In her own words, getting Annie to do something means letting her do it. Hearing this comes as something of a relief: Annie is one of those remarkable students about whom a teacher pleasurably frets. What pedagogical strategies, say, could challenge this young thinker best? What commentary might enhance her writing talents? Determining which of my student authors to nominate for the Boothe Essay prize was immediately evident. Deciding which of this author’s projects would be most worthy, however, was more vexing. Whether she tackles her own Sixteen Sestinas, difficult philosophical arguments such as Hegel’s on Antigone, less commonly taught literary texts like Aeschylus’s Oresteia or Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman, or, as here, Shakespeare’s oft-read and written-upon Hamlet, Annie produces surprisingly original pieces of intellectual complexity enveloped in a finely wrought prose, indeed, poetry. As her casual comment with which I began already indicates, it is in her sensitive scrutiny of the workings of language, its metaphors and its music—or, rather, in her inhabitation of each particular author’s languages—that Annie discovers her most sophisticated insights and by which she conveys her own highly nuanced arguments. This is a kind of fretting in which I happily engage; I eagerly anticipate the pleasure of reading, and re-reading, Annie’s future publications. I’ll add only that to get Annie’s work means to let it work its charms.

Erin Ferris
Hamlet stalks the halls of Elsinore, twisted by the bloody urgings of his murdered father, contorted by internal conflicts he will prove ultimately unable to untangle. This Prince of Denmark, mangled and distorted by forces beyond his control, has been resurrected to relive his anguish on innumerable stages for innumerable audiences—Shakespeare’s Hamlet, as a text, a play, and an investigation of the human condition, as one of the most compelling and oft-pondered works yet penned, may never be laid to rest.

Martin Evans suggests Hamlet derives its power to fascinate from the sum effect of its enigmas. He begins with an Aristotelian postulate: Art imitates life. Applying a simple physical analogy, he asserts that, if the play is to function as a mirror, it must be fundamentally opaque. If the light of literary or psychological explication passed through the text, Hamlet would be nothing but a worthless sheet of glass. Instead, its impenetrable surface, shining with that inner mystery, offers up the reflection of the observer. If Evans is correct, we aim our gaze at Hamlet’s heart and instead find ourselves fascinated, like Narcissus, by the nuances of our own countenances.

However, Hamlet functions not through reflection but refraction. Certainly opaque, certainly mysterious, it is a carnival mirror, and Shakespeare has rippled its glass. We aim our gaze at Hamlet’s heart and instead find ourselves fascinated by a world of overblown curvature and frightening proportions. It is this distorted world, not a faithful reproduction of the logic or illogic of life, that chains the observer’s intellect and soul to Elsinore. Already entombed in its heavy walls, Hamlet finds himself surrounded by multifoliate distortions, both entranced and horrified by them. Shakespeare simultaneously guides Hamlet to bend himself and his world to fascinate and manipulate other characters on the stage—and the audience beyond it.

Refractions plague Hamlet, hypnotize him, and provoke him to obsession just as they raise the eyebrows of the rest of the court. Claudius describes his marriage to Gertrude as one undertaken “with a defeated joy, / With an auspicious and a dropping eye, / with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,” and the sorrow of Old Hamlet’s death refracted onto the joy of the marriage (1.2.10-12). This set of distortions, coupled with Hamlet’s new knowledge that Claudius, as “a murderer and a villain,” created those foul twists, sets Hamlet’s mind to “carnal, bloody and unnatural acts … accidental judgements, casual slaughters … [and] deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,” as Horatio will later describe to Fortinbras in the play’s final scene (3.4.97; 5.2.383-385). The “forced cause” in Hamlet is begotten by the twisting of characters, natures, and even the inanimate.

