CHAPTER ONE
In modern performances of *Hamlet*, the dumb show is frequently omitted. Many critics have protested the deletion, some of them vigorously. J. Dover Wilson says, "Remove [the dumb show], and what happens? The play scene is ruined." One may agree with this opinion and at the same time suspect that the custom of gauging the worth of the mime only by its contribution to the play-scene accounts, in part, for failure to establish the show as indispensable. Referring to the "common assumption" that the show is "only a mechanical necessity," H. D. F. Kitto says, "In a dramatist of Shakespeare's class, should we not expect the dumb-show to be . . . an integral part of the whole?" Certainly, one might expect to find a special, even an intrinsic, significance in a dramatic convention to which Shakespeare gives unconventional form. And when a playwright has his protagonist, expounding on the art of the dramatist and the actor, scorn "inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" although the playwright himself is employing a puzzling dumb show (through the agency of the scorners) and, repeatedly, the noise of kettle-drum, trumpet, and cannon, one might suppose both the silent scene and the sound of ordnance to be germane to a large purpose. To date, one approach to the significance of the show has not been taken: a close consideration of its nature and function in the light of figurative and structural patterns throughout
Hamlet. When Shakespeare placed the mime in the second scene of the third act, he gave it a medial position in the unfolding of the framing action. In the following study, I hope to demonstrate that he also gave it a meaning central to his basic thesis and a figurative significance that makes it indispensable.

Midway in the course of Hamlet a drama in progress before the assembled court of Denmark is interrupted when the Danish King, rising from his seat in the audience, cries, "Give me some light," abruptly dismisses the players, and leaves the "theater." The dramatic matter thus violently terminated is itself violent: a ruler is treacherously slain; his place of power is then assumed and his wife wooed and won by the killer. The inner-stage performance is repetitious: what the players first enact in dumb show is in the process of replay, with dialogue, when the theater is closed by the invoker of light. And if one action is presented in two dramatic forms to the stage audience, it is thrice-presented in as many guises to the Hamlet audience. "The matter" that the King and the Queen of Denmark have been entreated to "hear and see" (III.i.23) and that they first only see, the Hamlet audience has first only heard. For both pantomime and playlet iterate the gist of the tale poured into "ears of flesh and blood" (I.v.22) by the Ghost of Hamlet's father who—appearing to Hamlet, accusing King Claudius of murder, and charging Hamlet with revenge—recounts, in vivid detail, the peculiar circumstances of that murder and its immediate aftermath: the King sleeping in the garden; the pouring of poison into the sleeper's ears; the "leperous" effect of the deadly hebenon (64); the murderer's subsequent abuse of "the whole ear of Denmark" with false report of the victim's death (36–38); his wooing of the victim's wife with "wicked wit" (44); and his success in this, as in his assault on the ears of King Hamlet and Denmark. Thus, an account of two forms of poisoning by way of the ears is first presented in affecting narration by a speaker who repeatedly enjoins his audience to "hear," to "list" (5, 7, 22, 34). His hearer then resorts to action on a stage as a medium for, and determinant of, action in the Danish court. Proposing to
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observe the show that Claudius presents on seeing a dramatization of the deeds ascribed to him, Hamlet commissions the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* (or *The Mousetrap*). Before the King whose "seeming" he so can "censure" (III.ii.91–92) and the court whose ear has reportedly been abused by false report, the substance of the Ghost's revelation is pantomimed in a scene that dispenses with the spectators' ears and is repeated in dramatic action with dialogue.

This play-scene has been a subject of much scholarly controversy, and perhaps no aspect of it has aroused more argument than the dumb show. There is concord among critics on one point: they all remark that the show is unconventional. Although few studies of it have taken into close account the use of the show elsewhere in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, a commonplace of the comment on the silent scene in *Hamlet* is that it "has no parallel in Elizabethan drama." But with this observation, harmony on the matter ends. Varying approaches to *Hamlet*—whether they are, for example, mechanical, philosophical, or psychological—may naturally elicit different views on the function of the dumb show. But among those scholars whose approaches are similar, opinions on Shakespeare's use of this dramatic convention differ remarkably. The range of opinion is so great that even a brief sampling of some of the interpretations attendant on varying approaches throws into sharp relief the peculiar nature of the pantomime and the questions it raises.

