

Immodest Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the concept of mimesis, or imitation, in relation to self-revelation and concealment, drawing on examples from Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Hamlet. It examines the limits of dramatic mimesis, and analyzes scenes in Hamlet where characters unwittingly reveal themselves through bodily confessions, contrasting this with the self-exposure of actors like the First Player. The essay argues that confession, in these instances, is a non-mimetic, immodest display of the self, irreducible to the expression of content or moral state.

KEYWORDS

Mimesis, Diegesis, Hamlet, Plato, Concealment

“There is a kind of confession in your looks, which your/
modesties have not craft enough to colour”
-William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.279-80¹

“There is nothing more terrorizing than the
possibility that nothing is hidden”, Adam Phillips,
Monogamy

If someone seems to me fully transparent – if I feel that I can see through right them – then I am likely to be bored by them. If I feel that someone can see right through me, then I am likely to be terrified by them. If, as Paolo D’Angelo masterfully details in his book *Sprezzatura* (D’Angelo 2018, p. 22), art is born of the impossibility of nothing being hidden, then the avoidance of terror or boredom in social life depends on its artistic character. Without artistry, sociality loses its vitality and enjoyment.

What D’Angelo calls “the principle of *artem celare*,” like *sprezzatura*, is moral as well as aesthetic. Calling it a “principle” – that is, making it available for philosophical discussion – already tends in the direction of the terrors of un-concealment. Philosophy brings

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hiding into the open. Philosophy, alas, not only lacks, but also strips away, nonchalance. And yet philosophy pays for its lack of nonchalance by giving us words, making new and different conversations possible. Think of words like *arte*, *sprezzatura*, *mimesis*, *beauty*. What would we miss were these words to go missing, or to become unusable in conversation? Does philosophy give back as good as it takes away?

Let me consider *mimesis* as one mode of art's concealing – as an homage to the work of Paolo D'Angelo on *sprezzatura*.

There is an intriguing story by Thomas Bernhard which tells of a famous imitator of voices who toured Europe, astonishing audiences with his mimetic powers. There was, it seemed, no one that he could not mimic or imitate. And yet, his mimetic capacities had one crucial limitation, as Bernhard writes:

'We could also make requests, and the voice imitator took pains to fulfill all of them. But when we proposed that he close the program by imitating his own voice, he told us that he could not' (Bernhard 1997, p. 13).

We can, I think, infer that the voice imitator spoke in his own voice when he admitted to the audience that he could not imitate himself. Indeed, we might imagine that the audience's request was designed precisely to test the limits – or, to test the precise limits – of the imitator's mimetic skills. To compel him, in other words, to speak skill-lessly as himself and as no other.

The story raises a series of intriguing questions. Does dramatic *mimesis* have a natural limit in the inimitability of one's own body, one's voice, one's bearing [*skema* in Greek]. Does the singular embodiment of the voice-imitator guarantee a limit of *mimesis*, insofar as he is born with one voice, unlike any other – a voice that he cannot vocally divide or duplicate or hide or conceal in performance? A voice that he cannot conceal?

Given that a performer can imitate, in principle, any other human being, living or not – is there any limit to a performer's mimetic capacity? If we believe Bernhard's story, then it would seem that this limit lies in the imitator's inability to mimic himself. How so?

I want to take up this question by considering the immodest limits of dramatic *mimesis* in some scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601). But before turning to Shakespeare, it will be helpful to supply some reminders about the term *mimesis* as it appears in the Third Book of Plato's *Republic* (Plato 1962).²

² For a fuller discussion of *mimesis* in Plato more generally, see my *Una politica della scena* (2013, Chapter One).

According to the original formulation given by Plato in the Third Book of the Republic, the difference between speaking as oneself [diegesis] and speaking as another [mimesis] is not, strictly speaking, a distinction that has anything to do with whether or not the performer speaks in a way that faithfully reveals his 'inner self.' Rather, the question regards the extent to which one's capacity to imitate others in voice or bearing is predicated upon, and conditioned by, an inviolable limit: namely, the fact that one cannot speak 'mimetically' and at the same time reveal oneself. To speak mimetically, for Socrates, is to speak in such a way that one 'hides' oneself: *artem celare*.

