, 2021), 120.

culture. Shakespeare's interest in the interplay among modes of representation has been explored by scholars such as Christopher Braider, Alison Thorne, and Richard Meek. As Meek argues, the playwright's numerous descriptions of paintings and sculptures point to Shakespeare's interest not only in the visual arts but "in the art of narrative, in the relationship between different types of mimesis, and in the question of whether language can 'do what so many writers have wanted it to do: 'to make us see.'" I press this question further to ask: make us see *what*? At a time when tropes of blackness began to coalesce around an emergent racial discourse, questions of language, sight, epistemology, and race became increasingly intertwined. Shakespeare's investment in these issues has been the subject of work by various scholars including Patricia Akhimie, Dennis Austin Britton, Noémie Ndiaye, and Kim Hall. Hall's seminal *Things of Darkness* effectively traces the emergent racial discourse tied to the formation of an English national identity, one which relied heavily on a black-white binary. As Hall writes, "descriptions of dark and light, rather than being mere indications of Elizabethan beauty standards or markers of moral categories, became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate notions of 'self' and 'other.'" ¹³

Although scholarship on race in early modern literature often attends to a visual schema of black and white, these conversations have remained largely separate from historicized discussions of visual and verbal representation. My thesis intervenes in this gap by investigating Shakespeare's language of whiteness and blackness alongside early modern visual culture and understandings of artistic representation in that period of English history. Critical to Shakespeare's storying of white violence, I argue, is the intersection between visual and verbal modes of representation. Tracing the numerous references to portraits, miniatures, and mirrors in

¹³ Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 2.

Hamlet, this thesis situates such objects within a larger discourse of early modern visual culture in order to draw out their fraught yet vital relationship to language in the play. It is my contention that miniatures and mirrors arrive on the scene charged with meaning and important implications for the racial formation and preservation of whiteness, not only in Shakespeare's Globe but also in our world today.

(In)visible Whiteness: Narratives of Criminality

Over the course of this thesis, I hope to show that stories of white violence have a direct bearing on the status of whiteness in society, or to put it differently, how such stories make whiteness “worldly.” Introduced by Sara Ahmed, the notion of whiteness as worldly calls attention to the pervasive, material presence of whiteness, a presence that is felt, lived, yet always imperceptible to itself. So whiteness might be said to operate like oxygen, or like the arrangement of a house. We who notice its presence are those who have felt its absence, or more accurately, who have been made to feel our absence from it—the oxygen snatched away, the house made strange to bodies like our own: “If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness.”¹⁴ Whiteness plays host to the world. It is a role achieved and maintained by the assumption of invisibility. As Ahmed goes on to explain: “I want to consider whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category of experience, and how this disappearance makes whiteness ‘worldly.’ To put this simply, what I offer here is a vocabulary for re-describing how whiteness becomes ‘worldly.’ Whiteness describes the very ‘what’ that coheres as a world.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ahmed, 153.

¹⁵ Ibid, 150.

According to Ahmed, the survival of whiteness depends on its own concealment. To become worldly, it must perform a disappearing act. What is to be done, then, with those acts of white violence that demand notice, what I describe as acts of *criminal whiteness*? For instance: “Lynched, castrated, raped, branded, mutilated, whipped, socially sequestered, profiled, harassed, policed, disproportionately arrested and incarcerated, the Black body has endured a history of more than symbolic white violence.”¹⁶ Rather than assume that such acts of racial brutality threaten the invisibility of whiteness, I argue that in fact they further its concealment. The narrativization of criminal whiteness as exceptional erases not only a longer (ongoing) history of white state violence against racialized bodies, but also the manifold iterations of violence that extend beyond the overtly physical. So George Yancy, recalling the assault of a Black woman by six white men in West Virginia, notes:

Many whites will read about Megan Williams and posit her situation as anomalous, something of which only ‘those racist whites’ are capable. This form of moral distancing functions to allow many whites a sense of moral superiority over ‘those white racists,’ while obfuscating their own racism through the act of disavowing only a *particular form* of racism. This creates deep forms of self-deception.¹⁷ (emphasis in the original)

Yancy widens the scope of meaning when he argues that the crimes committed against Megan Williams were “only a *particular form* of racism.” He also exposes the ways in which accounts of racial brutality restrict the definition—and accordingly, the acknowledgement of the extent—of racist thinking and behaviour that occur in everyday experience. In the case of Megan Williams, white violence becomes mediated by a narrative of exception (“those racist whites”) that erases the more covert, though not less destructive, forms of racism extant in Western society today. In her response to this erasure, bell hooks suggests a move away from the term

¹⁶ Yancy, xvi.

¹⁷ Ibid, xvii. I want to advise caution and issue a trigger warning here for those interested in learning more about Megan Williams.

“racism” toward “white supremacy” in order to capture the “very small but highly visible liberal movement away from the perpetuation of overtly racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of Black people *which often masks how all-pervasive white supremacy is in this society*, both as ideology and as behavior”¹⁸ (emphasis mine). My thesis joins this important scholarly initiative to evaluate white violence in more expansive terms and so account for the pernicious assortment of white violent acts against the always-already-racialized body. I want to notice the manifold structures of white violence that pervade and persist in today’s society, to lay bare the hidden continuum from “mundane whitely ways of being-in-the-world” to the more overt manifestations of white racism.¹⁹ As I will show, attempts in early modern drama to story criminal whiteness are themselves acts of “ordinary” violence against Black being.

I use the term “criminal whiteness” to refer to those kinds of violent behaviour which disturb the demarcation of whiteness as morally pure, innocent, safe—in short, behavior which threatens the “white” status of the agent. Moreover, by appending the word “criminal” to “whiteness,” I call into question the concomitant processes by which white epistemic orders invent and then invest an essentialized criminality onto the non-white body and particularly the Black body.²⁰ The desire to map white violence onto a framework of exceptionality assumes a particularly pernicious hue when considered alongside the construction of violent, criminal blackness. I contend that these two impulses of whiteness do not coincide by accident. Attempts to erase (or more aptly, to *un-race*) white violence when possible, and to make exceptional when impossible, work together with normalised representations of intrinsic Black criminality to

¹⁸ bell hooks, 113.

¹⁹ Yancy, 56.

²⁰ Yancy provides a useful articulation of this process in his monograph *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, drawing attention in his introduction to the “axiological frame of reference where blackness is identified with demons,” a frame of reference which “presupposes the identification of whiteness with ‘light,’ ‘divinity,’ and goodness” (xx).

preserve power—and not power only but comfort, the ease of white being and moving in the world. For this reason, an analysis of how criminal whiteness unfolds in the public imagination is necessarily an interrogation of the entrenched narrative of *blackness as criminal*. To put it simply, the storying of white violence is itself an act of epistemological violence against Black being.

I want to return, for a moment, to Yancy's claim that the narrativization of white violence as exceptional helps to "obfuscate" one's own racism. Meaning "to obscure" but also "to dim the sight" and "to use obscure or impenetrable language," the word *obfuscate* evokes a sense both of the visual and the verbal. It might thus be said that the storying of criminal whiteness works to render racist behaviour invisible and illegible to the white gaze. Paradoxically, within the framework of this narrativization, both the white and non-white body assume a certain level of visibility as well as legibility. The white body and Black body become that which is always already understood, either as pure, safe, and good, or else as corrupted, dangerous, and evil. It is important to note, however, that the process of (un)seeing and (mis)reading race is not a straightforward one. As Yancy argues, "the Black body and the white body lend themselves to processes of interpretative fracture, moments of disarticulation." My thesis considers the moment of disarticulation that disrupts the storying of criminal whiteness, a disruption which I argue results in a crisis of visibility and language. Specifically, I take up this crisis of sight, language, epistemology, and race as it occurs in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play directly concerned with the anxieties of confronting white violence. How does this play "story" the acts of murder, treachery, and sexual infidelity so prevalent in the early modern revenge tragedy? In what ways does it inform the (un)seeing and (mis)reading of race, and in what ways does it fail? As I will show,

Shakespeare's tragedy put forward the storying of white violence as a vexed, vulnerable process, one in which the white gaze must turn, even if only for a moment, toward itself.

Something Rotten in the State of Denmark

O villain, villain, smiling damnèd villain!
My tables,
My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark. (1.5.106-110)

Stage directions indicate at this point that Hamlet "*writes*." Perhaps he is jotting down, word for word, the newly discovered adage that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Certainly, the sustained reflection on Claudius's smile may call to mind the king's first appearance on stage, where shows of goodwill, affection, and cheerfulness comprise the entirety of Claudius's conduct toward his sullen nephew. Petitioning Hamlet to "remain/Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye," Claudius generously misinterprets the prince's grudging compliance as a "gentle and unforced accord" that "sits smiling to my heart" (1.2.116, 123-4). The force of Hamlet's claim that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" requires that the audience recollect these lines, and more importantly, imagine the face of the man who delivers them. As I will show, the prince's fixation on his uncle's smile belongs to a larger concern in the play about how to picture criminal whiteness. For Hamlet, Claudius's smile signals a breach in the integrity of the visible world, racial signification, and the very structures of whiteness in Denmark. The smile emerges not as an involuntary, biological expression of an inner (and presumably truer) reality, but instead as artificial reproduction, the carefully curated and dangerous display of

feigned emotion.²¹ What intrigues me most about this scene is not Hamlet's preoccupation with
visuality alone, but rather the accompanying, almost instinctive desire to write something down.
In a play where "the 'hunger to know' is dramatized as 'the desire to see,'"²² Hamlet's decision
to set down in writing the prescription that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" can be
understood as a way to preserve a visual epistemology informed by language. The prince's
adage, I suggest, does not supplant the visible so much as it shapes the very act of seeing.
Whatever he has written on his tablet sanctions the prince's conclusion that now he sees Claudius
rightly. As he examines the finished product, Hamlet declares, "So, uncle, there you are"
(1.5.112).

In *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, Ian Smith traces the use of "verbal
blackface and racial drag"²³ in *Hamlet*, showing how the prince literally and figuratively portrays
his murderous uncle—and later himself as the imminent avenger—in racialized terms. Beginning
with Hamlet's description of Claudius as a "Moore," Smith unpacks the prince's racial
consciousness, drawing out the theatrical particularities of Hamlet's bloody, blackened avenger
Pyrrhus, as well as his staging of the similarly painted murderer Lucianus—two metadramatic
characters assigned by the prince to represent himself and Claudius, respectively. Smith makes a
compelling case for the prince's racial consciousness, the fact that "in Hamlet's mind, violence is
already racialized and attached specifically to a black identity and population."²⁴ I want to
highlight Smith's attention to language, that is, the "verbal blackface" and ekphrastic
descriptions that paint tyranny black in Hamlet's theatre. What does this language do for Hamlet?

