

## Al-Ghazālī on Stage

### Toward a Theological Interpretation of the Javanese *Wayang* Theatre

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The Javanese shadow puppet theater or *wayang kulit* is known for its unique adaptations of great Sanskritic narratives, in particular the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, which have been performed in Java for many centuries.<sup>1</sup> In Java, the Indian narratives were changed and expanded. The mountains and rivers received Javanese names, and the Pandawa brothers, the central characters of the *Mahābhārata*, were understood to be the mythical ancestors of Java's ruling class. Despite its long history and the fact that the *wayang* is considered to be such an important cultural property today, the contemporary *wayang* is a fairly recent invention. As Sears (1996) has shown, the *wayang* as we know it today cannot be separated from the colonial moment and orientalist scholarship that presented and, indeed, created it as a manifestation of an unchanging essence of 'Javaneseness' that could be uncovered and reconstructed by Europeans (13). The *wayang* as it was constituted in colonial discourses became part of the interlocking apparatuses of Dutch control, part of which was the promotion of a supposedly reconstructed pre-Islamic Javanese tradition at the expense of Islam (15). Both descriptive and constitutive of prevalent power structures, scholarly accounts of the *wayang* not only became part of the colonial Dutch, but also of the post-colonial Indonesian hegemonic political agenda. However, as a performative tradition that is constantly re-imagined, the *wayang* can also be and has been used

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<sup>1</sup> Although unequivocal evidence for the presence of *wayang* performances before the eleventh century is not extant, the term *wayang* in the context of literary narratives was already in use in the ninth century (Zoetmulder 1974: 208 f.).

for the subversion of these power structures. The objective of this paper is an analysis of a particular figure in the *wayang*, a character called Semar, who can be seen as a subversive factor in the hierarchy of power and status depicted in the *wayang*. It proceeds by looking at both play scripts and accounts of Semar by recent Javanese intellectuals that negotiate the mythical boundaries that delineate the *wayang* tales, and by interpreting these sources through the lens of al-Ghazālī's articulation of the interaction between different epistemologies and his imagining of ways in which types of knowledge that are irreducible to each other can be simultaneously held and possibly even brought into conversation with each other. Al-Ghazālī's profound influence in Islamic Java in general and on Sufi traditions in Java more specifically has often been noted (Zoetmulder 1995: xv, 21; see also Feener 1998 and Riddell 2001: 185, 275), and although the presence of al-Ghazālī's theology in the *wayang* has not yet been explored, I believe that aspects of his thoughts that have been relevant for some Javanese are expressed by Semar, and that his theology can help us understand Semar's import. By exploring this dimension of the *wayang*, I am hoping to start a conversation on the way in which both scholarly and literary texts from the past are still influential in contemporary Java, although not in a straightforward and one-dimensional manner. While theological texts and literary types do provide a model or script for contemporary Javanese Muslims, the way in which these scripts are emplotted cannot be predicted and can diverge, especially when the audience is heterogeneous; and so a medium that was meant to maintain power structures can end up being used for their very subversion, as is the case with the *wayang*.

The *wayang* has several functions that may coexist in a single performance, or one of them may be emphasized in a particular context at the expense of others. Performances have often

been held in conjunction with religious events or life-cycle rites and have fulfilled a ritual purpose (Keeler 1987: 5). In addition, the *wayang* is a source of entertainment, and puppeteers are often praised for their clever and original sense of humor (Sears 1996: 5). Furthermore, the Javanese often emphasize the didactic function of the *wayang* and the way in which it presents the spectator with moral dilemmas and the noble hero's reaction to them. Even though different scholars have provided diverging accounts on what precisely is considered to be the didactic message of the play,<sup>2</sup> it is uncontroversial that the hero of the story embodies a particular Javanese ideal of the noble and dutiful knight, who is simultaneously a heroic warrior and the pinnacle of sophistication and refinement. The relation of the puppets and the *dhalang*, the puppeteer, is often interpreted as a performative symbolization of the relationship between human beings and God, the master puppeteer, who creates and directs humans, just like the *dhalang* through his knowledge and skill brings the puppets to life (Brandon 1970: 18).<sup>3</sup>

Semar, the subject of inquiry of this paper, is a figure that is originally Javanese and has no prefiguration in the Sanskritic texts of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*.<sup>4</sup> The character of Semar was developed in the performative setting of the *wayang*, in which the *dhalang* or puppeteer would depart from the written text and insert *carangan* or side-stories in response to the situation in which the *wayang* was staged (Pigeaud 1938: 367 f.). Over time, Semar became a

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<sup>2</sup> According to Sri Mulyono (1981) and Franz Magnis-Suseno (1991), the Javanese consider the *wayang* to primarily teach its spectators about the complex nature of moral dilemmas and the impossibility of innocence in a flawed world. Ward Keeler (1987: 243), on the other hand, writes that the Javanese mainly consider the *wayang* to exhort them to virtues such as patience and fairness.

