CHAPTER TWO
In his careful study on the dumb show, Dieter Mehl remarks on the difficulty of “defining the exact meaning and limits of the term”: observing that “any piece of silent action where one would normally expect dialogue may be called a dumb show,” he adds, “However, one can usually apply the term . . . to all cases where one or more characters advance and retire without having spoken.” This broader definition he subsequently qualifies in classifying processionals, but he also later notes that it is often hard “to draw the line between dumb show and a particularly festive procession” or, drawing the line and saying of the processions in one play that they are not dumb shows proper, he adds that “in performance [they] possibly assumed the character of dumb shows.” If the boundaries of the term are not always easy to pinpoint, there remain definable variations in the form of the show: perhaps the most frequent is the “whole scene, complete in itself, without dialogue”; in another familiar form, the show may present “only a short significant gesture or a brief meeting, important for the development of the plot”; the simplest form, one common to the classical tragedies, is the ceremonial procession.

Some of this may appear irrelevant to the present study. Obviously, there is only one dumb show in Hamlet: it is so labeled by the playwright, it meets the requirements of the initial definition above, and it takes the first form described.
But *Hamlet* also includes repeated instances of, and references to, other silent actions, some of which recall forms of the show, some of which contain allusion to "show" or "mutes" or "dumbness," and the pantomimic nature of which is often emphasized in the dialogue. And such details must, in a play where a dumb show figures prominently, give us pause; for the peculiar nature of the convention, its mobility and variety, the familiarity of the audience with its elements and uses—all provide the dramatist with conditions for evoking in the spectator imaginative equivalences between matter and technique. If Shakespeare should want to invest mute action with a large symbolic significance, he might—by a recurrent use of pantomimic actions that recall a familiar form, characteristic, or gist of the dumb show—exploit a symbolism inherent in the latter; and any resultant comment on "dumb show" might serve as a reagent to measure the dumb show proper. On these premises I propose to list instances and descriptions of pantomimic action in the play; to note whether they contain reminders of the stage convention of dumb show; to determine whether they (and passages describing or presenting speechlessness or motionlessness) present a consistent pattern of comment relevant to the play-scene; and then to consider briefly the use Shakespeare makes of ordinary components and subject matter of the stage device. The label most frequently applied to the dumb show in *Hamlet* is "unique"; and this may suggest that Shakespeare's mime has little in common with other pantomimes. But I hope to demonstrate that it is unique, not because it lacks conventional ingredients, but because Shakespeare, evoking a contemporary familiarity with those ingredients, puts common practice to uncommon use.

We have noted that the word *dumb* is assigned to descriptions of the action and effect of the Ghost (I.i.171;ii.206). And if one recalls the nature of the action that often marks a dumb show, certain aspects of the Ghost's comportment when he appears before the watch are most suggestive: for example, he "with solemn march / Goes slow and stately by them: thrice he walk'd / . . . whilst they, distill'd / Almost to jelly with the act of fear, / Stand dumb and speak not to him" (I.ii.201–6). The action of the dumb show is often similarly
solemm and ritualistic; and mimes frequently show a thrice-presented action: in *Gorboduc*, for instance, the company of mourners in one of the shows passes "thryse about the stage." Thus, the accounts of the Ghost's early appearances contain reminders of a form and a formula of the dumb show; and recollection is further joggled by a repetition of the word *dumb* to describe all of the participants in these brief meetings. Then, when the Ghost appears for the first time to Hamlet, both dialogue and stage direction emphasize his speaking action, his gesturing, at the outset of the meeting: the reiterated reference to the "beckon[ing]," the "courteous action," as the Ghost "waves [Hamlet] to a more removed ground" (I.iv.58, 60–61,68,78,84) underscores the Ghost's initial resort to mute action.

