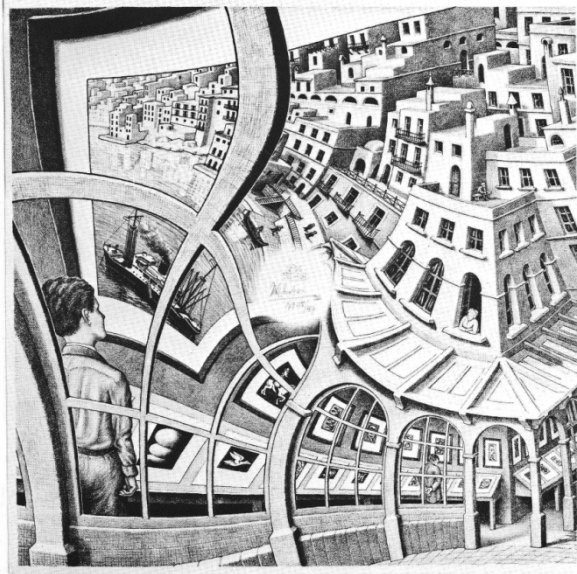


Shakespeare: Hamlet's Homunculus

J.D. Casten – 1990/2005

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MC Escher – “Print Gallery”

“What coil is that you keep?”—Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (III.xiii.45) ~1584-1589

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil”
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (III.i.66-67) ~1599-1601

“for in my troubled eyes
Now may'st thou read that life in passion dies”
—Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (II.iv.46-47)

“A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye”
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (I.i.112)

“but I cannot imagine the thousand sides of a chiliogon
as I do the three sides of a triangle, nor, so to speak,
view them as present [with the eyes of my mind]”
—Descartes, *Meditation VI*, 2 ~1641

SEDUCTION INTO GOD’S EYE VIEW

One measure of good creative writing and art may be gauged in part by the power it has to seduce you into its reality—this seduction may elicit a “suspension of disbelief,” where, when reading fiction, or watching plays, one is immersed in a fabricated world: one’s own perspective is swept away as one becomes a sort of “universal,” “God’s eye,” third person, or audience observer/spectator in a world that is not real (or is no more than semi-real). In a Buddhist like way, one is a passive eye in the storm of an unreality on par with dreams: one’s own ego ceases to exist, merging with the virtual non-existent. This sort of experience—one of belief—contrasts with the more detached and self-conscious act (if there is such a thing) of criticizing a text: analyzing the parts, and studying the details of plot, character, motifs, etc. With this withdrawal from the text, one confronts an artistic object, or artifact: there is a more conscious separation between subject and object. Subjectivity itself, since at least the Renaissance philosopher Renee Descartes, has often been thought to be somewhat like a theater of the mind, where there seems to be a “homunculus,” or a little person inside the person, a self-certain (“I think, therefore, I am”) ego, who is the integrated observer (or single audience member) of the play of the senses. Hence, Descartes’ Renaissance thinking emphasized a sort of “doubling” of consciousness, or a separation of the observer and observed senses, where the observed itself could be doubted as a dream

(and which could be guaranteed as reality, only by its inclusion in God's perfect being).

OBSERVERS OBSERVING OBSERVERS OBSERVING

Unlike Bertolt Brecht's foregrounding of stage apparatuses and musicians in the play "The Threepenny Opera," in order to break the willing suspension of disbelief; and hence attempt to cause the audience to be more distanced from, and possibly more critical of his play, I believe Renaissance playwrights such as Thomas Kyd and William Shakespeare used techniques to draw viewers deeper into their plays. One such technique, used in various forms, was to establish the audience or reader as part of a play by creating a situation where the play parallels the situation of the reader or the audience member. Such occurs when there is a "play within a play" (we too are part of the inner play's own audience), or when a character reads within a play, and we as readers read the text with the character. More than simply hearing what other characters hear, or what one character thinks out loud, with this technique of mirroring, paralleling, or representing the act of observing an object or action, the character(s) and spectator(s) become one in the act of observing. The play represents what the observer is doing (reading or watching a play); but instead of making the observers more self-conscious about their status as observers (self-consciousness has been defined as being able to explicitly model one's actions), I find this technique actually immerses the viewer or reader even further into the play.

