

**“Frighted with False Fire”:
The *Hamlet* Mousetrap as a
Platonic Ascent**

Kaley Hutter

College of Arts and Sciences

Research Week 2024

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Plato on Mimesis, Images, and Dialectic Ascension

- What is mimesis?
- Drama as a copy of the image of reality: “two generations away from the throne of truth” (*Republic* 597E)
- The Platonic Ascent = the return to the transcendent wisdom of the True Being (Plato’s tactic: dialectic dialogues)
- Plato challenges poets to prove him wrong (*Republic* 607c); scholars have argued that Shakespeare fulfills this “prophecy” (Auerbach 330).
 - Kaytor: Shakespeare can be accounted for a “Platonic motivation” (102).

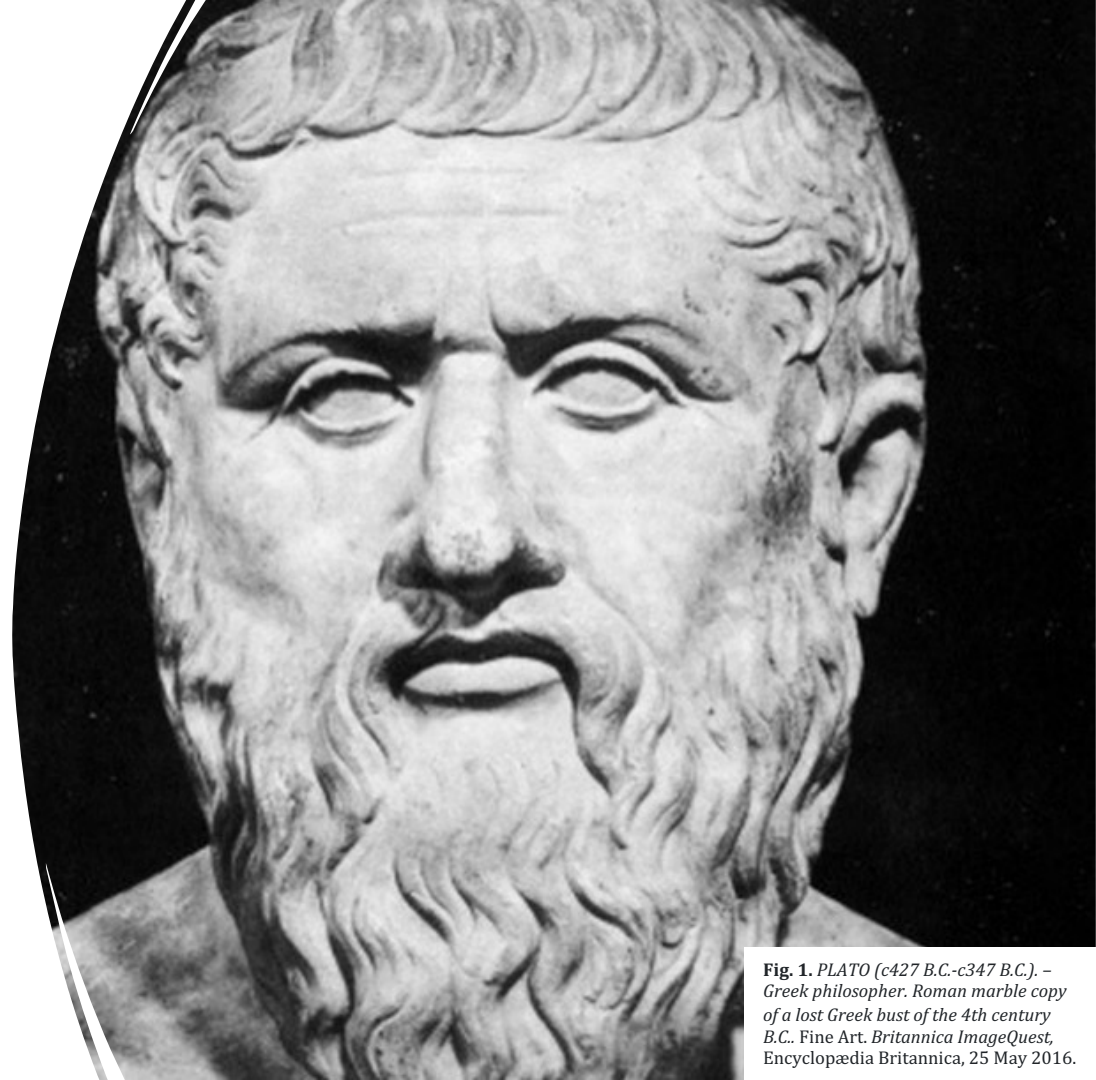


Fig. 1. PLATO (c427 B.C.-c347 B.C.). – Greek philosopher. Roman marble copy of a lost Greek bust of the 4th century B.C. Fine Art. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.



Transcending Reality

Plato praises those who see “beyond the things we now say ‘exist’ and [poke] their heads up into true reality” (*Phaedrus* 249c) – those who can “recall those things that are real” (250a).

Auerbach: Shakespeare “embraces reality, but he transcends it”; his imitations aim beyond just an “earthly coherence” of the physical world (327).

Plato’s dialogues resemble the dramatic genre (Partee, Sheppard).

Fig. 2. “Plato.” Photograph. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.

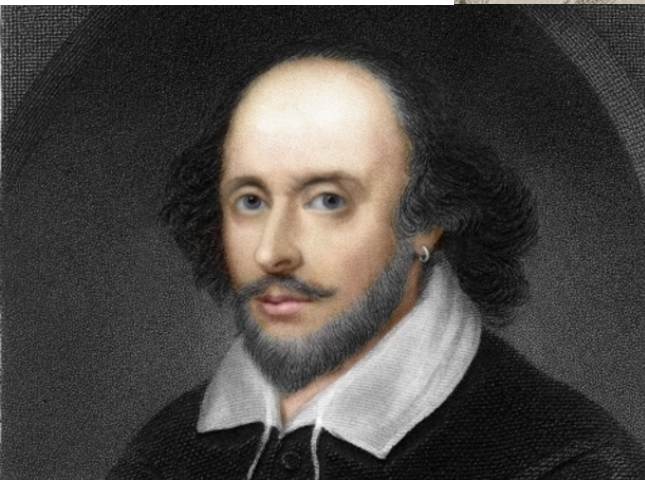


Fig. 3. *William Shakespeare*. Illustration. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 6 Dec. 2017.

Points of Inquiry

What is the relationship between dramatic representation and the Platonic True Being in *Hamlet*?