In the first passage above, we are told that the Ghost's appearance causes the spectators to "stand dumb"; but in another passage, it is said and shown to produce what would appear to be an opposite effect: a "show of violence" (I.i.144). This early intimation that a dumb action may elicit both dumbness and violence (the latter itself significantly called a "show") is repeated in various ways: each piece of pantomimic action in the play has a direct bearing on the next, and each produces a show of dumbness or a show of violence, noise. Hamlet reacts with disproportionate passion when his companions try to thwart the mute summons of the Ghost; and after the Ghost tells his story, the immediate effect on Hamlet of the encounter that begins with a dumb gesturing is "wild and whirling words" (I.v.133) when he, in turn, communicates with others. Most significantly, the next time we hear of him (when Ophelia details the form of his visitation to her in her closet), he is described in words emphatically used to describe the Ghost (see, for example, I.ii.233–34) and in phrases reminiscent of earlier speculations about the "perturbed spirit": he is "pale . . . piteous . . . As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (II.i.81–84). Not only has he thus put on some of the look of the Ghost; he also now resorts, like the Ghost, to dumb action. When Polonius asks Ophelia what Hamlet "said," she answers:
He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm;
And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. Long stay'd he so;
At last, a little shaking of mine arm
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being: that done, he lets me go:
And, with his head over his shoulder turn'd,
He seem'd to find his way without his eyes;
For out o' doors he went without their helps,
And, to the last, bended their light on me.

(II.i.87-100)

This account of a brief meeting composed of mute gesturing,
a waving of the head "thrice," and a strange symbolic departure recalls the action of the dumb show. And, again, whatever brings on Hamlet's "dumb show"—whether it is the ghostly communication that begins with a silent beckoning or Ophelia's own silence, her refusal to talk with him or to accept his letters—there is the implication that his mute action is generated by an earlier action that is, in some sense, "dumb."

Similarly, the Player's Speech expands the intimation that "dumbness" may lead to "dumbness" or to "the show of violence." It does not, like the descriptions of the Ghost or like Ophelia's account of Hamlet's conduct, describe a speaking action-without-words. But besides picturing a silent tableau in the midst of a scene of "crash" and "thunder" and thus continuing the motif of dumbness and noise, the tale of King Priam's murder does detail a peculiar process of cause and effect: as we have seen, a blow (itself retributive in nature) causes a noise that effects a "pause," succeeded by "aroused vengeance." Violence is symbolized by a "hideous crash" that produces a "silence . . . hush as death": both sound and silence are elements in a process of destruction. An evil action has such consequences that its own movement is arrested, and the "pause" that ensues (likened to "silence") seems to reflect
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DUMB SHOW

a potential for ending the process. However, in Pyrrhus's case both noise and silence reflect the nature of storm, and his "still[ness]" leads to renewed vindictiveness and "dreadful thunder." And, most suggestively, hard upon this figurative illustration of a movement of evil comes Hamlet's request that the players perform Gonzago, a play preceded by a silent scene. Then on the heels of the dumb show—which elicits only silence from Claudius—and the playlet comes the prayer scene.

Hamlet's conduct in Ophelia's closet may be termed "dumb show" in the sense of a mute exhibition of grief; but though Claudius's conduct in the prayer scene may include the factor of speaking action, his attitude of prayer may be, in another sense and by his own admission, termed "dumb show," whether mute or not. The reference in this passage to a "pause" and the suggestion, again, of a particular cause-and-effect process are relevant to our present purposes. Immediately after the dramatic presentation of a ruler's death, the initial part of which strikes him dumb, Claudius describes himself in lines reminiscent of the Player's description when, stricken by the crash that marks a king's fall, Pyrrhus stands in "pause" and like "a painted tyrant . . . like a neutral to his will and matter" does "nothing." Claudius now says of himself, "Like a man to double business bound, / I stand in pause where I shall first begin, / And both neglect" (III.iii.41-43). A declaration of a condition of pause follows on the dumb show and Gonzago, and a potential in the "crash" of the court entertainment for catching the conscience of the King or for leading to new violence appears to be suggested in Claudius's awareness of "double business." But what transpires, as shadowed forth by his words just before he kneels, is a "silence . . . As hush as death." And when he rises from prayer saying, "Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (98), he reveals that his appearance of devotion has added up to only that—appearance, seeming, mere "noise," mere "dumb show."