²¹ The smile takes on a proliferation of meanings across Shakespeare's works. In other tragedies, particularly *Othello* and *Macbeth*, as well as in a number of history plays, smiling emerges as either artificial or ambiguous, and is almost always misconstrued, with unfortunate consequences. For a more detailed survey, see White, "Smiles That Reveal, Smiles That Conceal," *Shakespeare*, vol 12., no. 2, pp. 134-147.

²² Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare: Looking Through Language*, 111.

²³ See Ian Smith, 128.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 122.

How does such racialization work, and why? I contend that Hamlet's racialized language intervenes in a visual crisis of whiteness precipitated by Claudius's violence. I thus explore the intersections of verbal and visual representation in *Hamlet*, offering the portrait, the mirror, and the theatre as integral components in the prince's storying of white violence. This thesis builds on Smith's important reading by showing how the racialized language revealed in Smith's analysis responds directly to a crisis of representation, specifically visual representations of whiteness. In a play intensely concerned with appearance, perception, and what Alexander Dunlop identifies as the "fundamental epistemological question of the play . . . how we can know the real essence of people,"²⁵ Hamlet's racialized language functions like the adage in his tables, teaching audiences at the Globe and in theatres across the world today how to picture, see, and read the face of violence.

In Chapter One, I examine Claudius's miniature in the context of early modern portraiture and Queen Elizabeth's royal iconography. As I will show, Hamlet privileges a visual epistemology that crucially occludes traces of its own mediation, so that what is seen is presumably what is already "out there," rather than constructed and construed. Within that framework, Claudius's miniature occasions an interesting and, for Hamlet, a provocative visual quandary. This chapter takes up the resulting crisis as a revealing and potentially destabilizing moment in the formation of invisible whiteness, one which calls into question the apparently natural or fundamental meaning of whiteness in the play. In Chapter Two, I turn to the object of the mirror as Hamlet's response to the visual crisis of Claudius's miniature. An important metaphor in the play, the mirror functions largely as a visual cue for Hamlet's "verbal blackface," that is, for the numerous instances of ekphrastic description by which Hamlet paints white crime

²⁵ See Dunlop, 206.

black in the play. I thus posit the mirror as an important apparatus in the prince's storying of white violence. A visual object with manifold uses and strange forms in the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare's mirror emerges not as a simple reflection of the white self but as an elaborate reflection *by* the white self in making criminal whiteness exceptional. Hamlet's distinct—and as I will show, conflicting—approaches to the miniature and the mirror culminate in the prince's approach to dramatical performance. In the final section of Chapter Two, I contrast the representational practises of the children's companies with Hamlet's own stage production of "The Mouse Trap," a comparison which I suggest will lend further insight into Hamlet's visual episteme and the contradictions inherent in the formation of invisible whiteness.

By attending to the historical, cultural, and relational lives of visual objects and the Elizabethans who encountered them, this project aligns squarely with the goal of early modern critical race studies to "elucidate early modern racial formations . . . simultaneously in their own historical terms and in conversation with our own times."²⁶ What I offer here is one early modern example of how the visible (what is seen) becomes imbued with fictions of truth (what is known), or more concretely, how the white body *comes to mean what it means*. This thesis thus issues a challenge for modern readers of Shakespeare to reckon with one of the most widely celebrated tragedies across the globe and to ask ourselves what kind of world, exactly, *Hamlet* presents to us today.

²⁶ See Ndiaye, "1623-2023: The First Folio Unbound," 182.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MINIATURE

“Like Clear Truth”: Whiteness and the Royal Face

Encased in a dark, oval-shaped frame, Queen Elizabeth I looks intently ahead, the faintest hint of a smile on her lips. Pale-faced with golden locks, a white ruff, and glinting jewels scattered across her hair and dress, the queen sits before a blue backdrop, her gleaming figure redolent of a star in the sky. Early modern literary accounts of Elizabeth belabour her queenly radiance. In one poem, Richard Barnfield likens her to a celestial body whose constant light distinguishes her from the moon: “She shines by Night, but thou by Day do’st shine:/Shee Monthly changeth; thou dost nere decline.”²⁷ Another poem, written in Latin for a particular portrait of the queen, celebrates the luminous beauty conveyed in the shape and colour of Elizabeth’s face:

Your ivory brow conquers your primrose countenance with
shining whiteness:
How does your charming beauty shine through your
delicate cheeks?
What neck with gold hair is more pure than gold?
Does any rosy beauty shine in a snowy mouth?
And will no woman begrudge you such a face
So long as you always wish to live a maiden?²⁸

The essential qualities of the royal face materialize superficially in this description of the portrait, from the “shining whiteness” of Elizabeth’s brow to the beauty that “shines” through “delicate cheeks” and in a “snowy mouth.”²⁹ Without recourse to the picture in question, however, the reader must rely on the imagination to supply what is lacking in these lines, and the

²⁷ See Barnfield, *The Complete Poems*.

²⁸ See Riehl, 125.

²⁹ It is worth noting that the emphasis on Elizabeth’s beauty is intimately tied to a discourse of sovereignty. As one passage, taken from the “Speech to the Queen at Sudeley, 1592,” states: “It is her Beauty onely creates her Queen; ‘tis that which adds a commanding power to every syllable. Beauty is the Image of the Creator, and the Rhetorick of Heaven” (see Riehl, Chapter Two).

dearth of information is significant. Aside from a marked attention to the queen's whiteness—the “ivory brow” that apparently ameliorates Elizabeth's yellowish, or “primrose,” complexion; the golden hair that is “more pure than gold”; and the “snowy mouth” that is for the poet a sure sign of “rosy beauty”—this blazon offers very few distinguishing details about Elizabeth herself. I open this chapter with a picture and two poems, each concerned with the issue of representing the royal face, in order to foreground a central question of this thesis: in a world where pictures were designed “not only to be looked at, but also to be read and deciphered,”³⁰ what did Shakespeare's use of visual images teach audiences and readers to see?

This chapter explores the visual epistemology of whiteness that develops through early modern English portraiture, bringing this epistemology to bear on the world that Shakespeare crafts in *Hamlet* and the world we inherit today. I begin by attending to the peculiarities of early modern English portraiture, showing how portraits of the period heavily relied on textual mediation in their representations of the aristocracy. I then turn to the unique discourse of miniature painting, largely influenced by renowned court limner Nicholas Hilliard. This chapter argues that the royal miniature played an important role in constructing nascent ideologies of empire and whiteness during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It is my contention that the miniature performs this work through the covert integration of visual and verbal representation—covert because, as we will see, the discourse on limning that solidified somatic whiteness as a sign for empire also functioned to elide its own acts of construction. In other words, I argue that the royal miniature offered up to spectators of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* arrives on the scene fraught with ideology and understood, at the same time, to be the essential, unmediated image of sovereign whiteness. In the second section of the chapter, I interrogate this visual epistemology

³⁰ See Stelzer, 60.

as it unfolds in *Hamlet*, putting the royal miniature in conversation with the distinct representational styles of the adult and children's companies discussed in the play. The prince's preoccupation with the miniature actors and the miniature picture of his villainous uncle marks an important epistemological crisis in *Hamlet*. Like the children's company whose presence undermines the mimetic functions of the theatre, Claudius's "picture in little" emerges as an impossibility and an interruption, troubling the truth claims of the miniature and casting a persistent shadow over the play's racial formations of violence and criminality.

When Hamlet confronts Gertrude in the famous closet scene, he holds a private exhibition of royal portraiture, inviting his mother and, implicitly, the audiences at the Globe to consider the "counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (3.4.55). While modern readers can only speculate as to the nature of the stage props used for these performances, an art historical approach offers important insights into the effect of Hamlet's exhibition on both readers and audiences of the play. Portraits from the period incorporated a variety of emblems and texts, so that for the Elizabethan, the process of viewing a portrait almost always involved the conscious act of reading, deciphering, and drawing connections to and between various texts. For instance, the Plimpton sieve portrait, one of the many paintings depicting Queen Elizabeth with a sieve in her hand, shows the queen posing in a background crowded with quotations (fig 1.1). The Italian motto "TVTTO VEDO & MOLTO MANCHA," translated "I see everything, and much is lacking," hovers above a globe in the top left corner and signals both the queen's divine wisdom and her right to conquest. Hanging over Elizabeth's left shoulder is her royal crest, as well as a few words from Petrarch alluding to the futility of romantic love: "Weary rest, and rest with woe and pain."³¹ The image of the sieve is also a reference to texts. Onlookers might recall the tale of

³¹ For reference, see the Elizabeth I Sieve Portrait in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

the Roman virgin Tuccia, who demonstrated her purity by carrying a sieve of water from the river Tiber to the Vestal Temple without losing a drop of water. Or they might think of Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (1586), in which the image of the sieve appears next to a few lines about prudence and discernment. We see here how visual images in an Elizabethan portrait not only allude to established myths and legends of the past, but also generate new texts that are subsequently taken up into the meaning of the portrait.³² In the case of the Plimpton sieve portrait, emblems and textual allusions encourage a reading of the queen as the holy virgin, the wise sovereign, and the divine conqueror of the realm. The close relation between visual and verbal modes of representation persists throughout the Elizabethan period. Mary E. Hazard's extensive analysis of Elizabethan portraits draws out the complementary and, indeed, necessary role of texts in English portraiture:

Not only did Elizabethan portraiture have a distinctively “linguistic” orientation (literal incorporation of text, metaphoric allusion or allegorical structure, or pictorial encoding of semantic meaning), but also analogies between language and picture were endemic to Renaissance art theory from its beginnings . . . Similarly, the long history of ekphrastic practice and of the art of memory conditioned Renaissance viewers to interpret paintings contextually—i.e., to “read” rather than merely to “view” them.³³

What emerges consistently across this survey of early modern English portraiture are visual images largely reliant on accompanying forms of verbal representation, whether that be through adage, contemporary verse, or classical myth—and more often than not, an amalgamation of all three. When taken and read comprehensively, the early modern portrait, and Elizabeth's royal portrait in particular, appears as something more than mere imitation of the sitter's image.

³² Similarly, in her discussion of the Siena sieve portrait, Mary E. Hazard points out that “interpretation of the significance of the painting depends upon knowledge of text . . . both the text represented by the mottoes on the painting and *that implied by pictorial allusion* to folk tale, legend and literature” (75, emphasis added).

³³ Hazard, 61. It is worth noting that the interplay of language and visual art explored in Renaissance art theory is reflected in poetic theory, too, as suggested by Sidney's famous description of poetry as a “speaking picture” in *The Defense of Poetry*.

