

# Praxis

Karen Joy Fowler

*This story, set on a future world where political intrigue goes on against a backdrop of “cybers” used as slaves and “simulations” that enact Shakespeare’s plays, is a... murder mystery? Well, there’s a killing and much is mysterious, but it’s more the mystery of what-is-reality as in the works of writers such as Shirley Jackson and Philip K. Dick.*

*Karen Joy Fowler studied writing in a class taught by Kim Stanley Robinson; “Praxis” was her first sale, but she’s already published several more fine stories and we can look forward to her byline for years to come.*

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

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The price of a single ticket to the suicides would probably have funded my work for a month or more, but I do not let myself think about this. After all, I didn’t pay for the ticket. Tonight I am the guest of the Baron Claude Himmlich and determined to enjoy myself.

I saw *Romeo and Juliet* five years ago, but only for one evening in the middle of the run. It wasn’t much. Juliet had a cold and went to bed early. Her nurse kept wrapping her in hot rags and muttering under her breath. Romeo and Benvolio got drunk and made up several limericks. I thought some of them were quite good, but I’d been drinking a little myself.

Technically it was impressive. The responses of the simulants were wonderfully lifelike and the amphitheater had just been remodeled to allow the audience to walk among the sets, viewing the action from any angle. But the story itself was hardly dramatic. It wouldn’t be, of course, in the middle of the run.

Tonight is different. Tonight is the final night. The audience glitters in jewels, colorful capes, extravagant hairstyles. Only the wealthy are here tonight, the wealthy and their guests. There are four in our own theater party: our host, the Baron; his beautiful daughter, Svanneshal; a wonderfully eccentric old woman dressed all in white who calls herself the Grand Duchess de Vie; and me. I work at the university in records and I tutor Svanneshal Himmlich in history.

The Grand Duchess stands beside me now as we watch Juliet carried in to the tombs. “Isn’t she lovely?” the Duchess says. “And very sweet, I hear. Garriss wrote her program. He’s a friend of the Baron’s.”

“An absolute genius.” The Baron leans towards us, speaking softly. There is an iciness to Juliet, a sheen her false death has cast over her. She is like something carved from marble. Yet even from here I can see the slightest rise and fall of her breasts. How could anyone believe she was really dead? But Romeo will. He always does.

It will be a long time before Romeo arrives and the Baron suggests we walk over to the Capulets’ to watch Juliet’s nurse weeping and carrying on. He offers his arm to the Duchess though I can see his security cyber dislikes this.

It is one of the Baron’s own models, identical in principle to the simulants on stage—human body, software brain. Before the Baron’s work the cybers were slow to respond and notoriously easy to outwit. The Baron made his fortune streamlining the communications link-up and introducing an element of deliberate irrationality into the program. There are those who argue this was an ill-considered, even

dangerous addition. But the Baron has never lacked for customers. People would rather take a chance on a cyber than on a human and the less we need to depend on the poor, the safer we become.

The Duchess is looking at the cyber's uniform, the sober blues of the House of Himmlich. "Watch this," she says to me, smiling. She reaches into her bodice. I can see how the cyber is alert to the movement, how it relaxes when her hand reappears with a handkerchief. She reverses the action; we watch the cyber tense again, relaxing when the hand reemerges.

The Baron shakes his head, but his eyes are amused. "Darling," he says, "you must not play with it."

"Then I shall walk with Hannah instead." The Duchess slips her hand around my arm. Her right hand is bare and feels warm pressed into my side. Her left hand is covered by a long white glove; its silky fingers rest lightly on the outside of my arm.

The Baron precedes us, walking with Svanneshal, the cyber close behind them. The Duchess leans against me and takes such small steps we cannot keep up. She looks at the Baron's back. "You've heard him called a 'self-made man'?" she asks me. "Did it ever occur to you that people might mean it literally?"

She startles me. My eyes go at once to the Baron, recognizing suddenly his undeniable perfection—his dark, smooth skin, his even teeth, the soft timbre of his voice. But the Duchess is teasing me. I see this when I look back at her.