SHAKESPEARE'S DIALOGUE WITH KYD

This essay cites examples of this paralleling technique, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *Hamlet*, in part, to highlight how Shakespeare may have picked it up and used it after reading

Kyd. Yet, unlike T.S. Eliot, who in his “Hamlet and His Problems” (*Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot*, 1960—Harcourt Brace & World Inc., pp. 46-50), found that *Hamlet* was lacking an authentic emotion encoded in the text with an “objective correlative,” due to its derivative relation to *The Spanish Tragedy*, I find that with *Hamlet* Shakespeare takes up an active dialogue with Kyd. *The Spanish Tragedy* may have touched Shakespeare’s heart, for in that play a father loses a son. The name of the murdered son in that play, “Horatio,” was used in *Hamlet*, where in a reversal the father has been murdered, and “ironically” this Horatio is one of the few principals to survive the tragic finally. Shakespeare too lost a son, most non-coincidentally named, “Hamnet;” much akin to the “revenging” son named, “Hamlet,” and here we see the seeds of a deep connection between the two plays through Shakespeare’s eyes (the survival of Horatio perhaps being a wish for the survival of his own “kid”—and included in *Hamlet*, not as the lead, but as a friend of the lead: *The Spanish Tragedy*’s author, Kyd, could be seen somewhat as a written friend of Shakespeare). Possibly Shakespeare was demonstrating how meaning arises from relationships, not just between words (ala Saussure), or characters in a play, but also with the emotional ties between writers and readers at a distance: inter-subjective meaning, rather than meaning embodied in an observed object, as Eliot might have it. The quotes that head this essay demonstrate that the dialogue between Shakespeare and Kyd was not only plot/structural, a lifted use of a technical motif (as this essay will illustrate), but even in the interplay of specific lines.

The motif technique of having observers observe (with) observers observing, relates to this Shakespeare, Kyd (& Eliot) dialogue, in that it highlights both the subject/object relation (with subject observing and object observed, where meaning might be embodied in the observed object); yet, subverts that distinction between observer and observed for the actual observer, and puts them in direct relation to the characters and

objects within the play—suspending disbelief, and making the play all the more significant in the experiential moment. This homunculus paralleling technique puts the observer in the play, possibly letting them feel even more inter-subjective-like relations with the characters. Although Eliot might cast Shakespeare as the emotional manipulator, I believe Shakespeare writes from the heart, with an emphasis on relationships, that again, includes his own, as well as his characters'. Yes, the use of a novel technique may seem crafty, but when huge egos are involved, and Hamlet appears to have an ego, or at least some degree of honor and pride, this technique that emphasizes the subjective and the inter-subjective is germane to the issue of egos—and relations between egos; and with soliloquies, and the ego's relation to itself with the whole issue of (hesitating) self-reflecting and self-consciousness. In this dialogue with Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare deftly uses the technique of self-reflective modeling in *Hamlet* (a play within a play, or texts within the text of the play) to parallel Hamlet's own self-conscious self-reflecting.

PARALLEL SELF-REFLEXIVE LOVE & DEATH REVELATION

And both *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* use the play within a play (with each lead character being a playwright, (at least in part, Hamlet adds to a play, as Shakespeare transformed Kyd's)), as a tool for exposing the murderers—the sought revenge upon whom drives the tragedy of the plays. This self-reflexive technique operates as a pivot for revelations— in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the “public” finally discovers the truth, when the play tragically ends with a revenge murder suicide bloodbath as the revenge in the play within the play plays out for real; while in *Hamlet* Shakespeare uses the play within the play to a more subtle end of simply confirming suspicions for Hamlet—the virtual circumstances evoke a real emotional response from the

guilty spectators and expose them as the murderers (just as the virtual play may evoke (sometimes cathartic) emotions from the audience).