The fact that the action of the dumb show precisely foreshadows the action of *The Murder of Gonzago* is one feature of the court entertainment that has puzzled critics and has led to considerable disagreement among them. It has been argued that the pantomimic prefiguring of the action to follow is needed, in order to inform the *Hamlet* audience of the plot of *Gonzago*, since the latter is to be interrupted. But this explanation is more often rejected than approved: it has also been frequently pointed out that there is no need for a pantomime for such a purpose, since the necessary information has already been provided in the Ghost's description of his murder, in Hamlet's declaration that he will have the players "play something like the murder of [his] father" (II.ii.624),
and in his remark to Horatio that one scene of Gonzago "comes near the circumstance" of his father's death (III.ii.81-82). In a similar antithesis, some critics say that Shakespeare intends, by means of the silent preview, to leave the Hamlet audience free to watch the stage audience during Gonzago, and others say that the dumb show cannot be justified on such a score, since neither action nor speech in the playlet is calculated to require undivided attention from the Hamlet audience. Such differences of opinion do not necessarily reflect a fundamental disagreement on the importance of the pantomime. But there is striking disagreement on this point. At one end of the spectrum is the commentator who finds the show useless and who, looking for an explanation for Shakespeare's insertion of a useless matter, hypothesizes that an original dramatic version of the Hamlet story contained a dumb show, that Shakespeare omitted it in his version, and then that the players in his troupe insisted on its reinsertion, lest the groundlings protest the loss of a popular scene. At the other end is the critic who contends that the dumb show is Shakespeare's means for pointing to inaccuracy in the story of the Ghost, since—so the critic says—Claudius's lack of reaction to the pantomime indicates that it does not reflect his crime.

The readings are as diverse when the focus is on Hamlet as dramatist, on his intentions in regard to the pantomime, and on the part it plays in his scheme. All of the following views, with various emphases and qualifications, have been set forth at one time or another by one or more critics: the dumb show is a foolish miscalculation on Hamlet's part; it is not of his doing, but is instead an unexpected addition by the visiting players, who thus jeopardize his plan; it is a part of a careful method of providing a double test—Hamlet, being cautious and conscientious, employs both the dumb show and Gonzago so that the determination of Claudius's guilt will not rest on just one trial; it is one of a planned series of shocks, since Hamlet knows that Claudius will not be "caught" easily; it is an aspect of his decision to keep the King guessing, to tantalize him and increase his perplexity; or (since an exact presentation of following action is not traditionally character-
istic of a dumb show) it is a crafty means of deceiving the King into a position of false security, of providing him with a sense of relief that he will not have to experience anything so close to the fact again, so that Gonzago will hit him with double force.

There is an accompanying variation in the interpretations of the effect of the show on Claudius. Some critics say that it puts him on guard; others, that it catches him off guard. One argues that the pantomime immediately provides the King with the information he has sought, the "source of [Hamlet’s] distemper" (II.ii.55); others argue that it puzzles him. Since Claudius says nothing about the pantomime, there is perhaps more extreme disagreement on the question of his reaction to the show than on Hamlet’s purpose in employing it. One may read in one critical study that the mime allays Claudius’s fears; in another, that it starts the turn of the screw and leads to an exhibition of terror; in another, that it attests to his coolness and self-possession in the face of a recognized threat. The fact that Claudius does not comment on the dumb show has led to hypotheses that he is not sitting where he can see it or that, engrossed in conversation, he does not pay any attention to it, theories that have been contested on various counts—for example, the unlikelihood of the King’s not having a good view of a court performance, particularly one that he has been "entreated" to attend, or his ignoring one sponsored by a nephew he wants to conciliate.