<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that this religious interpretation of the puppeteer's role is not confined to Javanese Muslims, but is also claimed by Java's Christians (see Magnis-Suseno 1991), quite possibly due to the Dutch colonial project of separating the *wayang* from Islam and declaring it to preserve an uncorrupted essence of Javanese-ness (Sears 1996: 15).

<sup>4</sup> According to Brandon (1970: 3), Semar might be based on the *vidusaka* clown figure in the Indian epics. If this is indeed the case, the figure has undergone such dramatic changes that it is nonetheless adequate to call him an originally Javanese figure.

canonical part of the stories and performances, and at times when *wayang* performances were commissioned to praise the Sultan or to promote birth control and five-year plans (Hatley 2005; Cohen 2002: 110), Semar was an element of the *wayang* that could potentially contribute an aspect of subversion to the normative narrative that was being promoted. For present purposes, I will call Semar a trickster, a term which I mean to employ as a heuristic tool rather than a static category. I do not wish to imply that the Native American coyote, Jung's archetypal definition, and Semar all share a clearly identifiable structure. Rather, my intention in using this term is to point to a common feature of the trickster, namely that the trickster as a literary device is used as an unconventional and often absurd way of expressing something which cannot be expressed in a straightforward manner due to the limitations of discursive language and epistemology. My constructive argument is that the trickster as a literary device is a paradoxical figure, a symbol that is on the one hand disruptive of a given society's normative and epistemic frameworks, and therefore appears to be vulgar, dangerous, or even mad. On the other hand, the trickster figure derives her very power not in spite of, but rather by means of her madness and epistemic Otherness. Her seemingly foolish and sometimes outrageous actions are not only explained and justified by the trickster's familiarity with the divine, but become the visible sign of having a deeper knowledge and greater spiritual power than other people and, by implication, influence on those around.

In *wayang* performances, moments in which the hero of the story experiences some distress are accompanied by the so-called *gara-gara* scene, in which nature lapses into turmoil: the earthquakes, volcanoes erupt, and the seas begin to boil. In the middle of this confusion appear several most unusual companions. Quite unfazed by the alarming situation, they sit down on the

ground and entertain each other with a round of pranks and tricks. They are the *Punakawan*, Semar and his adopted sons Gareng and Petruk, who are in some cases accompanied by a third adopted son, Bagong. These figures have a peculiar, almost grotesquely ugly appearance. Semar is so fat that his body is wider than it is long, Gareng is cross-eyed and has disjointed arms, and Petruk's face displays an enormous, crooked nose. Their jokes are never refined and often obscene, and are sometimes accompanied by further vulgar gestures such as belching and farting. In order to understand the significance of the *Punakawan's* ugliness and manners, it is important to note that the division into good and bad characters in the *wayang* usually corresponds to a figure's physical features: for example, the Pandawa brothers, the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, are refined and noble both in terms of appearance and comportment and their moral status. And while there might be some exceptions to this rule,<sup>5</sup> a good person in the *wayang* would at least never behave in such a lowly manner. This division is not only comprehensive, but also static, to the point that the personas represented are types rather than characters. They and the relations between them are defined by style, status, and potency. While moral questions are foregrounded, moral development or a figure's maturation process is not part of traditional *wayang* stories. In the context of this rigid framework, Semar, along with his companions, is a model of crudeness, madness, and powerlessness. He is the lowly servant of the respective story's hero.

A few examples from the play *The Reincarnation of Rama* (Brandon 1970: 81 ff.) will show how Semar and his sons, in this case only Petruk and Gareng, are portrayed as socially inferior characters. Their language and manners are coarse. In our first encounter with the *Punakawan*,

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<sup>5</sup> As Magnis-Suseno (1982: 12) points out, Kumbakarna, the brother Rahwana, the villain of the Ramayana, is such an exception. He looks like a terrifying giant monster, but is one of the most beloved and admired figures of the *wayang*.