The core elements of love and death (central to comedy and tragedy) are often found in written letters of Renaissance plays—and the revelation of some key fact: perhaps it is not a coincidence that the most basic elements of these plays are often represented with moments using the self-reflexive technique. Possibly there is some socio-psychological element to this condensation of the essential issues in these moments; at any rate, there remains this reduction of key elements of many plays with the use of the self-reflexive technique where an audience may become more consciously aware of said elements.

EXAMPLES OF READERS READING IN *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY*

Now, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, there are two important letters, the first from Bel(le)-imperia:

“A letter written to Hieronimo! Red Ink.
 ‘For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.
 Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee;
 Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him:
 For these were they that murdered thy son.
 Hieronimo, revenge Horatio’s death,
 And better fare then Bel-imperia doth”
 (III.ii.25-31).

Again, the central pivot in the play, involving death and the murderers’ guilt, is presented using the self-reflexive technique. Even though letters are used in other plays too; there is much conspicuous discussion of letters and writing in *The Spanish*

Tragedy, and *Hamlet*, making such a motif in itself; e.g. later in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo apologizes to Bel-imperia:

“I found a letter, written in your name,
And in that letter, how Horatio died.
Pardon, O pardon, Bel-imperia,
My fear and care in not believing it”
(IV.i.35-38).

Connected to the issue of the willing suspension of disbelief when reading fiction, Kyd relates the revelation of facts in writing and disbelief; and a sort of repentance for a prior lack of faith. Like Hamlet requiring his mouse trap play to further confirm his suspicions of his murderer Uncle, Hieronimo had to have the material evidence verified by a second letter, this time from Pedrigano to the King of Spain, which fell into Hieronimo’s hands, reading:

“My lord, I write, as mine extremes requir’d,
That you would labour my delivery.
If you neglect, my life is desperate,
And in my death shall reveal the troth.
You know, my lord, I slew him for your sake,
And was confederate with the prince and you;
Won by rewards and hopeful promises,
I help to murder Don Horatio too”
(III.vii.33-41).

To further illustrate this self-reflexive technique motif, note Kyd bringing in yet another parallel with yet another letter:

“*Hier.* Say, father, tell me what’s thy suit?
Senex. No, Sir, could my woes
Give way unto my most distressful words,
Then should I not in paper, as you see,
With ink bewray what blood begin in me.

Hier. What's here? "The humble supplication
Of Don Bazulto for his murd' red son."

Senex. Ay, sir.

Hier. No, sir, it was my murd' red son:
O my son, my son, O my son Horatio!
But mine, or thine, Bazulto, be content.
Here take my handkercher and wipe thine eyes,
Whiles wretched I in thy mishaps may see
The lively portrait of my dying self."
(III.xiii.73-84).

Like the readers in a play mirroring the readers of the play, Hieronimo sees the old man Bazulto, with his letter of complaint, as a mirror or portrait of himself.

“TO BE OR NOT TO BE” & “I THINK THEREFORE I AM”

Hieronimo, in the prior scene (where he begins to carry a book), had commissioned a piece of art (from a painter whose son was also murdered):

“paint me a youth run through and
through with villains swords”
(*The Spanish Tragedy*, III.xiia.131-132)),

which has:

“no end; the end is death
and madness! As I am never better than when I
am mad; then methinks I am a brave fellow, then
I do wonders; but reason abuseth me, and
there's the torment, there's the hell”
(III.xiia.167-171).

This seems to inform Shakespeare's own "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, with its:

"To die, to sleep—
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub"
(*Hamlet*, III.i.63-64)

"But the dread of something after death"
(III.i.77)

"Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all]"
(III.i.82)

"And lose the name of action"
(III.i.87).

Here, we have something other than "robbed" themes—instead there is a philosophical "dialogue:" Kyd compares bravery to madness, and reasoning to a self-inflicted abuse which delivers him to a hell (of knowing that his bravery is possibly madness); Shakespeare picks up this theme of reasoning between action and inaction, relating it possibly to thoughts of suicide (and Hieronimo does kill himself)—but conscience, like reason, thwarts "bravery" for fear of a possible "hell" after death. Shakespeare seems to be saying to Kyd, yes, rational contemplation (of actions often being done irrationally) may be hell, a self-abusing paralysis... but how irrational may be the final act of risking ending all acts, when the hell to come may be worse? Shakespeare, through Hamlet, seems to agree with Kyd's Hieronimo who is caught between mad bravery, and reasoned cowardice, but ups the stakes, as it were, brilliantly putting uncertain death in the mix, making action or inaction all the more vital—with a consequence of a living hell or a possibly worse death.