In fact, the faces depicted in portraiture, and especially in miniature, were notoriously inaccurate. Painters rendered their subjects more attractive than their real-life counterparts and, in the case of Queen Elizabeth, not only more attractive but strangely untouched by time.³⁴ When Richard Barnfield compares the moon to the superior Elizabeth (“shee Monthly changeth; thou dost nere decline”), he inadvertently draws attention to the static representation of the royal face across portraits produced in the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign. Each miniature and half-length portrait reproduces the queen with a young, strikingly white face now commonly referred to as the “Mask of Youth.”³⁵ More than an indication of the aging queen’s vanity, the replication of the face mask in most of her state-sanctioned portraits registers a critical aspect of Elizabeth’s imperial iconography. The queen’s face, described by art historian Roy Strong as a “compilation of hieroglyphs,”³⁶ appears in each of her pictures as the paragon of Englishness, imbued with early modern connotations of beauty, virtue, and the divine right to rule. The most visible marker of these essential qualities is Elizabeth’s “legendary fairness.”³⁷ The implications of this marker are significant. As England began to cast its gaze beyond its own shores, images of the nation’s sovereign acquired an imperial potency inextricably linked to the whiteness of the Mask of Youth. In the Elizabethan miniature, the whiteness of the royal face becomes laden with meaning, a kind of ocular proof to be read and recognized in conjunction with the young country’s nascent imperialism. Elizabethan portraiture thus captures a preoccupation not so much

³⁴ At least to early modern English eyes. In an 18th century survey of Elizabeth’s portraits, Horace Walpole famously lamented that there “is not a single portrait of her that one can call beautiful . . . A pale Roman nose, a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff, a vaster farthingale and a bushel of pearls are the features by which every body knows at once the pictures of queen Elizabeth.” See Strong, *The Elizabethan Image*, 32.

³⁵ See Strong, *The Elizabethan Image*, 59.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁷ Hall, 222. Peter Erickson offers a similar reading in “Representations of Blacks,” describing the “cult of Elizabeth” as “a cult of whiteness” (517).



Fig. 1.1—Painting by George Gower. The Plimpton "Sieve" Portrait. 1579. Folgerpedia, [CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED](#), no changes made.

with the mimetic properties of visual art as with its “iconographic ambiguity,”³⁸ the ability of portraits to assume an array of meanings suitable to the shifting political, cultural, and religious interests of the moment. In the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign, that moment was very much concerned with thoughts of conquest and empire.

Miniatures in this period played a significant role in the development of Elizabeth’s imperial iconography and, not unconnectedly, in early modern racial formations of whiteness and blackness. Aptly identified by Strong as “exquisite images which lie so beautifully,” these little pictures reproduced the reliance on text and visual allusion that was characteristic of early modern English portraiture.³⁹ Despite their size (miniatures averaged a length and height of about 5-6 centimetres) the portraits incorporated a number of quotations and literary references, often by means of the lavish, intricate designs on their casements. For early modern English miniatures were not stand-alone portraits but jewels, chiefly worn by courtiers and perfectly suited to their purpose as fashionable gifts and tokens of allegiance, affection, and approval.⁴⁰ One of Nicholas Hilliard’s miniatures of Elizabeth contains an engraving of dolphins on the openwork front of the case, while another locket enclosing the miniature of King James I bears an image of an ark in a stormy sea, with a Latin epigraph translated “may it go safely through the waves.”⁴¹

Karen Dalton’s fascinating analysis of what is now referred to as the Drake Jewel, with its gold case and two-layer cameo, attests the level of complexity these small objects could achieve in the development of Elizabeth’s imperial iconography (see fig 1.2). Received as a gift

³⁸ Hazard, 76.

³⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed discussion of portraiture in Elizabethan England, see Amanda Kellogg, “Power and Portraiture in Early Modern Literature,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 59, no. 1 (2019): 1–19; also Dympna Callaghan, “The Elizabethan Miniature,” in *A Companion to British Art*, 449–72, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013.

⁴¹ See Victoria and Albert Museum, *Princely Magnificence*, 86 and 59, respectively.

from the queen to Sir Francis Drake, likely on the occasion of Drake's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the pocket-sized jewel features the profiles of a black man and a white woman on a two-layer cameo. Inside the casement are a miniature of Elizabeth and, on the reverse, the painting of a phoenix. Dalton identifies the black man as the Roman emperor Saturn, arguing that the images on the jewel represent the return of the Golden Age, a return predicated on prevailing alchemical theories of the period:

[The] black emperor is Saturn the planet and the deity which reigns over the initial black (*nigredo*) stage of the transmutation. Elizabeth as the virgin moon goddess Diana represents the second step, the whitening (*albedo*) phase. The final red state (*rubedo*) is embodied in the classic symbol of the Philosopher's Stone, the phoenix rising from ashes, its brilliantly colored wings spread wide. In the end, of course, each image in this triangle points to Elizabeth the imperial empress, or as another of her favourite devices called her, the Una, the One and the All. (202)

By tracing the parallel developments of these classical and pseudoscientific discourses alongside an emerging English interest in navigation, privateering, and maritime conquest, Dalton shows how the Drake Jewel functioned both to register and to advance the development of Elizabeth's imperial iconography. However, while Dalton rightly rejects a reading of the black emperor as "a demon or a black pageboy or a slave," her conclusion that the emperor's blackness "is not burdened with the medieval, Christian connotations of sin, evil, and death" oddly overlooks the death of blackness and the "whitening" that Dalton identifies as crucial stages in alchemical theories of the second Golden Age.⁴² Indeed, at one point in her analysis, Dalton draws our attention to a late fourteenth century manuscript that conflates alchemical processes with imagery drawn from various religious sources, most notably the Christian story of death, burial, and resurrection. It is not too difficult to imagine that the image of the black emperor, which in

⁴² See Erickson, Peter, and Clark Hulse, eds. *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, and Empire in Renaissance England*, 205.

Dalton's formulation would have turned Elizabethan thoughts toward alchemy and empire, might equally and concomitantly have recalled the various negative associations of blackness with early modern notions of death, negation, exoticism, and the need to be "whitened."

The status of the Drake Jewel as both a commodity and an art piece also asks that we interrogate the aesthetic intentions behind (as well as the reception of) the contrast between the Black emperor on the outer cover and the miniature of Queen Elizabeth enclosed in the jewel. John Lyly's remark in 1578 that "we commonly see a black ground doth best beseeem a white counterfeit" reminds us of the longstanding tradition among early modern painters to use blackness as a foil for white beauty.⁴³ Lyly goes on to cite the case of Venus, who "according to the judgement of Mars, was most amiable when she sat by Vulcan." In the playwright's estimation, the Roman goddess of beauty and desire is most evidently beautiful and desirous when she is juxtaposed beside her unsightly husband Vulcan, god of fire, the forge, and at times, the infernal.⁴⁴ This white-black dichotomy, with its manifold associations to the beautiful versus the ugly, the desirable versus the repulsive, the heavenly versus the hellish, takes on a particularly racialized and gendered connotation in the Drake Jewel. With its presentation of a black emperor and a white queen, the jewel merges the alchemical imagery of a new Golden Age with an artistic foil of phenotypical difference. Putting this visual schema in conversation with an incipient English colonialism, Kim Hall shows how the jewel becomes an "image of a white embedded in darkness, of discovering and merchandising a precious whiteness from 'dark'

⁴³ Lyly's association of white skin with beauty (Venus is the Roman goddess of beauty and desire) is representative of general early modern English perceptions of beauty in the visual arts. See, for instance, Lyly, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*.

⁴⁴ At one point in the play, Hamlet wonders whether the ghost of his father is, in fact, a "damned ghost" and whether his own "imagination" are "as foul / As Vulcan's stithy" (3.2.77-79). Hamlet's swift transition from the Ghost to the god Vulcan conflates blackness, filthiness, and hell in just a few lines. As G. R. Hibbard notes, Vulcan's "smithy was thought of as being blacker than any earthly smithy, and as having affinities with hell" (*Hamlet* 252).



Fig. 1.2—The Drake Jewel (front). 1588. Image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons under [CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/), no changes made.

continents.”⁴⁵ When considered in light of its environs, then, Elizabeth’s miniature emerges not only as a reflection of the queen’s imperial iconography but also, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, as a consolidation of empire and whiteness on a visual scale.

Lyly’s comment on foils also carries important implications for early modern beliefs about the art of limning more broadly. According to Lyly, Vulcan’s blackness “beseems” Venus—that is, suits or befits her natural qualities, similar perhaps to the ways in which complementary colours are effectively enhanced by being placed next to one other. Lyly’s complementary colours, the “black ground” and “white counterfeit,” raise an interesting question about artifice. Does the visual contrast serve to construct beauty and desire, or merely to reveal them? The question, it turns out, was of particular interest to early modern discussions on miniature painting. Despite the fact that these portraits reflected the symbolism and textual integration characteristic of early modern English art, miniature painters and their supports made the unique claim that the art of limning captured and revealed essential truth. As Emanuel Stelzer points out, the word “limning” derives from *illuminare*, meaning “to illuminate.” A watercolour technique distinguished by the use of deep, bright colours, limning was thought to bring substance to shadow, not only in the form of literal colours added to an outline, but more profoundly, as an act of revelation about the portrait subject. Rather than the enigmatic images and “shadows” typical of English portraiture, the miniature was thought to offer substance and light: “Limning enables men and women to ‘illuminate’ these shadows: it brings clarity where ambiguity reigns.”⁴⁶

Notably, while various poets and painters lauded the revelatory qualities of limning, other artists, including Hilliard himself, insisted that the apparent truth captured in the miniature

⁴⁵ Hall, 218.

⁴⁶ Stelzer, 60.

derived not from the technique of limning, but rather from the qualities of the sitter and the very absence of technique. Nowhere does this idea become more apparent than in Hilliard's discourse on shadowing, which the artist formalised in *A Treatise concerning the Arte of Limning* (c. 1598-1602). Hilliard begins his reflection on shadows and light by recounting a conversation with Queen Elizabeth, who once asked him to explain the different shadowing techniques of artists across the country as well as from the continent.⁴⁷ Elizabeth's curiosity stems from the conviction, both practical and moral, that shadows only obscure the truth, and that "the best to show oneself needeth no shadow of place, but rather the open light" (85). Convinced of this, Elizabeth chooses to be painted "in the open alley of a goodly garden, where no tree was near, nor any shadow at all, save that as the heaven is lighter than the earth, so must there be that little shadow that was from earth" (87). Hilliard tells us that the queen's decision "hath greatly bettered my judgement," and he urges limners not to lean so heavily on shadowing techniques in their paintings. While the artist acknowledges that shadowing may work to create the illusion of distance or to conceal the ugliness of a sitter, he nonetheless asserts that such contrivances are neither necessary nor welcome in miniature painting, whose sole concern is with the beautiful and the good. As Hilliard famously concludes, "[Beauty] and good favour is like clear truth, which is not shamed with the light, nor needs to be obscured; so a picture a little shadowed may be borne withal for the rounding of it; but so greatly smuttred or darkened as some use, disgraceth it, and is like truth ill told" (87). By instructing limners not to over-shadow, Hilliard turns the miniature into an exercise in truth-telling. His miniature does not cast light on the sitter. Rather, it captures the light—the "beauty and high favour"—that was always already there. It does not reveal; it *reflects*.

