

CHAPTER 1

THEATRE'S OFFENCE: *HAMLET AND THE TEMPEST*

'Who's there?' – The Tangible Problems of Unfolding the Theatrical Situation

'Who's there?' – this famous question opens William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.¹ It is not yet the encounter with 'the ghost' that evokes this question, although it certainly prepares the ground for its impending appearance on stage. It concerns another 'spectral apparition' that is 'natural' only inside the fictional world of the play: there it is two minor characters, two sentinels, one taking over the shift of watch from the other, who have to identify each other in the dark of the night.² For the theatre audience, however, as part of the external communication system, the first words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* pronounce and expose a fundamental and delicate process of theatrical art: 'Who's there?', this question automatically raises in the viewers, whenever an actor makes his first entrance on the stage. The convention of theatre wants that the play answers this question by conjuring up a somehow spectral, because hybrid body; a body which is and is not just the actor's body. A stage character is to be established who is present but not quite, who is in need of embodiment by an actor who resides in/comes from another world, one that does not exist for the characters in the fictional world.

Hamlet opens with a metatheatrical gesture. It exposes on stage the uneasy and dramaturgically difficult situation of acquainting the theatre audience with the fictional world of the play they are beginning to watch. The spectators are waiting for some dramaturgical help from the fictional world to name and characterise the figure who has just entered the stage. However, the second person on the platform refuses the audience this conventional favour by shifting the question in an interesting way: 'Nay, answer me,' it says, 'Stand and unfold yourself' (*Ham.* 1.1.2). Staying with the metatheatrical reading, this imperative concerns the audience itself – it questions the supposedly asymmetrical theatrical setting. It troubles the distinction between the passive, anonymous watchers, who merely consume the play, and the active actors on stage, who present their craft to the audience.

In the fictional world, the darkness of the nightly scene – probably indicated by a lantern carried by one of the actors – prevents that the imperative 'unfold yourself' can be understood in a visual way, demanding a gesture of showing, disclosing or displaying, that is, 'laying open to the view'. Instead, the request 'to unfold yourself' asks the encountering other to 'disclose or reveal' itself 'by statement or exposition' – the *OED* lists the quotation from *Hamlet* as an example of this 'linguistic' meaning of the verb *unfold* ('unfold, *v.* 1'; 2.).

It might be indicative for Shakespeare's theatre that this particular use of *unfold* transposes the visual denotations of the verb ('To disclose or lay open to the view; to display. Also *fig.*' (*OED*, 'unfold, *v.* 1'; 3.)) into the realm of words. Although theatre is characterised by its very name as an institution of sight (gr. θεάομαι, *theáomai*, 'to behold, view, contemplate'), the dominant medial channel of Shakespeare's art of theatre is certainly established by the power of words.

However, paraphrasing the imperative 'unfold yourself' with 'explain who you are' cuts off important connotations that are crucial for a fuller understanding of the opening

scene. It covers the central fact that whosoever decides or is forced to ‘unfold himself’ makes himself the vulnerable object of another’s ‘handling’ – be it the gaze or some other way of ‘being dealt with’. ‘Unfolding’ is a gesture of exposing oneself, of presenting the other a maximum of attack surface. It implies abandoning the protection of hiding oneself in the darkness or behind shields. In contrast to the active, autonomous position as the subject of a speech act, ‘unfolding’ merely prepares the ground for something to come, for something that the encountering other will do with what has just opened up, what has been unfolded. As a gesture, it therefore undermines the classical active/passive distinction: although acting intentionally, the ‘subject’ (dis)places itself into a passive, a waiting position. By expanding the (social, bodily) contact zone it facilitates encounters that might happen to it ‘from without’ and that are initiated by others.

The imperative at the beginning of *Hamlet* carries the traces of this paradoxical suspension of active and passive. It not only qualifies the autonomy of the subject that is called upon to ‘act’; the request to ‘unfold’ is also accompanied by another imperative that highlights the passivity, the waiting position which the other is to take: ‘Stand and unfold yourself’ (*Ham.* 1.1.2). It is here that we return to the metatheatrical reading of this little dialogue. The imperatives are an answer to the question ‘Who’s there?’ that I have suggested to be also the characteristic question of the audience at the beginning of a play. The spectators’ question: ‘who is this fictional character that the actor who has just entered the stage represents’ (‘Who’s there?’) is answered with: ‘stand, stay still and expose yourself, open yourself up to what the play will do with you during the next two hours’ (‘Stand and unfold yourself’). The groundlings in the pit certainly feel addressed by the request to stand – and might do even more so if the actor voicing the imperative speaks the words in the

rough direction of the audience, indicating his inability to locate the person who is approaching.

The spectators in the theatrical setting obviously do not primarily expose themselves to be seen or heard – as spectators it is they who see and hear. However, by seeing and hearing they expose themselves to something that the play does to them, to what Farah Karim-Cooper has called ‘the tactile assault’ that the sight and sounds of performance can ‘impose upon the bodies, minds and souls of early modern audience members’ (*The Hand* 157). These ‘tactile’ effects that theatre produces can be tragic or comical, cathartic or entertaining. Although seeing and hearing obviously play a crucial role in the theatrical constellation, they are both only means involved in the generation of theatre’s effects. As the first two lines of *Hamlet* indicate, theatre cannot be reduced to observing and listening. On the one hand, the paradigm of the visual, which describes best the distant and superior position of the audience watching a play performed for them is not particularly suited to approach the question of how theatre achieves its effects. The visual and its metaphoric field are deeply and inextricably entangled with notions of knowledge and truth – literally with ‘in-sight’. As a consequence, analysing theatre under the paradigm of the visual or of communication (‘What is it that we see?’, ‘What is the message communicated to us?’) is always in danger of reconstructing theatre as an institution of cognition. It forgets that the complex theatrical experience is a much more bodily affair than the paradigm of seeing and understanding can account for. Howard Marchitello observes the interplay between perception and bodily vulnerability which is negotiated in the play itself: ‘In *Hamlet* the organs of perception – eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin – are simultaneously the means through which one apprehends the material world and the loci of a profound material vulnerability’ (142). This vulnerability entails ‘a process of change that perturbs the ostensible stability of the eye’s domain’ (Raman 135).

On the other hand, we can only develop a sense of theatre's particular capacity of 'moving' the spectators by linking this capacity with the prominence of theatre's dominant visual and aural medial channels. Theatre does not merely 'touch' its spectators as a result of the characteristic co-presence of actors and audience (cf. Fischer-Lichte); the two senses of distance, seeing and hearing, emphasise the spatial (and fictional) division of stage and audience which theatre has the power to traverse. Theatre moves, theatre touches – but it touches from a distance.

In the following I would like to tackle the question of theatre's affective effects with this paradigm of 'touching from a distance' in mind – and with Shakespeare as my guide. I think that the two lines discussed above give only a first glimpse of what *Hamlet* as a whole is (among other themes, obviously) concerned with: theatre's process of 'concerning', of 'offending' – of touching – that takes place in-between stage and audience.

Enter the Ghost – 'Touching this dreaded sight'

Barnardo's frightened encounter with what turns out to be Francisco, the fellow sentinel from whom he takes over the nightly guard, foreshadows the first highlight of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the entrance of the king's ghost. In fact, the ghost has actually been concerned in Barnardo's initial anxiety. As he tells Horatio, he has encountered a strange apparition the nights before. In his question 'Who's there?', it is therefore also the fright of the past nights that speaks. The ontological reality of the apparition is obviously still in doubt, so that Barnardo and his comrade Marcellus have asked Horatio, a socially superior authority and a learned man, to be present at their watch in order to become witness of the unnatural events. The latter is sceptical about the 'factual background' of the two sentinels' ghost story:

MARCELLUS

Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy

And will not let belief take hold of him

Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us. (*Ham.* I.I.22–4)

The Arden³ editors paraphrase the uncommon 'Touching' with 'concerning' and thus work out the overall message of Marcellus's speech act: Horatio simply does not believe in what Barnardo and Marcello claim to have seen. However, as the metaphor 'taking hold of' indicates, the complex wording of Marcellus's statement is grouped around the semantic field of 'touching'. It thereby generates meaning that exceeds its superficial message. 'Touching this dreaded sight' voices an interesting paradox, an impossible passage from one sense, the visual, to another, to the haptic.³ Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, like the later *The Winter's Tale*, 're-examines the relationship of vision and touch' (Tribble "'O, she's warm'" 74). The sight, this sight, is given; the task seems to consist in translating the visual into touch. 'Touching' is the challenge.