Petruk and Gareng are having an animated quarrel over the question who has to take care of the newly purchased donkey, and their argument soon turns into a fistfight (115). Petruk knocks Gareng unconscious, and puts his inert brother on the donkey with a sign around his neck that says: “Look at the ass on this donkey!” (122) Semar then gathers his sons by engaging in a behavior which, he reasons, would embarrass even his irreverent sons enough to make them come and attempt to stop him: he sings an obscene song about newlyweds (120). When they meet their master Arjuna, they greet him warmly, but inappropriately by following the rules of etiquette either in gross exaggeration or simply incorrectly, for example by calling the prince *cuci*, the “washer”, instead of *suci*, or holy person (126). On other occasions, Semar is also known for his very pragmatic concern for food and money, and his willingness to use any means, no matter how unheroic, to defeat his opponent, such as his infamous flatulences that dispel his or his master’s opponents faster than any more heroic feat could (Magnis-Suseno 1991: 38). But Semar is not primarily a fighter. Most of the time he supports his master through his mere presence and advice, much unlike his master, who is characterized by bravery. All of these examples show that Semar and his behavior are in a dichotomous relationship with the nobility and virtue that is usually associated with the value system represented in the *wayang*.

While his master represents the ideal of sophistication, elegance, and heroism, Semar actively mocks and challenges the lifestyle of the noble hero whom he serves, simply by means of his own antithetical behavior. At first glance, there seems little doubt that Semar’s only purpose is to clown around and to reduce the intensity and tension that is often created in the *wayang* when the hero is confronted with a moral dilemma. Some scholars, including Ward Keeler (1987: 12; 1992: 29) and Jan Mrázek (2005: 110) have therefore referred to the

*Punakawan* as the clown servants. But Semar does more than just entertain. It is implicitly understood that his crude and crazy comportment reflects a knowledge that transcends the knowledge of everybody else on stage. In pre-Islamic times, Semar was considered to be divine, the highest god of indigenous Java, without whose companionship the hero would be defeated. In “The Reincarnation of Rama” as well as in most other plays, his first appearance is introduced by the narrator’s words that although Semar is extremely ugly, “he is in reality the ancient god Ismaya, protector of Java” (Brandon 1970: 120) who “could rule the world if he so desired, and the highest gods could not prevent it” (ibid.). Even in Muslim Java, Semar is considered to be a figure of religious authority, who apprehends divine truth and communicates it to the people around him, thereby criticizing their flawed ethical system that hardly disguises their actual immorality. As a trickster, his ambivalence is expressed by means of two irresolvable tensions: first, his extraordinary religious authority is in a dialectic relationship with his social or structural inferiority; and second, he is simultaneously unpredictable, even dangerous, and humanity’s comforter and sustainer.

This paradoxical nature of the trickster and his integration of these opposites in one person shows that the trickster is a figure in a liminal state in van Gennep’s (1960) understanding of the term. He is betwixt and between the positions defined by the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in a cultural space. Liminal persons are simultaneously characterized by lowliness and sacredness, and their special status makes them potentially

dangerous in the eyes of the other members of the respective community.<sup>6</sup> But while van Gennep looks at liminality as a temporal interface in the context of rites of passage that are transitory and which result in the reintegration of the liminal figure, the trickster's liminality belongs inextricably to his personality. He is anti-structural, because his ambivalence and his integration of opposite characteristics make it impossible to locate him in a cultural space in the same manner as with other figures in the *wayang*.