Such a bare sampling does not do justice to the interest of many of the arguments in which these views appear. It does, however, reveal some of the questions provoked by the dumb show and those most commonly debated: why does the mime directly anticipate the subject matter of Gonzago? does Shakespeare preview the play in order to provide information? if so, is the information necessary? if unnecessary, is the show superfluous? if superfluous, was the device forced on Shakespeare against his own better judgment, or was it a politic catering to popular taste? what is Hamlet’s purpose in employing the show? or is it foisted on him by the visiting players? what is the effect of the show on the stage audience? is Claudius’s silence during and just after the show significant and, if so,
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what does it signify? Some of these questions can be dealt with more summarily than others: it has often been pointed out that the show provides suspense, develops tension, and serves (with Gonzago) to present an effective dramatic contrast to the action that frames it—in brief, that giving information is not the only office of a pantomime. And as to whether the show was imposed on Shakespeare by the other members of his troupe, as W. J. Lawrence conjectures, or on Hamlet by the players, as J. Dover Wilson contends, the first begs the question and the second, though part of an ingenious argument, is not supported by strong evidence.

The most important shortcoming, as I see it, in critical explorations of the nature and function of the dumb show lies not so much in the questions asked as in a failure to search for answers outside the confines of the play-scene itself. Thus, only infrequently are certain other questions surely relevant to the whole matter considered, and then only casually: for example, is Hamlet's expression of contempt for dumb shows significant in a play that includes one? what is intended by the frequent parallels, implicit and explicit, between the "puppets" in the court entertainment (or characters in a fiction) and the characters in the play proper? why have a "presenter" who is, in effect, mute insofar as any real fulfillment of the function is concerned, and a prologue that, belying its name and nature, is silent, uninformative, about the matter that follows? And many other questions also requiring that the mime be viewed in the context of the whole play have never been asked: for instance, do the reiterated allusions to "dumbness" throughout Hamlet throw any light on the meaning of the silent scene? does the frequent linking of dumbness and noise, in conjunction with the literal use of stage noise, have any bearing on the use of the dumb show?

Perhaps a failure to take a large view of the show is manifested in certain confusions sometimes found in arguments on its function. Obviously, though Shakespeare stands behind the whole play, one must distinguish properly between his intentions and those he gives to the dramatist within the play, between the purposed effect on the Hamlet audience and that on the Gonzago audience. An explanation for Shakespeare's
use of the show must naturally be more complex than an explanation for Hamlet's use of it; one does not automatically add up to the other, and each must accommodate the other. If, for example, it is said that Shakespeare needs the pantomime to inform his audience of a plot he plans to break off in the middle, Hamlet's need for the show must still be accounted for—after all, he does not know that the play will be interrupted. The same considerations must apply when one is focusing on Hamlet's motives. It is true that a critical study centered on the purposes of the dramatist within the play and evoking a Hamlet who is rash or careful, inept or crafty, foolish or wise, cruel or antic or conscientious, or various combinations of these, inevitably implies that Shakespeare employs the pantomime for ends he does not share with Hamlet. Even so, in some writings, the words "Hamlet" and "Shakespeare" are carelessly interchanged, and the implicit distinction between the motives of the two is fuzzed by the explicit imprecision. Moreover, one can hardly avoid the suspicion that some scholars go so far afield in an effort to solve difficulties relevant to Hamlet the dramatist that, paradoxically, they lose sight of the dramatist Shakespeare. However convenient it may be to a solution of certain questions about the court entertainment to declare that Claudius is deep in conversation during the dumb show, it is hard to believe that Shakespeare wants his readers to arrive at such a conclusion when he gives the King no conversation and has no other character allude to such speech or action.