Shakespeare compares a possible death brought by action to an unknowable dream; while Kyd compares bravery to madness: in both instances risky action may metaphorically separate one from reality (or waking sanity) since to act is to no longer think things through. Where Kyd seems to emphasize the hell of reasoning; Shakespeare emphasizes the possible hell of suicidal action. Yet both seem to imply that reasoning brings one closer to reality (“godlike reason” (*Hamlet* (IV.iv.38)), since action sends one off into something possibly other than reality: an ego temporal entrance into the world with a roll of the dice, (outside of the interior mind), which ironically results with ultimate real consequences. Both Kyd and Shakespeare may be bound to the sort of Renaissance thinking philosophically exemplified by Descartes, believing that the interior mind is intertwined with divine reason’s reality and that the exterior world is a possible illusion; directly connecting to Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum” ego which by God given reason finally finds the doubted world to be real. Yet, Kyd and Shakespeare develop Descartes notion (before Descartes!), associating madness and suicidal risk with action in the external world, artistically and tragically embodying Descartes’ abstract exercise in doubt: God may make the external world real; but fear of death and madness may have a way of preventing one from acting in the world as if one were in a dream, even without God’s reality.

Hamlet is replete with a cluster of motifs that revolve around the notion of the unreal: madness, dreams, the ghost, books and the play (fictions, and reproductions), and thoughts (which are ephemeral). This too parallels Descartes’ philosophical discussion in his Meditations (again the exterior world possibly being illusory like a dream, or the subjective observer being tricked by some devil, and actually being insane)—and the connection to Descartes is furthered by Shakespeare’s use of the phrase “mind’s eye” used by both Hamlet (I.ii.186) and Horatio (I.i.112) which brings to mind the notion of a homunculus—the

homunculus being a philosophical outgrowth of Cartesian philosophy. Philosophy itself is mentioned in *Hamlet* too:

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy”
(I.v.166-167);

and,

“there is something in this more than natural, if
philosophy could find it out”
(II.ii.367-368);

Which two citations fix philosophy between the explainable and unexplainable. Hamlet also speaks of the “book and volume of my brain” (I.v.103) while the Queen speaks of “the very coinage of your brain” (III.iv.137; when Hamlet sees the Ghost); bringing the possible materiality of mind to fore; (which however contrasts with the Queens claiming that Hamlet “turns’t my eyes into my very soul” (III.iv.89)—suggesting that the soul is mentally seated behind the material eyes, looking out through them). Hamlet often delves into the issue of what is real and what may not be, what may be merely mental, and what may be deadly fact. It is in struggling between these two realms, that Hamlet becomes concerned with honesty, and is suspicious of those around him; speaking to Polonius:

“I would you were so honest a man”
(II.ii.176),

Accosting Ophelia:

“are you honest?”
(III.ii.102),

Chastising Guildenstern:

“do you think I am easier to be play’d on than a pipe?”
(III.ii.369-370),

And deriding Osric as a phony: (V.ii.187-194).

But suspicious thoughts and over-contemplation give way to action, fate (and death) with the conclusion of *Hamlet*. At the close of scene IV, Hamlet exclaims:

“I do not know
Why yet I live to say, “This thing’s to do,””
(IV.iv.44-45);

And the foreshadowing words of the Player King in the play within the play:

“Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own”
(III.ii.213),

Lead to Hamlet noting:

“And prais’d be rashness for it— let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will”
(V.ii.6-10).