Theatre, I would like to claim, is deeply familiar with this transfer, this passage. As its name indicates, it starts from sight but only to aim for touch, for moving the spectators. Theatre does, however, not overcome, or harmonise the paradox that Shakespeare's 'Touching this dreaded sight' exposes. It rather operates with this paradox as its basic condition. Theatre touches from a distance, it touches in a constellation that resembles the visual one, but operates differently and follows its own, non-visual but much more bodily goal.

The metatheatrical reading which I have tried to develop from the fragment of Marcellus's statement can be accused of one decisive lack of consistency regarding the direction of touch: whereas the theatre analogy seems to demand that it is the (theatrical) spectacle, 'the sight', that touches the spectator, the grammatical construction of Marcellus's statement – if we take the liberty of reading 'Touching' as a somewhat

‘forgotten’, ‘impersonalised’ present participle – rather suggests that Horatio (metaphorically) touches the apparition. However, the context in which the phrase is embedded suspends the unambiguity of the haptic direction: Horatio is said not to ‘let belief take hold of him / Touching this dreaded sight’ (*Ham.* 1.1.23–4). Marcellus’s statement thus tells us of a double movement of touch that brings together both directions. In between the two lines it even performs the contact between a touch which is suffered (‘letting take hold of’) and one that is actively initiated (‘touching’ in its grammatical function as present participle). In other words, we here encounter again the structure of the imperative ‘unfold yourself’ which opened this first scene of *Hamlet*. Horatio’s con-tact to the ‘real’ nature of the ghost is barred, because he has not been willing to expose himself enough to it, ‘will not let belief take hold of him’. Although he has obviously been somehow ‘concerned’ with the apparition in discussions about its nature that he has had with the sentinels, although they have ‘touched’ upon the ‘dreaded sight’ with words, Horatio has not yet been contaminated with the emotional trouble that the ghost spreads. His position towards the ‘sight’ is yet the one as which he is famously introduced: he is ‘a scholar’ (*Ham.* 1.1.41).⁴ He judges over what others think to have observed repeatedly – he makes theory (again from gr. θεάομαι, *theáomai*, ‘to behold, view, contemplate’) in its literal sense. Horatio does not ‘let belief take hold of him’ while he, in a theoretical manner, ‘touches’ on this ‘dreaded sight’, while he refers to it, while he makes it his subject matter, without being involved himself. He touches on it merely theoretically, that is, without being touched by it himself. This is the attitude of the scholar. It translates touch into theory, into the paradigm of the visual, which is defined by the fundamental asymmetry of ‘touching without being touched’. The scholars of the Arden³ edition mimic the scholar Horatio by glossing ‘touching’ (‘Touching this dreaded sight’) with ‘concerning’: the Latin *cernō* can be understood as a synonym

of *videō* and is thus closely connected to the sphere of the visual. What gets lost in the editors' and Horatio's scholarly dealing with the question of the ghost is the emotions produced by the sentinels' encounter with the apparition. It is these strong affects that characterise this encounter and make Marcellus speak of 'this dreaded sight'.⁵

From Horatio's scholarly perspective, the apparition is 'but [their] fantasy', nothing but 'a making visible' (gr. φαντασία, *phantasia*). It is no coincidence that this 'making visible' strikingly describes what theatre in fact appears to do: enacting 'fancies', as Prospero describes his 'art' of producing a court masque in *The Tempest* (cf. *Tmp.* 4.1.120–122). The lines preceding the entrance of the ghost in *Hamlet* thus call up a critical attitude towards the theatrical art that is topical since Plato's prominent critique in *The Republic* (cf. *The Republic. Books 6–10* 595a–608a). It considers theatre inferior on ontological grounds: as merely representation or even projection, without 'real' substance, and therefore at best irrelevant if not corruptively misleading. In this ontological hierarchy, the ghost holds a position similar to that of theatre; as ghost he lacks ontological density, so to speak – he is too far away from the originality of the ideas in order to be a trustworthy messenger of truth (cf. Derrida *Specters of Marx* 5).⁶

However, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* premises these theoretical metatheatrical reflections only to negate them as an outside view on theatre that necessarily misses its core. In fact, Horatio has not come as a scholar. He has abandoned his books. His joining the sentinels during their nightly watch has to be understood as a gesture of 'unfolding'. He has left behind the intellectual sphere in which he holds a position of control to expose himself to elements over which he has no authority. By (dis)placing himself into the uneasy, because vulnerable, position of waiting, he contributes his share for enabling a touching encounter. Touch cannot be conveyed discursively – it has to be performed and suffered, at the same time. And this is exactly what happens.

The ghost appears, as if conjured up by Barnardo, who has just begun telling the story of the past encounters, and the touching experience takes place. The symptoms which Horatio shows indicate unmistakably that he has been contaminated with the very emotional trouble from which Francisco and Barnardo have already been suffering since their first encounters with the ghost

BARNARDO

How now, Horatio, you tremble and look pale.
Is not this something more than fantasy?
What think you on't?

HORATIO

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes. (*Ham.* 1.1.52–7)

Belief has ‘taken hold of him’ in quite a literal sense: ‘the truth of [his] experience is registered somatically’ (Marchitello 139), abstract vision has to be supplemented by a ‘sensible’, ‘bodily’, non-intellectual impression. ‘[U]ltimately bodily experience alone convinces him,’ writes Sarah Outterson-Murphy (259). Exposing himself to ‘[t]ouching the ghost’ serves as the ‘true avouch’.

In her article dedicated to *Hamlet*’s reflections on the ‘interactive physical experience of playgoing’ (253), Outterson-Murphy works out that the medical vocabulary like ‘contagion’, ‘infection’ and ‘symptoms’ associated with what she calls ‘ghostly performance’ (254) is not mere imagery. Shakespeare’s theatre is embedded in ‘a culture in which humors and spirits had emotional effects and theater could mold the spectator’s physical body’ (253–4). A passage from Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* serves Outterson-Murphy to argue that, in the early modern age, ‘contagious emotion’ (260) was a medical reality:

[A] corrupt and false Imagination [. . .] works not in sicke and melancholy men only, but even most forcibly sometimes in such as are found, it makes them suddainely sicke, and alters their temperature in an instant. And sometimes a strong apprehension, as *Valesius* proves, will take away Diseases: in both kindes it will produce reall effects. Men if they see but another man tremble, giddy, or sicke of some feareful disease, their apprehension and feare is so strong in this kinde, that they will have the same disease. (Burton 125)

When the 'Ghost unleashes its spectators' emotions', he shapes them 'through its own infectious bodily power', Outterson-Murphy writes (257). This physical, material process – which touches from a distance – has the capacity of spreading to the audience: 'the complex response to the Ghost' in *Hamlet* 'models the vulnerability [. . .] of theatrical spectatorship itself' (254). The audience exposes themselves deliberately to the 'reall effects' of an overactive imagination.

Certain keywords which are dropped in the first ghost scene indicate that it negotiates and reflects on theatre and its emotional effects. When Horatio says that the ghost 'harrows [him] with fear and wonder' (*Ham.* 1.1.43), he calls up two important Aristotelian concepts of theatre: φόβος, *phóbos*, 'fear', and τὸ θαυμαστόν, *tò thaumastòn*, 'tragic wonder' (cf. 1452a).

A glance at Shakespeare's *Tempest* might underline that Shakespeare habitually draws on these concepts to exhibit the metatheatrical quality of a scene.⁷ The island on which Prospero restores his daughter's rights by confronting his rivals with a series of spectacles is clearly identifiable as a dramatic reflection on theatre and its effects. When, in the fifth act, the characters attempt to put their experiences on the island in words, the notions we discovered in *Hamlet* pervade the description:

GONZALO

All torment, trouble, wonder and amazement
Inhabits here. Some heavenly power guide us
Out of this fearful country. (*Tmp.* 5.1.104–6)

These metatheatrical reflections in *The Tempest* also elaborate on another notion that plays a major role in the first scene of *Hamlet*: belief. Horatio was first accused of not letting ‘belief take hold of him’. After encountering the ghost he refers back to his initial disbelief, concluding that he ‘might not this believe’ without the ‘true avouch’ of his ‘own eyes’. This oscillation between belief and disbelief also shapes the experience of the characters in *The Tempest*: ‘Whether this be / Or be not, I’ll not swear’ (*Tmp.* 5.1.122–3), Gonzalo says, for example, while Sebastian and Antonio decide that, after one of the overpowering spectacles, they will ‘believe / That there are unicorns’ ‘[a]nd what does else want credit’ (*Tmp.* 3.3.21–5). It is again late in the fifth act that Prospero declares this question of believe to be a characteristic of the (theatre) island:

PROSPERO

You do yet taste
Some subtleties o’th’ isle that will not let you
Believe things certain. (*Tmp.* 5.1.123–5)

These ‘subtleties o’th’ isle’ not merely suspend the stability of a certain epistemological framework; they involve severe bodily/medical ‘infringements’: ‘an unsettled fancy’, for example, that is caused by ‘brains / [. . .] boiled within th[e] skull’ (*Tmp.* 5.1.59–60), as Prospero explains.⁸ It is similar dangers that Horatio fears when Hamlet wants to follow the ghost all on his own. He fears that it ‘might deprive [his] sovereignty of reason, / And draw [him] into madness’ (*Ham.* 1.4.73–4). In Horatio’s reasoning, it is the ‘very place’, outside, somewhere on the battlements of Elsinore, that ‘puts toys of desperation / Without more motive into every brain’ (*Ham.* 1.4.73–8). This place, at this hour, is apparently in itself ‘touching’:

HAMLET

The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold.