Moreover, the analogy is two-pronged and twice enforces the figurative comment. Like Pyrrhus, Hamlet strikes a blow, in the dumb show and Gonzago, which "strikes wide"; nevertheless, "the whiff and wind" of it brings the King to his knees and occasions a pause. But although the sword of the onlooker
FIGURATIVE DESIGN IN HAMLET

Hamlet "stick[s]" in the air and, like Pyrrhus, he does nothing, the pause leads only to new-aroused vengeance. It, too, is death-like and is followed by Claudius's plan to have Hamlet killed in England and by Hamlet's striking a blow at an arras. Both of these blows fall wide of the mark; yet both result in "hideous crash," one the "fall" of a father whose death leads to the silent procession of Ophelia's mourners. The movement of violent action and pause, the chain of noise and dumbness and renewed noise described in the Player's Speech, shadows forth the dramatic process in Hamlet.

To return to instances of pantomimic action that recall types of the dumb show proper, we should note that the court entertainment is also followed by the reappearance of the Ghost, whose visitation is again pictured in terms of a speaking action-without-words. Critics offer various explanations for the Ghost's return and his declaration that he comes "to whet [Hamlet's] almost blunted purpose" (III.iv.111) at a time when Hamlet has just slain Polonius, thinking him the King. But whatever additional explanations there may be for this reappearance, it is logical—in view of a pattern wherein various manifestations of noise and dumbness produce more of the same—that the dumb show should beget various kinds of "dumb show." And despite the fact that the Ghost speaks, the scene also contains, in Hamlet's words to Gertrude about the Ghost, reference to pantomimic elements or, at the least, reminders of a "form" or "action" that speaks: "Look you, how pale he glares!" says Hamlet. "His form . . . preaching to stones,/ Would make them capable. Do not look upon me;/ Lest with this piteous action you convert/My stern effects" (125-29). The fact that the Ghost appears to Hamlet, but not to Gertrude, is reminiscent of an infrequent use of the dumb show: elsewhere in English drama there are shows that are visible to only one person on the stage. Although such mimes may be used to provide indirect comment on the sole viewer's state of mind and although some critics have argued that the Ghost is a figment of Hamlet's imagination, catching an echo here of a traditional use of the device does not require acceptance of the strict implications of the use or connive at the idea that the Ghost is a projection of Hamlet's
The Significance of the Dumb Show

mental state. After all, the appearance of the Ghost is not a dumb show, and he is seen elsewhere by other characters in the play. But his materialization after the court entertainment, in the midst of a violent harangue, and on the words "a king of shreds and patches," and the effect of his "dumb show" on Hamlet, whose resultant "distemper" Gertrude initially calls madness, reflect the process found elsewhere in connection with pantomime or with speechless and motionless display.

The last silent actions I want to point to take the form of processions. The first is so labeled: Enter Priests, Etc. in procession; the Corpse of OPHELIA, LAERTES and Mourners, following; KING, QUEEN, their trains, Etc. The dumb-show processional frequently presents a matter of sorrow, and the funeral procession becomes a traditional motif, used alone (as in the classical tragedies) or to begin a show (as in Antonio's Revenge). So the filing on stage of the company of Ophelia's mourners, though not a dumb show proper, contains echoes of a familiar form and a familiar subject matter. Again, immediately succeeding this mute action is a scene of rant and violence: perhaps not only the movement we have observed, but also the figurative equivalences of dumbness and noise, are accommodated by the use of the processional elsewhere to begin a dumb show.

The play ends with another procession; during it a particular music that often marks a dumb-show processional is played. Horatio says, "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage" (V.ii.406-7), and the final stage directions are A dead march. Exeunt, bearing off the dead bodies; after which a peal of ordnance is shot off. Again, a silent action is followed by a noise that is an intrinsic part of the sequence. The purpose of the procession, its ceremonious nature, the music—all recall the dumb show. Moreover, earlier, Hamlet's names for the spectators, struck dumb by what they witness, as "mutes or audience to this act" (346) recall, on the one hand, characters in a dumb show and imply, on the other, that what they watch and hear is a show. Thus, since the "act" is a matter of noise heard by an "audience" and since the "mutes" occupy the same sphere of action as the actors, Hamlet's
speech and its context reinforce the metaphorical comment that noise effects dumbness and that dumb show and the show of violence/noise are essentially one. And it is the scene thus defined that leads to the silent scene "high on a stage."