On my reading, the liminality of the trickster is, first and foremost, a status which represents the existence of conflicting epistemological systems. The society's ethical system the trickster has come to criticize as immoral is embedded in the respective culture's world view, the shared judgments of what is the cultural norm, a standard determining what can be regarded as good, normal, or, indeed, meaningful. To echo the late Wittgenstein, the normative use of binary distinctions such as good and bad or normal and abnormal presupposes a shared form of life including not only opinions and definitions, but also judgments, much in the same way in which the method of measurement is determined by a certain constancy in results (1958: §242). In other words, what is at stake here is not only the reevaluation of certain norms in a community's framework of moral thought. Rather, the way in which language and other units of meaning structure a community's experience of the intersubjectively accessible phenomenal world, and with it, implicit agreements about what is meaningful and what is not, constitute the basis of the respective community's language and discursive thought and therefore enable, but also crucially

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<sup>6</sup> A discussion of this potential danger can be found in Douglas (1966: 30 ff.) and Turner (1967: 97 f.), who emphasize that transitional figures are often considered ritually unclean and have the potential of polluting especially those who have not yet passed this threshold and have therefore not experienced this liminal state themselves. Semar's main potential to be dangerous is his potential of criticizing of prevalent power structures. As it will become apparent in the discussion of al-Ghazālī, the liminal situation does not necessarily need to be considered dangerous.



limit all further thought. The individual participant in the language of a particular community has very little to do with these more fundamental rules, or, in Wittgenstein's words, "What is a telling ground for something is not anything *I* decide" (1975: §271; his italics; see also §94 ff.). A discourse that does not follow these rules is, therefore, outside a community's realm of rational thought.

Meaningful discourses are only possible if the epistemological framework that enables them simultaneously eliminates alternative epistemologies by either making them meaningless or by explicitly defining them as being beyond discursive thought. In the following, I will show that Semar can be understood in exactly these terms: His opinions are not aligned with the prevalent form of life and his judgments are informed by a different, higher kind of reality. To employ Wittgenstein's words again, he does not use the same language games as the people around him, and therefore his behavior appears to be mad,<sup>7</sup> ridiculous, or even dangerous. In other words, the trickster's transgression of societal norms is only meaningful from within the discourse that produces them. We can understand the trickster in this sense as a literary representation of epistemic Otherness. Such a literary representation of epistemic Otherness can also be understood as a religious symbol. First and foremost, a symbol of any kind is a public or intersubjectively accessible unit of meaning in Geertz's (1973) sense of the term. His discussion of religious symbols emphasizes their cognitive value, which establishes a congruence between a culture's lifestyle or their ethics and their world view, and the meta-ethical and epistemological structures, one could say metaphysics, which make this lifestyle meaningful and simultaneously

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<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein spelled out the difference between error and madness by showing that madness, as opposed to a mere error, is a divergence with the respective community's world view that cannot be explained just by reference to this particular world view: "Can we say: a *mistake* doesn't only have a cause, it also has a ground? I.e., roughly: when someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright." (1975: § 74; his italics).

justify it (90). But these religious symbols point at something that is beyond a particular community's limits of discursive knowledge and understanding. They are paradoxical, because they are components of ordinary speech, while simultaneously pushing against the limits of what ordinary speech can meaningfully represent. Geertz understands this paradoxical nature in terms of two perspectives humans can take to understand reality. In his essay *Religion as a Cultural System* he notes that that, in the context of these discourses, human beings move "more or less easily, and very frequently, between radically contrasting ways of looking at the world" (120), thereby performing Kierkegaardian leaps<sup>8</sup> in both directions, or engaging in ways of understanding the world that are based not only on different presuppositions, but also on a different form of cognition.

The idea that there are different kinds of knowledge that cannot be reduced to one another is one that has been very familiar in Islamic thought since the formative period of theology, and was formulated by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in a way that proved to be influential for the further development of Islamic thought around the world. His thought has long been well-known in the Malay-Indonesian world due to an early Malay adaptation of the *Ihyā' 'Ulum al-Dīn* by 'Abd al-Samad al-Palimbānī in 1788 (Feener 1998: 580; Riddell 2001: 185). In the twentieth century, the Sumatran reformer Hamka further contributed to the wide currency of Ghazālīan thought in Indonesia (Riddell 2001: 275), although he used al-Ghazālī's theology only selectively.

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of the Kierkegaardian leap is taken from Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (1962) as well as their *Unscientific Postscript* (1968), in which Kierkegaard's pseudonym Climacus refers to the leap as a qualitative transition from being an unbeliever to being a believer, a transition that is neither direct nor immediate, and which constitutes the break between knowledge and faith.