HORATIO

It is nipping, and an eager air. (*Ham.* 1.4.1–2)

The personifications of air in *Hamlet* foreshadow, I would suggest, the important metatheatrical role which air will play in *The Tempest*. Ariel, the character that embodies the theatrical medium, the central play-actor of Prospero's spectacles, already carries the element in his name. He, who is 'but air' (*Tmp.* 5.1.21), acts out Prospero's fancies. The resulting performance is itself repeatedly associated with the life-enabling element, for example when Prospero speaks himself of the 'airy charm' (*Tmp.* 5.1.54) that his 'potent art' (*Tmp.* 5.1.50) has brought forward. It is therefore no coincidence that the play as a whole is called *The Tempest* – a rather unusual Shakespearean title. *The Tempest* is, as a play, literally three hours of 'air made thick', as Thomas Heywood has the Presenter in his *Four Prentices of London* tell the audience when they are to imagine 'stormy tempests, that disturbe the Maine' (Heywood 175), 'air made thick' which becomes 'thin' again, only when the performance is over:

PROSPERO

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air; (*Tmp.* 4.1.148–50)

The 'eager air' on the battlements of Elsinore thus provides the predestined setting for a theatrical encounter. The nightly air bites even more shrewdly, intensifies its 'nipping' to yet another degree, when old Hamlet's ghost – itself 'as the air, invulnerable' (*Ham.* 1.1.144) – emerges from it. Its disquieting effect is exposed when Hamlet returns to Horatio and Marcellus after having conversed with the ghost in confidence. Hamlet is obviously changed, his reason appears to be disrupted:

HORATIO

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

HAMLET

I am sorry they offend you – heartily,

Yes, faith heartily.

HORATIO

There's no offence, my lord.

HAMLET

Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,

And much offence too. Touching this vision here

It is an honest ghost – that let me tell you. (*Ham.* 1.5.132–7)

Like the ‘victims’ of Prospero’s spectacles, Hamlet seems to leave the encounter with the ghost and the ‘eager air’ showing traces of madness. The question whether this madness is feigned, a spectacle staged by Hamlet himself, or ‘real’, might turn out to miss the point. Instead, Horatio’s words deserve close attention. The metaphor he chooses to express Hamlet’s disturbed state of mind, ‘wild and whirling’, alludes to a field that has been dominant since the beginning of the scene: the field of weather, of ‘active air’, so to speak. Hamlet’s words are themselves ‘eager air’, air that ‘bites’ and is ‘nipping’. As he himself notices, ‘they offend’: they ‘strike against’, they ‘transgress’ a certain order of social graces. They do not keep the distance that is due.⁹

*‘It is offended’ – The Contagion of
‘touching this vision here’*

The notion of offence is the key concept Shakespeare employs to characterise the way in which the ghost interacts with other characters. The notion is introduced in the first encounter with the ghost which Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* stages: ‘It is offended’ (*Ham.* 1.1.49), Marcellus comments, when the ghost retreats, falsely attributing its leaving the stage to having attempted to talk to it. It is four scenes later that the audience

gets to know that there was more truth in Marcellus's words than he was aware of. 'There is' offence, 'much offence', as Hamlet emphasises – but not 'merely' between two beings that encounter each other, not as a result of inappropriate words. The offence touches, it concerns – as the Arden³ editors gloss again – the ghost, and more than that: the offence catches on,¹⁰ it wants to communicate itself. The change which Horatio notices in Hamlet indicates that a contagion has happened between Hamlet and the ghost. The apparently enigmatic formula, 'Touching this vision here', refers to this encounter. It strikingly resembles Marcellus's 'Touching this dreaded sight' (*Ham.* 1.1.24) discussed above: the verb 'to touch' again appears in an ambiguous participle construction, again followed by the demonstrative adjective 'this', expressing a relation of nearness to a noun denoting a visual perception (here 'vision' instead of 'sight'). The reoccurrence of the grammatical construction and of the paradoxical connection of two distinct sensual domains, the haptic and the visual, is too prominent to pass as mere coincidence. On the contrary, I would suggest that the wording of the two phrases characterises the encounter with the ghost in its defining particularity.

The participle construction produces the impression of serving as the beginning of a causal argument, the participle explaining the cause or reason for an action or an event that follows: 'because I touched the apparition, XY happened'. It thereby emphasises the focus on the effect that the encounter with the ghost brings forth. As a result, it also reinforces the particularity of the notion of touch worked out above: as illustrated by Shakespeare's use of the verb 'to unfold', touch carries in itself the double character of an action and a suffering, of active and passive, of initiating an encounter and of exposing oneself to becoming the object of one. Being bitten by the cold air – suffering a touch – requires exposing oneself to it (in itself a notion of touch) – and, conversely, exposing oneself to the cold air of the ramparts implies waiting for some

sort of touch, no matter whether this is of a biting, nipping, or of a 'visual' nature. The paradoxical transfer from one sensual domain to the other which characterises the touch of the two phrases is even emphasised by the demonstrative adjective 'this'.¹¹ It allocates to the domain of nearness what is in fact absent and in itself untouchable: the past 'sight' or 'vision'. The actual impossibility of 'touching this vision' highlighted by the two formulas resonates with theoretical reflections on touch by Jean-Luc Nancy or Jacques Derrida. Reflecting on his friend's work, Derrida characterises this paradox of 'touching the untouchable' as the very core of the concept of touch itself:

How to touch upon the untouchable? Distributed among an indefinite number of forms and figures, this question is precisely the obsession haunting a thinking of touch – or thinking as the *haunting* of touch. We can only touch on a surface, which is to say the skin or thin peel of a limit [. . .]. But by definition, limit, *limit itself*, seems deprived of a body. Limit is not to be touched and does not touch itself; it does not let itself be touched, and steals away at a touch, which either never attains it or trespasses on it forever. (Derrida *On Touching* 6)

Theatre's reflecting on its own mediality raises a question that latently accompanies all our touches: it is the convention of distance between audience and stage, between fictional and factual world, that suspends the illusion of the directness, the immediacy of touch that makes suffering and initiating touches unproblematic in our everyday experiences. Theatre thus paradoxically intensifies touch by taking it its brute force.

Hans Blumenberg follows a path similar to Shakespeare's when trying to explain the 'permanent mediality of the subjective body [*ständige Mittelhaftigkeit des Eigenleibes*]' (*Beschreibung des Menschen* 659; my transl.). He reminds his readers of other media, like air, to which we have become so used that we forget of their existence as media. It is no

coincidence that air, as shown above, happens to be of crucial importance for Shakespeare's metatheatrical reflections; both the mediality of the body and of the theatrical medium are involved in the production of theatrical affects.

The embeddedness of theatre in the actual real world of touches – its touch being one of many touches – grants it the possibility of being 'effective', of transgressing its own realm and of playing a role in the world. This is what Shakespeare stages with the insistence on the notion of 'offence'. One can be fatally offended in life – as has been the old king – one can be offended with words – as Marcellus thinks the ghost to be – and there is a line of transfer from one to the other – that is what Hamlet and his punning on 'offence' exposes. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is dedicated to the communication, to the transfer, to the passing on of 'offences' – and thus comments on what theatre actually does. The old King's offence fights against its being forgotten. It is to be held in the world, it is to be proliferated, in order to be turned against its culprits.