This hypothesis of an inattentive Claudius is suggestive in another way of a general limitation in critical writings on the matter. Dover Wilson, in declaring that Claudius converses during the mute performance, is taking exception to evidence elsewhere of the King's alertness and habitual public show of good manners; W. W. Greg, in declaring that the show is used to establish the falsehood of the Ghost's account, is contradicting proof elsewhere of truth in the Ghost's version of the crime. And although other commentators may not so conspicuously challenge or deny evidence elsewhere in the play, they do tend to overlook the relationship between the dumb show and figurative patterns and motifs that run
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through the drama. Claudius's lack of verbal reaction to the dumb show has hamstrung critics trying to determine the effect that the show has on him; and his silence is ambiguous if one isolates the scene. But passages elsewhere in the play have a bearing on the matter of the King's silence. There is, for example, at the opening of Hamlet a species of "dumb show"; and it, too, provokes dumbness in the spectators. The very words are used: we are told that the Ghost is "dumb" and that his appearance causes the "watch," in turn, to "stand dumb" (I.i.171;ii.206). No dumb show proper, the Ghost's appearance is yet described in terms reminiscent of traditional uses of the convention, and Horatio's account to Hamlet implies that the Ghost resorts to a kind of speaking action-without-words, a "show" later attested to by stage direction and dialogue when the Ghost appears again. A pattern of key words insistently reiterated and of a particular kind of stage action consistently reemployed informs the use of the pantomime proper. And if Claudius's dumbness in the face of the dumb show is viewed in the light of the overall figurative pattern, one may see that his silence (the only evident reaction; all else—conversation, terror, self-possession, and so on—is conjecture) is, in itself, a clue to the character of his response and a clue to the function of the dumb show as well.

I repeat what is, in my opinion, a basic matter: why does Shakespeare have a man who commissions a play containing a mime inveigh against "inexplicable dumb-shows and noise"? Furthermore, why does he have a man of taste, whose critical judgments in some respects reflect (in the light of Shakespeare's practice) Shakespeare's own views, express distaste for two dramatic devices that Shakespeare himself is employing? The first question has occasionally caught the passing attention of a critic. The second has not. And a close look at both is long overdue. No note has been taken of Hamlet's adverse criticism against the background of Shakespeare's practice and relevant comment in Hamlet: the use of a dumb show; the use of stage noise; the repeated allusions to both dumbness and noise; the provocative equations of the two; the insistence that both produce only more of the same. (The latter idea, to be traced
and analyzed in forthcoming chapters, is suggested in a variety of ways: for example, in the descriptions—as well as the stage use—of a chain of noise in which the drum starts the sound of the trumpet, the trumpet the sound of the cannon, the cannon the reverberation from the heavens, "re-speaking earthly thunder.") Nor, in any study of Shakespeare's manipulation of the dumb show convention, has note been taken of a chain of acts (or descriptions of acts) approximating "dumb show" throughout a play that begins with the silent and "solemn march" of a dead man past the watch at the "dead hour" in "the dead vast and middle of the night" and concludes with watchers who are "mutes," with "senseless ears," a "peal of ordnance," a "dead march," and the spectacle of dumb show. Those critics who find the exact pantomimic foreshadowing of Gonzago so unusual should look beyond the immediate context of the scene: the matter described by the Ghost, repeated in dumb show, and repeated again in Gonzago (presented thrice, like Hecate's curse "thrice blast[ing], thrice infect[ing]," or like the appearance of the Ghost three times before the watch—also referred to more than once as a potential blasting and linked repeatedly with infection) fits into a pattern of repetition marked by echoing and reechoing words and noise, echoing and reechoing acts, by such insistent reiteration, in fact, that technique itself serves as indirect comment.