"I like him very much," I answer. "I imagine him to be exactly like the ancient aristocracy at their best—educated, generous, courteous..."

"I wouldn't know about that. I have never studied history; I have only lived it. How old would you guess I am?"

It is a question I hate. One never knows what the most polite answer would be. The Duchess' hair, twisted about her head and held into place with ivory combs, is as black as Svanneshal's, but this can be achieved with dyes. Her face, while not entirely smooth, is not overly wrinkled. Again I suspect cosmetic enhancements. Her steps are undeniably feeble. "You look quite young," I say. "I couldn't guess."

"Then look at this." The Duchess stops walking and removes the glove from her left hand. She holds her palm flat before me so that I see the series of ciphers burnt into her skin. IPS3552. It is the brand of a labor duplicate. I look up at her face in astonishment and this amuses her. "You've never seen anything like that before, have you, historian? But you've heard perhaps how, in the last revolution, some of the aristocracy branded themselves and hid in the factories? *That's* how old I am."

In fact, I have heard the story, a two-hundred-year-old story, but the version I know ends without survivors. Most of those who tried to pass were detected immediately; a human cannot affect the dead stare of the duplicates for very long. Those few who went in to the factories gave themselves up eventually, preferring, after all, to face the mob rather than endure the filth, the monotony, and the endless labor, "I would be most interested in interviewing you," I say. "Your adventures should be part of the record." *If true*, but of course that is something I do not say.

"Yes." The Duchess preens herself, readjusting an ivory comb, replacing her glove. We notice the Baron, still some distance away, returning to us. He is alone and I imagine he has left the cyber with Svanneshal. The Duchess sweeps her bare hand in the direction of the hurrying figure. "I am a true member of the aristocracy," she tells me. "Perhaps the only surviving member. I am not just some wealthy man who chooses to call himself *Baron*."

This I discredit immediately as vanity. Revolution after revolution—no one can verify a blood claim.

Nor can I see why anyone would want to. I am amazed at the willingness of people to make targets of themselves, as if every time were the last time and now the poor are permanently contained.

“I must apologize.” The Baron arrives, breathless. “I had no idea you had fallen so far behind.”

“Why should you apologize,” the Duchess chides him, “if your guest is too old for such entertainments and too proud to use a chair as she should?” She shifts herself from my arm to his. “Verona is so lovely,” she says. “Isn’t it?”

We proceed slowly down the street. I am still thinking of the Duchess’ hand. When we rejoin Svanneshal it is as though I have come out of a trance. She is so beautiful tonight I would rather not be near her. The closer I stand, the less I can look. Her eyes are very large inside the dark hood of her gown which covers her hair and shoulders in a fine net of tiny jewels. In the darkened amphitheater the audience shines like a sky full of stars, but Svanneshal is an entire constellation—Svanneshal, the Swan’s throat, and next to her, her father, the Dragon. I look around the amphitheater. Everyone is beautiful tonight.

Juliet’s nurse is seated in a chair, rocking slowly back and forth in her agony. She is identical to the nurse I saw before and I tell the Baron so.

“Oh, I’m sure she *is* the one you saw before. I saw her once as Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*. You didn’t imagine they started from scratch every time, did you? My dear Hannah, anyone who can be recycled after the run certainly will be. The simulations are expensive enough as it is.” The Baron smiles at me, the smile of the older, the wiser, to the young and naive. “What’s amazing is the variation you get each time, even with identical parts. Of course, that’s where the drama comes in.”

Before, when I saw *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence was killed on the second night, falling down a flight of stairs. That’s mainly why I went. I was excited by the possibilities opened by the absence of the Friar. Yet the plot was surprisingly unchanged.

It makes me think of Hwang-li and I say to the Baron, “Did you know it was a historian who created the simulations?”

“I don’t have your knowledge of history,” he answers. “Svanneshal tells me you are quite gifted. And you have a specialty... forgive me. I know Svanneshal has told me.”