'Offence' is, however, not to be understood as an abstract, as a moral concept merely indicating 'injustice'. '[T]he fundamental sense of "offence" is [. . .] tactile' (B. R. Smith *Phenomenal Shakespeare* 146). 'To offend' denotes literally a 'striking against' that in its Latin etymon *offendō* also transports the lethal consequences of striking, being a synonym of *interficiō*, 'to kill'. The etymological background of 'to offend' closely resembles the linguistic history of 'to touch': no matter whether it is the Vulgar Latin **toccāre*, from the onomatopoeic 'toc', suggesting the sound of two objects colliding, or a blending of the Latin *tundēre* and *tuditāre*, signifying 'to strike, to slaughter' that has to be counted as its etymological ancestor (cf. *Le Petit Robert*, 'toucher, *v.*'), 'touch', like 'offence', has its semantic roots in a rather violent movement which is both initiated and suffered. By grouping 'touch' and 'offence' together, their shared 'material', 'haptic' dimension is foregrounded. I would suggest that it is this 'material' level of

transmitting impulses that plays a decisive role for Shakespearean theatre. In *Hamlet*, the serial movement of transmitted stimuli, of transferred offences, becomes thematic: Hamlet's famous hesitating exposes the impossibility of translating the received impulse, the initial offence into a rational, an intellectual scheme. As the protagonist of a tragedy, he cannot merely hear of an injustice, revenge his father and thereby set the world back in joint. He rather acts as a switch, a relay, a distributor through which the offence is channelled and by which it is spread in the world. As a result, Hamlet does not merely revenge an initial offence and thereby redeem his world from a wrong it suffered. On the contrary, he becomes himself the perpetrator of a series of offences which cannot be morally justified: he kills Polonius, and he is deeply involved in Ophelia's and Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's death.

Let us return to the crucial early scene that sets in motion all the following. It is, as Freddie Rokem writes, '[t]he presence of the ghost [that] triggers the action of the play' (114). Hamlet is not so much informed by the ghost's words, he is contaminated by them. Hamlet himself introduces the notion of contagion in a later scene. His words intensely chime with the situation of the ghost's appearance:

HAMLET

[...]

'Tis now the very witching time of night

When churchyards yawn and hell itself breaks out

Contagion to this world. (*Ham.* 3.2.378–80)

The ghost's words touch Hamlet – from the Latin *con-tangere* – when they are poured in his ears as the venom has been poured into his father's. It is not so much a task he has been given, but a touch. Hamlet will pass on, will distribute this touch, will spread it in the world – and he begins this mission without delay. The 'wild and whirling words' he addresses at Horatio testify to Hamlet's contamination.

They literally continue the 'eager air' that 'bites shrewdly' to which Hamlet has been exposed while encountering the ghost. They 'offend' (*Ham.* 1.5.33), as the old king has been 'offended' (*Ham.* 1.1.49), intermitting/communicating the past and almost forgotten offence into the presence of a world which does not want to know of it. It is no coincidence that Hamlet's violent offending, that his 'wild and whirling words', take hold of the body via the very orifice that Claudius has chosen for his venom: the ears.¹² I agree with Thomas Rist that *Hamlet* 'embodies contemporary medico-religious theories', and that 'the metatheatrical response to the Ghost in Act 1 Scene 5 suggests a model for audiences' responses to theatrical affect' (151). The violence of words – and this implies that their effect is no less 'bodily' than that of Claudius's venom – is undoubtedly one of the major themes of Shakespearean theatre. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, Shakespeare elaborates in *The Tempest* on the analogy between theatrical speech and the forces of the weather in order to give an account of theatre's capacity to move and trouble the audience (cf. Ungelenk). Traces of this analogy can already be observed in *Hamlet*. In this earlier play, Hamlet's 'wild and whirling words' – which are in themselves always also associated with play-acting by the suspicion that his madness is not 'real' but 'feigned' – resonate with the advice he gives to one of the actors who have arrived at court:

Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus,
but use all gently; for, in the very torrent, tempest and, as
I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire
and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.
(*Ham.* 3.2.4–8)

'O it offends me to the soul' (*Ham.* 3.2.9), Hamlet says, when actors overdo their art and thereby make fools of themselves. Theatre misses its goal when it is bad play-acting and not what is acted that touches its spectators. He instructs the players to

temper their verbal and gestic ‘whirlwind’ because he wants to employ theatre’s genuine, its irresistible, touch on the viewers.

The fact that the famous theatrical spectacle which Hamlet stages for the court – a paradigmatic play-within-a-play scene – is so prominent in the realisation of Hamlet’s project indicates that theatre holds a special relation to touch. It is a privileged practice for spreading touch, for bringing into touch. In his explanation of the theatrical setting Hamlet himself comes to speak about theatre’s touch:

KING

What do you call the play?

HAMLET

The Mousetrap. Marry, how tropically! This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna. Gonzago is the duke’s name, his wife Baptista. You shall see anon ’tis a knavish piece of work, but what of that? Your majesty and we that have free souls – it touches us not. Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung. (*Ham.* 3.2.230–6)

As its title suggests, *The Mousetrap* is thought to work as a test – or an ‘experiment’, as Howard Marchitello notes (152): it is to sift the guilty from the innocent and thereby verify the ghost’s claims. The spectacular test is based on touch: as a coin is touched with a touchstone, the theatre performance touches its spectators – and Hamlet will closely observe their reaction in order to find out the one that is touched, the deceitful one with the false appearance. The trap springs: in the middle of the performance the ‘king rises’ (*Ham.* 3.2.258) and leaves the room. It is he who has been touched, he who is ‘the stricken deer’ (*Ham.* 3.2.264), as Hamlet says, continuing the haptic logic that characterises the whole scene. The play-within-a-play has from the beginning been concerned with him. It is not only ‘the image of a murder done in Vienna’ but also, rather, the exact image of Claudius’s deeds, of his murdering his

brother, of his marriage with the queen that the players bring on stage. For Claudius, the play must appear as a dreaded revenant, a revenant of the past which bursts into the seemingly shining present. He is 'the galled jade', because only he has fully experienced what the play depicts, he has already been touched by the depicted events 'in real life' – and probably carried away a wounded conscience. The play is therefore his personal spectral encounter – and it is him who is offended.

*Touchability and Theatre – 'Who was so firm, so constant,
that this coil / Would not infect his reason?'*

The success of Hamlet's 'mousetrap' negates the scene's being what it is: a theatrical spectacle. As a theatre performance, *The Mousetrap* does not merely concern one single, because guilty, spectator. This is not how the theatrical touch works. Although apparently irrelevant for Hamlet's mission, the scene's theatricality plays a major role for the play as a whole. The scene is embedded in elaborate and lengthy metatheatrical reflections, which Hamlet shares with the theatre audience. Hamlet's thoughts revolve around one central observation. Although the actors are only 'in a fiction, in a dream of passion' (*Ham.* 2.2.487), they are capable of doing what the impassioned Hamlet does not feel able to do: they communicate their passions, spread them, affect others with 'their own' affects. Hamlet is fascinated by the actors' ability to touch – by their capacity to pass on touches, to convey the troubled harmony of humours they have produced in their own body.¹³ Hamlet's plan to use the players' extraordinary ability for his mission is based on the indistinguishability, and therefore the functional replaceability, of authentic and feigned touches. The indifference for authenticity which Hamlet observes on the theatre's side of production sits rather uneasily with the apparent selectivity of its effect on the side of reception, with the individual

reactions amplified by readings like Karim-Cooper's ('Touch and Taste' 229). Why should being touched by a theatrical performance depend on the authenticity of being the one who has suffered the very same touch in real life before? Hamlet's thought experiment of imagining an actor act out on stage the emotions he himself feels qualifies the idea of direct concernment via authenticity:

HAMLET

[. . .] He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears. [. . .] (*Ham.* 2.2.497–501)

The effect which the actor's passions exercise on the audience does not depend on any preconditions: it is explicitly the 'general ear' which theatre's 'horrid speech' cleaves, which it touches violently. If there is any difference between 'the guilty' and 'the free', then it is a difference of degree: both are touched, the first rendered mad, the second 'only' appalled. However, the classification of effects which adds 'the ignorant' as a third category of watchers to the list does not aim at differences, but at the general effect which theatre produces: the last quality ascribed to the actor's craft sublates the specification of watchers. It concerns something we all share: 'the very faculty of eyes and ears' is 'amazed' – once again an allusion to Aristotle – and the power of theatre is thereby generalised. Theatre does not presuppose an indexical relation of play and watcher. The 'image of a murder' does not merely affect the murderer who is depicted.

The sentence, in which Hamlet comments on the effect, the 'touch', of the 'knavish piece of work' deserves close attention. Its complexity is easily overlooked: 'Your majesty and we that have free souls – it touches us not,' Hamlet tells King Claudius. The statement is highly ironic – the audience

shares with Hamlet the knowledge that Claudius has probably murdered his brother. He certainly has no 'free soul' and therefore – this is what the statement implies – is likely to be touched by the following spectacle. The moment when this touch finally happens seems to decode Hamlet's message: it was a first, provocative verbal touch at the sore spot of Claudius's guilt. However, what about the 'we' that Hamlet talks of, including himself and others: do they have 'free souls' – and are they touched by the spectacle?