One idea in the pattern we have been tracing—that "dumb show" or "the show of violence" breeds more "dumb show," more "noise"—bears on Shakespeare's use of repetition in the play-scene. Repetition is not an uncommon ingredient of the dumb show. In, for example, *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon*, after the dumb show has been enacted once, the presenter asks the players to repeat the scene, and it is reenacted while the presenter introduces each character and explains the action; in *A Warning for Fair Women*, the murder shown in a dumb show is "also presented in the actual play," and "the incident is successively presented in two different ways, once in the form of a morality, the second time as a factual report." No one would argue that repetition is a technique sparsely employed in the literature of the time. The Renaissance poet is likely to say everything twice over—not to recapture the first fine careless rapture, but to impress moral ideas on reader or spectator; and he is likely to give that repetition different forms, extending and enriching his instruction by the varied nature of the repetition itself. And as the examples above from other plays demonstrate, reiteration is a natural concomitant of a dramatic convention that so often aims at explication or teaching.

But we have seen that the use of repetition in the court entertainment in *Hamlet* has touched off a puzzled response from critics. What surprises is the precise duplication, joined to the fact that the dumb show lacks the allegorical disguise so often conveying moral instruction and justifying a repetition. Moreover, the repetition does not take the common form of edifying narrative; it does not appear to serve any of its usual ends: to detail, explain, clarify, moralize, provide an enlightening change of perspective, and so on. And, at that, it goes beyond what is ordinarily remarked on: the mime rehearses an action already presented in description by the Ghost. Thus the action is given, in some form, three times.

We have had occasion to notice Shakespeare's reference to the
thrice-performed action: the poison used by Lucianus is “thrice blasted, thrice infected” with Hecate’s curse (III.ii.269); the Ghost appears thrice before the watch, a point repeatedly insisted on; when he appears, “thrice he walk’d / By their oppress’d and fear-surprised eyes” (I.ii.202–3); the dialogue suggests that the Ghost beckons to Hamlet thrice, though this is perhaps debatable; “three times, and in vain,” one critic says, “Hamlet tries to get away from the Ghost” during the “swearing” ceremony; and when Hamlet resorts to mute show with Ophelia, “thrice his head thus waving up and down, / He raised a sigh” (II.i.93–94). When the same detail is attached, again and again, to an unnatural action, then technique may take on import. This is not to say that all repetition, even when it is threefold, serves the same end. The use of parallel and counterpoint is a salient feature of the drama: for example, three sons—Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras—with fathers slain; three injunctions to “remember”—from the Ghost, from Laertes, and from Ophelia in madness; a scene wherein a man whose father has been murdered listens to a dramatic speech about a man who kills the father of his father’s murderer. Playing off character against character, situation against situation, is a method of procedure found in all of Shakespeare’s plays; and Hamlet contains many instances of this technique. But in the peculiar unvaried repetition in the court entertainment where the action in the dumb show leads to exactly the same action in Gonzago, Shakespeare gives technique itself thematic significance. Employing a familiar element of the dumb show in an unfamiliar way, he graphically illustrates the idea that “dumbness” and “the show of violence” perpetuate themselves. Technique informs the dramatic process where the story of the Ghost generates a dumb show which mirrors that story and which, in turn, is mirrored in the ensuing playlet. And in the light of the figurative process elsewhere in the play, the repetition suggests that all are “dumb shows,” though two of them are variously presented with words.