“Mass movements. They don’t lend themselves to simulation.” The Duchess has not heard of Hwang-li either, but then only a historian would have. It was so many revolutions ago. I could argue that the historians are the true revolutionary heroes, retaining these threads of our past, bringing them through the upheaval. Many historians have died to protect the record. And *their* names are lost to us forever. I am glad for a chance to talk about Hwang-li.

“Hwang-li was not thinking of entertainment, of course. He was pondering the inevitability of history. Is the course of history directed by personalities or by circumstances?” I ask the Baron. “What do you think?”

The Baron regards me politely. “In the real world,” he says, “personalities and circumstances are inseparable. The one creates the other and vice versa. Only in simulation can they be disjoined.”

“It follows then,” I tell him, “that if you could intervene to change one, you would simultaneously change both and, therefore, the course of history. Could you make a meaningful change? How much can depend upon a single individual taking a single action at a single moment? Or not taking it?”

“Depending on the individual, the action, and the moment,” the Duchess says firmly, “everything could change.”

I nod to her. “That is what Hwang-li believed. He wished to test it by choosing an isolated case, a critical moment in which a series of seeming accidents resulted in a devastating war. He selected the Mancini murder, which was manageable and well-documented. There were seven personality profiles done on Philip Mancini at the time and Hwang-li had them all.”

The Baron has forgotten Juliet’s nurse entirely and turns to me with gratifying attention. “But this is fascinating,” he says. “Svanneshal, you must hear this.” Svanneshal moves in closer to him; the cyber seems relieved to have both standing together.

“Go on,” says the Baron.

“I was telling your father about Hwang-li.”

“Oh, I know this story already.” Svanneshal smiles at the Baron coquettishly. “It’s the murder that interests him,” she says to me. “Aberrant personalities are sort of a hobby of his.”

The Baron tells me what he already knows of the murder, that Frank Mancini was killed by his brother Philip.

“Yes, that’s right,” I say encouragingly. This information survives in a saying we have—enmity is sometimes described as “the love of the Mancinis.”

It is the Duchess who remembers the saying. But beyond that, she says she knows nothing of the case. I direct my statements to her. “Frank Mancini was a security guard, back in the days when humans functioned in that capacity. He was responsible for security in the Irish sector. He had just learned of the terrorist plot against Pope Peter. The Pope was scheduled to speak in an open courtyard at noon; he was to be shot from the window of a nearby library. Frank was literally reaching for the phone at the moment Philip Mancini burst into his study and shot him four times for personal reasons.”

Svanneshal is bored with the discussion. Although she is extremely intelligent, it is not yet something she values. But she will. I look at her with the sudden realization that it is the only bit of inherited wealth she can be certain of holding on to. She is playing with her father’s hair, but he catches her hand. “Go on,” he says to me.

“Philip had always hated his brother. The murder was finally triggered by a letter Philip received from their mother—a letter we know he wrongly interpreted. What if he had read the letter more carefully? What if it had arrived ten minutes later? Hwang-li planned to replay the scene, running it through a number of such minute variations. Of course he had no simulants, nor did he need them. It was all to be done by computer.”

“The whole project seems to me to raise more questions than it answers.” Svanneshal is frowning. “What if the Pope had survived? How do you assess the impact of that? You cannot say there would have been no revolution. The Pope’s death was a catalyst, but not a cause.”

I am pleased to see that she not only knows the outlines of the incident, but has obviously been giving it some thought. I begin to gesture emphatically with my hands as though we were in class, but I force myself to stop. This is, after all, a social occasion. “So, war is not averted, but merely delayed?” I ask her. “Another variation. Who would have gained from such a delay? What else might have been different if the same war was fought at a later time? Naturally nothing can be proved absolutely—that is the nature of the field. But it is suggestive. When we can answer these questions we will be that much closer to the day when we direct history along the course we choose.”

“We already do that,” the Duchess informs me quietly. “We do that every day of our lives.” Her right hand smooths the glove over her left hand. She interlaces the fingers of the two.

“What happened in the experiment?” the Baron asks.