We do know that Hamlet 'is touched'. The offence his father suffered has taken hold of him. We have discussed Horatio's observation of Hamlet's 'contagion' after making contact with the ghost. His humours have obviously already been troubled before the performance begins. He is therefore no good test person to assess theatre's power to move the spectators. Instead of diagnosing – or rather speculating about – the rest of the stage audience's humoral reaction to the performance of *The Mousetrap*,¹⁴ I would suggest turning the attention again to *The Tempest*.

Prospero, in the function of the stage director, asks his main actor, Ariel, the very question that we are about to examine. They meet after the spectacle of the shipwreck has ended and discuss the success of the performance:

PROSPERO

My brave spirit,
Who was so firm, so constant, that this coil
Would not infect his reason?

ARIEL

Not a soul
But felt a fever of the mad and played
Some tricks of desperation. [. . .] (*Tmp.* 1.2.206–10)

Theatre's touch is here negotiated not as a question of morals, of guilt and 'free souls', but – as we would today call it – as a question of physiology. It is medical knowledge of his

time – and not merely a metaphoric field – that Shakespeare employs to make his characters discuss the effect of theatre. Infection was conceptualised as the effect of having been exposed to ‘unwholesome’, corrupted material, as contaminating contact with air, water, ‘atmosphere’ that passes on its own corrupted quality. In some of his curses Caliban gives us an idea of how this infection was thought to work in the early modern age – shared knowledge that would not have to be explained for Shakespeare’s audience:¹⁵

CALIBAN

[. . .] A southwest blow on ye
And blister you all o’er. (*Tmp.* 1.2.324–5)

CALIBAN

All the infections that the sun sucks up
From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him
By inchmeal a disease! (*Tmp.* 2.2.1–3)

The fact that ‘not a soul’ could resist the powerful impact of the spectacle which Prospero had staged is the result of simple natural laws. If the theatre company proves able to temper ‘the very torrent, tempest and, as I may say, whirlwind of [their] passion’ to produce an unwholesome atmosphere, the audience exposed to this troublesome theatrical weather will be contaminated, will be infected and catch the ‘fever of the mad’. Theatre’s touch is a ‘material’ one, one against which reason or knowledge is powerless.

Although the reach of Prospero’s spectacle appears to be ‘universal’, this scene is only of limited validity for answering the question whether Hamlet’s ‘we’, the party with presumably ‘free souls’, have been touched by the theatrical performance they attended. The ‘souls’ that Ariel speaks of, the souls who all ‘felt the fever of the mad’ are Prospero’s intended audience. Prospero staged the spectacle for them, exactly as Hamlet

organised the play for Claudius. Although Prospero's victims are not all tainted with obvious guilt – Ferdinand the king's son and future husband of Prospero's daughter and especially Gonzalo, the 'honest old councillor', are drawn as rather innocent, sympathetic characters – they become the objects of Prospero's rather violent dealings. They are more than merely the audience of a spectacle: they are closely involved in Prospero's project to re-establish the dynastic order; they are the subjects of the plot that he has designed. Prospero's spectacles thus also work as mousetraps: they sift the innocent (Gonzalo, Ferdinand) from the guilty and malevolent (Antonio, Sebastian, Caliban, Stephano). 'Theatre' is employed as a tactical means of reaching goals which are closely connected to the individual identities of its 'viewers' or, rather, 'victims'. From this perspective, as a tactical means, spectacle loses the specificity which characterises it as theatre. Prospero's manipulations could as well be read as the effect of his power as a magician. Theatricality comes to the fore when the double audience of the play-within-a-play is concerned: when the touch of the spectacle transgresses the intended audience and begins to affect both audiences, the one on stage and the one in the auditorium. Here, in this strange resonance between the internal and the external communication system, reflection ends and performance begins.

Shakespeare's *Tempest* gives an account of this theatrical process of transgression. A spectator discloses her theatrical experience, gives vent to her being moved by what she has just seen. A spectator, who merely happened to be present, whose attendance was not part of Prospero's tactical plans: Miranda. She represents on stage the anonymous spectator in the audience, who has watched the tempest scene from a certain distance, without having been involved in Prospero's strategic calculations. And yet, she complains to her father that she has 'suffered / With those that I saw suffer' (*Tmp.* 1.2.5–6). The 'tempest's' violent weather – which consists of both a

heavy storm and the desperate ‘howling’ (*Tmp.* 1.1.35) of the shipwrecked human beings who are said to ‘assist the storm’ (*Tmp.* 1.1.14) – has literally hit Miranda. She is touched, although she is exposed to the tempest (*The Tempest?*) only as the audience in a theatre is to a play: ‘O, the cry did knock / Against my very heart!’ (*Tmp.* 1.2.8–9), she exclaims. Prospero’s reassurances that the shipwreck was just a spectacle and that no one took any harm from it cannot revoke the bodily disturbance that Miranda has suffered:

PROSPERO

The direful spectacle of the wreck which touched
 The very virtue of compassion in thee,
 I have with such provision in mine art
 So safely ordered, that there is no soul –
 No, not so much perdition as an hair,
 Betid to any creature in the vessel
 Which thou heard’st cry, which thou sawst
 sink. [. . .] (*Tmp.* 1.2.26–32)

The play clearly embeds Prospero’s statement in the context of theatre. The effect of the two perceptions that dominate the reception of a theatre performance, seeing and hearing, are discussed. The dialogue from which this speech is taken is imbued with important keywords of Aristotelian drama theory: ‘Be collected; / No more amazement. Tell your piteous heart / There’s no harm done’ (*Tmp.* 1.2.13–15), Prospero tells Miranda some lines before the passage quoted above. As in *Hamlet*, the Aristotelian concepts of τὸ θαυμαστόν, τὸ *thau-mastòn*, ‘amazement/wonder’, of ἔλεος, *éleos*, ‘pity’, and perhaps even of ἁμαρτία, *hamartía*, ‘the tragic flaw’, are alluded to. However, Prospero’s soothing words slightly shift the semantic field that informs their speaking about the spectacle. Whereas ‘pity’ (‘piteous heart’), the standard translation of Aristotle’s *éleos*, is recognisable as a theatrical *terminus technicus*, ‘compassion’ rather invokes a different semantic

context. Its Christian undertones are emphasised by being grouped together with the alliterating 'very virtue' that also transports a religious tinge. Replacing 'pity' with 'compassion' therefore attempts to transfer/convert Miranda's reaction from 'the affective' into 'the virtuous', from the realm of a bodily movement to the realm of intellectual or moral mastery. Prospero's verbal intervention tries to fend off or at least to make forget the bodily impulse, the *offence* that his daughter has suffered as a result of his conjuring up the tempest scene. It is significant that Prospero calls up his 'provision' to counter the 'knock[ing]' and 'beating' (*Tmp.* 1.2.176), the violent touches which Miranda experiences as effects of the spectacle she has observed. It testifies to the clash of two conflicting domains: the domain of rational and intellectual control and the domain of touch, of being exposed to forces whose contaminating contact cannot be avoided.

The domain of touch, which eludes intellectual or rational control, prevails. This is exposed in another play-within-a-play scene, the court masque which Prospero stages for the betrothal of his daughter to Ferdinand:

FERDINAND [*to Miranda*]

This is strange. Your father's in some passion
That works him strongly.

MIRANDA

Never till this day

Saw I him touched with anger so distempered!

(*Tmp.* 4.1.143–5)

This time the emotional disturbance is no calculated effect achieved by theatrical means – it hits the stage manager, Prospero himself. Until now he had directed the emotionally 'offending', the troubling spectacles from a safe distance. In one scene he even literally watched the events from 'on the top' (*Tmp.* 3.3.17 SD), towering over the spectacle like '[s]ome god o'th' island' (*Tmp.* 1.2.390). Now it is he who

is 'touched'. The source of Prospero's distemper is not quite clear – probably Caliban's rebellion, although this appears to be well under Ariel's control; its function, however, is obvious: it disrupts the masque and brings it to a sudden end. It is significant that 'distemper' ends a stage spectacle which displays the very harmony of humours. The court masque can in many ways be understood as the tempest scene's opposite: whereas the latter performed a disturbing spectacle of violent and contagious humoral trouble, the masque presents an image of harmony; an abstract image, a piece of paradise which is to be gazed at and admired. This image is not moving, not troubling, not touching at all. It is, in Shakespeare's staging, a failure. Its sudden end can be understood as a biting commentary on the pompous stage practices of his rivals Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones – and it indicates that it is contagious distemper, not the ostentation of polished harmony, that Shakespeare's theatre is all about.¹⁶