Let me illustrate, merely by the expedient of choosing several words or phrases much annotated but almost invariably without recourse to passages outside the play-scene, the importance of looking beyond the immediate context of the scene itself. D. G. James has said, "It is a platitude of Shakespeare study that Shakespeare could, with wonderful ease, charge a word with two or three meanings at once; there is hardly a page of Shakespeare which does not illustrate this." It is also a commonplace of that study that certain familiar Renaissance themes are inherent in the Hamlet plot: for example, that wrongdoing recoils on the doer and that evil generates evil. And Caroline Spurgeon's study has shown that Shakespeare often connects noise with evil and the reverberations of sound with the movement of evil. Given such premises
and given in *Hamlet* the stage use of a chain of noise that ritualizes intemperate or violent action, one cannot consider only in their immediate context such suggestive expressions as “false fire” and “mallecho” (to select, from the many similarly charged words and phrases in the play-scene, two describing the play-within-the-play and the dumb show). Whether *Hamlet*, by “false fire” (III.ii.277), refers to the whole court entertainment or particularly to the representation of the Player King’s poisoning or to the promised representation of a wooing is not really important: that the King is taunted with being “frighted” by a mere likeness of the real thing, a blank discharge, is clear. What does deserve attention is the name “false fire” for a stage representation of evil within a larger dramatic frame that makes repeated use of false fire in the drinking rites to give ceremonious form to immoderate or false action. Similarly, *Hamlet* labels the dumb show “mallecho” (148); unless one dismisses the possibility of wordplay, “mallecho” is an apt name for a show that echoes the actions described by the Ghost, if not his words. Both “false fire” and “mallecho” accommodate a meaning of evil; both link evil with noise; both are used to describe dramatic action; both are peculiarly applicable to Shakespeare’s use of ordnance: the blank discharge of the cannon is certainly “false fire,” and both the method used and the reverberation of the martial sounds may be fittingly termed “mal-echo”—especially in view of the nature of the acts transformed into noise. If such elements elsewhere in the play do gloss these designations for drama, then the mute scene, as well as the one with dialogue, is called a noise and there is a suggestion of evil in the noisy custom or the noisy stage production itself, as distinct from the matter each represents.

Of course, two examples do not make a pattern. But when the same figurative connections appear again and again, it is harder to believe that they are all fortuitous, all casual, all inconsequent, than to believe that they are not. Again without drawing any conclusions about the purport of provisional examples of figurative interplay, let me point to one more line in the play-scene that also contains some of the connections potential in “false fire” and “mallecho” and that, picking up
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implications elsewhere in the dialogue, may provide more details for what might add up to a comment on drama—and on the dumb show. It has been observed that Hamlet’s quotation, “the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge” (when he is urging Lucianus to “begin”) is “possibly reminiscent of the True Tragedie of Richard the Third: ‘The screeking raven sits croaking for revenge. Whole herds of beasts come bellowing for revenge.’”¹⁶ A dissimilarity in the two quotations underscores an oddity manifest in the Hamlet line. One wonders at Shakespeare’s strangely inappropriate use of the word “bellow.” Just before the play-scene Hamlet censures “bellowing” and uses the word to describe actors who lack “the accent of Christians” (III.ii.35–36); yet here he uses it in support of an injunction to a character to “act.” Elsewhere, he uses bellowing to describe players who “imitated humanity . . . abominably” (39–40); yet in a play where a pervasive bird and beast imagery illuminates a comment on beastly nature as contrasted to what is properly human and where “bellowing” is descriptive of players who do a bad job of imitating “humanity,” he refers to a bellowing fowl in exhorting a stage representation of a man to action. The very unsuitability of the word in its immediate context draws our attention to it and leads us to notice its fitness in a larger context where noise is linked with various manifestations of violence and evil; both with some form of dramatic action; and men who imitate humanity “abominably” with the beastly. Also, we again are presented with a contrast between what happens in the play-scene and Hamlet’s earlier remarks on drama: not only does he scorn dumb shows and then ask for a play that includes one; he also expresses dislike for “noise” and “bellowing” and the beastly, and then enjoins a player to “act” in their name.