⁴⁷ See Hilliard, *A Treatise concerning the Arte of Limning*.

In a sonnet titled “To Mr. Hilliard, Upon Occasion of a Picture He Made of My Ladie Rich,” Henry Constable praises Hilliard’s ability to capture reality in his paintings. “No man knew aright,” Constable avers, “To give to stones and pearles true die and light, / Till first youre art with orient nature strive” (lines 6-8). Despite this initial celebration of Hilliard’s “art,” the final stanza of the sonnet marks an abrupt shift away from limning toward the painter’s subject: “But thinke not yet yow did that art devise; / Nay, thank my Ladie that such skil you have.”⁴⁸ Here Constable elides the very artifice he began the poem praising. The “true die and light” of the painting, the speaker suggests, derives not from the skill of the limner but from the shapes and forms of the lady herself. Constable’s sonnet echoes the prevalent conviction held by early moderns about the potency of the miniature. Whether through the technique itself or through the qualities of the sitter, the miniature *illuminated* what was apparently already there. A subtle but important paradox follows. In the royal miniature, a carefully constructed iconography of empire and whiteness assumes the illusion of “clear truth.” What is, in fact, a reading of reality becomes reality itself.

“Have you eyes?”: Visual Crisis in Denmark

When Claudius’s miniature makes its first appearance in *Hamlet*, it does more than stand in for an absent king. Audiences turn their attention to a visual object strongly associated with royal iconography and presumably truer to reality than other modes of visual representation. That the play invites us to ponder the significance of the miniature in particular is made immediately apparent by the fact that Hamlet singles out of the “picture in little” in his first mention of portraiture (2.2.362). Furthermore, Hamlet’s description of Claudius’s miniature as “more than

⁴⁸ Constable, cited in Strong, “Queen Elizabeth, The Earl of Essex, and Nicholas Hilliard.”

natural” (line 363) and a subject for philosophical inquiry locates the miniature at the heart of a play largely concerned with the strange and philosophical. When Hamlet first encounters the Ghost in the play, he famously exhorts Horatio to “give it welcome” (1.5.186), on the grounds that there are “more things in heaven and earth . . . / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (line 188). This chapter takes Hamlet’s instruction as an invitation to attend to yet another strange and whitely spectacle in the play, the miniature of a villainous king.⁴⁹ It is my contention that by evoking the concept of the royal miniature in relation to Claudius, the play articulates a critical issue not only for its titular prince but for Shakespeare’s England and the very construction of whiteness nascent at the turn of the seventeenth century. What is at stake for the prince of Denmark is not merely the overinflated cost or sheer vogue of a tiny picture—a phenomenon with which Elizabethan audiences would have been well-acquainted—but more problematically, the potential dismantling of an object that has come to represent beauty, goodness, power, and empire through a visual schematic of whiteness.

It is evident from the very beginning of the play that the world of *Hamlet* hinges on faith in the visual domain, the prioritization of knowledge gained through the act of seeing and being seen. Already in the opening lines we learn just how important the sense of sight is to the characters of the play, as a bell strikes midnight, and a sentinel calls out in the pitch-darkness: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). Barnardo and Marcellus, the two sentinels on duty that night, have twice seen a ghost roaming along the grounds, and we learn that they have asked Horatio to accompany them on the third night to “approve our eyes and speak to it” (line 34). Horatio’s subsequent conviction that the Ghost does, indeed, exist rests on his confidence that his own eyes

⁴⁹ In *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare*, Alison Thorne draws an insightful connection between portraiture and the Ghost in *Hamlet*: “It is not too fanciful perhaps to describe the ghost’s striking resemblance to the deceased king as being essentially of a pictorial nature, given that the primary function assigned to portraits both during and prior to the Renaissance was to preserve the memory of the dead by means of a living likeness” (144).

will not deceive him. As he tells the guards later that night, Horatio would not have believed “[without] the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes” (lines 67-68). Throughout the play, characters operate under a similar assumption: Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are instructed to spy on the prince; Polonius claims that he can prove Hamlet’s love for Ophelia simply by watching them interact; and Hamlet’s plot to expose his uncle through “The Mouse Trap” depends for its success on the reliability of perception, the ability of both Hamlet and Horatio to “observe my uncle” accurately (3.2.85). In other words, this is a world where “sight is the predominant sense,” and where “hypotheses concerning the nature of reality can be put to the test and demonstrably proved or disproved.”⁵⁰ Despite the fact that the play consistently throws doubt on the soundness of such an epistemology, Hamlet and the royal court in Denmark continue to operate as though knowledge and understanding can be gleaned from the simple, physical act of seeing with one’s own eyes. Yet as I will go on to show, what Hamlet desires in actuality is not the plain truth of the visual realm, but a world already and continuously transformed by the power of language. Hamlet is, in this sense, a limner, making meaning through the interplay of pictures and words and serving up the results as the unmediated, self-apparent revelation of the world around him.

In such a world, where the act of seeing is a claim to knowledge, Claudius’s miniature assumes a distinctly problematic role. The prince first mentions the miniature in his discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern concerning the rise of the children’s companies and the decline of Hamlet’s own favoured “tragedians of the city” (2.2.352). When Rosencrantz brings up the topic, he introduces the child actors as “an *aerie* of children, *little* eyases” (2.2.331, emphasis added). Rosencrantz’s reference to a bird’s nest and to young hawks captures the

⁵⁰ Thorne, 110.

voraciousness and viciousness of a distinctly juvenile group of actors. Hamlet's reaction to the company shows a similar concern for age. "What, are they children?" he exclaims, "Who maintains 'em? / How are they escoted? Will they pursue the quality / No longer than they can sing?" It is worth noting that a few scenes later, we learn the prince's philosophy on the theatre. In Hamlet's view, fidelity to nature is critical to good acting. The "purpose of playing," Hamlet tells us, is "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to / nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her / own image, and the very age and body of the time / his form and pressure" (3.2.20-23). If, as the prince would have it, the theatre exists as a form of mimetic reproduction, obscuring the very act and artifice of mediation, it is not surprising that Hamlet finds these "little eyases" problematic, unfit to show "the very *age* and *body* of the time his / form and pressure."

Historically, the mention of an "aerie of children" likely referred to the Children of the Chapel, who first appeared at the Blackfriars Playhouse in 1600.⁵¹ At that time, the actors of the Children of the Chapel would have been between ten to fourteen years old.⁵² While Lucy Munro cautions readers against overstating the differences between child and adult companies, she nevertheless acknowledges the obvious distinctive effect that younger actors would have had in their performance of particular roles, especially at the time of their introduction in the early seventeenth century: "[When] the children's companies were revived in 1599-1600, one of the aspects which seems to have most impressed their contemporaries was their performance of age . . . Some of the Chapel plays also foreground the incongruity of a prepubescent or pubescent boy playing an adult."⁵³ Hamlet's remarks suggest an awareness of this incongruity, as well as a deep

⁵¹ For detailed analyses of the children's companies, see Sanders 2014; Munro 2005. By and large, scholars interpret and gloss this scene as a reference to the so-called War of the Theatres, which presumably involved competing playwrights like Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker. For an interesting alternative reading, see Knutson 1995 and, once again, Munro's stunning study on the Children of the Queen's Revels.

⁵² Munro, 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42.

concern for its implications. Wondering at the success of the children's companies and the sudden fall from grace of the public theatres, the prince reveals a frustration not simply for the caprice of theatregoers but, more to the point, for actors whose very presence undermines the mimetic possibilities of the playhouse.

In the middle of this conversation, Hamlet turns to the subject of the miniature. As he reflects on the phenomenon of the "little eyases," the prince declares:

It is not strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark,
and those that would make mows at him while my father
lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for
his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this
more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. (2.2.359-363)

Hamlet seems to emphasize here the whims of the public, as well as the scandalously high evaluation of Claudius's portrait. It is "not strange," that is, not surprising, that the people of Denmark have so abruptly switched their preference from the public theatres to the children's companies, since they have shown an equal fickleness in their treatment of Claudius and Old Hamlet. Yet the same behaviour that is, in one sense, "not strange" to Hamlet is, in another sense, utterly and completely strange: "there is something in this / more than natural." I contend that what Hamlet finds unnatural in this scene is not simply the fickleness of Denmark, but more troublingly, the potential discrepancy between what can be observed and what "passes show" (1.2.88). Indeed, the prince's comparison of the miniature actors to Claudius's miniature portrait suggests a shared crisis in Hamlet's visual epistemology. Like the make-believe of the theatre that is interrupted by the incongruity of children playing adults, the truth claims of the miniature break down in the image of a white murderer playing a king.

Throughout this scene, Hamlet pays a marked attention to visual appearances, from the people who "make mows" (literally, "make faces") at Claudius to the king's own face in

portraiture. It is not insignificant that when Hamlet first discovers his uncle's crime, he fixates on Claudius' facial expression, describing him repeatedly as a "smiling damnèd villain" (1.5.106). Widely considered the trademark of England's renowned limner, the smile features as an integral attribute of the Elizabethan miniature.⁵⁴ Nicholas Hilliard, in his *Treatise Concerning the Arte of Limning*, asserts that the primary goal of the miniature painter should be to reproduce "those lovely graces, witty smiles, and those stolen glances which suddenly like Lightning pass . . . by which the affections appear."⁵⁵ Hamlet's remark on smiling villains and his scrutiny of the face in the miniature scene thus call into question the capabilities of an art style that was thought to be uniquely adept at capturing an individual's fleeting, private, and presumably genuine affections. More than this, Hamlet's query problematizes the fundamental claim to revelation attributed to miniature painting. If, as we have seen, the miniature was understood to illuminate or make visible the natural goodness of the sitter, Claudius's villainous smile in portraiture offers a disturbing alternative, the possibility that limning may not so much illuminate the truth as invent it.