Prospero does not (emotionally) remain '*at a distance*' (*Tmp.* 3.1.14 SD), does not direct and manipulate his surroundings as the unmoved mover of the others' humours. He is himself involved in the disturbance of the world. There is, to put it in Hans Blumenberg's words, no 'safe shore' from where to watch 'death and shipwreck' without being touched (*Shipwreck with Spectator* 32). 'Touchability [*Betreffbarkeit*]' – 'in the double sense of organic and optical exposedness' (Blumenberg *Beschreibung des Menschen* 777; my transl.) – is the name which Blumenberg gives to this fundamental condition of (human) being. 'Touchability' precedes all intellectual mediation and embeds the human in a world that he or she shares with others. Only the dead and the gods 'watch from the safe shore', from a sphere of 'untouchability [*Unbetreffbarkeit*]' (Blumenberg *Shipwreck with Spectator* 32). Whereas Miranda's emotional reaction to the tempest scene almost looks like a staging of Blumenberg's shipwreck-with-spectator-setting, Prospero's surprising distemper appears to illustrate another

Blumenbergian theorem – the human's back, which stands for the limits of human (pro)vision: 'The back is the unknown in and of ourselves; thereby at the same time the epitome of our touchability [*Betreffbarkeit*] for the unexpected' (*Shipwreck with Spectator* 204; my transl.). Touchability in its Blumenbergian understanding may also be used to give an account of the logic of touch on which the *Mousetrap* is based and which convicts Claudius of murder: 'It is the body that demarcates the spatiotemporal line that takes the deed as its starting point. The person responsible can be touched [*betroffen*] along this line and be held accountable' (Blumenberg *Beschreibung des Menschen* 783; my transl.). Shakespeare's theatre is undoubtedly intensely concerned with touchability. It examines, it probes, it 'touches on' touchability, as its own condition of possibility and reason for its emotional effectivity. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Shakespeare's and Blumenberg's understanding of touchability. Although Hans Blumenberg, the founding father of metaphorology (cf. Blumenberg *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*), can surely not be accused of being insensitive to the importance and the uncontrollable forces of semantic fields, Blumenberg's concept of touchability remains rigidly subjugated to a particular, metaphorical use. One of his rare definitions of touchability gives an explicit account of its conceptual dependence: he talks of 'touchability [*Betreffbarkeit*], which is founded on visibility and its consequences [*Folgen*] and which becomes conscious as such [*und als diese bewußt wird*]' (*Beschreibung des Menschen* 203; my transl.). Shakespeare's touch is not founded on visibility, and surely does not become conscious in the realm of the visible. On the contrary, his theatre can be understood as an extensive argument for the reverse relation.

In Blumenberg's oeuvre, touch supplements vision. Phenomenology's foundation on the visual perception of the subject inevitably causes a problem: How can I be sure that what I see with my own eyes can be seen by others in the

same way? It is the ‘possibility of objectivising my experience’ (Blumenberg *Beschreibung des Menschen* 786; my transl.), as Blumenberg calls it, that is at stake. The introduction of touchability is necessary in order to find answers to the question of intersubjectivity and open phenomenological philosophy towards the social dimension of life.

Hamlet may be read as an indication that, in Shakespeare’s theatre, touch is not merely an effect of vision and hearing. In a certain sense, it also precedes the two dominant medial channels. On the level of plot, it is the old king’s offence and its transmission/proliferation that initiates and wheels the play, that ‘gives to see’.¹⁷ With regard to the external communication system, establishing the theatrical situation asks for a willingness of the audience to be touched. As the first words of the play indicate, the spectators have not only to expose themselves to the theatrical events (‘stand still’), they also have to contribute their share – to ‘assist the storm’, according to *The Tempest* – even in order to hear and see. The empty platform stage, which has to be transformed into a lively scenery by the viewers’ imagination, testifies to the cooperation demanded from the audience in the early modern theatre. The paradigm of visual or aural perception is not particularly suited to reflect on this cooperation taking place between stage and audience. ‘Perception’ establishes an asymmetry of active (actors) and passive (viewers) which forecloses the productive interaction in which the spectators get involved. Touch, in contrast, with mutuality at its conceptual core, allows us to trace the performative effects of seeing and hearing which define theatre – the vulnerability of the audience as well as the dependence of the theatre makers on their viewers’ contribution to the performance.

Although Farah Karim-Cooper associates ‘the inability to be touched’ in Shakespeare with ‘the inhumanity of being resistant to sensation’ (‘Touch and Taste’ 236), touchability

is not an 'anthropological' concept. It is not, as for Blumenberg, a quality which defines the human being's role in the order of the world. For Blumenberg, humanity took its start with the upright gait: a posture that decisively extends the field of view and at the same time exposes the human being to become the ('touchable') object of the perception of others (cf. *Beschreibung des Menschen* 777). In Shakespeare's world, touch is explicitly not a human affair, as *The Tempest* exposes, when Prospero notices that Ariel appears to be touched by the suffering of Prospero's enemies:

PROSPERO

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself
(One of their kind that relish all as sharply,
Passion as they) be kindlier moved than thou art?
(*Tmp.* 5.1.21-4)

'By definition, an apparition or ghost cannot be touched,' writes Evelyn Tribble ("O, she's warm" 76). Nonetheless, Ariel is indeed sensitive to touch. He is but air and therefore invisible – and nevertheless not exempt from touchability. Although not human, 'one of the most damning judgements' (Karim-Cooper 'Touch and Taste' 246) does not concern him. This judgement is, of course, 'to be called "senseless"'. Blumenberg defines invisibility as the criterion that distinguishes the gods from the human being, the criterion that makes the gods untouchable. For Shakespeare, touch is neither mediated nor the abstract condition for mediation – it is itself the tangible medium, the medium which can be experienced with the own body.¹⁸ As worked out above, it is the characteristic of touch that it combines action and suffering – Ariel, who is the main agent of distributing theatrical touches, must therefore himself be sensitive to suffering touch. Transmitting touch always involves both, acting and suffering, at the same time.

Touch is not the effect of a particularly human faculty – it is not intellectually mediated in any way. It is material touch.

Prospero's words give an account of the series of touches which is passed on from one agent to the other: Ariel has a 'touch' of the court party's 'afflictions', of their having been 'dashed', 'struck', 'knocked down' (lat. *affligere*) – the 'touch' Prospero has dealt via Ariel is transmitted to the court party, from them to Ariel and finally finds its way back to Prospero. The insistence of the very materiality of touch is no coincidence: it is not a dominant field of metaphor, but describes the way Shakespeare and his contemporaries conceptualised their embeddedness in the world.

Prospero provides us with the keyword that enables us to reconstruct the working of the early modern world of touch: 'passion'. 'Passions' in the early modern understanding can be literally 'moved' (cf. Raman 120): the balance of the four humours that were thought to flow through the microcosm of the human body was a fragile one. It stood in close communication with the elemental composition of the macrocosm that surrounded it, so that being exposed to 'external distemperances' like bad weather, unhealthy atmosphere, unfamiliar diet – or theatre! – could affect the temperance of humours, could cause 'distemper'.¹⁹ 'Passion' is conceptually very similar to 'touch'. It implies a suffering – lat. *patior*, gr. *πάσχω* – that is not to be separated from a forceful, often violent action. 'The word *passion* [. . .] suggested that emotions seize upon and possess those who suffer them [. . .]' (Roach 28). When someone is 'in some passion', as Miranda's father is, 'distempered', 'touched with anger', he or she is not caught in passivity; on the contrary, we expect him or her to act, to pass on the offence, the touch he or she has suffered. 'Thus we move, because by the passion thus we are moved,' writes Thomas Wright in *The Passions of the Minde* (176), which appeared in 1604. The series of touches triggered in this way do not have to constitute a spiral of infinite violence. When Miranda hopes

that 'Pity move my father' (*Tmp.* 1.2.447), she wants the touch to travel in loops and thereby establish a new balance. Her father has suffered an initial offence, the usurpation of the dukedom by his brother and he has given back the offence by exposing his brother to the spectacles. Being moved by others' sufferings, sharing their being touched, offers the chance of re-establishing a new humoral harmony. This is what the 'very virtue of compassion' is all about:

What I am talking about here is compassion, but not compassion as a pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Com-compassion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of brutal contiguity [*contiguïté brutale*]. (Nancy *Being singular plural* xiii; transl. altered)