What does that relationship imply about the function or value of mimetic drama within the Platonic framework?



Fig. 4. *The Play Scene, Act III, Scene II of Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, engraved by Charles Rolls. Engraving. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.



The Mousetrap

Hamlet: “I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions” (II.II.580-4).

He uses the “the image of a murder” (III.II.221) to expose the truth behind his father’s death: “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (II.II.596-7).



Memory & Recognition

The purpose of drama, according to Prince Hamlet, is “to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (III.II.20-23).

Mazzaro: “Being highly mimetic, drama becomes a way of reliving experiences in memory instead of analyzing and understanding them. It preserves rather than alters. Through identifications with the performance, audiences retrieve impressions from their individual storehouses” (107).

What does the recognition in *Phaedrus* have to do with the recognition Claudius experiences in Act III of *Hamlet*?

Fig. 6. “A Mirror Up to Nature.” Photograph.
Royal Shakespeare Company, 2009.

The Role of Memory: Two Realms

PHYSICAL MEMORY

- Learned knowledge of material reality (what has happened)
- Human ability to perceive, store, and recall tangible reality

SPIRITUAL MEMORY

- Innate knowledge of immaterial reality (what is True)
- Human capacity for conviction, desire for beauty, and instinct towards affection (*Phaedrus* 249d)

Physical Memory

Claudius recognizes his own actions through the similar actions onstage.