The relationship drawn between noise/violence and dumbness is also indebted to the traditional character of the mime. Noise is a common ingredient of the silent scene. Sometimes
FIGURATIVE DESIGN IN HAMLET

the stage directions call simply for a background "musicke" (see, for example, Endimion); sometimes, more specifically, for trumpets, flutes, fifes, or other musical instruments, or for the shooting off of a "great peale of ordinaunce" (Jocasta); sometimes, for a particular music—a "dead march [to be] plaid" during the pantomime (Tancred and Gismund). Whether the silent action is introduced or accompanied by "gastly fearefull chimes of night" that "with a dolefull peale [fill] the roofe with sounds of tragedie" (A Warning for Fair Women) or "louder musicke . . . To yeeld, as fits the act, a Tragicke sound" (The White Devil) or the discharging of "peeces" that with the sounds of "drommes and fluites" and the marching of armed men signify "tumults, rebellions, armes and ciuill warres" (Gorboduc), or whether the sounds carry no particular symbolic signification, noise of some kind is a conventional element of the dumb show. Shakespeare employs this convention: the sound of trumpets (or, in the First Folio, of hautboys) introduces his silent scene. But given throughout the play figurative links between noise and evil; a line in the dialogue linking noise with dumb shows; the chainlike, noisy ritual of the sound of drum, trumpet, and cannon in a play where one form of "dumb show" leads to another and one "show of violence" to another; a frequent figurative identification of both noise and dumbness with implements of destruction (as we shall see in a study of the figurative patterns)—one is led to suspect that Shakespeare is exploiting the fact that he has an audience conditioned to connecting noise with dumb show and to equating that noise with disorder and tragedy. It would follow that the story of the Ghost, the dumb show, and Gonzago are not only all "dumb show"; all, including the dumb show proper, are also a matter of "noise."

The content of the shows elsewhere in English drama is variable in nature. But certain subjects recur: we have observed that one form of the show often presents a company of mourners or a funeral procession; another is the representation of a murder, especially one that is horrible, strange, ingenious (see, for example, The Battle of Alcazar or The White Devil). A matter of physical unreality—of the magical or the supernatural—is also common to the show. And in plays

26
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DUMB SHOW

that, generally speaking, appear after Hamlet, the mute scene is used to display false appearance, artificiality, hollowness. In such cases, the dumb show becomes a means for presenting "show," and the dramatist thus evokes metaphorical equations between technique and content. Dieter Mehl points to this development; and, in relation to the thesis of the present study, his observations are so pertinent that I quote them in some detail. Speaking of Marston's use in Antonio and Mellida of a silent scene on the main stage while eavesdroppers in the gallery comment on it, he says that a remark by Mellida, one of the onlookers, makes it "clear that for her [the pantomime] was only an empty show"; on The Revenger's Tragedy, "We find recurring references to masques, revels, and other courtly entertainments as particularly sinister manifestations of the depravity of the rich. It is only fitting in this play that the installation of the profligate Lussurioso as Duke should be presented as a dumb show. It is a hollow triumph, full of outward 'show,' but doomed from the beginning"; on Women Beware Women, "Within the main plot complications arise chiefly out of the contrast between the simple conditions in the house of Leantio and the splendid world of the Court. . . . While the special atmosphere in Leantio's house is conveyed by means of the language, by dialogue and description, the world of the Court is presented by magnificent 'show'"; and Mehl adds that the way in which "Bianca is attracted by the deceptive lustre of the court" (which is presented in dumb show) is "underlined by the deliberate choice of artistic means." Of the dumb show in The Changeling, he says, "Such a mode of presentation implies some oblique comment."

In short, Mehl finds the substance of these dumb shows peculiarly attuned to the nature of the device. Similarly, though the dumb show in Hamlet presents the conventional ingenious murder, though there is nothing unusual in the choice of content, all signs point to the conclusion that its presentation in dumb show invests that matter with a particular significance. But before continuing with this aspect of Shakespeare's manipulation of the convention, let us turn for the moment to obvious differences between the dumb show
in *Hamlet* and other mimes, differences sometimes cited as evidence that Shakespeare's dumb show is unique.

