

Reciprocal Mirror and the Captivity of the Text: Planes of Captivity in *Hamlet* by the ImPerfect Dancers

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In his exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet famously states: “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.). He further expands the concept of prison onto the whole world. The Italian artists from the ImPerfect Dancers, whose *Lady Macbeth* had been applauded by the audience at the 23rd Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival in 2019, juxtaposed in their *Hamlet* two visions of captivity. The first one, constituting the sequence of dramatic events, is the image of madness, which holds soul and mind captive more effectively than the walls of an asylum. At the same time, it ignites the imagination of a young woman, who seeks freedom in reading Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Madness manifests itself here not only as social exclusion but provides an illusory passage to Elsinore. The asylum patient’s alternative emotionality makes her identify with Ophelia, which deceptively mingles two planes – that of Shakespeare’s fiction and apparent empirical reality. This assumption of Ophelia’s self leads the patient from fascination with Shakespeare’s text to an unsuccessful attempt at transgression, which emphasises the degree of the character’s becoming a captive of her own imagination. At first it seems that the border between the two planes of the production was blurred. The young woman tries to keep pace with the characters’ dance, follow the rhythm of their movement, mingle in the crowd of courtiers, even replace Polonius’s daughter. The ensuing scenes expose the illusory nature of this communion and the play’s mirror, in which the protagonist examines herself, turns out to be reciprocal. First, Hamlet, lamenting Ophelia’s death, rejects her as if she were an intruder; then, it is Horatio, the only one who remains alive, who rejects her. Voluntary relinquishing the status of a passive observer (a bystander?) has its concrete price: first, that of shattering the illusion, then functioning in a loop. When it seems that tragedy is finished, characters rise, encircle the sick young woman and start anew another cycle of betrayals, revenges and deaths. Her piercing cry, which ends the production, suggests that she realised that her imagination entered into a pact with the dungeons of Elsinore. According to Ewa Partyga, the crossing points with the stories of the others constitute vital junctions in

how a narrative is woven. There are no such crossing points in the production; there is only a game of illusory reflections, which lead to no significant narrative consequences.

Not only madness becomes a prison in the production, but the stage itself, or – rather – the frame of Shakespeare’s narrative, from which there is no escape. According to Patryk Kencki, another axis of drama is the tension resulting from the subordinate dependence of the fictional world of the production on the fictional world in the play. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as performed by the Italian artists, functions as an intra-work. Its characters are called to life from the darkness and silence by the young woman’s reading from the play’s pages and her imagination. Both activities occupy the opposite extremes of scenic agency. Whereas the imagination brings to life characters with a variety of emotions, potential of finding alternative solutions and filling in Shakespeare’s indeterminacies, the recorded story delimits the sequence of events, leading to the inevitable catastrophe. Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Horatio, Laertes and Old Hamlet become on stage living prisoners of a story concluded a long time ago, which they have to cyclically enact. Their fates are curbed by the tradition which is visualised in the convention of classical dance. The incredible harmony of pirouettes, leaps and lifts constrains the natural expression of characters. The classical convention is conducive to rendering the characters unreal. In the ImPerfect Dancers’ production, this process is counterbalanced by realistic facial expressions and mimetic gestures from the repertoire of conventions of dramatic theatre. Besides, in the scenes emanating particularly heightened emotions, characters’ individual, unique expressions appear to break the form, disrupting the fluency of movements, breaking postures and making particular figures non-finito. This is best manifested by Gertrude, performed by Ina Broeckx. In order to exhibit the effect of internal quiver, the dancer shudders convulsively, which – paradoxically – transforms the conventional representation of the history into a reliable representation of inner emotions, despite the somewhat expressionist hyperbole. This leads to a shift in the paradigm of classical dance. Individualised and fully-fledged characters no longer fit in neither the convention, nor the story. Aware of the inevitabilities of fate, they stretch and bend the story and look for places of indeterminacy they can fill. However, they find themselves in a blind alley, as they cannot change the course of the story.

The production opens with waking dead Hamlet. It is not, however, an element of reverse narrative, one of the links of a repeatedly perpetuated cycle (also visible in Maja Kleczewska's *Hamlet*, staged in 2019 at the 23rd Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk). Hamlet's fate hovers above the character from the very beginning; this process is literally manifested in the stage design by means of a bloodied skull hanging above the stage. In one moment, the Danish Prince begins to stroke the skull gently, not to show his longing for Yorick but for the finality of death, which he cannot experience. Gertrude, too, shares the awareness of the cyclicity of fate and the emotional price she has to constantly pay for coming to life in the readers' minds. This is visible when she puts an inverted black crown on her head: instead of being a token of power, the crown becomes a prison chain.

An excellent example of the conflict between the play's reading and imagining is the character of Old Hamlet, whose stage presence exceeds the shape of the figure outlined by Shakespeare. He is not a mere ghost, but a ghost of the ghost of the Danish king. He is emotionally bonded with those characters he was close with when he was alive. He is especially affectionate to Gertrude, which may be directly derived from the play's closet scene, in which the Ghost forbids Hamlet to mistreat his mother. Old Hamlet/King Hamlet appears in the scene of the dance dialogue between Hamlet and Gertrude to fight against Claudius for the Queen's soul. He repeats this duel parallel to the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, he cuddles dying Gertrude and, like a death angel, he holds dead Ophelia and accompanies his dying son. He appears where the consequences of the revenge he initiated lead him. He seems to be overburdened by the metaphorical role of the director of the tragic events, yet he desperately clings to his stage life. In the scene of the young woman's ripping out from the drama the pages she has read, he painstakingly collects them conscious that he owes his existence to the strokes of print on paper.

The ImPerfect Dancers artist constructs on stage an ingenious chamber of mirrors. Banal as it may seem, the story of the young woman who escapes from the empirical world into an imagined one, peopled with characters from the play of plays, on the one hand alerts the spectator to the potential price and illusory nature of attempts at transgressing between (still apparent) reality and fiction, and, on the other, showcases imagination as a space for an alternative existence of the *dramatis personae*. The characters, in turn, endowed with emotions that the spectator can easily relate to and

that constitute a springboard for gaining autonomy, are in fact imprisoned in their literary reflections and a world which, constrained by words and marked with a cruel beauty, is for them a mere prosthesis of reality. As a result, a question appears to haunt the production which Hamlet poses in the play: “What have you ... deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?” (2.2. 239–241)¹

1 Quotations from *Hamlet* come from the following edition: William Shakespeare. 1982. *Hamlet*. Ed. by Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare. Second series. London: Methuen.