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ANDRZEJ WAJDA'S *HAMLET* (IV)  
– A MATATHEATRICAL READING OF *HAMLET*

There has always been a great difficulty in interpreting *Hamlet* – critics have analyzed it as a tragedy in Greek terms (T. S. Eliot judged *Hamlet* as a defective tragedy), they psychologized Shakespeare to a greater or lesser extent (the best critics of *Hamlet*, like J. W. Goethe, S. T. Coleridge, A. C. Bradley, were rather psychological in their approach, concentrating on its content more than on its form), they politicized Shakespeare (J. Kott) and finally, some of them employed the tools of other fields of language science, such as semiotics, and applied it to the drama (Martin Esslin, Susan Merlose, Peter Reynolds, Egil Tornqvist).

I have chosen some scenes from *Hamlet* which can be viewed from the metatheatrical angle, both in reference to the play text and to Wajda's TV theatre production entitled *Hamlet* (IV). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines metadrama or metatheatre as:

drama about drama, or any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence. Normally, direct addresses to the audience in prologues, epilogues, and introductions are metadramatic in that they refer to the play itself and acknowledge the theatrical situation; a similar effect may be achieved in asides. In a more extended sense, the use of a play-within-the-play, as in *Hamlet*, allows a further metadramatic exploration of the nature of theatre, which is taken still further in plays about plays, such as Luigi Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1921). (132)

I will analyze Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the view of an outstanding performance produced by a modern director – Andrzej Wajda – who, in my understanding of the term, presents a metatheatrical reading of the play. In this paper, the phrase – metatheatre, coined by Lionel Abel in his book entitled *Metatheatre. A New View of Dramatic Form* (vii), will refer not only to the idea of a play-within-a-play device, or to the notion of

“theatrum mundi” in literature and art, but also to the literary and self-referential aspects of metadrama, as Richard Hornby defines them in his book *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (31). He argues that “metadrama can be defined as drama about drama, it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense drama itself” (Hornby 17) and gives a list of different aspects of metadrama such as “literary and real-life reference and self-reference” as well as the earlier acknowledged “play within the play” and “the ceremony within the play” (Hornby 32).

Andrzej Wajda employs a wide range of theatrical experiments and metadramatic tricks to highlight the idea of the metatheatrical aspect of *Hamlet*. He uses literary and real-life reference in his production, and he allows actors to become somehow free, independent, both from his or the dramatist’s will. Thus he creates an unforgettable atmosphere of shattering the theatrical illusion, which, in turn, gives the audience a show in which the boundaries between who is a character, who is an actor, who is a spectator and who is a director – utterly blur.

#### **The director’s introduction – a direct address to the audience and the use of real-life reference**

Andrzej Wajda’s appearance on the screen, at the beginning of the TV theatre spectacle – i.e. before the play itself begins, creates immediately an atmosphere of a theatrical pretence, all achieved by means of a cunning trick. A real, contemporary director acts as an actor who addresses the audience directly in order to explain the purpose of this particular theatrical event. The director-actor refers to the play’s fictional status and makes us – the spectators acknowledge the theatrical situation. It is metadramatic by definition, the director’s direct address introduces not only a real-life reference, but abruptly deflates the theatrical illusion. In the introduction to the performance, in a rather lengthy explanatory speech, Andrzej Wajda speaks about the choices he made and the setting he selected. To everybody’s astonishment, Wajda has chosen an actress to play the most famous male part, and, as he tries to convince his audiences, the choice was made because of the actress’s outstanding abilities; the idea of making the play more complex, stranger than it really is, seems not to have been the director’s interest. The cross-dressing of the characters, however, is quite typical of many Shakespearean plays, so probably, somewhat subconsciously, the director refers to the roots of the Elizabethan theatre and thus he makes a literary reference.

### Female Hamlet – the use of real-life reference and surreptitious asides

Hamlet is the most complex figure in the performance. Andrzej Wajda's choice of a female Hamlet, a woman who takes on the role of the most famous dramatic male character, brings up to light the immediate associations with the historical references to the theatre and acting. Many a time in the theatre history, in the Elizabethan times as well, male actors took up female roles – here, in *Hamlet (IV)*, the cross-dressing is reversed. The idea, however, remains the same: an actor is a vessel, a vehicle in a director's hands; he (or she) fills the script with a personal reading of the play and adds psychological insight into the given dramatic persona, but he is still himself, a real contemporary person.

Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska plays her Hamlet in a very personal, intimate way; sometimes we forget that she is a woman, at other moments, especially in the asides, she directly reminds us that Hamlet is only a character. It certainly fits into the director's idea of making Hamlet's soliloquies the core of his metatheatrical production. Bearing in mind the definition that "normally, direct addresses to the audience... are metadramatic in that they refer to the play itself and acknowledge the theatrical situation; a similar effect may be achieved in asides" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* 132) – Wajda's choice seems evident. Hamlet in *Hamlet (IV)* is enriched by the actress's femininity, which definitely deepens the metadramatic effect of the play. The actress reveals not only Hamlet's thoughts, but also her own reflections on the art of acting and theatre.

In the opening scene of Wajda's "address", we can see an empty stage and an actress – Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska – walking across it, wearing her ordinary modern clothes. Then, we see the actress changing her clothes into Hamlet's black doublet and preparing herself in front of a dressing mirror. She is in front of the audience, her dressing room in full view, and surprisingly somewhere backstage there is the "proper" stage, the public stage where the play – *Hamlet* begins. Meanwhile, we hear the director who rallies against the theatrical pretence and states that *Hamlet* is theatre for him. Thus, the setting for the play should be the theatre itself. The division into the "proper", public stage and the private space of Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska's "dressing room" is upheld throughout the production which makes us remember that we are watching a play about a play.

The key images of the performance are strictly connected with its metatheatrical notion: there is a real dressing room table and a mirror, the rear entrance to the stage with its heavy iron door, a real window covered

with a black cloth, the video screen on which Hamlet and Horatio watch Claudius and Polonius during “The Mouse Trap” – the play-within-the-play, and finally there is the Stary Theatre’s own architecture. All these props refer to actors’ everyday life, it is their working place, so the setting and the props double the metadramatic effect. They are to suggest the illusory character of the stage reality – the play takes place within the theatre walls, and not in the castle of Elsinore. Among all other props, which are in fact authentic elements of the theatrical reality, the dressing mirror plays an enormous role in heightening the effect of metadrama; when the actress looks at herself in it, the audience simply sees a woman who tries to check if she can play Hamlet. It helps to separate the actress from the character she plays; thus it serves not only as an alienation technique (because of the actress’s gender) but also as a real-life reference. The actress revealed that:

The mirror helped me enormously, the very ability to *look into your own face as you speak* opens amazing possibilities: “What do I think? What do I do?” So the mirror had multiple meanings. I rarely looked at myself as a woman in it, but this had great significance for me in the scene with the skull and Hamlet’s “Let *her* paint an inch thick; to this end *she* shall come.” That was *me* in the mirror. (Howard 64)

In this sense, Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska responded favourably to the director’s idea that Hamlet should be a “chamber piece”, a continual rehearsal, a happening in front of the spectators’ eyes. As a result of the director’s artistic vision, the actress becomes “the subject” of *Hamlet (IV)*. Thanks to Wajda’s original setting – a new Hamlet comes into being, Hamlet imprisoned within the theatre walls, an actress who is forced to play the most demanding male part and who has to struggle with the role as well as with her femininity during the performance. The actress confessed:

A gong announcing the start took me by surprise, emotionally naked, because it was as if I’d crept in privately and surreptitiously, testing whether I could play Hamlet, suddenly I was caught by the situation. And I had to do it. (Howard 64)

In act three, scene one, the most intimate scene of Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy, Andrzej Wajda makes Budzisz-Krzyżanowska’s Hamlet especially powerful. In this scene, both the director and the actress – as a vehicle of his metatheatrical vision of *Hamlet* – create an unforgettable metadramatic tension. At the very moment of the most famous dramatic soliloquy, it is the actress herself who is concerned with perfecting her role on a tricky and unworthy stage that everybody’s life is. The director’s idea to show that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts” (*As You Like It*, II, vii, 289) becomes evident when the

actress pulls up the ragged cloth that covers a real window overlooking a real street. She shouts the words of "to be or not to be" speech as she stares through the window; we can observe her eyes, full of tears; she looks completely exhausted, as if the part of Hamlet she is to play made her "dead tired". Literally dead, as the actress described fully in her confession that she was "playing for her life" on the stage and reality:

Hamlet's death isn't caused by a poisoned sword – that's all histrionics, out on the stage – it's true death, simply from exhaustion, from terrible effort which living is, which each performance is. One should play every performance as though it were one's last. It's truly appalling sight when actors take off their make-up in the front of the dressing-room mirror. It's like death. And that's how I wanted my Hamlet – playing for my life, in a theatre. (Howard 66)

Wajda privileges Hamlet's consciousness so much that the performance concentrates on these intimate moments in the actress's dressing-room. The actress herself focuses on Hamlet's monologues and the audience can watch her taking on the role of Hamlet, spy on her preparations, see her out of the scripted text as a woman struggling with the role of a man, suffering from her own inadequacies, and appreciate the ways her personality and Hamlet's tragic condition touch or clash.