In the first Act, Shakespeare tears the thin seal between earth and the afterlife, allowing an inhabitant of the latter to seep through and discolor the former. He confronts Hamlet with the revelations of his father’s ghost, distorting his gray soul with the reddish tint of revenge. Hamlet “think[s] meet to put an antic disposition on” immediately after conversing with Old Hamlet’s shade (1.5.171-172). Perhaps he chooses at this moment to “cast [his] knighted color off” in an effort to evade Claudius’s suspicions until his own
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can be confirmed, or perhaps he thinks that affecting a mind aflame with madness might help smoke out the vermin usurper-king (1.2.68). Perhaps this feigned madness then grows, feeds upon his extraordinary circumstance, and overcomes his reason. In any case, Shakespeare’s distortion of Hamlet is intended to deceive or provoke other characters, and his new, unnatural ravings do elicit intense attention. Claudius summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern specifically for the purpose of addressing Hamlet’s distortion, telling them:

Something you have heard
Of Hamlet’s transformation; so call it,
Sith nor th’exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was. (2.2.5-8)

The underlying causes of Hamlet’s “transformation” are unclear both to Claudius and the reader, lending the text its opacity—but it is the transformation itself that concerns the King. Hamlet’s mother notices this change as well, ordering Rosencrantz to seek out Hamlet because his “behavior hath struck her into amazement and admiration” (3.2.332).

A change in “[Hamlet’s] exterior” accompanies his behavioral shift. Soon after he meets the ghost, Hamlet bursts in upon Ophelia with “no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled / Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle” (2.1.79-80). His figurative “inky cloak” and “customary suits of solemn black” have been exchanged for disarray (1.2.77-78). The scene is revealed only through Ophelia’s description, not performed—physical imagery depicting his transformation is necessary to draw the audience closer to the forces at work upon Hamlet. The language Shakespeare later provides Ophelia again focuses upon the prince’s appearance. She says his was an “unmatched form and feature of blown youth” but is now “blasted with ecstasy,” indicating the prominence of physical distortion in conjunction with behavioral transformation (3.1.162-163). The metaphysical framework of Hamlet’s world is knocked apart by the ghost, his character has become warped, and his physical fabric—his clothes—begin to reflect this disorder. His new distorted form attracts Ophelia’s attention, and her words bring it to the attention of the audience through detailed imagery.

Despite his obvious distaste for unnatural distortions, Hamlet knowingly employs them to his own ends. In Act 3, Scene 4, he is summoned to the queen’s bedchamber. He thrusts two portraits at Gertrude, one of his father and one of Claudius, and insists that the images portray the distilled nature of each. “See what a grace was seated on this brow: / Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,” he exclaims of his father (56). Of Claudius, he tells her, “Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother” (65-66). He is attempting to convince Gertrude through incredibly overblown hyperbole that she should put aside Claudius’s affections—and he succeeds. “Thou turn’s my eyes into my very soul,” Gertrude tells him. Hamlet distorts physical imagery to fix the queen’s conscience upon the very distortion that has mesmerized him so: the corruption of her virtue—a move that directly parallels the metatheatrical effect of his own physical distortion upon the audience.

The appearance of the ghost in Gertrude’s chamber during the same exchange further ensnares both her and Hamlet in a net of writhing distortions. As before, this net is expanded to include the reader or audience as well. Commanded by a supernatural being, Hamlet “bend[s his] eye on vacancy” and “holds discourse” with “th ’incorporeal air”
Gertrude’s unwitting irony—that the ghost, clearly visible from even the cheap seats, is “incorporal air”—compels the observer to mark the ghost more carefully, to invest more of his intellect in peeling back the shifting layers of the scene. Shakespeare’s choice of the word “bend” might indeed be the hinge upon which the play turns.

All in Elsinore is horrifically, tragically, and even comically bent out of shape. Most notably, Hamlet’s black wit transforms Polonius, making of him a comic buffoon before he is made a tragic corpse. The death of a clown is deeply affecting, as Hamlet himself demonstrates while musing upon Yorick’s skull (5.1.80). “Gambols,” “songs,” and “flashes of merriment” are a confirmation of life and the joy of living. When distorted to serve death, they call forth emotions powerful enough that Hamlet’s “gorge rims at it” (5.1.80). If Elsinore’s court jester was Yorick, Polonius is the play’s, and his death pins the audience just as the gaze of Yorick’s empty skull pins Hamlet because he was once an endearing, clownish figure. When the Prince of Denmark unleashes his wit upon the elderly adviser, his attacks are composed of verbal distortions, absurdities, and exaggerations. “Do you know me, my lord?” Polonius asks Hamlet, crudely attempting to ascertain his mental state. “You are a fishmonger,” Hamlet tells him. Polonius is somewhat taken aback, unable to respond save with a scintillating, “Not I” (2.2.188; 175). During another exchange regarding the shape of a cloud on the horizon, Hamlet’s lines suggest Polonius is but clay in his hands (3.2.268-275). He insists the cloud is first a camel, then a weasel, and finally a whale. To each contradictory suggestion, Polonius emphatically agrees. The impossible cloud and Polonius’s shifting opinions exemplify a running technique. Hamlet bares a toothy Shakespearean grin, which is then reversed once more to reveal thin-lipped tragedy. “Very like a whale” is the second to last line Polonius will speak to Hamlet before the prince rams two feet of steel into his intestine (3.2.390).