We have seen that far from dispensing with common components of the pantomime, Shakespeare emphasizes them: he makes use of the familiar elements of noise and repetition, and he employs a familiar form and a familiar subject matter. Mere differences between his show and those in other plays are not necessarily relevant to the question of "uniqueness." A study of the history of the convention reveals, for example, considerable variation in the positioning of the pantomime, in its importance, and in the use of accompanying interpretative comment: the dumb show may appear before or between acts, or as a scene within an act; it may appear alone, or in juxtaposition with a dialogue scene; it may be superfluous to the plot or an organic part of it; it may or may not be a part of a prologue; it may include an explanatory narrative, provided by a chorus or a presenter, who may be either outside or inside the action of the play proper. And the pantomime adapts to a great variety of uses: it may be employed to telescope history; to accommodate large sections of plot; to explain the dramatic situation; to foreshadow coming events, prefiguring tragedy; to furnish didactic comment on the following scene or the whole drama; to provide an entertaining interlude; or to serve any of a number of other purposes. In short, the fact that the show in *Hamlet* is not necessary to the plot (or that prologue, presenter, and accompanying interpretative observations do not reflect a hard-and-fast rule) does not—as some critics appear to suggest—establish its singularity. The device is so versatile that the exceptional nature of the *Hamlet* mime cannot be defined by saying that it does not do what pantomime elsewhere may do, especially when shows elsewhere may be directed toward ends obviously irrelevant to Shakespeare's needs.

What is perhaps more to the point is the frequent observation that the show is extraordinary in that it lacks the figurative disguise often found in pantomimes with which it appears to have some elements in common. Mehl observes that there are "many plays where the content of the dumb show is repeated in the dialogue" but that "in all these the dumb show
The Significance of the Dumb Show

is allegorical or symbolic and does not exactly anticipate the particular plot of the play”; and he adds that in *Hamlet* “dumb show and play [being] themselves parts of a very complex drama” an allegorical pantomime here “might have detracted too much from the actual play and puzzled the spectators unnecessarily.” But the dumb show in *Hamlet* may lack a familiar allegorical form and still not lack a figurative disguise. Shakespeare’s technique here is one that remarkably accommodates two audiences. If he had used his dumb-show characters in a conventional allegorical or symbolic fashion, his moral comment would tend to be confined, pointed at the play-within-the-play and at the stage audience (as it would be if he had used a conventional presenter). And if he wants the mime to contain comment on *Hamlet* as well as *Gonzago* and to be directed at the *Hamlet* audience as well as the *Gonzago* audience, he has a problem quite different from that of the playwright whose dumb show precedes a section of the play proper and is intended for the edification of the off-stage audience or who aims a symbolic comment at an audience within the play.11

I propose that in *Hamlet* the show is used for symbolic ends. Early and late, the mime appears in plays on a “Senecan” mode; it is particularly identified with such tragedies and, attached to them, almost invariably presents an action of violence, grief, disruption of order, of unnaturalness and “noise.” I propose that Shakespeare evokes the ideas in this ready-made symbolism; that he makes an imaginative leap from a familiar matter of the dumb show to “dumb show” as a definition of that matter; that he defines evil and unreality as “dumb show”; and that his extraordinary manipulation of the ordinary elements of the pantomime reinforces a complex figurative comment on two alternatives for “action” on the world stage: the seeming that makes life a “dumb show” and the being that makes it true play, a mirroring of Nature.

A habit of mind that can produce such figurative equivalences is characteristic of Shakespeare. And these particular connections are not unique in seventeenth-century thought: Thomas Browne, for example, is later to define “dumbe showes” as lacking in “reality, truth, or constancy.” More-
over, as we have observed, other playwrights identify unreality, falsehood, and instability by presenting them in dumb show. There is nothing far-fetched in an equation of "dumb show" and evil: the history of the convention promotes it. There is nothing far-fetched in an equation of "dumb show" and unreality: again, conventional practices foreshadow such a connection. Pantomime, as we have remarked, is not uncommonly used to represent a dream or a vision, or to project the imaginings of a character on the stage. Moreover, Mehl notes that "in the earlier classical tragedies the pantomimes help to remove the play even further from reality than it would be without them. By the symbolic interpretation of the action through the pantomimes . . . the spectator is continually reminded of the unreal character of the performance." The traditional practice of providing by way of the silent scene a change in the level of dramatic reality, as well as the traditional employment of magic and the supernatural in dumb show and its use to represent dream and vision, makes it an easy step to identifying "dumb show" with unreality. And the connection traditionally drawn between unreality and evil further elucidates Shakespeare's use of the dumb show.

