

Metatheater as Rivalry and Dialogue

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Abstracts

“Fabulously Counterfeit” Layered Ironies in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*

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While any play which draws attention to itself as a performance shifts the focus of the audience in further to a performance inside the performance, or back out from the story reaching into the space every human in the theater shares together, *The Spanish Tragedy* accomplishes both, modeling the tropes of revenge tragedy and deception narratives which flourished throughout the Elizabethan and onto the Jacobean stage. Weaving layers of irony into an atmosphere of performance which begins with the opening frame and is carefully left unclosed at the end of the play, *The Spanish Tragedy* is most explicit in the deadly performance itself. When Hieronimo’s enemies have invited him to provide court entertainment for the upcoming wedding, he asks them to act in a play he has written, assuring them, “it will prove most passing strange/And wondrous plausible to that assembly” (4.1.84-5). By Thomas Kyd’s linguistic slight of hand, the performance of Hieronimo’s Soliman and Perseda, is not the only performance “passing strange/and wondrous plausible” to the assembly gathered to watch *The Spanish Tragedy*. Indeed, Kyd layers the frames of performance, and the subtle interplay between them in such a way that his audience is left in an uncomfortable irony. Some characters enlist others as actors in their plays. Some believe themselves to be actors only to find themselves executed out of their plays. Intensified by the breached theatrical conventions of portraying death on stage, as well as the complex use of language to both reveal and conceal this irony allows the audience to find the play as much about performance as it is performance.

Theater Kyd?: Morality and Metadrama in *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and *King Leir*

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Thomas Kyd’s acknowledged plays show a peculiar fascination with theater, extending from the Senecan inductions that frame them to their content that foregrounds the pragmatic uses of play-acting. Hieronimo presents a pageant early in *The Spanish Tragedy*, then ends the play by luring his enemies into an all-too-real bloodbath upon a stage. Erastus uses a mummer’s charade to recover a love token in *Soliman and Perseda*, only to be condemned via another sort of farce (a

sham trial), while the titular characters enact a psychomachia interlude in their first shared scene that is reminiscent of Medieval drama. My paper explores two other plays of possible Kydian origin: 1) the mysterious *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* that has been theorized either as a descendent of a lost *Ur-Hamlet*, or a corrupted abridgment of the more famous Danish tragedy, and 2) the play *King Leir*, which has been ascribed to Kyd by some attribution study. I explore how these two texts use metatheatrical interludes to showcase the importance of theater as a means of control, endorsing its ability to achieve moral and political ends via manipulation of the audience. I argue that this contrasts with a more skeptical view of theater in Shakespeare's parallel tragedies, which emphasize psychological, satirical, and existential dimensions inherent in self-referential theatrical tropes. Even if we do not see these distinctive patterns as evidence of Kyd's involvement with these two plays, the contrast allows us to better appreciate the different concerns and preoccupations that Shakespeare brought to the table in taking up the preexisting stories. It also may suggest that a playwright working circa 1590 was more anxious to defend the occupation against anti-theatrical attacks, while a later writer could see this war as concluded and feel comfortable interrogating the art form in which he labored.

Cross-dressing as Metatheatrical Deception in Jonson's Comedies

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While cross-dressing in the works of Shakespeare has received near-exhaustive critical attention, relatively little notice has been paid to the ways his contemporary Ben Jonson both relied upon and reworked the tropes established by Shakespeare's comedies. Shakespeare's cross-dressing comedies follow a fairly predictable form; audiences could feel secure in the expectation that they would be aware of the cross-dressed heroine's true identity, that cross-dressing would act as a reconciling force between estranged characters, and that the cross-dresser would ultimately shed her masculine persona adopt a proper domestic role. By the time Jonson wrote *Epicene* in 1609, these audience expectations would have been well-established, providing Jonson with a set of assumptions to play on and overturn. For instance, Shakespeare's formula leads audiences to believe that they will know when a female is cross-dressed, but Jonson's audience is just as surprised as the characters when *Epicene*'s wig is pulled off to reveal a boy; the audience must now confront the fact that they have believed in, and perhaps been attracted by, a female character that has always been male. Jonson's later comedy *The New Inn* adds yet another layer to this layered cross-dressing identity. If audiences feel that they are now 'in' on the joke, having learned from the subversion of *Epicene*, they find themselves fooled yet again as they learn that the cross-dressed character that they believe to be male has in fact been female all along. Jonson, having already overturned Shakespeare's established formula to elicit erotic confusion and humor, therefore continues adding new layers of gendered identity to his cross-dressed

characters in order to maintain his ability to lull his audience into a false sense of security, only to once again unsettle their notions of gender and identity in his final unmasking scenes.