Nancy's words read like a wonderfully apt description of the early modern theatre space – despite of their having nothing to do with Shakespeare or early modern theatre at all. As part of an ontology of 'being-with' (cf. Heidegger *Sein und Zeit* §26) they challenge prevailing conceptions which base the world and its consistency on the self-sufficient subject and his subjugating vision. The resonance between Nancy and Shakespeare's theatre is, however, not a mere coincidence. The early modern theatre space can be understood as a prime example of Nancy's ontological reflections – because it is a special space of touch. As in Nancy's theories, touch in the Shakespearean theatre decentres and de-hierarchises relations of all kinds: in The Globe, spectators of different social background experience 'the disturbance of brutal contiguity'. This is not only an inevitable effect of a thousand people crowding in the narrow wooden structures of the public theatre, where contact (and probably also contagion) could hardly be avoided. Groundlings and aristocrats

in the galleries share what Nancy calls ‘com-passion’: they co-experience the ‘contact of being with one another in this turmoil’.²⁰ ‘Turmoil’ and ‘disturbance’ are theatre’s productions: they are generated on stage and then spread in the auditorium. They are the reason why the spectators pilgrimage to this new cultural site. The joy of playgoing consists in exposing oneself to this theatrical turmoil. Theatre provides a reassuring and reliable frame for experiences which mean danger for life and limb in ‘real life’. It gives its spectators the opportunity to cede control and be tossed about by theatre’s stormy air. Theatre’s state of emergency lasts only for two or three hours – this is, however, not the only reason why the touch of theatre can be enjoyed rather than has to be dreaded. The fact that one is not alone in and with this trouble is certainly equally important. Theatre is a space of com-passion in a profound and precise sense: ‘being with one another’ is not just the effect of experiencing the play as part of a crowd of watchers.²¹

The theatrical community is constituted as a community by the very particular way that theatre affects its viewers – by the ‘procedure’ that I see at work in the formula ‘Touching this dreaded sight’. Theatre does not establish a relation between two predefined, particular bodies. Theatrical community does not take place between entities (subject–object) that are linked for an intelligible reason. The spectators are moved by a spectacle that does not concern them personally, a spectacle whose fictionality erects an unbridgeable distance between itself and its viewers. Theatre’s touch is characterised by its loss of direction: it *touches* the innocent bystanders for no reason at all and regard-less of their person or social standing. This is the ironic metatheatrical truth of Hamlet’s famous words ‘Your majesty and we that have free souls – it touches us not’: theatre touches us because we do not have free souls. The theatrical community is not a community of humaneness, of a supposedly shared virtue of ‘human’ pity. It is a community of ‘brutal contiguity’, of a shared

neighbourhood, the neighbourhood of earthly, imperfect, radically dynamic and co-dependent life. As in Blumenberg, touchability is located in this mortal world.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be read as an extensive reflection on the question of the 'free soul' – and of the radical incompatibility of this religious concept with earthly existence. As Stephen Greenblatt has so brilliantly worked out in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, the ghost embodies this complicated reflection. His spectral appearances, his (theatrical) entrances, his oscillating wanderings between purgatory and the earth have their origin, their condition of possibility in old Hamlet's lack of a free soul at the moment of his death. Hamlet's constant hesitation – and that is to say the play's main 'content' – is more than once fuelled by his relating his actions to the question of (moral) guilt and the free soul.

What Hamlet's behaviour gives to see – *zu sehen gibt / laisse voir* – is an unresolvable moral problem that governs the play's fictional world. The offence that his father has suffered cannot be redeemed. It is not an arbitrary impediment, located in the fictional world, that renders redemption impossible, but structural, even ontological reasons. Redemption is a privilege that is exercised the day after this, after our earthly world – as the ghost tells Hamlet with regard to his mother: 'leave her to heaven' (*Ham.* 1.5.86). The events proceeding from the offence suffered by the king are not framed by a higher 'moral' order. The offending, contaminating touch spreads itself, is transmitted and dispersed without any rationale fully controlling or coordinating its manifold paths.

The lethal duel between Hamlet and Laertes that initiates the play's catastrophe is explicitly characterised as an affair of 'touch' and 'contagion':

LAERTES

[. . .] I'll touch my point

With this contagion, that if I gall him slightly

It may be death. (*Ham.* 4.7.144–6)

The failure of Claudius and Laertes's plan, the fact that their stratagem heavily backfires – in the end, they all fall victim to the venom – exposes that the contagion of touch resists control and mastery. It cannot be instrumentalised for one's own ends. Laertes's offending 'touch' spreads; it contaminates without regard to plans or intentions. The radical indeterminateness of the *con-* of 'contamination' contradicts any manageable manipulative employment of touch. Although there may be exact plans whom the touch is to concern, whom it is 'to regard', touch remains indifferent to predefined directions. Its sole criterium is contiguity; it touches whatsoever its contamination can reach.²²

With Claudius's dying of 'poison tempered by himself' (*Ham.* 5.2.312), the story appears to come full cycle. However, the production of poetical justice – at least Claudius has been 'punished' in the end – is superficial and weak. The play does not end in moral harmony; it ends in cruel devastation. Its touches have, as the finale exposes, eliminated themselves. Here something interesting and complex happens: the duel scene illustrates on stage how the formation of a (theatrical) community, that is, a community of contaminating compassion, works – and, at the same time, it brings this community to an end. The self-annihilation of touches performs the dissolution of the theatrical situation – the very moment when, as Prospero puts it,

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air (*Tmp.* 4.1.148–50).

The theatrical situation collapses when the distance inscribed in the notion of touch is no longer upheld; when the offence destroys the touching contact, when it pierces – 'gall[s]', 'scratches' – the contact-surface. A tension had characterised the touching contact, a tension which held two (or more)

'bodies' together and at distance at the same time, articulating them against each other. The constitutive structures, writes Stephen Greenblatt, 'are themselves necessarily built up out of [...] friction' ('Fiction and Friction' 86). When the tension of touch is broken, the bodies which had been touching lose distinction and thereby cease to exist. This is what happens when Claudius, Hamlet, Laertes and Gertrude mutually kill each other: the tension between them had articulated Shakespeare's play; their death ends it.

Despite its illustrating the non- and therefore omnidirected contagion of touch, the final scene does not expose and metatheatrically reflect on stage the theatrical touch as so many scenes did before. Although it shows a sort of spectacle – the duel, which a stage audience watches – it may be among the least metatheatrical scenes of the whole play. It may be a surprising suggestion, but the fatal 'touches' which bring the play to an end are not metatheatrical at all. In fact, they work as a contrasting parallel scene to the initial ghost scenes. The one triggers theatre; the other makes it dissolve. The paradoxical 'Touching this dreaded sight' is replaced by the banality of lethal violence. Whereas the impossible sensual transfer of the first establishes a relation of fragile, but continuous, contact of contiguity, the latter's brutal corporeality destroys contact in a gesture of impatient annihilation. It is a banal 'touch', a 'touch' which does not bear in it the paradoxical tension, the distance and nearness, the acting and suffering, which characterises touch as touch and which makes touch so interesting for Shakespeare's theatre.

Hamlet's peculiar bearing in the last scene is a case in point for this contrast. Since his contaminating encounter with the ghost, Hamlet had been a precursor of Shakespeare's later *Tempest*. As worked out above, his 'wild and whirling words' offend. Despite their being hardly intelligible, they do not fail to exercise a strong effect on his interlocutors. No one really seems to be 'so firm, so constant', one could say, that Hamlet's

‘coil / Would not infect his reason’. He touches others, in a theatrical way: ‘Your behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration’ (*Ham.* 3.2.317–18), Rosencrantz tells Hamlet about his mother’s reaction to his odd demeanour – the choice of words again alludes to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. According to his own testimony, Hamlet is ‘essentially [. . .] not in madness / But mad in craft’ (*Ham.* 3.4.185–6). There can be little doubt that this craft is of a theatrical nature, that Hamlet is literally ‘acting’ the ghost’s ‘dread command’ (*Ham.* 3.4.105). I would suggest taking him by the word: he has not simply been infected with madness by the contaminating contact with the ghost, nor is he coolly putting into operation a plan that involves playing the lunatic. He has been contaminated with the theatrical touch – he is deeply moved, his passions are swelling and he distributes his being touched to the world. His madness is thus neither authentic nor fake. It is not even ‘his’ madness. It is theatrical: crafted, but beyond control. Hamlet becomes ‘ghost’ (and that is to say ‘actor’) – ‘suggesting that ghostliness [or theatricality] is somehow physically catching’, as Outterson-Murphy writes (258). He is not ‘essential[]’, but effectual, effectual as a result of his spectral, of his dubious ‘ontological’ (mad or not) status. This theatricality, this turmoil of passions is to be spread – this is the ghost’s ‘command’. Hamlet acts out this command. He has not chosen this task; the task has chosen, or rather contaminated, him.