Critics sometimes point to Ophelia's surmise that the show "imports the argument of the play" (III.ii.150). Dover Wilson, saying that "there appears to be no other example in Elizabethan drama of a dumb-show setting forth an argument," finds its uniqueness in this use. But Mehl observes that Ophelia's use of the "word argument . . . could as well apply to an allegorical presentation of the plot" of Gonzago as to its "exact plot." Both Wilson and Mehl (like Ophelia) refer to the argument of the play-within-the-play, although both (unlike Ophelia) have the "import" of another play to consider. And whether the word refers literally or figuratively to Gonzago or whether there are arguments in other dumb shows, Ophelia's remark is indeed suggestive and Shakespeare's method indeed unique: by investing the dumb show with symbolic meaning, he uses it to import the argument of the play, but of Hamlet, as well as Gonzago.

We have seen that the echoes of familiar forms and components of the dumb show suggest that from the time when
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DUMB SHOW

the Ghost of the dead King (dumb to the watch and to Horatio) strikes the onlookers dumb or elicits from them "the show of violence," to the end of the play when the violent show of general death also strikes the watchers dumb, "mutes . . . to this act," the matter of the dumb show sounds through the play; that, like the reverberations of "earthly thunder," dumb shows and noise echo dumb shows and noise; that the "act" that "thunders in the index" (III.iv.51-52) still thunders in the dumb epilogue as the noise of the ordnance marks the funeral procession preceding a promised "show" where the "bodies / High on a stage [will] be placed to the view" (V.ii.388-89) and Horatio—who first tells Hamlet about the "form of the thing" (I.ii.210)—plans to play the presenter telling the "unknowing world / How these things came about" (V.ii.390-91). The sequence that begins with the pouring of poison into a man's ear ends with Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence" (369); with a description of Claudius, "The ears are senseless that should give us hearing" (380); and with the promise of a silent tableau with declamatory accompaniment. In short, the dumb show proper—a mime of murder and a "show of violence"—presents the argument of Hamlet, which contains a chain of silent scenes and pantomimic actions, all instinct with death. Nevertheless, the distinction between Hamlet and the court entertainment—the dumb show and Gonzago—is part of that argument; nor should the form and content of Horatio's proposed "show" and presentation be identified, as it sometimes is in critical writing, with the form and content of Hamlet. For we shall see that Shakespeare distinguishes between seeming and reality by way of these instances of "show."

In Shakespeare's hands, the dumb show is not only a piece of stagecraft centrally placed in the structure of the drama; it is also a definition central to comment on the action that makes life a hollow show and the antithetical action that gives substance to a performance on the world stage. In other plays, the dumb show may serve to define, in a limited context, vanity and pomp and self-serving; beastliness and depravity; artificiality, false-seeming, unreality, and emptiness; the isolation and circumscription attendant on evil. But in Hamlet, "dumb
FIGURATIVE DESIGN IN HAMLET

show” becomes an extended metaphor, and elements of the
dumb show—repetition, noise accompaniment, form, and con­tent—implement an essential symbolic commentary. Exactly
what “dumb show” represents and exactly what it leads to is
developed in a figurative design grounded in the facts of the
Ghost’s story. The poison-ear imagery, the confinement and
the beast-trap imagery, which we shall now explore, take their
point from the literal details of the murder of King Hamlet,
details that lead to the presentation of the dumb show and
are recapitulated in it. Thus, a figurative pattern based on the
particulars of a murder explicates the nature, operation, and
effect of “show” in general and of “show” in Hamlet in partic­ular. We shall see that the burden of the figurative design
picks up the burden of the pantomimic action that echoes
through the play like a refrain and choruses the movement of
Hamlet’s tragedy: “a-down a-down . . . a-down-a. O, how
the wheel becomes it!” sings Ophelia in madness (IV.v.170–72). And the way in which Shakespeare here fuses technique
and meaning—so that the wheel, the refrain, recalls the de­scriptions of Fortune’s wheel “bowl[ing] . . . down the hill of
heaven, / As low as to the fiends” and of the “cease of majesty
. . . a massy wheel”—is the way in which he uses the dumb
show to define “dumb show.”