Moreover, the form of the dramatic inset, as well as individual words and phrases within the play-scene, takes point from patterns of fact and figure throughout Hamlet. For example, technique provides a counterpoint to matter when an “act” of murder leads to its reenactment within a framing action where murder recurrently leads to murder.¹⁷ And the nature of the two presentations in the inset makes the sequence of which they are a part an oblique echo of a process
detailed earlier in the play. Whereas both pantomime and playlet dramatize an act described in the Ghost’s tale to Hamlet and thus add up, as we have noted, to a peculiar sequence of accounts of king-killing, the Player’s Speech—tale and dramatic performance in one—describes an act of king-killing as a similar sequence of sound, silence, and renewed sound. In the Player’s rendition of Aeneas’s tale to Dido, we hear that Pyrrhus (a son bent on avenging his father’s death) directs a blow at Priam that, though failing to take the king’s life, occasions his fall, an event marked by a “hideous crash” as “senseless Ilium / Seeming to feel this blow . . . Stoops to his base.” This noise “takes prisoner” the “ear” of Pyrrhus; his sword “seem[s] i’ the air to stick,” and in mute tableau he stands like “a painted tyrant.” His pause, likened to the “silence” before a storm when the winds are “speechless,” is succeeded by “dreadful thunder,” as Pyrrhus again turns his sword on Priam (II.ii.490–510). Thus, the slaying of a king is described as a process of “crash,” “hush,” and “thunder.” A correspondence between a sequential description of a matter of king-killing and the form that matter takes in the sequence of the Ghost’s tale, the mute scene, and the playlet, may appear to be tenuous stuff, especially when analogies between the two matters are imprecise and fluid. But references to, or instances of, sequences of sound or silence or both are too common in Hamlet to be called chance. One must conjure with the possibility that the pattern significantly charges the passages in which it appears.

Neither the limited purpose and effect of the dumb show nor its larger dramatic function can be determined when one views it only in relation to Gonzago and the stage conversation immediately framing it. One may agree with any one of various arguments supporting the proposition that Hamlet deliberately employs the dumb show: for instance, that it is consonant with his nature to bait Claudius, as cat with mouse. But within the context of the play-scene there is no absolute disproof of the argument that Hamlet does not bargain for the show. One may agree with the critic who argues that Claudius’s silence accords with the response one might expect from a self-possessed man adept at dissembling, aware that a stage
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facsimile of his deed may be coincidence, and reasonably confident that it strikes no chord in the majority of the viewers; that such a man might naturally resort to subterfuge with the question, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence i' it?"; that it is consistent with Claudius's resolute, crafty, and decisive nature that though he bears with a mute and unemphatic stage counterpart of his deed and with its replica so long as no note is strongly struck that connects him in the mind of the generality with the stage villain, he acts abruptly when threat increases and the stage wooing of a dead ruler's wife is forecast. Nevertheless, within the context of the play-scene there is no absolute disproof of the argument that Claudius does not see the show or that, seeing it, he is oblivious to its purport. Given certain interpretations of cause and effect, one may agree with those who find the show an important part of a dramatic movement illuminating the natures of both Hamlet and Claudius. But given other interpretations, one may as well agree with those who find it superfluous. Within the scene itself, nothing tips the scale in a definitive way. But if one looks elsewhere in the play, one finds a pattern suggesting that dumb show is the logical issue of Hamlet's expressed intent and that Claudius's silence is the logical issue of dumb show; in short, that the mime is not a matter of accident and that Claudius does see and does react to it.

So, agreeing with W. W. Lawrence that the play-scene is "the keystone to the arch of the drama," I propose to approach the question of the dumb show from a somewhat different tack than that ordinarily taken: first, by way of a look at traditional aspects of the convention and Shakespeare's choice and use of those that serve his particular purpose, and then by a study of the part the mute scene plays in a comprehensive figurative and structural design.