Significantly, the truth claims of Claudius's portrait will more directly implicate notions of whiteness later in the play. When Hamlet confronts his mother with the two portraits of Claudius and Old Hamlet, he launches into an ekphrastic description of each king for Gertrude and audiences at the Globe to imagine, beginning with Old Hamlet:⁵⁶

See what a grace was seated on this brow—

⁵⁴ See Strong, *The Elizabethan Image*.

⁵⁵ Hilliard, 57.

⁵⁶ The text does not indicate whether the portraits displayed in Gertrude's closet are miniatures or larger portraits. On the one hand, Hamlet's earlier allusion to Claudius's "picture in little" (2.2.362) lends weight to the credence, popular in contemporary productions and film adaptations of the play, that Hamlet uses miniatures (see Stelzer). Conversely, Neil Taylor and Ann Thompson note that the prince's ekphrastic reference to Old Hamlet's "station like the herald Mercury / New-lighted on a heaven kissing hill" (3.4.59-60) may be suggestive of a "full-length portrait." Nicholas Rowe's 1709 illustrated edition of *Hamlet* takes this latter view. It is worth noting, however, that Rowe's book is something of an exception, and 18th century performances of *Hamlet* largely interpreted the portraits as miniatures (see *Hamlet*, the Oxford Shakespeare, 280).

Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten or command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha? Have you eyes? (3.4.55-67)

I quote this passage at length to foreground Hamlet's emphasis on visibility. Repeatedly, he enjoins Gertrude to look and see, drawing her attention to her husband's brow, forehead, eye, and physical stature in a kind of male blazon. By cataloguing the king's physiognomy, Hamlet seems to suggest that the royal face in portraiture corroborates Old Hamlet's internal qualities: his grace in line 55, power in line 57, manliness in line 62, and beauty in line 66. We might recall Nicholas Hilliard's assertion that "beauty and good favour is like clear truth, which is not shamed with the light, nor needs to be obscured." Surely Hamlet thought so. The picture he paints is of a king whose overwhelmingly positive qualities visibly shine forth in his physiognomy. Moreover, twice in this speech, Hamlet alludes to the whiteness of the old king, remarking on the "curls" that resemble those of the sun-god Hyperion⁵⁷ (line 56) and then comparing Old Hamlet to a "fair mountain" (line 66). As Hamlet instructs his mother to look and see, the white body of Gertrude's first husband begins to assume meaning, that is, to become the physical, visible proof of virtue, virility, beauty, and power.

The racial signification of Hamlet's language throughout this scene becomes especially apparent when Hamlet turns to the portrait of his uncle. In contrast to the nine lines dedicated to Old Hamlet's praise, Claudius's picture is dealt with in a few brief strokes. He is described in

⁵⁷ Old Hamlet is compared to Hyperion twice in the play.

lines 64-65 as a “mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother” and then in line 67 as a “moor,” a term which in the early modern period could refer both to a geographic upland and to an African and/or Muslim person. Ian Smith points astutely to the fact that the word is capitalized in both the Second Quarto and First Folio of *Hamlet*, suggesting that the prince’s language reinforces a “value system that locates the whiteness of the deceased king over the low-lying blackness of the ‘Moore.’”⁵⁸ Given that Claudius is Old Hamlet’s brother and thus presumably white, the prince’s scathing rhetorical query to Gertrude, “Have you eyes?” (3.4.67), begs the question: is Claudius’s blackness so evident? The prince’s emphasis on visibility bound up in a patently racialized rhetoric borders on the absurd, a demand for (in)sight beyond the senses.

Of course, Hamlet’s attempt to show his mother the counterfeit presentment of two kings hinges on ekphrasis, the “verbal representation of visual representation.”⁵⁹ In her analysis of ekphrasis within the classical tradition, Ruth Webb identifies *energeia* as one of the defining qualities of ekphrastic description: “What distinguishes *ekphrasis* is its quality of vividness, *energeia*, its impact on the mind’s eye of the listener who must . . . be almost made to see the subject.”⁶⁰ Richard Meek likewise notes that this quality of *energeia* comprises both “pictorial vividness” and “affective power.”⁶¹ In other words, so vivid is the description of the object or event in question that listeners will not only see what is being described but be “moved” by it. While Hamlet’s insistence on Claudius’s blackness contravenes against the bounds of the visual domain, his use of ekphrasis encourages Gertrude not so much to see *literally* as to feel, imagine,

⁵⁸ Smith, 121. See also Patricia Parker, “‘Black Hamlet’: Battening on the Moor,” *Shakespeare Studies* 31 (2003): 127-164.

⁵⁹ See Meek, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare*.

⁶⁰ Webb, 13.

⁶¹ Meek, 9.

and be gripped by the verbal picture of criminal blackness. Indeed, the movement from this scene into the next bespeaks Hamlet's vested interest in a kind of spiritual perception. Following his indictment of Gertrude, Hamlet catches sight of the Ghost and repeatedly urges his mother to "Look you how pale he glares" (line 142) and "look you there, look how it steals away!" (line 154). When asked what it is she sees, Gertrude responds: "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see" (line 151). Hamlet's emphasis on visuality in this scene, juxtaposed with Gertrude's alarmed observation that her son's eyes "do bend . . . on vacancy" (line 134), suggests that what Hamlet actually sees when he looks at Claudius's portrait is in fact vacancy, an empty page waiting to be filled with the text of a racial imagination.

It is worth noting that Hamlet does not provide any idiosyncratic or defining features of either brother in his blazon. Given the emblematic nature of Elizabethan portraiture, the pictures of the two kings would have appeared not as exact imitations, but indeed, as a "*counterfeit* presentment," the royal iconography of two sovereigns waiting to be read and deciphered (line 55, emphasis added). Hamlet thus invites Gertrude and audiences at the Globe to accept as clear, ocular proof the kind of evidence that has already been tampered with. What Hamlet wants us to see are not the portraits at all but his own reading of them. Moreover, Hamlet's treatment of each portrait is strikingly incongruous. On the one hand, by attending to the various physical attributes of Old Hamlet, the prince puts forward a visual epistemology in which the white body acts as a salient witness to its own virtue. By contrast, Hamlet obfuscates Claudius's whiteness in his narration of the second portrait, skimming over physical features and lumping Claudius's attributes into two vivid yet impersonal metaphors about mildewed ears and "Moorees." Hamlet's abrupt switch from a catalogue of his father's physiognomy to four pithy lines on Claudius's blackness thus marks an important paradox in the play whereby, in Richard Dyer's words,

whiteness needs “always to be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent, both alive and dead.”⁶² Put simply, the paradox of whiteness in *Hamlet* is that it matters—it matters enormously—except in cases where it does not. I use the word *matter* here to mean significance but also substance, the physical presence and mass and felt weight of a thing. It is the irony of *Hamlet* that whiteness comes to matter, to be overwhelmingly present and symbolically meaningful, in the portrait of an absent sovereign, while the whiteness of an incumbent, criminal king is consistently (and insistently) overlooked.

In this chapter, I have offered the miniature as an early modern project in meaning-making, the configuration of somatic whiteness as a visual signpost for goodness. Hamlet describes the image of his father as “a combination and a form indeed / Where every god did seem to set his seal” (3.4.60-61). Yet the seal is superficial, an act of imposition rather than revelation. George Yancy describes that act of imposition as one of congealment: “The body’s meaning is fundamentally symbolic. The body’s meaning is congealed through symbolic repetition and iteration that emits certain signs and presupposes certain norms. Also, the body is a battlefield, one that is fought over continuously across particular historical moments.”⁶³ If, as I have argued here, the miniature engages in the battlefield that is the white body, Claudius’s “picture in little” captures a critical moment of contestation, in which the meaning of that body becomes uncomfortably incongruous and unfamiliar. Looking on the portrait of criminal whiteness, the white gaze experiences visual agnosia, the inability to recognise what is being presented even when, as Hamlet himself insists, the senses remain uncompromised. This visual agnosia is not unique to Shakespeare’s fictional prince. When Dionne Brand describes the white murderer whose wedding photos are “plastered all over the newspapers, showing what a normal

⁶² See Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, 39.

⁶³ See Yancy, xxii.

life [he] led,” she invites us to consider the kinds of (mis)seeing perpetuated by pictures of criminal whiteness today. Brand’s implication that we do not so much see the white murderer as dream of what he was and what he could have been reveals the same visual agnosia and the same insistent impulse to tell a story about white violence. In the chapter that follows, I turn to the figure of the mirror to press this point further, showing how the prince of Denmark “stories” his uncle’s violence, his mother’s infidelity, and—most critically of all—his own murderous intentions in the play. As we will see, portraits of criminal whiteness require spiritual insight, a glimpse into the inner workings of the individuated white self.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MIRROR

The “Example of Other”: Looking Awry in the Early Modern Mirror

When Hamlet confronts his mother in the closet, he begins his speech with the declared intention of showing Gertrude her reflection: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.24-25). Hamlet proceeds to showcase his portraits in several lines of sustained ekphrastic and, as I argued in Chapter One, racialized narration. The figure of the mirror at the beginning of this scene thus anticipates Hamlet’s speech, not only as a visual cue for the prince’s verbal blackface but also as an important signpost for his aim to implicate Gertrude in Claudius’s crimes. Why Hamlet settles on the image of a mirror and what that object does to his storying of criminal whiteness are the central concerns of this chapter. I open with a brief history of the early modern mirror, showing how the physical form and manifold uses of that object presented Shakespeare’s audiences with an active, transformative representation of the self. In particular, this chapter explores two functions of the mirror, its use as a corrective instrument in painting and as a visual metaphor for the genre of the “mirror book.” Putting these manifold forms and functions in conversation with Shakespeare’s play, I show how visual and textual representation coalesce in Hamlet’s mirror to mediate criminal whiteness, both on the stage and in portraiture. Twice in the play, audiences watch as a white character peers into a “mirror” and sees a black murderer gazing back. Attending to these two moments in the play, I argue that the mirror functions to story white violence, allowing Hamlet to acknowledge criminal whiteness and at the same time to make it strange, the unnatural blot on the canvas of goodly whiteness.