Again, with Hamlet’s initial suspicions and eventual “divinely” fated action, we can see a parallel with Descartes’ methodical doubt and certain conclusion that God is and guarantees reality; Descartes is emotionally embodied in *Hamlet*, yet *Hamlet* predates Descartes’ *Meditations* by some 40 years. Shakespeare builds a play that is fraught with doubt and talk of

madness and dreams which end up in certain death, quite awhile before Descartes “systematically” doubts waking reality and ends up with the certainty of God. It is almost as if Descartes were responding to the tragedy of *Hamlet* with his proof of God’s existence. Just as Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be” indecision and doubt is resolved in an half-planned action that accords with God given fate, Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” self-consciously relieves the doubting ego by showing it that it is already on a path of existence included in God’s perfection. Both Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and Descartes’ ego face doubt, are transformed by a realization that we are already on a path not completely created from within ourselves, and conclude with a faith in divinity (even dying Hamlet uses the word “Heaven” twice in his closing lines (V.ii.332 & 343)).

More important technically, that seminal turning point of modern philosophy, Descartes’ *Meditations*, where the subjective ego was isolated and opposed to a doubted theatre of objective sensation (the “Cartesian theater of the mind” opening the door to the likes of solipsism and German idealism), that turning point may have erupted in part from the play *Hamlet*, where beyond a stream-of-conscious soliloquies, the “homunculus paralleling self-reflexive technique” was combined with motifs of madness and dreams; where the act of observation was modeled, and thus made more self-conscious— with *Hamlet* subjectivity itself was made more self-conscious— and was placed in a world of dreamy madness and doubt.

In a way, the egotism of the character Hamlet, in combination with Plato’s Transcendent Oneness, could be seen as opening the door to German Idealism’s transcendental ego! And hence Hamlet’s supposed madness, could be a precursor to the philosophical schism between subjective and objective reality: a sort of philosophical schizophrenia can be traced back at least to Renaissance theatre and Shakespeare:

“So They loved as love in twain
Had the essence but in one
Two Distinct, division none:
Number there in love was slain. [...]
Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded:
That it cried, ‘How true a twain
Seemeth this concordant one!
Love hath reason, Reason none,
If what parts, can so remain.”

(lines from the poem, *The Phoenix and Turtle*, which Shakespeare had printed in 1601, around the time he was working on *Hamlet*, and displays his own interest in dialectical matters).

Hamlet says:

“Give me that man
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
In my heart’s core”
(III.ii.71-73):

Hamlet is very passionate, and continually struggles to channel this passion wisely, yet finds there is no steering clear of fated death: the possibility of death being that ultimate reality that may separate dreams from waking life. *Hamlet* is not

“like the painting of a sorrow,
a face without a heart”
(IV.vii.107-108);

Even though it be a play, it grips it’s audience with “real world” examples of the anxiety accompanying the possibilities of losing reality with the mind on the one hand, and finding the

reality of the world through death on the other: Hamlet truly is caught between a rock and hard place, between the possible phantasms of the mind, and the deadly consequences of action.

THE SIMULACRUM FLOWS THROUGH US

The split between the interior mind of contemplation, and the exterior world of action, brings us back to the subjective and the objective, or subject/object split that informs the self-reflexive paralleling technique of using plays within plays and texts within texts. These techniques invite us to enter a fictional world, suspending our own reasoning and withdrawing critique. Yet, we don't act out in these worlds, we simply observe the actor/characters in them: we become part of a simulacrum of unreal actions that are not our own. Possibly, and this is conjecture, our own "real" world too, with its memes, and information flows, discourses, and language games, that pass from one generation to the next, and spread like diseases, or wildfires; possibly this world acts through us: we don't use language, "language speaks us;" a language and culture informed and shaped by writers of fiction—hence making our reality semi-fictional. Shakespeare and Kyd, as playwrights who model our world, make it explicit, and bring its details to consciousness may also be seducing us into their worlds in part to raise our own consciousnesses—we may suspend both our reasoning, and our own actions, only to learn more about what it means to self-consciously reason with our linguistic minds and act in our consequential world. And since self-consciousness is so bound up with language, it is no surprise that the writers, Kyd and Shakespeare, are obsessed with language. *The Spanish Tragedy* concludes with Hieronimo cutting out his tongue with only the ability to write; and tongues are referenced throughout *Hamlet*:

“murder, thought it have no tongue will speak”
(*Hamlet*, II.ii.560).