“Hwang-li never finished it. He spent his life perfecting the Mancini programs and died in a fire before he had finished. Another accident. Then there were the university purges. There’s never been that kind of money for history again.” I look into Svanneshal’s eyes, deep within her hood. “It’s too bad, because I’ve an experiment of my own I’ve wanted to do. I wanted to simulate Antony and Cleopatra, but make her nose an inch longer.”

This is an old joke, but they do not respond to it. The Baron says politely that it would provide an interesting twist the next time *Antony and Cleopatra* is done. He’ll bring it up with the Arts Committee.

Svanneshal says, “You see, Daddy, you owe Hwang-li everything. He did the first work in synthetic personalities.”

It occurs to me that the Baron may think Svanneshal and I are trying to persuade him to fund me and I am embarrassed. I search for something to say to correct this impression, but we are interrupted by a commotion onstage.

Lady Capulet has torn her dress at the collar, her hair is wild and uncombed. Under her tears, her face is ancient, like a tragic mask. She screams at her husband that it is his fault their baby is dead. If he hadn’t been so cold, so unyielding...

He stands before her, stooped and silent. When at last she collapses, he holds her, stroking the hair into place about her sobbing face. There is soft applause for this gentleness. It was unexpected.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Svanneshal’s face glows with appreciation. “Garriss again,” she informs me although I know Garriss did the programming for the entire Capulet family. It is customary to have one writer for each family so that the similarities in the programming can mirror the similarities of real families created by genetics and upbringing.

The simulants are oblivious to this approval. Jaques tells us, every time, that the world is a stage, but here the stage is a world, complete in itself, with history and family, with even those random stagehands, death and disease. This is what the simulants live. If they were told that Juliet is no one’s daughter, that everything they think and say is software, could they believe it? Would it be any less tragic?

Next to me I hear the beginning of a scream. It is choked off as suddenly as it started. Turning, I see the white figure of the Duchess slumping to the ground, a red stain spreading over her bodice. The gloved hand is pressed against her breast; red touches her fingers and moves down her arm. Her open eyes see nothing. Beside her, the cyber is returning a bloody blade to the case on its belt.

It was all so fast. “It killed her,” I say, barely able to comprehend the words. “She’s dead!” I kneel next to the Duchess, not merely out of compassion, but because my legs have given way. I look up at the Baron, expecting to see my own horror reflected in his face, but it is not.

He is calmly quiet. “She came at me,” he says. “She moved against me. She meant to kill me.”

“No!” I am astounded. Nothing is making sense to me. “Why would she do that?”

He reaches down and strips the wet glove from the warm hand. There is her lifeline—IPS3552. “Look at this,” he says to me, to the small group of theater-goers who have gathered around us. “She was not even human.”

I look at Svanneshal for help. “You knew her. She was no cyber. There is another explanation for the brand. She told me...” I do not finish my sentence, suddenly aware of the implausibility of the Duchess’ story. But what other explanation is there? Svanneshal will not meet my eyes. I find something else to say.

“Anyway, the cybers have never been a threat to us. They are not programmed for assassination.” It is another thought I do not finish, my eyes distracted by the uniform of the House of Himmlich. I get to my feet slowly, keeping my hands always visible and every move I make is watched by the Baron’s irrational cyber. “The autopsy will confirm she is human,” I say finally. “Was human.”

Svanneshal reaches for my arm below the shoulder, just where the Duchess held me. She speaks into my ear, so low that I am the only one who hears her. Her tone is ice. “The cybers are all that stand between us and the mob. You remember that!”

Unless I act quickly, there will be no autopsy. Already maintenance duplicates are scooping up the body in the manner reserved for the disposal of cybers. Three of them are pulling the combs from her hair, the jewels from her ears and neck and depositing them in small, plastic bags. The Baron is regarding me, one hand wiping his upper lip. Sweat? No, the Baron feels nothing, shows no sign of unease.

Svanneshal speaks to me again. This time her voice is clearly audible, “It tried to kill my father,” she says. “You weren’t watching. I was.”

It would be simpler to believe her. I try. I imagine that the whole time we were talking about the Mancinis, the Duchess was planning to murder her host. For political reasons? For personal reasons? I remember the conversation, trying to refocus my attention to her, looking for the significant gesture, the words which, listened to later, will mean so much more. But, no. If she had wanted to kill the Baron, surely she would have done it earlier, when the Baron returned to us without his cyber.

