

Explore the ways in which Shakespeare uses metatheatre in his plays

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Explore the ways in which Shakespeare uses metatheatre in his plays All the world's a stage And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts~ Jacques, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene vii, lines 139 - 142 ~Shakespeare draws on the stage metaphor, an ancient idea stretching back to the time of Pythagoras, and incorporates this comparison of the real world and the world of theatre into a number of his plays. In offering this mutually analogous concept, Shakespeare makes frequent use of metatheatre to present the audience with a combination of these opposing ' worlds', commenting on both by metatheatrically breaking the audience's illusion of watching reality. Indeed, the real world (or ' life') and the world of theatre are so closely linked with the ideas of reality and illusion that they are virtually interchangeable terms, and Shakespeare makes pertinent observations about the intertwining of the four. By mirroring themes in the main plots, and apparently blending life/reality and theatre/illusion and blurring the boundaries between them, Shakespeare's metatheatre illustrates some of the ways in which reality and illusion seep into both life and drama. It shows us how life can be theatrical and illusory, and also exemplifies well as the realistic nature of so much theatre. Elizabethan dramatists like Shakespeare felt the need to acknowledge and define the relationship between their illusory plays and reality, as Anne Richter says: ' A sense of contact with the audience...had to be maintained, a means of relating the play world with that reality upon which plays are built.' By drawing our attention to and making obvious the theatrical elements in the plays, Shakespeare was able to force the audience to acknowledge the artificiality of life. He broke the ' fourth

wall' of conventional naturalistic theatre, the proscenium arch separating actors and audience. In Hamlet, Shakespeare deals with realistic issues such as love, insanity, desire and self-hatred, but by casting Hamlet in the rôle of someone purposefully putting on an 'antic disposition' (I. v. 172) - this being a sort of metatheatre in its own artificiality - he prompts the audience not only to consider the various themes as they might arise in their own experience, but also to question the entire nature of reality in this world. Hamlet himself is surrounded by the questionable reality of a persistent ghost as well as a fratricidal uncle who is himself putting on a façade ('smile, and smile, and be a villain!' - I. v. 108) but the twist in the plot that most upsets events and threatens the reality within the play is the entrance of the players, since they eventually perform the 'Mousetrap' play-within-the-play. Hamlet's reaction to hearing the First Player's Senecan speech is itself metatheatrical: 'Now I am alone' (II. v. 549). The fact that there is obviously an audience watching him emphasises the theatricality, as well as spotlighting the fact that he is about to soliloquise. Hamlet's soliloquy is a comparison between theatrical and real passion; the first lines focusing on the Player incorporate vocabulary such as 'monstrous', 'passion' and 'Tears' - words that are emotionally charged, yet nonetheless controlled, rooted in the regular structure of the iambic pentameter verse. Although he breaks off with a part-line - 'For Hecuba!' (558) - order is soon restored as soon as he begins to talk about the Player once again. However, at line 566, the organisation of Hamlet's speech begins to break down when he considers himself; 'Yet I' disrupts the regular rhythm of the lines. Formally, despite the maintenance of the iambic pentameter structure, the flow of speech is

broken midway along lines with semi-colons or full stops, colloquialism (' I should ' a' fatted') and short questions and exclamations that proliferate (' Am I a coward?', ' Who does me this?', ' Bloody, bawdy villain!'). The speech also begins to lose shape as it descends into diatribe, moving from self-hatred (' A dull and muddy-mettled rascal' - 567) into violent curses against Claudius (Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain!' - 581 - here the repetitive assonance hammering the explosive insults even harder) and then reverting back to self-hatred - ' Why, what an ass am I!' (582).