Following the discussion of the dangers posed by the subject-matter of Homer's fictions for the souls of the young, Socrates changes the topic from the 'content' of poetry [*ta men logon*] to an examination of the 'style' of its presentation [*to do lexeos*] (Republic 392c-d). That is, Socrates begins to address the performance of speech [*lexis*], and not just the content [*logos*] of Homeric poetry. At this point, Socrates clarifies that the mimesis in which Homer engages has nothing to do with what Homer narrates, nothing to do with the philosophical distinction (which had been introduced earlier in the dialogue) between truth and falsity or fiction [*pseudos*]. Instead, the operative question concerns the act of speaking; *lexis*, or which modality of speaking is to be preferred.

Socrates begins this section of the dialogue by proposing a distinction, within poetic *lexis*, between *diegesis* and *mimesis*. As is common in Plato's dialogues, the comparative novelty of the terms being introduced are signaled by the interlocutor's request for further clarification (Havelock 1963, p. 22; Else 1986, pp. 26-27). Translations of this distinction have had an interesting after-life in narratological theory in the work of Gerard Genette and others, where these terms are generally rendered, respectively, as 'indirect' and 'direct' discourse (Genette 1988; Halliwell 2002, p. 54 n42). This translation is useful for the analysis of written discourse, as a means of analyzing narrative perspective in a literary work. However, in the context of Plato's dialogue, the distinction that Socrates proposes between *diegesis* and *mimesis* has not so much to do with narrative perspective. Instead, it regards the relationship between a speaker and his *lexis*; between a speaker and a certain style of speaking: the here-and-now bond between a speaker and a particular act of speaking. This is what Socrates means to explain or treat with the distinction introduced between *diegesis* and *mimesis*.

Socrates begins with *diegesis*. In a sense, he suggests, the sheer fact of diegetic speech is presupposed as the ontological ground

from which the discussion of mimesis can begin. Being able to speak – free of mimesis – wholly as oneself, revealing oneself in speaking to be oneself and no other, is the ontological precondition of the distinction between diegesis and mimesis. Diegesis, says Socrates, occurs when “the poet speaks as himself” [*legei autos ho poietaes*] – and in fact, Socrates himself then performs or recites a passage from Homer to demonstrate what he means (393a). This act of recitation itself places Socrates into a potentially mimetic relation to Homer, even as Socrates’ performance (as often happens in Plato’s dialogues) serves to reveal Socrates himself as the speaker, no matter what he says. The point here seems to be less that Homer (or Socrates) is speaking ‘indirectly’ or ‘omnisciently’ about the events of the Trojan War. Rather, the point is that – through the very performance of such speech – the one who is speaking is revealed as who he is; or, more precisely, he is not concealed in the act of speaking. “If the poet never concealed his own person” [*ei medamou heaton apokruptoito ho poietaes*], says Socrates, then “his poetic narration would be wholly devoid of mimesis” (393d). This seems to be the meaning of diegetic speech: it is a mimesis-free mode of speaking in which the speaker is not obscured by the act of speaking, but rather gets revealed as who he is in the performance.³ Thus, Socrates’ insistence on the purity of diegetic speech presupposes the singularity of the speaker; he or she is unreplaceable. So, diegesis names the limit of mimesis: one cannot imitate or impersonate or conceal oneself in the act of speaking as oneself. Mimesis, on the other hand, is characterized by Socrates this way:

“When the speaker makes a speech in the person of someone else, shall we not say that he assimilates his manner of speech [*ten autou lexin*] as nearly as he can to that of the character concerned?... And is not such assimilation to ‘imitate’ [*mimeisthai*] the person to whom one is assimilating oneself?” (393c-d)

‘To imitate’ is a kind of lexis that casts the agent – or, more precisely, the lexical bond between agent and action, between speaker and spoken performance – into some doubt. It is not so much that the listener might not believe the evidence of his senses, which tell him presently that the one to whom he is listening is in fact