“Some part of his funerals”: Playing the Part of the Departed in Nicholas Udall’s *Roister Doister*

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Suffering the pangs of thwarted desire, the titular character of Nicholas Udall’s *Roister Doister* (c. 1552) decides to go home and die. Assisted—or perhaps exploited—by his companion and parasite Matthew Merrygreek, Doister then stars in a drama within a drama, a ceremony within a play, an intralude within an interlude, as he participates in an elaborate travesty of the Roman Catholic *Officium Defunctorium*, a premature (and tonally immature) funeral service. Using this pre-Shakespearean example as a case study for metatheatrical possibilities, I contextualize this episode in the network of verbal play in Udall’s comedy, focusing on two elements that inform the mock funeral service but radiate out through the drama. First, the question of interpretation. What does metatheatre mean and how does it mean it? Critical opinion has been divided over the parodic orientation of the mock funeral service, with some seeing it as an Edwardian piece of hostile satire against the quasi-magical potency claimed for Roman rites, while others have read it as a festive Marian set-piece of apolitical entertainment. I read this funeral beside what seemed to be in Udall’s day the most notable component of his comedy: the ambiguous letter sent by Roister Doister to his beloved Christian Custance, a letter whose punctuation is altered in the play to produce contrasting performances from the same text, so that delivery, or performance, manages to transform praise into insult. Placed side by side, these two dramatic showpieces show how the period’s uncertainty regarding the import of performed rituals operated in tandem with rhetoric’s delight in reversibility, and the anxieties attendant upon the soteriological efficacy of rites could find in the theatre a space for recreation. Secondly, the question of temporality. What is the nature of the theatrical time that metatheatre unfolds within? Doister’s funeral proceeds at a quick clip, with representative Latin tags from the funeral service suggesting an accelerated performance of a longer script. “Dead men go not so fast / *In Paradisum*” Merrygreek says, commenting on the pace of the performance while also punning on the oddly “quick” or “living” status of the should-be deceased. In Udall’s busy comedy, “haste” or “speed” are frequently mentioned elements of the dramatic traffic, yet as things turn out, the slow-to-arrive deliverance at the end of the play confirms the sentiment that “good hap is not hasty; yet in space cometh grace.” Although the play often uses “to speed” in its meaning of “to succeed,” the force that ends up prevailing is the delayed reward for constancy and patience. Might then the intensified speed of the inset funeral be a marker of its intensified fraudulence?

Liminal Vengeance: Metatheatrical Screening, Dramatic Layering, and the Mitigation of Revenge

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Of all the dramatic genres represented in early modern English drama, none is more closely associated with metatheatricality than revenge tragedy. Every discussion of this family of self-aware tropes effectively begins with *Hamlet* in much the same way that Aristotle begins his discussion of tragedy in his *Poetics* with *Oedipus Rex*. But no play is more formative to the genre's interaction with moments of play-within-the-play and narrative framing than Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. It uses the distance and stability constructed through the representational layers generated by its metatheatrical conclusion to safely navigate the socially taboo elements that permeate the main plot. The most central of these taboos, revenge itself, is made both more palatable and more entertaining through Kyd's use of a series of strategies, culminating in the the-play-within-the-play, which constructs a liminal space in which the final acts of revenge are paradoxically both made more feasible and less possible at the same time. Kyd's innovative use of dramatic layers, which are created by the play's metatheatrical techniques, go on to become a hallmark of the English Renaissance revenge tragedy. Later playwrights built on Kyd's formula by utilizing a range of other restaged cultural performances to generate the same kind of dramaturgical effect.

Metatheatrical Constructions of Audience

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Recent scholarship suggests that the early modern soliloquy is laden with metatheatrical possibilities. Harry Berger claims "In every act of utterance dramatic speakers give themselves to be heard or seen. This implies that they represent themselves to themselves as well as to others and that they monitor these performances of themselves. They mark how their performances are being received and judged, and what their auditors and observers want or expect." Nancy Selleck's recent work, too, demonstrates that in early modern theater "Soliloquizing characters often address both themselves, absent others, and the audience successively in the same speech." This essay seeks to contribute to this discourse on soliloquy by analyzing how early modern metatheatricality not only addresses the audience, but also represents audiences to themselves, inviting them into self-reflexive adoptions of their theatrical roles as audience members. The rhetorical style of metatheatrical speech often cast audiences in a variety of possible theatrical roles (whether that be to praise and applaud a character, to bear witness to their suffering, to serve as confidante, etc.). This casting of the audience, too, is a strategy for

characters to fashion their own roles within a play (or at least attempt to) as they configure their identities through the recognition provided by audiences as “imagined interlocutors.”