Ironically, in criticising himself for his lack of real passion, Hamlet is actually displaying ardent emotion, but the audience is forced to acknowledge that even his more restrained comparison between real and theatrical passion at the beginning of his soliloquy actually achieved nothing. It is also particularly interesting for the audience to see an actor playing a character who is arguably himself a bit of an actor (Hamlet), comparing himself to an actor (the Player), played by an actor, and in this Shakespeare is exploiting the levels of metatheatre to emphasise that it is a play. We also see the artificial aspect of life portrayed in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The main question for critics regarding metatheatre in this play is the reasons Shakespeare had for inserting the Christopher Sly framing device and yet not finishing the play with it, since the character is dramatically problematic in terms of the length of time he should remain onstage, and how he should exit. In the anonymous play *The Taming of a Shrew* (1594), Sly remains onstage for the duration of the main plot, commenting upon it in an obviously metatheatrical manner and afterwards waking up from his ' dream' and returning home to apply the lessons that he has learned. Sly seems to function as another distancing

device to highlight to the audience that they are watching a play, an illusion, but if he is removed half way through the play then his use is certainly diminished. Tori Haring-Smith suggests the solution to this problem - ' After 1954 Shakespeare probably revised the play, omitting the epilogue in order to allow for more doubling' . Alternatively, Anne Barton suggests that ' Shakespeare decided to truncate the part so savagely because he discovered that he could not trust to actor who played it not to dominate the entire comedy,' and it is certainly possible that when adapting A Shrew Shakespeare may have had pragmatic rather than aesthetic revisions in mind. In any case, despite the arguable weakening of Sly as a metatheatrical device in not finishing it properly, the framing device does make comment on major themes of the main plot. Just as the First Player's Senecan speech in Act II, scene ii of Hamlet so obviously mirrors in its subject (the death of Priam) the main plot (the death of Old Hamlet), so too does the framing device as it reinforces one of the central themes - that a person's behaviour is denoted by the way others treat that person and the environment in which that person finds himself or herself. Whilst this theme in itself is not metatheatrical, that it also appears in the play-within-the-play, which unusually is actually the main plot, shows that metatheatre is being used to drive it home. Similarly, the theme of self-gratification is also not in itself metatheatrical and yet is presented metatheatrically in both the framing device and the Shrew scenes. Only at line 68 of Induction, scene ii does Sly really begin to believe he is a lord, when he is told that he has a wife. His switch at this line from prose to the blank verse normally reserved for noble characters is humorously indicative of the way that he only becomes

interested when he realises it can gratify him sexually. This seems to mirror a similar theme in the main plot, when we see Petruccio's initial interest in Kate in Act I. ii only arising from him hearing that she has a rich father, as well as Hortensio's disguise as a personal tutor in order to try to manipulate Bianca into loving him. However, the most central theme of both the framing device and the main plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and one that pervades many of Shakespeare's plays and is directly linked with illusion and reality, is that of deception, usually arising out of disguise. In *Shrew*, this idea is metatheatrical both in its presence in both the framing device and the main plot, and also thematically (disguise is a type of illusion). Furthermore, acting itself is a type of disguise, and so the nature of all the events comes into question - when someone appears to be something or someone that they are not, he or she immediately illustrates illusion. Duping Sly and making him believe that he is a lord, the real Lord begins the curious blurring of illusion and reality when deception becomes self-deception and Sly starts to 'forget himself (Induction, i, 42) because he 'cannot choose' (42) who he now really is. In this, Sly is like Kate, who is forced to act in the way Baptista and Petruccio orchestrate her to do, but in a way that she initially despises - a rôle that she 'cannot choose'. Disguise also abounds in the main plot not only in an obvious theatrical manner, with the disguised schoolmasters, but also more subtly when Bianca actually turns out to be a stubborn and unsubmitive wife - 'Am I your bird? I mean to shift my bush' (V. ii. 46) - and when it transpires that Kate makes a compliant wife - 'Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper/Thy head, thy sovereign' (146-7). And as if these copious illustrations of the theme of deception were not enough, it would be

emphasised further as, watching an actor playing an actor playing Kate or Bianca, the audience would be aware of the obvious theatricality; particularly with male actors playing female rôles, even more distance would be created between the real audience and the play-within-the-play. In addition, whilst the Lord appears to Sly to be casting him as the audience, Sly is actually himself being watched not only by one but two other audiences – the Lord and his men, and the real audience. This multi-layered metatheatre also found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when the real audience watch the fairies watching the lovers watching the Mechanicals, once again draws the audience's attention to disguise and its habit of blending the edges of reality and illusion (for each level is both life and theatre), highlighting the 'theatrical nature of life'. The metatheatrical theme of disguise is also itself expressed metatheatrically in *Hamlet* through the framework of spying and trickery. Whilst Hamlet disguises himself with 'an antic disposition' in order to observe Claudius and not be suspected, Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy upon Hamlet. Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet as he speaks to Ophelia in Act III, scene I, and Claudius speaks like a director setting up a scene to the actress Ophelia: 'Read on this book' (43). Similarly, Hamlet uses the 'Mousetrap' as a spying device, in which to 'catch the conscience of a King' (II. ii. 605). The cumulative effect of all these illusory disguises and the dramatic irony they produce compounds with the fact that there is a real audience watching all these characters watching each other, adding another layer to the idea that reality to one character is not necessarily another character's 'reality', as each character clearly has a different perspective, all cleverly orchestrated by the real director of action –