A term interchangeable with “looking glass” in the early modern period, the mirror appears both figuratively and literally across a vast majority of Shakespeare’s plays, so much so

that Adam Max Cohen identifies the mirror as “one of Shakespeare’s most important metaphors.”⁶⁴ Cohen outlines the diverse purposes of the mirror in the playwright’s oeuvre, from its use as a symbol for self-knowledge and exemplary behaviour to its associations with less commendable attributes such as pride, vanity, and self-deception. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, Antony is described as a “spacious mirror” worthy of Caesar’s emulation (5.1.33). In *Richard II*, by contrast, the king’s desire to purchase a glass that will enable him to “study fashions to adorn [his] body” (1.2.242, 244) alerts audiences to Richard’s emerging sense of hubris. Shakespeare also makes use of the mirror’s association with the future, one that emerged largely out of the medieval practise of catoptromancy. In *Macbeth*, for example, the newly crowned sovereign of Scotland receives a vision of eight kings, each of them similar in appearance to the murdered Banquo. In that vision, the final king holds a “glass” through which Macbeth sees “many more” (4.1.136). Realising that the long line of kings in the mirror are descendants of Banquo, Macbeth comes face to face not with his own reflection but with a future in which he is entirely excluded.

The physicality of the early modern mirror lent itself well to its employment as a trope in that period. Although as early as 1500, attempts at manufacturing flat mirrors were underway in Venice, the mirror familiar to most of Europe, and certainly to Shakespeare’s England, would have been convex in shape and quite small.⁶⁵ As Cohen points out, “Most of the glass pocket mirrors available to Shakespeare’s contemporaries distorted through their convex shape, and the metallic amalgam behind even the most expensive flat glass dressing mirrors tarnished or tinted with age, producing chromatic distortions.”⁶⁶ When Helena in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

⁶⁴ See Cohen, 151.

⁶⁵ See Ezell; also Gerolemou and Diamontopoulou for a broader history of the mirror in Europe.

⁶⁶ See Cohen, 163.

suggests that her “wicked and dissembling glass” (2.2.104) has led her to an inordinately high view of her looks, she is in fact voicing a common misgiving among early moderns, who wondered whether the mirror could reliably reproduce images of nature. Such attitudes of suspicion circulated widely among the public, in particular the fear that the mirror might present viewers with a more appealing version of themselves than nature had prescribed. This belief was not necessarily a negative or even a universal one, however. For some, the disparate reflection in the mirror could also signify a truer, often spiritual reality leading to greater self-knowledge. As Philippa Kelly argues, the convex mirrors familiar to most early moderns in England were just as much “instruments of correction” as they were potential instruments of deception.⁶⁷

Indeed, the deceptive and corrective functions of the early modern mirror make it a provocative counterpart to the miniature. As discussed in Chapter One, limners often rendered their subjects more appealing in portraiture. Yet the same discrepancies between reality and representation that go largely unacknowledged in the miniature become a central concern for the early modern mirror. Indeed, artists of the period encouraged the use of the mirror for its strange reflections, thus merging the corrective and deceptive properties of the glass into one. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, urged artists to consult the mirror when in need of a fresh perspective, explaining that the “work will appear to you in reverse and will seem to be by the hand of another’s master.”⁶⁸ Likewise, one of the earliest and most influential Renaissance texts on painting, Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *De Pictura* recommended the mirror as a way to test the accurate placement of light and shadows in a picture. Urging painters first to “learn . . . from Nature and from the objects themselves,” Alberti advises artists to use a mirror when appraising the success of their imitation: “Certainly, a mirror will be an excellent judge to examine this

⁶⁷ See Kelly, 3.

⁶⁸ Leonardo da Vinci, in Kemp, *Leonardo On Painting*, 18.

result. And even I do not know how objects depicted without errors becomes more pleasing in a mirror. It is surprising, moreover, that every imperfection of a painting appears more deformed in a mirror. Let, therefore, [objects] taken from Nature be corrected through the control of a mirror.”⁶⁹ Rather than a passive reflection of the painting, Alberti’s mirror assumes an active role, exaggerating both the perfections and the errors of nature rendered in the artist’s work. Evidently, the mirror’s function in painting is fundamentally paradoxical, as an instrument which de-forms in order to correct. The object so favoured for its corrective function in visual art is itself a faulty representation of reality, one which accomplishes its work primarily through distortion.

By the mid-sixteenth century, England was also welcoming the advent of crystal mirrors from the continent. Shakespeare may have been capitalizing on this new development when, in several of his later plays and sonnets, he emphasizes the more accurate reflective capacities of the mirror. In Sonnet 62, for example, the speaker begins by recounting his “self-love,” which “possesseth all mine eye / And all my soul and all my every part” (lines 1-2). This view of himself changes, however, when the speaker looks into a glass and discovers “myself indeed / Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity” (lines 9-10). In these lines the mirror appears as an objective measure of truth, disallowing the speaker’s self-love and presenting him with a more realistic image of his appearance and age. Shakespeare’s approach to the mirror, then, turns out to be remarkably diverse and unpredictable. As an object which sometimes reflects, sometimes invents, and sometimes lends perspective, Shakespeare’s glass registers the historical moment in which the playwright wrote, a moment in which overlapping and shifting technologies of the

⁶⁹ See Alberti, *On Painting*, 69-70.

mirror were raising a flurry of questions about the kinds of seeing and mis-seeing made possible by the mirror.⁷⁰

The strange forms and manifold uses of the early modern mirror underscore one crucial aspect of the mirror as it was perceived and developed in Renaissance England. We have come to expect today that in gazing upon a mirror, we will find our own selves peering back—perhaps in some slightly contorted form if the mirror is of the optical illusion kind, but always as a reflection of ourselves. This was not the case for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In a fascinating essay on what she terms “looking glass histories,” Margaret Ezell draws out the startling contrast between early modern conceptions of the mirror and our own. “Would you be surprised,” she asks, “if, instead of your face, you saw the devil exposing his backside to you? You would not apparently be surprised if you were an early modern European.”⁷¹ Ezell goes on to show how the use of mirrors in historical writing of the period invited readers to “look awry at contemporary people and events.”⁷² Her analysis centres largely around the mirror-book tradition, a genre which can be traced back to the medieval period and which took England by storm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Described by Jean Delumeau as a “moralistic genre in which readers were invited to look upon an ideal model for their behaviour,” these so-called “mirror books” capitalized on the symbol of the mirror by using variations of the words *mirror*, *speculum*, and *looking glass* in their titles.⁷³ Image and text come together in these books

⁷⁰ Bui draws attention to this overlap and the controversies it generated in her essay on “The Mirror and Age in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*.” As Bui helpfully notes, “The 1609 publication of *Shake-speares Sonnets* coincided with a growing interest in empiricism that would flourish later in the century, when the looking glass still seemed to possess magical properties but was also emblematic of modern science and the latest advances in artistic technique” (68).

⁷¹ Ezell, 317.

⁷² *Ibid*, 318.

⁷³ Cited in Cohen, *Shakespeare and Technology*.

to show readers not so much a reflection of themselves as a portrait of who they ought or ought not to be.

One example in the mirror-book tradition is William Baldwin's wildly popular *A Mirror for Magistrates*. First published in 1559 and reissued numerous times due to its high demand, Baldwin's *Mirror* features a collection of poems retelling the famous biographies and tragic ends of various figures across history. Surrounding the title on the cover page of Baldwin's book are the borders of what seems to be an ornate mirror frame. Readers peering into the glass, as it were, will discover the title in full: "A Mirror For Magistrates. Wherein may be seen by example of other, with how grievous plagues vices are punished; and how frail and unstable worldly prosperity is found, even of those, whom Fortune seemeth most highly to favour."⁷⁴ We can gather from the title that Baldwin's text is meant to instruct early moderns in matters of moral conduct, specifically through the use of historical and literary examples. Stories from the past emerge as guides, encouraging personal reflection on the present and insight for the future. The function of the figurative mirror in this text, then, is no mere correspondence between the self and its reflection. As the title of the book suggests, readers who gaze into the mirror of Baldwin's book enact a kind of double vision, a way of "[seeing] oneself along with seeing others."⁷⁵

Significantly, the kinds of visions encouraged by the mirror trope draw on complex intersections between mirrors, texts, and even portraits. In her analysis of the various woodcuts in early modern "mirror books," Debora Shuger concludes that the "majority of Renaissance mirrors—or rather, mirror metaphors—do reflect a face, but not the face of the person in front of

⁷⁴ See *A Mirror for Magistrates*, edited by Scott C. Lucas.

⁷⁵ See Ezell, 338.

the mirror.”⁷⁶ Several of these woodcuts feature people gazing into a mirror that has either paratextual elements or portraits of other people etched onto its reflective surface. In one woodcut from Jan David’s *Duodecim Specula* (1610), a man and women kneel before a glass containing the full-length images of Christ and the Blessed Virgin. The woodcut is entitled “SPECVLVM EXEMPLARE,” and a segment of text just below the illustration reads, “It shines and burns, the mirror of exemplary honesty; if you wish to have virtue, that of another.”⁷⁷

Another example, worth considering in more detail, is Samuel Clarke’s 1656 edition of *A Mirror or Looking-Glass Both for Saints and Sinners* (fig 2.1). A hefty tome detailing the history of “God’s Great Goodness” and “Severe Judgement,” Clarke’s book opens with a title page consisting of nine panels of illustrations. In the centre panel, a mirror frame encloses the paratextual information of the work: title, author, publisher, and publication date. Four side panels enclose the portraits of prominent Protestant theologians Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Wycliffe, and John Calvin. In the bottom panels, the artist has drawn images of persecution, as well as a juxtaposition of the two cities Ninevah and Jerusalem. Perhaps the most intriguing illustration of the set, however, is the image in the top panel. In that panel, two figures peer into a dark glass, the outlines of their reflections just barely visible on its shadowy surface. What is curious about this scene is that the figures are standing on opposite sides of the mirror, rather than facing it directly, so that what each man would have seen reflected back to him would not have been an image of himself at all, but that of his companion. Viewers are similarly encouraged to look at their own reflections “askew,” eyes moving instinctively from the

⁷⁶ See Shuger, 22. Later in the chapter, Shuger draws out the proximity of mirrors and portraits in early modern thought, arguing that at times these concepts even “seem interchangeable”: “Caxton’s *Mirroure of the world*, for example, translates the French *Image du monde*. Caxton presumably considers image and mirror equivalent since both give a miniaturized version of the actual object; the convexity of Renaissance mirrors—not their reflexivity—grounds the metaphor” (30).

⁷⁷ The original Latin reads: “Lucet, et inflammat, speculum exemplaris honesti; virtutem alterius si cupis esse tuam.”