Spiritual Memory

Claudius realizes the spiritual stakes of his actions and is afflicted by their potential repercussions.

Suggestion of Link

When watching the play, Claudius becomes visibly disturbed and must leave the room.

Scholarship on Drama as a Propelling Force

- **Gass:** The gulf Plato established between Being and the visible world can “only be crossed on a bridge of mimesis” (205-6).
- **Hammersmith:** the past takes on a “vividly present reality” when represented in memory (600).
- **Andrews:** “memory makes the past live” (263) ... true remembrance is “memory ... translated into action” (267).
- **Freiberger:** tragedy marks “the philosopher’s search for truth” (294).

DIALECTIC MOVEMENT

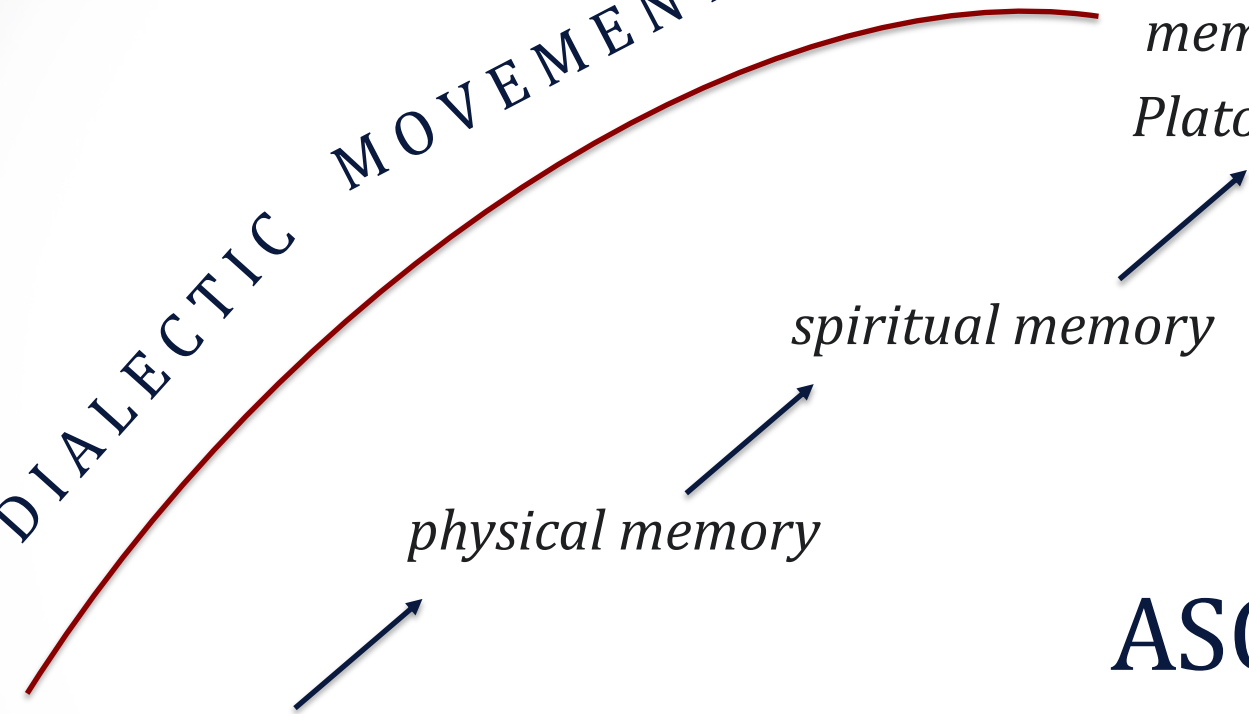
*memory of the
Platonic True Being*

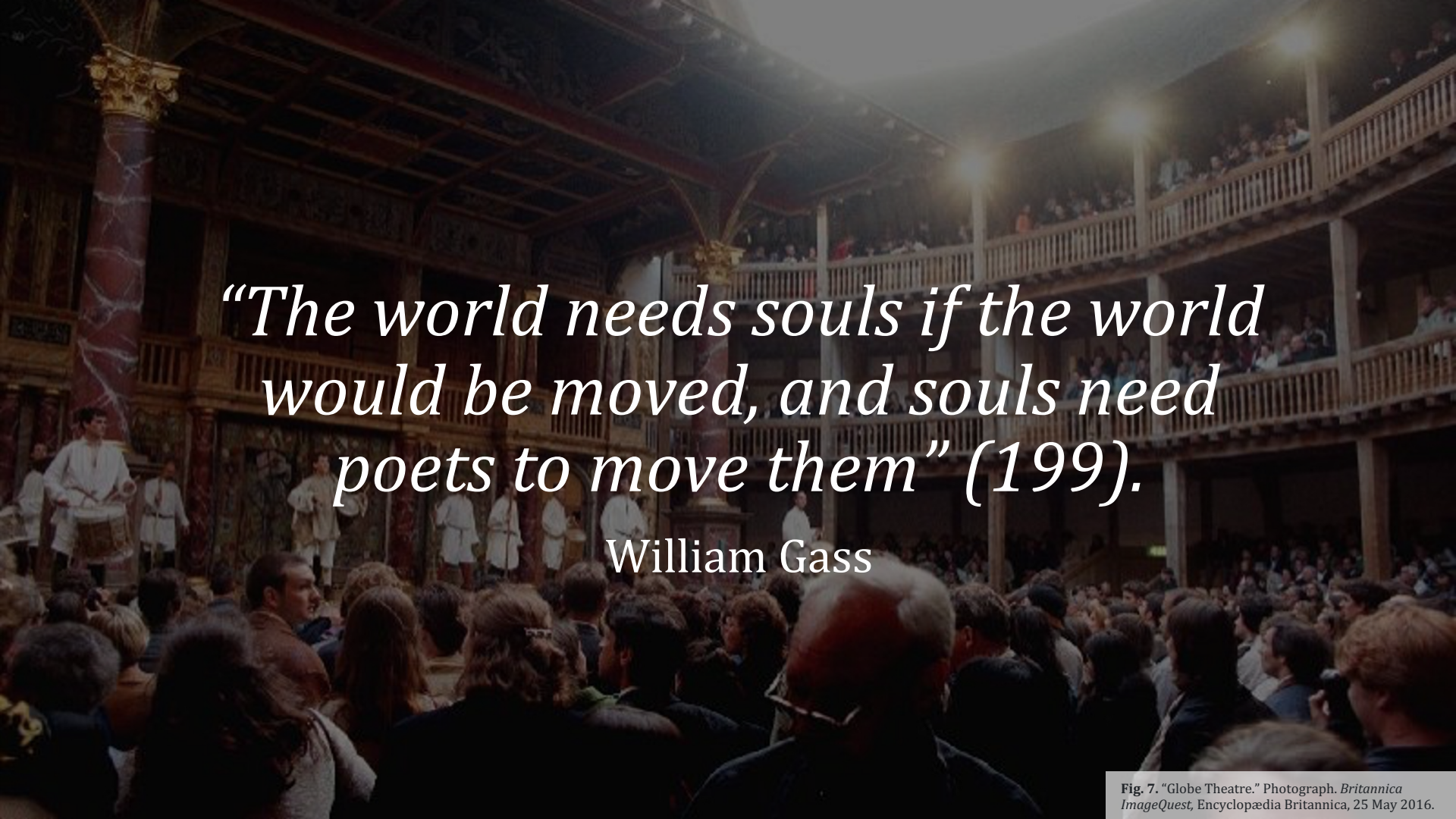
spiritual memory

physical memory

*vessel of recognition
(mimetic image)*

ASCENDING
THROUGH
REALMS OF MEMORY





*“The world needs souls if the world
would be moved, and souls need
poets to move them” (199).*

William Gass

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