Shakespeare. In addition, that Hamlet has told the audience (though not Claudius) that he will feign madness, and the popular view that this illusory theatre actually slips into reality and Hamlet actually becomes truly mad, also combine to once again prompt the audience to consider the nature of reality in their own lives. The famous soliloquy 'To be, or not to be' (III. i. 55) is spoken by Hamlet in apparent ignorance of Claudius' and Polonius' presence, and although a soliloquy, there is an added dramatic irony in that he is performing to not one but two audiences, making it a metatheatrical speech. To further this metatheatre and emphasise the idea that artifice or illusion might be seeping into this supposedly honest and realistic look into Hamlet's mind, Shakespeare presents much of the speech as quite ironic, as if it could be placed within quotation marks to signify further the illusory nature. Appearing almost as if he is conducting a rhetorical exercise in a matter of philosophical debate, Hamlet significantly does not use the first person 'I' but abstracts the speech further with the accumulation of infinitives: 'To be', 'To die', 'to sleep.' Whilst Hamlet clearly seems to be talking about suicide, the impersonal impression this removal creates actually distances the speech further from the character and the audience, portraying it even more as a piece of metatheatre to prompt not only the individual Hamlet but also the audience to consider the nature of life and reality. This metatheatre is also supplemented by the fact that the whole speech appears a bit like a play-within-a-play, with Claudius and Polonius providing the prologue, epilogue and audience watching the performance. Two 'Players' scenes frame the entire scene and thus the 'reality' is substantially undermined by the amassing theatrical imagery. However,

Hamlet is famously known as a play about the theatre itself, and whilst metatheatre serves one purpose, to highlight the combination of reality and illusion in the lives of both the characters in the main plot and the audience members, it also reminds the audience of the power of theatre in the realm of realism. Therefore not only do metatheatrical references emphasise the illusory nature of the real world, but they also 'express the depth of the play world.' This is immediately evident with the theatrical vocabulary that abounds in Hamlet, The Taming of the Shrew and A Midsummer Night's Dream, words that are both self-consciously theatrical and also those that simply conjure up the idea of the theatre. For example, Puck's statement 'I'll be an auditor, an actor too perhaps' (III. i. 70-71) clearly demonstrates his role as a member of a drama, and Hamlet's 'You that look pale...audience to this act' (V. ii. 326-327) show the illusory nature of the events onstage. However, when the Huntsman says to the lord in The Taming of the Shrew 'we will play our part' (Induction. i. 69), he is indicating that he will cooperate and help with the scheme, but the language he uses has definite theatrical overtones. Here language is being used as a form of metatheatre, stressing to the audience that they are watching a play, and so combining reality and illusion. Hamlet's decision to set up the 'Mousetrap', the focal point of the whole play, allows Shakespeare to demonstrate to the audience his belief in the power of theatre in the real world, in a number of ways. The play-within-the-play is put on by Hamlet precisely because it mirrors events in the main plot, in order to move Claudius (which it does - 'Give me some light. Away!' - III. ii. 269), and this itself shows the power of theatre as something realistic. But Hamlet adds to the metatheatre by commenting throughout. For