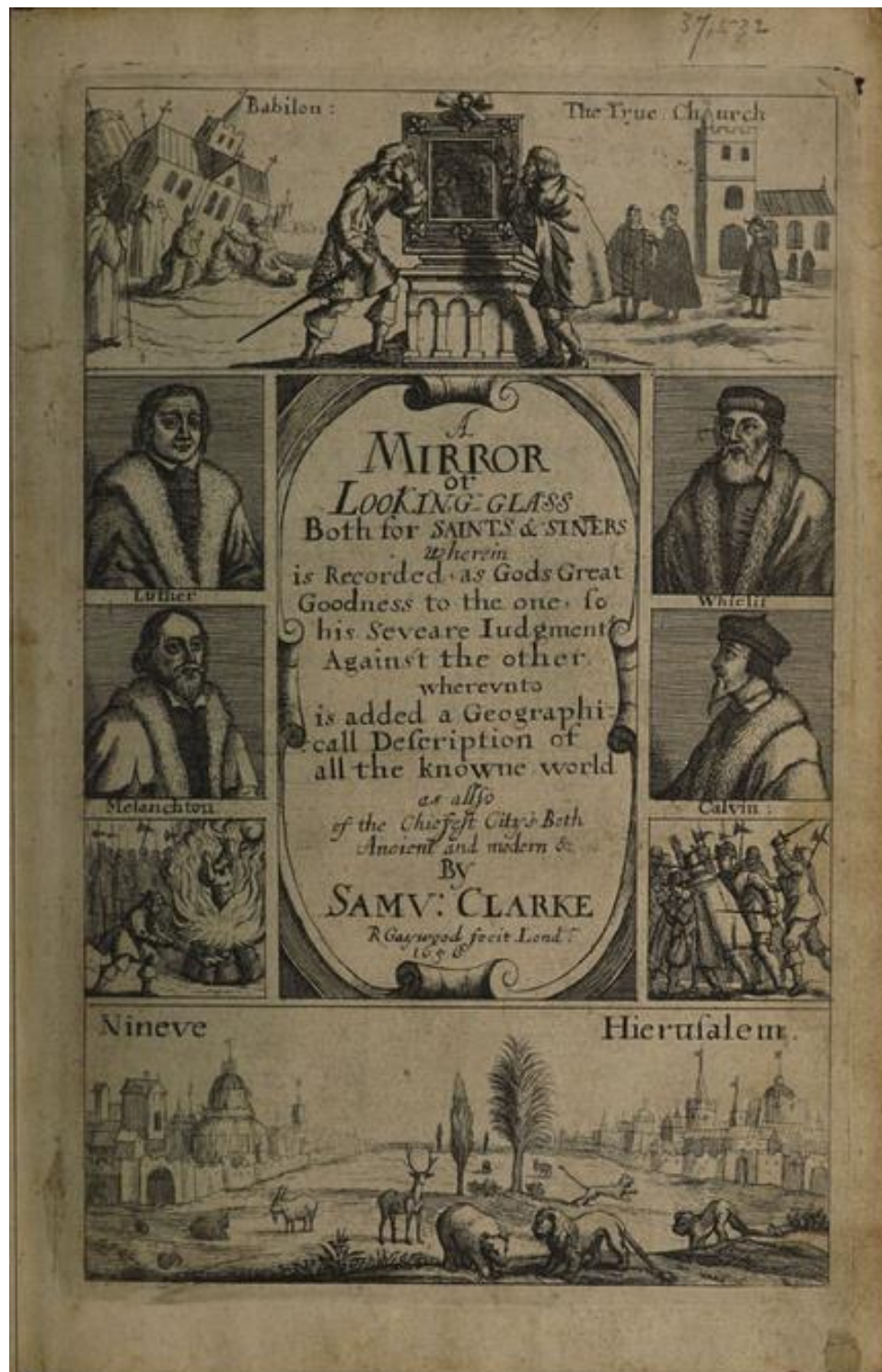


Fig. 2.1—Title Page of *A Mirror or Looking-Glass Both for Saints and Sinners* by Samuel Clarke. Public Domain.

mirror that occupies the central position to the two figures on either side, before finally resting on the distant scenes at the edges of the panel. It is here, in the background, that viewers become readers, interpreting the illustrations through the textual information provided above each picture. The caption “Babilon,” for example, invites viewers to look upon the image of a church with popish figures and collapsing domes and to recognize in it—that is, in the visual representation of Roman Catholicism—the extreme depravity of Babylon, that “mother of whoredoms, and abominations of the earth.”⁷⁸ Clarke’s title page thus guides viewers into seeing themselves not only through the “example of other,” to borrow from William Baldwin’s title, but more particularly, through an “other” whose face is mediated by portraiture, language, and the ideologies of difference developed through such intersections.

“The Inmost Part of You”: White Selves, Criminal Others

The mirror appears in *Hamlet* first as a metaphor for “The Mousetrap” and then as a second trap for Gertrude in the closet. When Hamlet states that he will set up a glass for his mother, we do not know if he produces an actual mirror on stage. We do know, however, that in the moments following this declaration, Hamlet presents Gertrude with two portraits and a verbal commentary for each picture. Like the appeal of the mirror-book to “see oneself along with seeing others,” Hamlet instructs Gertrude to look upon the example of the “other” in order to see herself. Significantly, the “other” that is being presented to Gertrude in this scene directly implicates blackness in the play’s formulation of violence. Put another way, Hamlet’s mirror directs Gertrude towards a racial vocabulary as the primary means to navigate her own criminality. Hamlet’s ekphrastic depiction of Claudius as a treacherous, hypersexualized Moor,

⁷⁸ See Revelation 17:5 (GNV).

when considered alongside the prince's staging of the mirror, can therefore be seen as an invitation—first for Claudius and Gertrude, and then for readers and audiences of the play—to negotiate their own relationship to violence not only from the safe distance of a spectator but also in explicitly racial terms. Peering into the glass of the early modern mirror, the white self (mis)recognizes violence as both alien to itself and proximate—indeed, essential—to the black body. In the section that follows, I trace Hamlet's use of the mirror and its affective power throughout the play. I want to show how the Danish prince maps a rhetoric of racial imagery and performance onto the figure of the mirror, and how, in doing so, Hamlet asks us to see white violence “awry,” that is, to look upon criminality as the strange, distorted, tragic reflection of whiteness in a mirror.

Hamlet first mentions the mirror in his discussion of the theatre. Just before their staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the prince instructs the visiting company of tragedians not to overplay emotion, explaining that the “purpose of playing” is “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (3.2.23-24). Hamlet's instructions provocatively recall Alberti's advice in *De Pictura* to “[let objects] taken from Nature be corrected through the control of a mirror.” As we saw earlier, this approach to visual representation understands the mirror to be a corrective instrument that works through distortion and particularly through exaggeration. Hamlet's own approach to the theatre as a mirror can likewise be seen as a fundamental paradox. What the prince wants from the theatre is not, in fact, an exact copy of reality, but rather, a copy already transformed by the distorting effects of the mirror. This desire quickly becomes apparent in the remainder of Hamlet's speech to the players. If, as he maintains in this scene, actors ought to evaluate their performance based on their faithfulness to nature, the various elements of “nature” with which the prince seems most preoccupied prove to be rather difficult to capture on the stage. In

Hamlet's view, the theatre ought to "show virtue her own feature, scorn her / own image, and the very age and body of the time / his own form and pressure" (lines 24-26). In the lines that follow, the Danish prince reflects on his own past encounters with poor acting:

O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor no man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. (3.2.26-33)

Hamlet's critique of those who "strut" and "bellow" seems to warn against exaggeration, the kind of unnatural acting that might lead one to doubt the humanity of the actors. Yet the prince's categorical divisions of nature into virtue and scorn, as well as Christian and pagan, raises a difficult question. What do good and evil actually *look like* in performance? In Hamlet's mind, Christian and pagan differences can be registered through the gait and accent of players on the stage. The prince's expectation that audiences will recognize objects of virtue and scorn in performance depends upon a shared language and collective imaginary of how these internal attributes appear in the visible realm of "nature." The actor who does not adhere to such a language is, for Hamlet, a mere imitation and abominable counterfeit of humanity.

Hamlet's theatre thus emerges not as a mere reflection of the world we encounter by our senses, but rather, as a world constructed and continually transformed by the interplay of sight and language. As it turns out, the object of scorn that Hamlet would have audiences recognize in his play is a man visibly demarcated by the colour of his skin. When Lucianus, the villain of Hamlet's *Murder of Gonzago*, steps onto the stage, he announces his arrival with the following lines: "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing, / Confederate season, else no creature seeing" (3.2.231-232). Lucianus's conflated imagery of atmospheric darkness, spiritual evil, and racial blackness paints the character in the hues of the "Violent Black Man," an early

modern type described by Ian Smith in his analysis of *Hamlet*. Arguing that Lucianus is a fully realized black character in Hamlet's play, Smith draws attention to a moment that is often glossed over by scholars and editors of this scene. At one point during the performance, Hamlet issues the following directive to the player of Lucianus: "Begin, murderer. Pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin" (3.2.228-229). Bringing performance studies to bear on these lines, Smith suggests that Hamlet's "damnable faces" are a reference to the actor's blackface and that the prince's staging of *Murder* is in fact a "racial spectacle":

By having a black Lucianus murder the sleeping duke, Hamlet uses the racial spectacle not only to pique Claudius's conscience, but also to materialize the ideological argument he has nursed throughout: Claudius is the murdering "Moore." Criminality and racial blackness conflate dangerously, making African identity, signaled in the category "Moore," the baseline for moral depravity. (138)

We must not forget that this "racial spectacle" is also, in Hamlet's mind, a mirror. If, as Smith argues, the play-within-a-play entrenches criminality in a discourse of racial blackness, Hamlet's definition of the theatre as a mirror lends Claudius the time and space not only to reflect on their own conscience but to comprehend their moral depravity as the deviant, distorted reflection of themselves in a mirror. The ensuing bifurcation of self that Claudius experiences in the aftermath of *The Murder* is, I suggest, a direct result of gazing into Hamlet's mirror. Claudius's contradictory desires to pray and not to pray, like "a man to double business bound" (3.3.41), shows audiences a character whose "bosom black as death" (line 67) may yet be "white as snow" (line 46). Insofar as the invitation to repentance remains, Claudius's sin may reflect the nature of the "Moore," but Claudius himself does not.

Mirroring and Miscegenation

In order to investigate the second appearance of the mirror in *Hamlet*, I need to return to the closet scene. I attend to this moment at length in order to show how Gertrude's response to the mirror parallels the (mis)identification of self that Claudius experiences one scene prior. As she gazes on the two portraits and listens to her son's ekphrasis, Gertrude's eyes turn inward "into [her] very soul," where she discovers "such black and grainèd spots / As will not leave their tinct" (lines 100-102). Scholars have tended to read the queen's reaction as a simple confession of guilt.⁷⁹ Pricked in her conscience, Gertrude admits to Hamlet's charge of adulterous lust and repeatedly pleads with her son to "speak to [her] no more" (line 107). Yet the words Gertrude chooses to negotiate her relationship to criminality suggest that this is not a moment of recognition at all, but rather one of displacement, in which the queen's sexual excess is both foregrounded and transposed from her compromised white body to the image of the "Moore."