### **Hamlet' asides and soliloquies**

#### **– the use of self-reference and real-life reference**

To a great extent, the play text takes place not in the castle of Elsinore but in the soul of Hamlet. Luckily for us, Shakespeare wrote a rather different play than a "defective tragedy". In particular, he wrote a play in which Hamlet's delay is not the main issue. Hamlet's conception of his role, of what to do and predominantly how to do it, becomes the central dilemma of the whole play. Hamlet's actions are the driving force of the play; he influences other characters, he is able to "re-write" his fate and to outwit his opponents, to confront the Ghost and finally, he is the man whose bravery leads to the final duel, carefully planned by his foes, but envisaged by himself. He is the man of action in his most difficult task - fake madness, which almost drives him mad in reality. That is, in the theatrical reality, of course. What Shakespeare gives us is an actor who is concerned with how, not whether, to perform his task. He is concerned with perfecting his role on a very tricky and unworthy stage that the court of Elsinore is.

What is so powerful about *Hamlet* is that it blurs the boundaries of two of most basic categories – life and death. It is death in the end that Hamlet surrenders to, Death – the greatest director of every life with no exception whatsoever. The connection which Hamlet makes between theatricality and the manner of death is not something which happens only in the scenes with the Players in the second act, but something which is planted in his mind at the very moment that he takes on his task of killing Claudius (*Hamlet*, I, v, 1090). At the same time, though, the effectiveness of theatricality in actually shaping or coping with reality is always ambiguous in the play.

This is the contradictory Hamlet who says that theatre is a lie and then says that it can reveal the truth; this is the Hamlet who believes that he can deal in a world of death and yet bring order to it, though he knows that it is the land the travellers do not come back from: “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns” (*Hamlet*, III, i, 1100). He is the man who would try to make the irrational possible and reasonable. By accepting his duty to kill and then trying to make that killing significant in all proper details, Hamlet is trying to keep a foot in each of two contradictory worlds, the world of dead and living ones, the world of reality and theatre, the world of a character obeying his author and an independent director and actor in his own proceedings. Hamlet’s “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” soliloquy (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 1098) throws strong doubt on the relationship between theatricality and reality: the actor can put on a show of emotions and “all for nothing”. Hamlet, though, chooses to ignore his own doubts and by the end of the same speech has convinced himself that theatre can reveal the truth, that “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 1099).

What Hamlet believes he can stage-manage as the director of his own play, what he is most concerned with, are the afore-mentioned boundaries. He is concerned with the opposition between life and death, life and stage, sanity and insanity, the author’s authority and the actors’ freedom in presentation of their art, between what is now and what is next. He is to direct his stage life and life in general, as he is a character who dies in the end of the play. Thus, he focuses constantly on the moment of death and how it affects the passage into next life. He thinks about this moment, this boundary line, in relation to five separate deaths – his father’s, Claudius’s, Rosencrantz’s, Guildenstern’s and his own. He believes that he can fix that line, choose the right moment of death that will determine what will happen after death. He rejects suicide in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy (*Hamlet*, III, i, 1100) precisely because it would not allow him to determine, to direct his fate, and his role. In suicide not only the after life would be unknown and unpredictable, but also the course of action, he is in charge of, would differ. Lionel Abel writes:

Since there could be no tragedy in prompt action on Hamlet's part, Shakespeare dignifies Hamlet's inactivity, making it philosophic. So we have the wonderful soliloquy on being and non-being, which quickly becomes a question put by Hamlet as to whether or not he should take his own life. But if it is better to be dead than to live, then how could killing Claudius avenge the murder of Hamlet's father? If there is a question as to whether one should be or not be, then there is surely no answer as to why Hamlet should kill Claudius. The great soliloquy is a complete contradiction of the assignment given Hamlet; it is much more than that; it is a contradiction of any assignment, of any action. But since we are speaking of a character in a play we are also speaking of that character's author. Shakespeare, too, had no reason to make Hamlet act, and a very strong reason for making him philosophise at the moment of the famous soliloquy. Thus it is that Shakespeare, with his unflinching feeling for the common, appealed to a very gross opinion, that thought and action contradict each other. This opinion has helped make Hamlet loved by audiences, who feel him to be a victim, not of his situation, but of his thought. (Abel 44)

The reason why Hamlet, by the fifth act, is prepared to face the end, is that he believes that he knows the boundary, that the passage to "the undiscovered country" will be significant, providential, artistically shaped. He lets other characters believe that they are able to plot against him. Then, he turns the final scene of the duel into a magnificent performance of his own creation with actors puzzled by the roles they are to play. He can tell Horatio that "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (*Hamlet*, V, ii, 1123, lines 212-215). He is ready for his death, he has rehearsed it, so it will go all right on the particular theatre night.