example, when he says 'The players cannot keep [counsel], they'll tell all' (141), he alerts the audience once again to the blurring of reality and illusion this time in the real world as the King and Queen knowingly watch a piece of theatre. Furthermore, by asking 'Madam, how like you this play?' (229), he adds fuel to the fire by stoking a response out of Gertrude that causes her to incriminate herself when she coins the phrase 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks.' The 'Mousetrap' exemplifies illusion reaching out and grabbing reality, dragging it out of the other illusion concealing it and forcing it into the light (reflected in Claudius' call for 'lights' and Polonius' triple repetition 'Lights, lights, lights!' (270). Mass confusion is caused as Claudius' reality (the truth about the murder) has been infringed upon by illusion (the play), and Hamlet is now in the position to judge the reality of Claudius' guilt or innocence. We can also see Shakespeare's attitude to the theatre penetrating the illusory walls of the play in the way that he adapts *The Taming of a Shrew* into the newer play. Whilst in *A Shrew* the actors were ridiculed figures, Shakespeare's speak in dignified language - 'Fear not, my lord, we can contain ourselves, / Were he the veriest antic in the world' (Induction. i. 100-101) and like Hamlet in his precise instructions to the players, the Lord is a theatre critic (105 ff). In these two instances, it may be that Shakespeare himself is metatheatrically inserting his own views about acting into the texts. Similarly, whilst the original Sly was knowledgeable about theatre, Shakespeare's Sly seems ignorant, and so by casting the drunken beggar as the character least well informed about theatrical matters, Shakespeare is implicitly espousing pro-theatrical views. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare also metatheatrically

emphasises the pedestal on which he places the theatre by illustrating this with a group of bad actors destroying a good play, the result being mocked as it flounders to stay buoyant. The Mechanicals constantly undermine the intelligence of all their audiences (the fairies, courtiers and real audience) with their pedantic literalism and humorous inappropriate breaking of the realm of illusion: ' I would have you think/That had in it a crannied hole or chink' (V. i. 155-156), ' You, ladies...May now, perchance, both quake and tremble here' (215-217), and perhaps the most unnecessary, ' All that I have to say is to tell you that the lantern is the moon, I the man i'th'moon, this thorn bush my thorn bush, and this dog my dog' (250-252). This obsession with the presence of the audience actually draws attention to the metatheatre as Shakespeare includes ' The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby' to show his superiority when it comes to mechanical difficulties behind theatre, drawing the audience's attention to what it is to be an actor. To ' bring the moonlight into a chamber' (III. i. 59) and transform a man into an animal are the problems that face both the Mechanicals in their play and Shakespeare in his face, and yet only Shakespeare succeeds. The fact that the mechanicals have chosen the classical story of Pyramus and Thisbe to perform is ironic and only heightens the play's comedy, as it was a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and very familiar to Shakespeare's contemporary audience. These stories of magical transformations also add to the idea of illusion in the play, especially since there are both literal transformations (" Bless thee, Bottom! thou art translated!" [III. i. 119-120]) and figurative ones (between harmony and chaos, dream and reality, joy and unhappiness, and day and night). Plays-

within-plays remind the audience that they (the audience members) are under illusion, just as the characters at that point are, but this realisation itself releases the audience from the illusion and prompts them to consider the nature of theatre. That Puck says 'If we shadows have offended. Think but this, and all is mended: That you have but slumbered here While these visions did appear' (V. i. 413 - 6) suggests that the audience should dismiss the entire play as a dream. However, because Puck, the character advising here, is part of this illusion himself, the audience cannot do this, and the metatheatre actually serves to reinforce the ideas already considered in the play (such as the nature of love or theatre). This illusion leaves an impression on the reality of the audience, and thus the two are blurred again, just as they are when Demetrius, still drugged, returns to the 'real world' of Athens. Using metatheatre, Shakespeare tries to reconcile the ideas of reality and illusion not only within the realms of the play, but in the world of the audience as well. Indeed, 'The Globe' itself is a theatrical metaphor for the worlds of life and the stage meeting and mirroring each other. Some of Shakespeare's references seem to elevate the stage to being realistic and some lower the real world to being illusory, and frequently there are intersections where illusion and reality, and life and the theatre cross over. Eventually, however, we come to realise that although theatre may often be perceived as realistic, actually when we make a careful study of realism, we realise that so much of it is often illusory or theatrical that the definition of 'reality' actually becomes 'illusion.' Similarly, if the theatre and what we perceive to be illusion actually contain truth about reality, then 'illusion' becomes 'reality'. And so the vicious circle continues and the audience

members are left floundering in their seats in deliberation about the true nature of ' reality'.