EXAMPLES OF READERS READING IN *HAMLET*

Besides indirect references to letters (such as the letter sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ordering Hamlet's death in England), there are several references to writing and reading in *Hamlet*. For example, Polonius reads a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia, the text of which he momentarily breaks from:

“‘To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia’—

That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, 'beautified' is a vile phrase. But you shall hear. Thus:

'In her excellent white bosom, these, etc.'

Queen. Came this from Hamlet to her?

Pol. Good madam, stay awhile. I will be faithful.

[*Reads the letter.*]

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

Thine evermore, most dear lady,
whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet.”

(II.ii.109-124).

Here again, we have issues of love and faith; but also there is the interruption made by Polonius to comment on, and critique the letter. This hint at interpreting a text is further echoed later in the same scene, when Polonius addresses Hamlet, with many asides (not all quoted here) to the audience: Hamlet “[*reading on a book*]”:

Pol. [*Aside.*] [...] still harping on
my daughter [...]

—What do you read, my lord?

Ham. Words, words, words.

Pol. What is the matter, my lord?

Ham. Between who?

Pol. I mean the matter you read, my lord.

Ham. Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards,...

(II.ii.191-197).

With these asides and interchange of words, we hear Polonius comment on Hamlet to the audience, and Hamlet indirectly comment about Polonius to Polonius, by way of innuendo: both Hamlet and Polonius are engaged in a bit of interpretation, where Hamlet includes the audience in on his little joking jabs at the aged Polonius with his synopsis of the book; and Polonius draws in the audience with his direct asides (yet another technique for drawing the audience into the play). Since Hamlet's words are oblique, the audience too must, like Polonius, interpret them (another paralleling); and like other texts within plays that reference belief and truth—this text that we do not get to read directly, supposedly includes “Slanders.” (Although Hamlet himself may have been sarcastic: Polonius notes that Hamlet's words are “Pregnant” (II.ii.209), suggesting that the real meaning is yet to be delivered: i.e., interpreted).

CHARACTER REVEALED THROUGH WRITINGS

We find Hamlet as both reader and writer, as when he writes the last words of his dead father's ghost, “Adieu , adieu! remember me.”(I.v.111) Words that say something about writing itself: the author is gone, possibly dead, but the written words live on in material memory. With these written words, in a moment of self-reference, Shakespeare appears to make the play speak for him and itself, drawing the reader into an act of interpretation (and indeed, when composing letters for

characters, the playwright takes on a different relation to their characters than when writing dialogue, which would be spoken spontaneously in the real world: they are put in the paralleling mode, genuinely writing as someone else). Curiously, Hamlet himself is the only author of the four instances of actual quoted text in the play: the words of the ghost, the love letter to Ophelia, a letter to Horatio (recounting a sea adventure with pirates taking him prisoner) (IV.vi.13-31), and a letter to King Claudius (warning of his return, with the postscript, “alone”) (IV.vii.43-53). These four writings refer to Hamlet’s four most important relationships: his dead father, his love, his best friend, and his enemy. Possibly these four writings can help clarify the character of Hamlet a little: First, he inherits his father, the King’s, legacy and all that entails. Second, his love letter to Ophelia demonstrates his sincere romantic side: he tries some sweet poetry, but confesses that his passions surpass his ability to articulate them. Third, his letter to Horatio accounts some slightly exaggerated adventurous and dubious heroism. Fourth, the letter to Claudius is mockingly polite. The four points of this constellation illuminate a complex character, a character who feels compelled to boldly and slyly defend his inflated honor, uses wit and eloquence to mask his aggressions, and yet still surpasses the limit of his capacity to express his emotions. No doubt, with this complexity comes some contradiction (as with verbal exaggerations falling short of earnest feelings); these complexities and contradictions make for a much more subtle character than Kyd’s Hieronimo, and beyond a suspicious literary embodiment of and precursor to Descartes’ doubting abstract ego—and perhaps it is this factor—Hamlet being a complex, human, character, that seduces one into a willing suspension of disbelief, and draws an audience into the play more than any self-reflexive, paralleling, homunculus technique.