In the final scene, however, Hamlet appears completely changed. At Ophelia’s grave, in the scene before, Hamlet had exposed his having become ghost: ‘This is I, / Hamlet the Dane’ (*Ham.* 5.1.246–7), he had proclaimed, re-enacting the appearance of his father’s ghost (cf. Gurr ‘The Shakespearean Stage’ 88), playing with the name he and his father share. He himself had called attention to the ‘something dangerous’ in him (*Ham.* 5.1.251), which the wisdom of the sane bystanders fear with good reason. Now, in the last scene, this ‘something dangerous’, Hamlet’s incalculable, offending force, has

suddenly disappeared. He is still effectively using his tongue, but in a different way than before. He outwits Osric, exposing the hot air of the latter's ornamented words. It is the intellectually superior position that Hamlet suddenly occupies – a position that no one, neither Horatio nor the audience, fears in any way, because it is not dangerous at all. Hamlet scores by getting the laughs, and it is the side of sovereign, well-controlled common sense that he personifies in this dialogue. What has become of his 'wild and whirling words'? Hardly any trace of them is left in the last scene. Hamlet has lost his characteristic theatricality, his being a forceful spectacle for the characters that share the stage with him. He has become an unambiguous, well-oiled cog in the play's plot. His surprisingly unhesitant embracing of the idea of the duel once and for all sets the play's course towards catastrophe.

At the same time, the last scene can be called the play's least didactic sequence. Here the audience is called upon to do what they have come for as a theatre audience: they stand 'unfolded', exposed to plain spectacle. There is no metatheatrical level, neither stage-audience nor a character embodying theatrical playacting, that shifts at least part of their attention away from the intensity of the play itself. The scene is not about theatre; it is theatre. It therefore structurally resembles the shipwreck scene of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Whereas in the latter Shakespeare starts with providing the audience with a piece of intensive, unbroken theatrical experience in order to reflect on this experience in the following rest of the play, he does it the other way round in *Hamlet*: here he begins with extensive metatheatrical reflections and ends with intensive, unbroken spectacle.

As a consequence, the last scene is, in a sense, the most theatrical of the play. 'Touching this dreaded sight' – this is what happens in, or rather in contact with, this scene. However, it is not on the stage – as a character's encounter with some sort of 'ghostly' spectacle – but between the

stage and the spectators that this '[t]ouching' takes place. The scene performs theatre's touch: it connects stage and audience; it binds together the theatrical space via the passions. It constitutes a contact which establishes the theatrical community by contamination, brings about a community of compassion.

'Give me that man / That is not passion's slave' (*Ham.* 3.2.67–8), Hamlet had told Horatio. We begin to understand that this apparently pessimistic sentence in fact exposes the very foundation of theatre. As admirers of theatre we are to affirm Hamlet's pessimism. It is our 'touchability' that makes us 'eligible' for compassion. It is neither a virtue nor a capacity we are endowed with as human beings, but an uncontrollability, an open door rather, which brings us into contact with one another and the world, which makes us enjoy both the 'disturbance of brutal contiguity' and the feeling of 'being with one another in this turmoil'.

Notes

1. Shankar Raman traces the critics' interest in the opening question back to Maynard Mack. He was 'perhaps the earliest to recognize that the question with which *Hamlet* begins – "Who's there?" (1.1.1) – is emblematic for its world [. . .]' (116).
2. In her cultural history of touch, Constance Classen makes us aware that moving in the dark was in itself a tactile affair: 'being able to find one's way by touch in the dark remained a useful skill well into the modern era' (11).
3. On the last pages of her 'Acting with Tact', Carla Mazzio gives a reading of the phrase 'Touching this vision' to which my chapter is indebted.
4. As we learn from Catherine Richardson, it would not only have been his 'elevated and authoritative verse' that 'marked him out from the others on stage', but also 'the costume of a scholar – probably the sober black of learning' (73).

5. Horatio's scholarly attitude and his following 'conversion' after encountering the ghost resonate with James Knapp's comparison of the attitudes of Hippolyta and Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Hippolyta offers an alternative to Theseus's reason; she urges an engagement with the phenomenal world that is embodied and invested rather than abstract and detached (a product of "cool reason"). Rather than seeking truth by bringing the world of apprehension under the control of reasoned understanding – making sense of what one has seen, or making what one has seen make sense – Hippolyta's reaction to the unfamiliar (the strange) is to remain open to the transformative power of experience' (383). The gendering of these attitudes – exposing oneself, affirming the transformational potential of vulnerability associated with the female – chimes with my readings in the subsequent chapters.
6. For the ontological implications of 'ghostliness' or 'spectrality', see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Many scholars, most prominently Stephen Greenblatt, have argued the connection of ghostliness and theatricality, on which my argument is based (cf. Greenblatt *Hamlet in Purgatory*; Outterson-Murphy; Carlson 4; Taylor 144; Anderson 5).
7. With good reason, James Knapp resorts to the notion of 'a constant source of wonder' when analysing the 'positive quality of images' – that is, the metatheatricality – in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, emphasising 'our experience with them, our openness to their call', despite their being 'not comprehensible, able to be reduced to a concept' (383).
8. A similar physiological reference to theatre's effects can be found in Theseus's comments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'More strange than true. I never may believe / These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. / Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends' (*MND* 5.1.1–6).
9. In reference to *King Lear*, Bruce R. Smith writes that 'The workings of speech are, then, no less tactile than the moving of arms and hands' (*Phenomenal Shakespeare* 165).

10. For Shakespeare's use of the medical notion of 'catching', see Michael E. Mooney's article on *Julius Caesar*.
11. The paradoxical crossing of senses that Jennifer Waldron associates with the 'effects of live theatre' (405) is a recurring topos in Shakespearean drama. Bruce R. Smith points us to different characters (Sly, Claudius, Leontes) having a 'desire to touch an illusion and to be touched by it' (*Phenomenal Shakespeare* 147); Farah Karim-Cooper reads the phrase 'This palpable-gross play' (*MND* 5.1.357) of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* literally, emphasising its tactility ('Touch and Taste' 226); Jennifer Waldron analyses the sensual crossing implied in St Paul's famous 'The eye of man hath not heard' (*MND* 4.1.209) passage of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (412–14); Kevin Curran has dedicated a reading to a passage in *Macbeth* that negotiates the crossing between the visual and the tactile (395): 'Come, let me clutch thee. / I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. / Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible / To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but / A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? / I see thee yet, in form as palpable / As this which now I draw' (*Mac.* 2.1.34–41). A similar crossing has been found by James Kearney in *King Lear* (459): 'Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I'd say I had eyes again' (*Lr.* 4.1.25–6).
12. According to Shankar Raman, a passage from perception to vulnerability is associated with the ear, which has a 'defensive function' that 'equally evokes its status as a passage way laying the self open to the world (for good or ill), opening the possibility of changing, becoming other' (134).
13. For a reconstruction of the physiological way in which the early moderns thought about acting, which involved a bodily adaptation of the own humoral balance, see Roach.
14. An analysis of the effects of Hamlet's encounter with the ghost does not have to speculate. As Thomas Rist observes, the Ghost himself 'describes the potential impact of his words in physiological terms' (149).
15. In 'Shakespeare's Virginian Masque', John Gillies has connected the depiction of intemperance in *The Tempest* to

- colonial discourse concerning the unwholesome climatic conditions in the British settlements in Jamestown.
16. For the relation of Shakespeare's masque-within-a-play and the cultural background of Stuart court masque, cf. Bevington; I. Smith; Gilman; Flagstad; Gillies; McNamara; Knowles.
 17. 'In *Hamlet*, to take a case in point, Hamlet goes from being "touched" (or playing it) to being "touched" (and dead),' writes Carla Mazzio ('Acting with Tact' 183). He also distributes touches – one of which comes back to him in the end.
 18. For a discussion of touchability which also refers to the medium of air, see B. R. Smith *Phenomenal Shakespeare*, 142.
 19. Gail Kern Paster has introduced the material notion of 'the passions' into early modern studies, which has proved to be very fruitful for analysing the way Shakespeare and his contemporaries thought of the body and its interaction with its environment (cf. Paster *Body Embarrassed*; Paster *Humoring*; Paster *Reading*).
 20. Michael Witmore makes a similar argument about the Greek *terminus technicus*, which is built analogously to *compassion*: 'the Aristotelian verb *sunaiathanesthai* (the activity of together sensing) names precisely the kind of distribution of sense and sensation that is the theater's stock-in-trade' (423).
 21. Sarah Outterson-Murphy emphasises the 'collective response' (264) which the Ghost's command to 'remember me' (*Ham.* 1.5.111) demands from the audience, also pointing to the religious tradition it evokes.
 22. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's thinking of 'contagion' can help understand the specificity of this concept, an important trait of which is the bringing into contact of radically heterogeneous bodies: 'We oppose epidemic to filiation, contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction, sexual production. Bands, human or animal, proliferate by contagion, epidemics, battlefields, and catastrophes. [. . .] The difference is that contagion, epidemic, involves terms that are entirely heterogeneous: for example, a human being, an animal, and a bacterium, a virus, a molecule, a microorganism' (Deleuze and Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* 241–2).