Tracing the theme of original sin in *Hamlet*, John Gillies argues that Gertrude's "black and grainèd spots" participate in a "language of sin, not crime—the primal sin of Eve."⁸⁰ Gillies goes on to elucidate the similarities between Shakespeare's Gertrude and conceptions of Eve in the early modern period, showing how both women share an inherent "frailty" and "susceptibility to persuasion."⁸¹ It is my contention that the language of original sin identified by Gillies in this scene complicates the role of Hamlet's mirror. When Gertrude looks into the dark glass, she sees another Eve, originally pure and perfect but now indelibly marked by blackness.

⁷⁹ Early criticism on *Hamlet* shows a preoccupation with the question of where, exactly, Gertrude's guilt lies and whether she knowingly participated in Old Hamlet's murder. While most scholars agree that the queen was unaware of the cause of death, they also tend to affirm her culpability in the play, drawing attention to this scene as evidence of Gertrude's own remorse for marrying her husband's brother. See, for example, Smith, Robert, "Hamlet and Gertrude, or, the Conscience of the Queen"; Maxwell, Baldwin, "Hamlet's Mother."

⁸⁰ Gillies, 411.

⁸¹ He also reminds us in a footnote that persuasion is "a strong suit of Claudius in *Hamlet*." The resulting parallel between Claudius and the Devil is provocative and particularly apt to my reading of the play, given the common representation of devils in blackface in the early modern period.

By showing the queen the black spots etched onto her soul, the mirror effectively disallows a complete self-identification of Gertrude with her crime. In other words, the queen's "inmost part" is not black but blackened, and her reflection in the mirror is one not of criminality but of corruption.

If Hamlet's mirror displaces criminality onto the black spots of Gertrude's soul, the queen gives no explanation as to what the spots are or how they have come to be there. However, the imagery of paint and tincture in Gertrude's language is telling. I argue that she is in fact drawing on a pervasive, early modern tradition of negotiating race through metaphors of ink and paper. Miles P. Grier calls this trope "inkface," the conceit "that black complexion and ink share physical properties such as transferability and indelibility and the cultural property of meaningfulness."⁸² In an essay titled "Black / White," Grier shows how early modern writers such as George Best and Samuel Purchas used metaphors of ink and printing to theorize on racial blackness and its transmission across generations. Most crucially for my analysis, Grier demonstrates the prevalence of inkface in Shakespeare's depictions of interracial coupling. Taking Tamora and Aaron the Moor as his main case study, Grier shows how Tamora's honour is perceived by the Romans to be blackened by Aaron's corporeal hue:

With his emphasis on black spots, Bassianus assesses Tamora's skin and the page in her hands by doing what Wendy Wall calls "reading for the blot." This cultural metaphor, she demonstrates, figured women's honour—their chastity—as a blank page. Unsanctioned sexual experience mars this page with a figurative black text that spells out the woman's character: harlot, jade, minx, coquette, whore, bawd. The moor is the only role that the drama of the time imagined as transferring a telltale, legible mark of dishonour. A Cassio could arouse suspicion, but as Othello notes of this (comparatively) unpainted player: "I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips."⁸³

⁸² See Grier, p. 321.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 329.

Grier's analysis carries a strong resonance with Gertrude's speech in the closet. Echoing Hamlet's racial imaginary, the queen envisions her soul as a white text blotted by her union with Claudius, who now figures as a violent, lascivious Moor.

For Gertrude then, as for Claudius, the mirror invites misrecognition, the chance to acknowledge one's own criminality without fully stepping into the role of the criminal. Though Gertrude recognizes the taint of black spots on her soul, there is no suggestion in her dialogue of having internalized that blackness. In fact, Hamlet's metaphorical glass allows Gertrude a doubling of the self which she may either reject or embrace. The queen's distressed avowal that Hamlet has "cleft [her] heart in twain" appears as evidence of a tortured conscience, that is, the inward capacity to reflect on the state of her soul and, as Hamlet enjoins Gertrude in this scene, to "throw away the worser part of it, / And live the purer with the other half!" (3.4.177-179). Meanwhile, the Black body cannot escape the essentializing discourse of violence that constantly overdetermines it. To dispose of blackness in *that* case would be to throw away one's very own self, for as Shakespeare's audiences well knew, "to wash an Ethiopian white is to labour in vain."⁸⁴ Denied inwardness, the Black man is reduced to the sum total of his skin, with all its negative early modern connotations. By contrast, Hamlet's mirror unfolds as an intervention, both on stage and in portraiture, to story white violence through the example of the other, teaching malefactors to recognize, avoid, and, when necessary, wash themselves clean of a crime that is both strange and accidental to whiteness.

⁸⁴ See Anu Korhonen, "Washing the Ethiopian White." Korhonen notes that the proverb was "repeated so frequently in Renaissance English texts that it was understandable even when either half of the sentence was omitted" (94). We see Shakespeare making use of this concept in *Titus Andronicus*. At one point in the play, the shameless black villain Aaron maintains that black "is better than another hue," boasting that "all the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan's black legs to white" (4.2.103, 105-106).

CONCLUSION

The Face of a Villain: Revising Hamlet's Tables

O villain, villain, smiling damnèd villain!
My tables,
My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark. (1.5.106-110)

I return at the conclusion of my thesis to Hamlet's tables and to the question of criminal whiteness. Who is the villain we find gazing through the glass of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Certainly, in a play replete with verbal tricks and visual antics, there can be no simple answer. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to the crimes most proximate to audiences and readers of the play. In the middle of his confrontation with Gertrude, the prince hears Polonius behind a tapestry and impulsively stabs him to death. Hamlet's hasty assertion that his "bloody deed" is "almost as bad" as Gertrude's elides the fact that while Polonius's murder is partially concealed behind the arras, it nevertheless instantiates one of the most violent acts performed on stage (3.4.34). Critics have taken pains to linger on the question of Hamlet's inwardness and delay, what R. A. Foakes describes as the "long tradition of seeing Hamlet as irresolute, paralysed in will, unhealthy, morbid, neurotic."⁸⁵ Yet despite the prince's reluctance to avenge his father, the majority of deaths that transpire over the course of the play are in fact committed by Hamlet's own hand. He stabs Polonius, tricks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into delivering their own death sentences, and mortally wounds both Laertes and Claudius in the final act of the play.⁸⁶

The force of Hamlet's accusation that Claudius is the "smiling villain" of Denmark is significantly undercut not only by the prince's murderous acts, but also by his disconcerting self-

⁸⁵ See Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence*, 117.

⁸⁶ Moving away from the traditional focus on *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy, Foakes offers an insightful analysis of spontaneous violence in the play. For Foakes, *Hamlet* is "much more than a tale of war, violence, and revenge; it is a story that probes deeply into the basic problem of human aggression" (131).

identification with Claudius. The central dilemma of *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy is worth bearing in mind here. As various critics have pointed out, the fulfillment of Hamlet's duty to his father depends upon his willingness, as well as his ability, to imitate Claudius as a murderer.⁸⁷ This conflation of identities is most apparent in the Player's Speech, which Hamlet requests just before the staging of "The Mousetrap." Hamlet begins the speech himself, choosing for his theme the classical narrative of Pyrrhus at the fall of Troy. Hamlet's Pyrrhus is a "painted tyrant," wrathful, bloody, and black (2.2.505). He wreaks havoc on the city in search of Priam and ends his violent spree by murdering the old king in front of Priam's wife Hecuba. While Pyrrhus resembles Claudius in this respect, the Player's Speech eventually reveals what Shakespeare's audiences would have known from the beginning. Pyrrhus is not only a murderer but a bereaved son in search of revenge. Hamlet's racial ekphrasis thus unfolds in this scene as its own strange mirror, doubling and collapsing the murderous intentions of two white men into a single, essentialized image of black violence.

If, as we have seen, the play-within-the-play functions as a mirror for Hamlet's villainous uncle, the final looking-glass of the play is *Hamlet* itself. Holding up a mirror to contemporary audiences, readers, and critics across the globe, Shakespeare's beloved tragedy invites us to see ourselves in a protagonist whose thoughts are black, and whose hands are apt, to speak and perform white violence on the stage. Ironically, the scholarly tendency to focus on Hamlet's inwardness and delay, rather than his pernicious, racialized language and instinctive aggression, suggests that by and large, critics have both accepted and sustained the storying of white violence that insists upon denial. We repeat a story about a "boy next door gone accountably and sadly wrong"—one who is, in Brand's words, "distressed," and in Foakes' words, "neurotic"—

⁸⁷ See Ian Smith.

and refuse to acknowledge the several acts of violence committed by Hamlet against both white and black bodies throughout the play.⁸⁸ More than a case of careless reading, our inability to recognize criminal whiteness in *Hamlet* is symptomatic of a troubling refusal to recognize ourselves. The inclination to treat this play like a mirror—what Ian Smith describes as a “widespread tendency of critics to identify with Hamlet, epitomized in Hazlitt’s famous embrace of the Danish prince, ‘It is *we* who are Hamlet’”—encapsulates the extent to which scholars participate in the prince’s visual agnosia, blind to the manifold ways in which we permit, perpetuate, and perform violence against Black being on an individual as well as an institutional scale.⁸⁹

I use the collective “we” in my conclusion not to lay a charge of universal blame, but rather to invite self-reflection, the kind of scrutiny that requires boldness, honesty, and a willingness to tolerate discomfort for the sake of creating a more just and equitable world. Bringing the question of “we” to bear on the reading, teaching, and dissemination of Shakespeare’s plays is, I insist, a necessary, though by no means sufficient, step toward antiracist practise and the anti-storying—or perhaps the re-storying—of white violence today. Such stories *can* be rewritten. If the body is a battlefield, it can be contested and won. Strangely enough, Hamlet’s “tables” are something of a comfort in this regard. Although the prince uses his book to mediate criminal whiteness, he unwittingly undermines his own labour by writing on an erasable book.⁹⁰ I want to leave the picture of Hamlet’s tables here as a reminder, not only of the pernicious fictions of race that emerge in the stories we construct, but of the fact that narratives of raced criminality are, indeed, constructed and can therefore be revised.

⁸⁸ See Brand, 70; Foakes, 117.

⁸⁹ See Ian Smith, 120.

⁹⁰ See Stallybrass, Peter, et al. “Hamlet’s Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England.”

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