Although al-Ghazālī has often been associated with his criticism of philosophy, one of his main and most influential achievements was the integration of the philosophical tradition into *kalām*, Islamic theology (Watt 1963: 65 ff.; Griffel 2009: 7). Instead of rejecting philosophy, he selectively criticized the methods of the philosophers and thereby made room for another type of epistemology, i.e. revelation. The ensuing tension turned out to be very productive in al-Ghazālī's thought. As Moosa (2005: 48) has noted, one key concept in al-Ghazālī's negotiation of different kinds of knowledge is the *dihlīz*, the threshold or vestibule, a transitional or liminal place between the house and the door. The *dihlīz* both reinforces and undermines the distinction between the inside and the outside, since liminal spaces can only exist in anti-thesis to a particular structure. Furthermore, according to Moosa, the metaphor of the *dihlīz* also conveys the impression that this liminal space is not threatening or dangerous, one to be avoided, but rather comfortable and welcoming (ibid.). This suggests that al-Ghazālī experienced the coexistence of different currents of knowledge that are irreducible to each other not necessarily as threatening, but rather as familiar and potentially productive.

In his intellectual autobiography *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, al-Ghazālī (as translated by Watt 1982) subjects all certainties, including those derived from sense-perception (23) and intellect (24), to systematic doubt and finds them incapable of providing assurance. He experiences this uncertainty as a malady, which is eventually cured. But the cure, as he emphasizes, “did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshaled argument, but by a light which God Most High cast into my breast... Whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.” (25). And later, he comments on *kalām* or theology by saying that he had found it to be a

science “which, though attaining its own aim, did not attain mine.” (27). While not denying that the kinds of knowledge produced by *kalām* can be useful in their own right, al-Ghazālī considers them to be insufficient and finds answers to his most pressing questions in Sufism, which includes both intellectual belief and practical activity: “The latter consists in getting rid of the obstacles in the self and in stripping off its base characteristics and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom from what is not God and to constant recollection of Him.” (54) In other words, the knowledge attained through the Sufi path is one that has to be located in a proper hermeneutic setting of practice that first prepares the respective person to cognize this type of knowledge. Due to this different cognitive practice, Sufi knowledge is irreducible to discursive types of knowledge, it is a stage beyond intellect: “It became clear to me, however, that what is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience, by ecstasy and by a moral change” (54 f.).<sup>9</sup> Rather than being people of words, he continues, Sufis are people of experience (55). However, since al-Ghazālī was arguably one of the most prolific writers in Islamic theology, it is obvious that he did not completely turn his back on the world of the written word. Indeed, his new insight did not mean that the talk about the knowledge of the Sufi is impossible. Rather, it means that such talk has to follow a method of its own.

Moosa shows how al-Ghazālī imagined new forms of knowledge through which contradictory or mutually exclusive views can be simultaneously maintained. He calls al-Ghazālī’s writing in a mystical voice his “heart-writing” or “dialogical writing” (104). The two

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<sup>9</sup> The word al-Ghazālī uses for ‘experience’ is the Arabic word ذوق , whose primary meaning is ‘to taste’. The choice of a sensory verb is also instructive of the nature of this cognitive experience as being direct and unmediated by discursive knowledge.

terms emphasize the introspective and heteroglot<sup>10</sup> nature of his writing respectively. Writing and reading no longer serve only the purpose of storing knowledge, but are also supposed to transform both reader and writer. The method of al-Ghazālī's heart-writing was characterized by the productive tension between different discourses and theological, philosophical, and mystical views. The knowledge that this kind of heart-writing is able to stimulate is one that enables the reader to “actively defy reason and to ‘walk on water’” (106), to embrace a Sufi counter-narrative, that accepts that there are types of understanding that transcend classification or rationalization and which, according to Moosa, is the “science of ‘otherness’ (alterity); in short, it is heterology par excellence” (108). Moosa's notion of heterology is informed by de Certeau (1985). Heterology according to de Certeau (68) is the discourse about the Other (the Other, in this case, being Allah or the Ineffable) that is a means of constructing a discourse authorized by the Other. The discursive Self and the Other are mutually constitutive without being reducible to each other.