³ It is true that Socrates says that there can be a “mixture” of diegesis and mimesis in a given performance (393e). In fact, part of Socrates’ analysis here centers on the fact that Homer goes back and forth between speaking in his own voice and speaking as if he were Odysseus or Chryses and so forth. However, strictly speaking, this ‘mixture’ or ‘back-and-forth’ underscores the temporal heterogeneity of mimesis and diegesis within the act of speaking itself. In the temporal distension of a given spoken performance one cannot simultaneously speak as one and as another. Mimesis and diegesis cannot contemporaneously characterize a particular lexis. Indeed, the rigorous separation of diegesis from mimesis in the lexis is what distinguishes the latter from logos.

speaking. Rather, the problem is that the one who is speaking could also then speak as if he were another, and yet another again, and so forth. With mimesis, it is as if the speaker were not ‘one,’ as if he were not unique, but rather potentially able to speak as if he were “many.” In other words, the bond between speaker and lexis is, with mimesis, not singular and irreducible, but rather multiple and multipliable. Mimesis thus radically undermines the singularity of a given speaker by severing the singular bond between this speaker and this discourse. It may seem anachronistic to invoke Plato as a prelude to a discussion of Shakespeare; however, as we will see, Plato’s texts provide an unexpected point of inter-textual clarification for the play *Hamlet*.

In the second scene of the second act of the play, Hamlet interrogates his companions on the suspicion that they have been “sent for” by Claudius. “Is it a free visitation,” asks Hamlet – to which poor Guildenstern replies, “What should we say my lord?” (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.275, 277)

Guildenstern’s spoken affirmation that he has no idea what to “say” in this context is quickly superseded by Hamlet’s observation that their very appearance renders speech superfluous. “You were sent for,” Hamlet concludes, “and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your / modesties have not craft enough to colour” (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.278-280). Moreover, Hamlet’s accusation that he lacks “craft enough to colour” – what? himself? his confession? – underscores the utter lack of skill in Guildenstern’s performance. He seems to reveal himself to Hamlet precisely insofar as this revelation is entirely lacking in the sort of refined *techne* that allows one to craft a public persona. Hamlet does not see his peer’s “painted face,” but rather his naked self-display. This awkward moment sheds light on the broader question of dramatic self-revelation in *Hamlet*, and its more well-known formulation at the close of the very same scene – namely, Hamlet’s soliloquy on the power of the “scene” to elicit a confession, even without the explicit act of speaking:

Guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been so struck to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.585-590)

Likewise, Hamlet later asks Horatio to “mark” Claudius’ response – a response, in other words, that makes itself available to

the eye rather than the ear – in order to see if “his occulted guilt do not itself unkennel.” “Confession” – or, the active, guileless revelation of some occulted guilt – is figured consistently in each of these instances as a visible, bodily response that exceeds verbliness [Hamlet calls it a “blench” (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.599)], as something that a particular embodied person (Claudius or Guildenstern) unwittingly reveals to some spectator.

From this perspective, we might conclude that ‘confession’ – this unwitting self-display – is not a conscious utterance on the part of the confessor, unlike, for example, Claudius’ explicit spoken confession to God later in the play (Shakespeare 1997, 3.3.36-38). Rather, confession is figured in this context as an involuntary, unskilled (diegetic) bodily performance by a ‘confessor’. Such “confessions” are moments in which the confessor is laid bare – despite his intentions – to a spectator or witness who sees or “perceives” (to use Hamlet’s term) the immodesty of guilt, before the confessor becomes fully conscious of his own act. From a psychoanalytical perspective, one could say that the confessor’s body apparently signifies what is unintentional, what does not pertain to the domain of consciousness.⁴ The connection between such spontaneous, unwitting acts of confession [Guildenstern or “guilty creatures at a play”] and theatrical acting in general is also made explicit by Hamlet’s remark to Guildenstern that his “modesty” “has not craft enough to color” his outward appearance. “Turning color” is an expression that, elsewhere in the play, refers explicitly to the “craft” of play acting. For example, Polonius instructs Ophelia “Read on this book / That show of such an exercise may colour/ Your loneliness” (Shakespeare 1997, 3.1.44-46); Polonius, upon hearing the First Player’s rehearsal of the Priam speech, complains: “Look wher he has not turned his colour and has tears in his eyes. Prithee no more” (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.515-516). Polonius’ complaint apparently echoes a common Puritan complaint against the English stages – namely, that theatrical action had the unsettling effect of altering the body’s outward appearance.⁵