Just as coincidence knocks Hamlet’s intentions awry, Shakespeare knocks temporal flow “out of joint” (1.5.88). At the beginning of the play within a play, Hamlet mutters, “How cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within’s two hours” (3.2.129-131). Ophelia is quick to correct him: “Nay, ’tis twice two months, my lord” (132). Hamlet’s contraction of time emphasizes his horror at his mother’s behavior and his preoccupation with her “over-hasty marriage” as a perversion of moral, familial, and social order. Hamlet’s place in time—his apparent age—is similarly distorted. As implied by his encounter with the gravediggers he is ostensibly near thirty years old (5.1). By the standards of Victorian England or medieval Denmark, he is a man, almost middle aged. At eighteen, Shakespeare was married; at thirty, Hamlet writes burning love letters to Ophelia and engages in passion suited to “flaming youth” (3.4.85). He is referred to as “young Hamlet” by Horatio, who is supposedly his peer and a fellow student at the University of Wittenberg. Hamlet swings back and forth through time, a mesmerizing pendulum suspended from some ominous Shakespearean clock.

But Hamlet himself warns that a play should not “o’erstep the modesty of nature.” He admonishes the actors who visit Elsinore that “anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold … the mirror up to nature.” If forced to align with Evans’s opinions, Hamlet’s musings are at best fundamentally incomplete. The setting of Hamlet’s play is not Elsinore but Italy, the villain not an uncle but a nephew, and—most compellingly—any character who could parallel Hamlet is mysteriously absent. Hamlet’s conceptual staging of his world is so distorted that he has removed himself from its mirror altogether. The play-within-a-play provides him an opportunity precisely because it is thus twisted; Hamlet would have lost
his audience and perhaps his chance to observe Claudius’s reactions were he not able to say, “This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna,” to divert the king’s questions as the dumb show unfolds (3.2.243). When The Mousetrap actually springs, it proves itself a trick mirror. Those who are innocent will be unaffected by the players, Hamlet reassures Claudius, his words tinged with sarcasm: “Our withers are unwrung” (3.2.248). Here Shakespeare’s very wording suggests that guilty parties will be metaphorically twisted by the mirror of the play; therefore it must be a metaphorically rippled glass. Hamlet suggests plays should be realistic because he is infinitely distressed by distortions, even those put on by actors:

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 … ? (2.2.560-564)

But he does not hesitate to utilize the play’s distortions to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.617). It is this same power of distortion that catches at the conscience of the audience and the reader.

If Hamlet and its role as a driving component of Western literary culture are to be satisfactorily addressed, Aristotle’s postulate must be amended to read thus: art transforms life. Art intensifies life, distorts it, bends it backward. A rippled mirror or a skewed pane of glass refracts focused light into a fascinating spray of unmasked color. The mesmerism of Hamlet is the light of inquiry transformed into a rainbow through the prism of Shakespeare’s text. Regardless of the nature of the literal world—be it logical, illogical, fundamentally knowable or unknowable—the literary world of Elsinore is a trap, a labyrinthine castle of its refractions. Attracted by their mysterious gleam, readers and audiences step within—and upon that first step, the conscience is caught, the withers wrung, the time set out of joint, and the projections of the “sullied flesh melt[ed], thaw[ed], and resolv[ed] into a dew” (1.2.130).

Works Cited
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