Cymbetween

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Although criticism has long framed early modern metatheater in terms of personal rivalries between playwrights and playing companies, more recent work has revised such narratives, promoting instead models built on cooperation and dialogue. Indeed, the *OED* even cites Shakespeare to define the rare, obsolete meaning of “rival” as “associate.” This paper examines how Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* engages with former rivals, new associates, and its material playing spaces overwritten by both. I suggest that the play marks a shift in Shakespearean metatheater, transforming past rivalries into a dialogue between plays, playwrights, and playhouses; in other words, I examine how it is in conversation not only with other plays and playwrights but also with its material conditions of performance. While scholarship on *Cymbeline* often argues that it was written primarily with the Blackfriars in mind, I contend that it was designed with a metatheatrical duality to harness the distinct spaces of both the Globe and Blackfriars to produce new, sometimes opposed meanings depending on venue. In particular, I view the political resonances of the ghosts of the Leonati’s rhyming fourteeners and the ensuing Descent of Jupiter in light of the Globe’s and Blackfriars’ past repertoires. I contend that the rich variety of formal conventions in the play’s finale, particularly the Leonati’s fourteeners, contributes to a stabler patriotic resolution at the Globe, where they evoke the form’s nationalistic history from Tudor drama and translations of the classics, from Homer to Virgil, Ovid to Seneca. In contrast, I suggest that at the Blackfriars the very same speeches recall the less patriotic, more parodic uses of the form on indoor stages by playwrights such as Ben Jonson and Francis Beaumont, undermining Jupiter’s prophecy for British prosperity and hovering over the play’s literal last word, “peace.”

Jonson’s Audience, Metatheatre, and the Game of Induction

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Through examples of Jonson and Nashe, this paper explores the audience-based metatheatre typical of inductions. While inductions have drawn scholars’ attention as sites of dialogue among poets and playing companies, I argue they are more immediately designed as dialogue with their audiences. Indeed, inductions’ sometimes rivalrous content is part of a wider game, whose aim is to open the field of meaning-making to the audience. Often used with satiric plays, inductive

metatheatre recognizes the audience directly as part of a feigned action, both provoking spectators and including them in the play-making process, enabling them to play the “judicious” role of entertaining competing and controversial positions. Recent scholarship suggests that some of these metatheatrical pre-play actions shared the function of prologues and epilogues – to gain the favor of a play’s first audiences, whose judgments could make or break the fortunes of a new play. In the case of inductions, however, that important insight begs further questions, since their tone and strategies often differ radically from those of prologues and epilogues. Instead of the solicitous approach in which prologues ask the audience’s indulgence or “gentle” attention, inductions tend to be comically abrasive or deliberately discomforting vis-à-vis the audience. At times, they can be downright abusive. Ben Jonson’s inductions fall into this category – or at least, they’ve been read as evidence of Jonson’s hostility toward his audiences. In fact, though, such antagonism is a common induction gambit, and Jonson’s are merely among the most elaborate and inventive examples of a convention that was wholly provocative by design. Despite the induction’s complex and risky rhetorical strategies, its persistence on early modern stages suggests it succeeded with audiences, who likely recognized that its seeming disparagement should be taken not at face value, but as a cue for their active role in the upcoming play.

Metatheatre and its Metaballads

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I’m currently writing on the ballad-singer/sellers who sold and sung their wares at the doors of theatres – but whose texts were sometimes referred to, promoted and performed on stage in plays themselves. There seems to have been a trade arrangement between these ballad traders and the playhouse, meaning that printed and performed ballads were in some way extensions of plays. That is making me ask questions about ballads as very particular and nuanced forms of metatheatre – or as plays as particular and nuanced forms of metaballads, of course. I’m also now questioning where ‘theatre’ or ‘performance’ starts and stops (given that balladmongers trade just outside the theatre precinct). My paper will probably deal with those issues and is likely to address Jonson and Shakespeare.

Metadrama, Race and Disguise, and the English Actress

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My paper offers a close look at the complex performance dynamics at work in a signal moment on the Restored stage: the epilogue to Elkanah Settle’s 1674 *Love and Revenge*, in which the

actor Mary Lee returns to the stage ‘*in a Mans Habit, but in a white Wig, and her Face discovered*’ after having played, for the duration of the play, a character who is both African and male. That this undisguising takes place in what Diana Solomon calls the ‘between’ space of the epilogue amplifies the metadrama of the play’s already-metadramatic closing frame, which essentially invites the audience into the tiring room, as it were, partially to deconstruct the illusions of race and gender. Settle’s play is in fact an adaptation of William Heminge’s late Caroline tragedy *The Fatal Contract* (1638-9); comparing how the two plays handle this moment of discovery allows us to consider how the stage materialized race and gender from the early modern period to the advent of the first English actresses.