Yet, it seems equally clear that Guildenstern’s bodily, visible, “colored” confession to Hamlet also differs in significant ways from

⁴ I am thinking of Freud’s discussion of lapsus in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and of Shoshana Felman’s psychoanalytical account of the ‘speech act’, put forth in her text *Le scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou, la séduction en deux langues* (1990); translated into English as *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan With J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (2003); and I am here paraphrasing remarks made by Judith Butler in the “afterword” to the English translation.

⁵ Harold Jenkins gives further evidence of this connection in one of the longer notes to his Arden edition of Hamlet; see Jenkins (1997, p. 481).

the First Player's bodily, visible, coloring during the Priam speech. After all – at least within the logic of the plot – Guildenstern is not acting mimetically, nor is he reciting a tale, when he inadvertently “confesses” the reason for their visit to Elsinore; whereas the First Player is clearly reciting a speech that Hamlet asked him to perform. Hamlet himself calls the First Player's performance “a fiction” –

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.545-51)

What amazes Hamlet is how such a bodily display could occur in the act of telling a tale, in a narration performed by the First Player in the classical style of the Homeric rhapsode. Strictly speaking, the First Player is not playing a role but rather reciting a narration⁶. Obviously, the player – or someone from the company – plays the mimetic role of Player King in the “Mousetrap”. However, it is important to bear in mind that the Priam speech is a classical narration, not a mimetic performance. Were Socrates standing alongside Hamlet and Polonius during the First Player's performance of the Hecuba and Priam speech, he might deem it a classic example of diegesis insofar as the Player does not seek to conceal himself in the act of speaking. What strikes Hamlet as “monstrous” is the fact that the Player manages, “in a dream of passion” to bring tears to his eyes not for the sake of playing the role of Priam, for example, but rather for the sake of telling Hecuba's tale. “For Hecuba! What's Hecuba to him or he to her / That he should weep for her?” (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.557-9). Unlike the mimetic actor, he does not try to conceal himself behind a role; he speaks in his own voice, through diegesis – if we want to use the Platonic vocabulary. And yet, in speaking as himself he speaks monstrously – for he puts his narrating body on the line, “his whole function,” for a “fiction... dream of passion.”

So, the First Player's narration presents a performance that resists analysis as mimesis, in either the classical or early-modern sense. His performance reveals him, as himself and no other; through his narration he is exposed as a performer before others, and yet he is not

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fully at stake. His risk is mitigated, insofar as he risks only his being as ‘narrator’ in the narrative performance – and risks nothing of that of which he tells. He places his body on the line, and exposes himself to others – but there are limits to this exposure, this vulnerability. And this limit is underwritten by the bond between speech and speaker which is revealed in the performance.

How can we compare the First Player’s self-exposure to that of Guildenstern or Claudius in the scenes I cited above? What, if anything, differentiates these bodily, visible “confessions” – Guildenstern turning color, or the King rising – from the speech performed by the First Player when he recites the speech of Priam? What separates one bodily, visible act of “turning colour” from another?

To begin to respond to this question, let us take a brief detour through another text by Plato – the *Ion*. This might seem like a misguided digression – given the simple fact that Shakespeare may not have known this text⁷. However, there is an uncanny similarity between Plato’s dialogue on the rhapsode and the First Player’s speech in *Hamlet* that may help us to unravel some threads in Shakespeare’s play.