I return Svanneshal’s gaze. “Did anyone else see that?” I ask, raising my voice. I look from person to person. “Did anyone see anything?”

No one responds. Everyone is waiting to see what I will do. I am acutely conscious of the many different actions I can take; they radiate out from me as if I stood at the center of a star, different paths, all ultimately uncontrollable. Along one path I have publicly accused the Baron of murder through misjudgment. His programs are opened for examination; his cybers are recalled. He is ruined. And, since he has produced the bulk of the city’s security units, Svanneshal is quite right. We are left unprotected before the mob. Could I cause that?

I imagine another, more likely path. I am pitted alone against the money and power of the Himmlichs. In this vision the Baron has become a warlord with a large and loyal army. He is untouchable. Wherever I try to go, his cybers are hunting me.

The body has been removed, a large, awkward bundle in the arms of the maintenance duplicates. The blood is lifting from the tile, like a tape played backwards, like a thing which never happened. The paths radiating out from me begin to dim and disappear. The moment is past. I can do nothing now.

In the silence that has fallen around us, we suddenly hear that Romeo is coming. Too early, too early. What will it mean? The knot of spectators around us melts away; everyone is hurrying to the tombs. Svanneshal takes my arm and I allow myself to be pulled along. Her color is high and excited, perhaps from exertion, perhaps in anticipation of death. When we reach the tombs we press in amongst the rest.

On one side of me, Svanneshal continues to grip my arm. On the other is a magnificent woman imposingly tall, dressed in Grecian white. Around her bare arm is a coiled snake, fashioned of gold, its scales in the many muted colors gold can wear. A fold of her dress falls for a moment on my own leg, white, like the gown of the Grand Duchess de Vie and I find myself crying. “Don’t do it,” I call to Romeo. “It’s a trick! It’s a trap. For God’s sake, look at her.” The words come without volition, part of me standing aside, marveling, pointing out that I must be mad. He can’t hear me. He is incapable of hearing me. Only the audience turns to look, then turns away politely, hushed to hear Romeo’s weeping. He is so young, his heart and hands so strong, and he says his lines as though he believed them, as though

he made them up.

The Baron leans into Svanneshal. “Your friend has been very upset by the incidents of the evening.” His voice is kind. “As have we all. And she is cold. Give her my cape.”

I am not cold, though I realize with surprise that I am shaking. Svanneshal wraps the red cape about me. “You must come home with us tonight,” she says. “You need company and care.” She puts an arm about me and whispers, “Don’t let it upset you so. The simulants don’t feel anything.”

Then her breath catches in her throat. Romeo is drinking his poison. I won’t watch the rest. I turn my head aside and in the blurred lens of my tears, one image wavers, then comes clear. It is the snake’s face, quite close to me, complacency in its heavy-lidded eyes. “Don’t look at me like that,” I say to a species which vanished centuries ago. “Who are you to laugh?”

I think that I will never know the truth. The Duchess might have been playing with the cyber again. Her death might have been a miscalculation. Or the Baron might have planned it, have arranged the whole evening around it. I would like to know. I think of something Hwang-li is supposed to have said. “Never confuse the record with the truth. It will always last longer.” I am ashamed that I did nothing for the Duchess, accuse myself of cowardice, tears dropping from my cheeks onto the smooth flesh of my palms. In the historical record, I tell myself, I will list her death as a political assassination. And it will be remembered that way.

Next to me Svanneshal stiffens and I know Juliet has lifted the knife. This is truly the end of her; the stab wounds will prevent her re-use and her voice is painfully sweet, like a song.

One moment of hesitation, but that moment is itself a complete world. It lives onstage with the simulants, it lives with the mob in their brief and bitter lives, it lives where the wealthy drape themselves in jewels. If I wished to find any of them, I could look in that moment. “But how,” I ask the snake, “would I know which was which?”

## **The End.**

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### **Notes and proofing history**

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