What al-Ghazālī's heart-writing has in common with Semar, the literary trickster figure, is the way in which they display the dialectic relationship between different epistemologies. In absolute terms, an alternative epistemology is nonsensical and cannot be understood from within a system, which is at the same time the only point of access. However, as a figure in a literary and performative context, Semar's transgressive behavior is an example of heterology: rather than being meaningless, it is a symbol that derives its meaning through its dialectical relationship with the prevalent epistemology. However, symbols in general and religious symbols in particular are necessarily epistemically underdetermined. They are multivalent, like al-Ghazālī's

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<sup>10</sup> Heteroglossia (in Bakhtin's sense; Bakhtin 1982: 293 ff.) is the existence of multiple discourses within a single text. They are not necessarily under the control of the authorizing voice of the writer.

heart-writing. As a multivalent unit of meaning in a performative context, the meaning of Semar is not unilateral. The *wayang* is an aesthetic production, and as such it is in a dialectical relationship with the world around it. Rather than being a mere meta-commentary, it develops out of the same assumptions that structure social life more generally, and not only explains and reflects on the intersubjective experience of the world, but also shapes this experience. In Turner's terms, we can think of such symbols as supplying "root metaphors" (1974: 23) that provide a conceptual framework for understanding the world without producing any telic development. Through performances and interpretations of the *wayang*, new discourses on Semar are translated into new forms of alliance and participation (Casey 1987: 216).

As noted above, the way in which Semar has been used by Javanese and other Indonesian intellectuals is for the subversion of the power structures intrinsic in Javanese and Indonesian society, and especially in the *wayang* due to its creation by Dutch colonial scholarship. Before turning to their writing, it should be noted that it is no coincidence that it is Semar the trickster rather than any of the other figures in the *wayang*, whose authority is more straightforward, that is used for the purpose of subversion. Semar's presence points us toward a belief wide-spread among Javanese Sufis that beyond the surface structure of conventional social stratification lies a deep structure, or a transcendent reality in which the conventional epistemological order is suspended. Because of the suspension of conventional epistemology, the rules of this transcendent order cannot be explained in a straightforward manner, but can only be apprehended indirectly, by means of the paradox of Semar's status. Semar's liminality symbolizes the limits of immanent epistemic and social formations and points to their transcendence and devaluation. The trickster as an epistemic Other is in a dialectical relationship with prevalent power structures, as

becomes evident if we look at Foucault's discussion of the interaction between power and epistemic Otherness. In the *History of Madness* (2006), Foucault shows that with the Renaissance and the increased endorsement of positivistic science, the split between reason and unreason became a variation or image of the split between good and evil (104), and unreason became something that had to be defined according to prevalent standards, controlled, and eliminated. Therefore, the mad person is the silenced Other in the history of psychiatry, whose identity and cultural space at any given time are more informative of the production of knowledge and the dominant discourses at that particular time than the experiential ontology of the mad person herself. The discourse on madness and mad people is a particular manifestation of the prevailing order of things, which, in turn, reflects the prevalent structure of knowledge. Foucault shows how particular investigations are structured around an epistemological context that determines what bodies of knowledge become intelligible and authoritative.

Contemporary Java is not post-Renaissance Europe, and Semar is not an ordinary madman.<sup>11</sup> His holiness and special authority not only correlate with his mad behavior, but are contingent upon it. In other words, it is precisely the trickster's epistemic Otherness and pervasive epistemic and social liminality which explains and justifies her special authority. As de Certeau noted, the irreconcilable views dialectically depend on each other and even construct each other. In this sense, the phenomenon of the trickster reorganizes the question of power and authority in relation with systems of knowledge, since their liminal status not only constitutes their Otherness, but also their special authority. However, the structure of this authority is ironically

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that another literary figure in the Javanese Islamic tradition that fulfills a very similar role to Semar is the so-called mad saint. An example is the nineteenth century poem on the mad saint Lebe Lontang, whose outrageous feats are justified by the narrator, who comments that unlike most other people, Lebe Lontang knows God (see Zoetmulder 1995: page and Wieringa 2001).

broken, because it depends on public opinion to elevate their epistemic Otherness to a new standard, which is in a dialectic relationship with the mainstream notions of meaningfulness and normativity. The authority of the trickster lies outside the Foucaultian discursive formation of power and knowledge, while at the same time depending on this very system, affirming its normativity not in spite of, but by means of its breach with it. Without the epistemological authority of the cultural norm, the trickster would lose her Otherness, which is her ultimate source of authority. And even though the trickster's special power rests on this liminality and the claim that the source of her authority is not part of the conventional power structures, the trickster becomes a new authority that is publicly recognized and celebrated in the *wayang*. The trickster both confirms the authority of the society's epistemological structures by being dialectically defined in demarcation from it, and denies it by offering an alternative, more authoritative sort of knowledge. In Java and beyond, the trickster is an example of institutionalized irony. At first glance, Semar appears to be a fairly unsophisticated clown. But both the audience and the *dhalang* know that Semar is a divine figure, whose true meaning transcends not only conventional ideas of sophistication, but also discursive knowledge more generally.