In the *Ion*, Socrates interrogates the prize-winning Ion, asking him in what exactly does his recital or performance consist. Referring to the very same story of Hecuba and Priam that the First Player in *Hamlet* recites, Socrates asks Ion: “when you sing a pitiful episode about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam, are you at that time in your right mind, or do you get beside yourself? And does your soul, in its enthusiasm, believe that it is present at the actions you describe...?” (Plato 1962, 535b-c). Ion responds with his own account of his spoken performance. “What a vivid example you have given me, Socrates,” he says, referring to the story that the First Player will recite in *Hamlet* two millennia later. “When I relate a tale of woe,” Ion continues, “my eyes are filled with tears; and when it is of fear or awe, my hair stands on end with terror and my heart jumps” (Plato 1962, 535c). As Paolo D’Angelo describes it in *Sprezzatura*: “The orator draws on the emotions of the audience so the listener, in order to be genuinely sympathetic to somebody’s pain, is convinced that such pain is authentic” (D’Angelo 2018, p. 22).

⁷ References to certain works by Plato (although not to the *Ion*) were commonplace among writers of all stripes in England in the years just prior to the staging of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and it is not inconceivable – although it seems impossible to prove – that Shakespeare was familiar with translations of Plato’s dialogues. A good survey of the evidence regarding the circulation of Plato’s texts in England in this period can be found in Jayne (1995, pp. 97-133).

In this way, Ion describes the activity of performing the same speech that the First Player performs in terms that are uncannily similar to those used by Polonius when he complains that the actor has “tears in his eyes.” However, Ion goes on to assure us that, as he performs, he is aware of the effect that his performance has on the audience, which weeps along with him: “You see I must keep my wits and play the closest attention to the audience,” he says, “since, if I set them crying, I shall laugh myself because of the money I take, but if they laugh, I shall cry because of the money I lose” (Plato 1962, 535e). And yet, as Socrates points out, Ion’s own life is not fully at risk when he speaks of Hecuba or Priam. As Hamlet himself wonders regarding the First Player, “what’s Hecuba to him or him to Hecuba?” In other words, while the actor or rhapsode – both Ion and the First Player – display clear, visible, bodily transformations during their performances [tears, turning color etc.] these transformations are understood in both cases within the context of relating a woeful tale that is not mistaken by either performer or audience to concern directly the one who relates it. Indeed, both Ion and the First Player retain – as they turn color, or produce tears – an awareness of the separation between their bodily appearance and their intentions with regard to the audience. Ion and the First Player – these twin narrators of Priam’s tragic tale – thus stand at the limits of mimesis. They reveal themselves, speak as themselves, and expose their own bodies and voices in the act of narration.

When Hamlet confronts Guildenstern, by contrast, we know precisely who is exposed by a confession in his looks. So, too, we know that Claudius – and no other – is at stake in the Mousetrap scene: “if he do blench.” Here, it is not Claudius’ ‘performance’ that is being judged – rather, it is Claudius himself. Just as Guildenstern’s acting skills are not being judged by Hamlet when he says that his friend’s modesty has not “craft” enough to color his actions – on the contrary, at stake is Guildenstern himself. He is judged through, and beyond, his actions. If he turns color, what he lays bare is himself before Hamlet.

As I mentioned earlier – Guildenstern had not yet confessed or disclosed any narrative ‘content’ or information. It is true that Hamlet interprets his coloration to mean that he and Rosencrantz were “sent for” – and Guildenstern affirms this verbally a moment later. However, strictly speaking, the visible, bodily coloration that Hamlet observes and names as a “confession” is not part of a narration; only the ‘confessor’ is revealed. This is all the more crucial for the famously enigmatic departure of Claudius from the performance

of the “mousetrap”. It is true that the King verbally confesses in a later scene, but here Claudius reveals no content, he simply displays himself: “The King rises.”

From this perspective, confession names an involuntary, theatrical performance that – before it reveals anything else – lays bare the agent before another. It is true, of course, that this ‘laying bare’ may produce or compel an interpretive moment on the part of the spectator – after all, Hamlet correctly interprets both Guildenstern’s blushing and Claudius’ rising. But I want to conclude by suggesting that – prior to the question of exegesis – these bodily confessions are a kind of self-display, not reducible to the manifestation or expression of a given content, or unconscious desire, or moral state – like “guilt,” for example, or “divine possession.” Such a display may make itself available to an observer like Hamlet. But – and this is my point – only on the prior condition that the confessor’s confession be revealed, first, as a non-mimetic, immodest display – finally ‘he’ and no other.”

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