Hamlet's inaction and delay are not the main issue in the course of the play. What delays him is not the fright of action; it is stage fright. As an actor, Hamlet wants to play his part as well as he can, as a director (of other character's actions) he wants to take over in the play entirely. He orders the Queen to obey him, he directs Ophelia, he constantly plays tricks on his false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and he summons the Players to perform the *Mouse Trap*, which he not only directs but even writes a script for. Thus, *Hamlet* becomes a metaplay which encompasses many affinities with the term 'metatheatre' which Lionel Abel explains thoroughly in his book:

... metatheatre gives by far the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness... metatheatre glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate... metatheatre makes human existence more dreamlike... metatheatre assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination... For metatheatre, order is something continually improvised by men. (Abel 113)

### Conclusion

In *Hamlet (IV)* the director confronts the illusion with the reality, and the life of Hamlet with the lives both of his actress and the audience, who watch her in the most private moments. In this way Wajda's *Hamlet* becomes an environmental play, an intimate "chamber piece" and the very idea to focus on Hamlet as an actor and a director, more than on the sequence of the scenes, makes the spectacle a metadramatic enterprise.

The stage – the location of the theatrical reality – is arranged in such a way that the audience gets the impression of direct contact with Hamlet's life. That is why Wajda places his audience behind the stage at a location which is normally inaccessible to them, the place where, as a director, he observes the creative process in which his actors are struggling with their parts. Thus, the spectators are "seated" at the actress's dressing room, a small place at the back of the stage and they can only see a part of this stage. The actors become people whose job is not to pretend but to reflect real life emotions and feelings. It leaves them much freedom; as if they were spied on during their rehearsals before the first night and the performance becomes a happening.

In *Hamlet (IV)* Budzisz-Krzyżanowska's Hamlet is not a one-dimensional character who will serve just as a dramatic persona, the imaginary figure of the dramatist's consciousness. As in the play text, her Hamlet takes on different roles, simultaneously referring to the audience as his (or her) contemporaries – that is "real" people in the 16<sup>th</sup> (or 20<sup>th</sup>) century (the use of real-life reference and self-reference is evident here); sometimes he is an actor – he acts as a "pretender" who puts "an antic disposition on" (*Hamlet*, I, v, 1091), who displays certain postures and wears various masks (the use of a play-within-a-play device); finally, he is a director who can stage manage other actors' performance and thus he fuels the play's action. As a result, the real audience are watching "a play about a play", as if it was a continual rehearsal, a happening presented in full view on the stage. Then, a theatrical lie becomes uncovered, exposed, a trick is brought to full light, and the audience are left without all the theatrical mysteries they are used to. I believe that in *Hamlet (IV)* Andrzej Wajda postulates the "theatre working like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic; a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text" (Brook 1977, 55).

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David Lodge called the novel "an intriguing introduction," and for Maria Grech it "seeks to expand the notion of reality and certainty." Indeed, the reader will find *Mandelstam* hardly as surprising as *The Master of The Celestial Hill*: the novel employs literary motifs through its some pages which (re)visited already present in French literature's *Wojna, for instance*.

The hero of the book, the novelist Adam Grech, is first introduced in a hospital, as he is recovering from his work under the care of an eccentric neuro-psychologist Dr. Dedic. In spite of Grech's protests, she imposes on him a kind of eye-therapy - which soon turns into a type of the patient. In the following chapters, as a result of numerous epistemologies, Dr. Dedic takes an epistemological guess from a doctor, through a hawk, a park, a prison, she develops into Erato, the muse. Consequently, the author's treatment opens into an interesting debate of literary theory. In the dialogue Erato speaks for "old style" traditional literary approaches, while Grech is shown as an advocate of self-conscious writing from the role of deconstruction.

From the very beginning the reader is notified that the usual presuppositions for "a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre" should, in the case of this narrative, be put aside. The setting of the story - a small grey hospital ward with yellow walls and padded curved ceiling - is merely unostentatious.

1 Cf. Michèle Knaflitz, "Wajda's *Hamlet (IV)* and *Charisma of the North Pole*" *New York Times* *Observer* 5, 1992. URL available from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (London: Fred, 1992).