Finally, I would like to cite some examples of how the subversive potential of Semar has been used by Indonesian intellectuals<sup>12</sup> to point to social wrongs. Magnis-Suseno<sup>13</sup> has

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<sup>12</sup> I am looking at Indonesian intellectuals rather than, more specifically, Javanese intellectuals, since the *wayang* has become a familiar prior text for many Indonesians, both thanks to Suharto's cultural politics and his invention of a common Indonesian identity based on Javanese culture (Antlöv 2005) and the increased mobility of contemporary Indonesian intellectuals, many of whom received their education in Java.

<sup>13</sup> Magnis-Suseno is cited here despite the fact that he is not a Muslim. But as a well-known figure in efforts at interreligious dialogue in Indonesia and the fact that his work has been often cited by Javanese Muslims, for instance Tuti Sumukti (2005) strongly suggests that his analysis is representative of the spirit of the time in which it was written.



commented on the fact that Semar's lowly status despite his actual power and wisdom criticizes a society that espouses traditional values while actually sanctioning dehumanizing forms of behavior, in particular the Javanese obsession with rank and etiquette:

With Semar there emerges a deep-seated understanding among the Javanese, even though this understanding is rarely stated, namely that, in contrast to outward impressions, it is the common people and not the elite of the Sultan's palace that constitute the source of strength, prosperity, and wisdom of Javanese society [...] The common people are aware that in the end it is they who actually hold divine and cosmic power, they are the source of all the strength that can be found in society. (1980: 37 f.)

Sri Mulyono (1982) makes a similar point, when he says that Semar symbolizes the wrath of the common people (38) and cites an example of a *wayang* story in which Semar leaves Arjuna because the latter behaved disrespectfully. He writes: "Whenever the Pandawa dare to disrespect and to underestimate Semar (the common people), they will sooner or later experience disaster." (70) Others have been less optimistic about Semar's resilience and his ability to triumph over the forces of evil, as is obvious in N. Riantiarno's non-traditional *wayang* play with the title *Semar Gugat* or 'Semar Accuses' (1995). In *Semar Gugat*, Srikandi, the queen, is possessed by the goddess Durga, who is portrayed as evil. The latter is trying to take control of the state through manipulating the queen. As a result, Srikandi repeatedly humiliates Semar, and Arjuna, who knows that Srikandi is acting unjustly, doesn't dare to oppose her. Semar fights the administrative forces and abusive power, but despite the fact that he is wiser than anyone else, he is depicted as vulnerable and is eventually defeated. N. Riantiarno's play has been read as a critique of Suharto's New Order (see Banawiratma 1999: 561 f.). It is a particularly creative way of using Semar's subversive power as it critiques the government as being so vicious and abusive of its people that even Semar, a divine figure, is powerless to fight it.

I have argued that Semar, whose authority derives from his transgression of Javanese social and epistemological norms but is nevertheless dependent on them, is a subversive figure. The epistemological subversiveness of Semar has been used for political resistance in colonial and post-colonial times. Though Foucault's analysis of the relationship between madness and a society's normative discourses is helpful in understanding Semar, it cannot fully explain how Semar's power can be dependent upon (indeed, recognized by) the discourses whose limits he violates. Such an understanding requires an account of multiple ways of knowing and their relation to the Real, which transcends them utterly. But Semar fits into al-Ghazālī's theory of experiential knowledge, which affirms the integrity of *kalām* and other forms of discursive knowledge, even as it critiques their occasional pretensions of universal adequacy. The Ghazālīan analysis of the *wayang* is appropriate, because al-Ghazālī's Sufism has had wide currency in Java for many centuries. In future research, I hope to demonstrate that the thought of al-Ghazālī had a direct influence on the *wayang* tradition. But for now, we may confidently say that, understood through the lens of Sufi epistemologies (especially al-Ghazālī's), Semar offers the performers and developers of the *wayang* tradition the possibility of critiquing hegemonic discourses, even the ones that created them.

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