

The function of metatheatricality in epicoene and the spanish tragedy essay



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Metatheatricality is defined by Stuart Davis as “ a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre’s claim to be simply realistic to be nothing but a mirror in which we view the actions and sufferings of characters like ourselves, suspending our disbelief in their reality. ” (Metatheatre). It is present in many Renaissance dramas, yet it is analysed, understood and critiqued in a vast variety of ways. Davis claims that metatheatre awakens our minds to life’s “ uncanny likeness” to art, theatre and forms undefinable.

Metatheatre begins by sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life’s uncanny likeness to art or illusion. This is a term difficult to analyse, and as a result even Nellhaus describes the analysis of plays-within-plays and self-consciously theatrical characters as “ problematic” (3). However, an attempt can be made to critically understand the significance of the epicene in Jonson’s *Epicoene*.

This drama shatters many illusions of typical social conventions, particularly during each revelation of *Epicoene*’s true character, and most notably in the final scene, where Morose finally learns of the truth surrounding his new bride. *Bel-Imperia*, Kyd’s creation of a manipulative woman in *The Spanish Tragedy*, can also be argued to be a social deviant, as she challenges the illusions of performance versus reality throughout. We do not know where her loyalties lie, and she seems to often contradict her own feelings and ideas.

Social dynamics are a focus of metatheatre, particularly in these plays, as the pretence of the characters is misleading, yet is a formative aspect upon

the play as a whole. Kyd explores the concept of metatheatricality and women, to an extent, in *The Spanish Tragedy*. This is evident from the outset, as, at the very opening of the drama, the ghost of Andrea introduces Bel-Imperia to the audience as “sweet Bel-Imperia” (1. 1. 11), a pleasant illusion that is soon shattered not long after we meet our female protagonist, Bel-Imperia, and learn of her plot for revenge. She is an interesting example of a self-conscious theatrical character.

Her manipulative, devious self is performing a role throughout the entirety of the play, as she so states herself, “Although I bear it out for fashion’s sake” (4. 1. 24). She does not appear as a victim amongst the misfortune occurring in the play, she appears calculated, logical and most definitely conniving when executing her revenge, and no qualms are expressed when exerting revenge on “[her] Andrea’s” murderer. The decision to leave his death “unreveng’d by me” is misleading (4. 1. 23), and where metatheatre and the revenge plot intertwine. She convinces the audience, momentarily, that she is withdrawing from revenging any death.

Yet, in the same scene she agrees to, “consent, conceal; /And aught that may effect for thine avail/Join with thee to revenge Horatio’s death” (4. 1. 46-48). She, acting as the lover that lost another, convinces Hieronimo, with ease, to allow her to join him in avenging Horatio’s death. Her conscious efforts to mislead and manipulate, while acting the part of the broken-hearted lover, “Don Andrea’s death, /Who, living, was my garland’s sweetest flower, /And in his death hath buried my delights” (1. 4. 4-5), encourage the audience to consider the theme of performance verses reality.

Bel-Imperia is, most certainly, not a typical female character in a Renaissance drama. She has a significant level of control over the male characters, as, even early in the tragedy, she manages to manipulate, mislead and deceive. She makes full use of her new lover, Horatio, as an unknown pawn of her revenge, while apparently still mourning Andrea, “ Ay, go, Horatio, leave me here alone; For solitude best fits my cheerless mood [...] Yes, second love shall further my revenge! I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend, The more to spite the prince that wrought his end” (1. 4. 58-59, 66-68) However, “ it is only after Horatio directs Bel-Imperia’s attention to himself that she comes up with the idea of loving him as a means of avenging Andrea’s death and thwarting Balthazar” (McGinnis Kay 27).

So, within days of the murder of her “ sweetest flower”, she is courting Horatio; “ Then ward thyself: I dart this kiss at thee” (2. 4. 40). While Bel-Imperia’s love for Horatio is a reality verses appearance debate, she wastes no time in committing herself to avenging his murder too, “ Myself should send their hateful souls to hell,/That wrought his downfall with extremest death” (4. 1. 28-29).

This love is, perhaps, the true indication that Bel-Imperia is self-consciously playing a role. Does she truly love Horatio, is this her reality? The blame of her possible false love cannot be truly blamed solely on Bel-Imperia, as Horatio “ redirect[s] Bel-Imperia’s attention from Don-Andrea to himself” (McGinnis Kay 26). Yet, has metatheatricality completely taken over, as she convincingly takes charge and directs her own actions, knowing the impact that it may have on others?

Is this a vindictive love-act, merely a cruel catalyst to enrage Balthazar for Bel-Imperia to exert her personal revenge on him? How Kyd develops the confusing, misleading, meta-theatrical nature of the play is described by William N. West as, " Setting himself against [his] earlier plays that resolved their confusions at their conclusions, Kyd proposes a theatre in which the conclusion is not the end of confusion, but its acme. Compared to later plays, *The Spanish Tragedy* does not simply represent confusion—it enacts it. "

Metatheatricality is explored to a large extent throughout *Epicoene*, again with the focus upon women and their impact on social conventions. From the outset, we question *Epicoene*. Even her name, likely derived from the word 'epicene', which Oxford English Dictionary defines as " having characteristics of both sexes or no characteristics of either sex", hints at something being amiss, that there is something unusual about this character. Is this character primarily a theatrical character? Is there evidence of the audience, or even other characters being misled?

The first reveal is our initial solid, obvious piece of evidence of the presence of metatheatre in the play, when *Epicoene* speaks out in the presence of *Morose*, " Why, did you think you had married a statue? Or a motion only? One of the French puppets with eyes turned with a wire? Or some innocent out of the hospital, that would stand with her hands thus, and a plaice mouth, and look upon you? " (3. 4. 37-40) This is where the presence of reality verses appearance comes to the forefront of the drama. Initially, to *Morose*, *Epicoene* appears the ideal Renaissance wife: obedient, silent, chaste.

Morose's illusions of his ideal wife are shattered the minute she opens her mouth. The audience are fully aware that all Morose wanted was nothing more than " a dumb woman" (1. 2. 26), and now he feels hard done by, " She is my regent already! I have married a Penthesilea, a Semramis, Sold my liberty to a distaff! " (3. 4. 66-67). As Epicoene isn't silent, she is associated with being loquacious, as, during this period, silence seemed to coincide with chastity, and evokes a sense of dread in Morose as she "[is] neither obedient nor quiet, [and] that the whole purpose of the talkative woman is to dominate males" (Cope 7).

Morose senses the trickery played on him during the pairing of the two, and searches for an escape, " Of my affliction. Good sir, depart, and let her do it alone" (3. 5. 62), as if wishing for her sole death were not enough, he calls her his loud-mouthed wife his " cittern" and a " plague". The impression is most certainly given that he is not happy about being deceived with Epicoene's supposed silence, and now feels as if he has been stuck with a plague.

The final reveal is the focus of metatheatricality in Epicoene, as it fully enhances the dwelling on the boundaries between reality and appearance present within the play. It is here that the truth behind Epicoene is revealed – that she is not at all what she seems. Morose hears, " You have married a boy: a gentleman's son" (5. 4. 220), and does not utter a word for the rest of the play. The dominant male, who sought a silent wife, is now struck dumb by his own selfishness and unattainable morals.

Is this play becoming truly aware of itself? The audience wants to see Morose getting his comeuppance, and what better way than a reversal of roles, as he loses his tongue. The boundary between performance and reality throughout the play is portrayed at a tentative balance, and it can be questioned as to how successful this play would be if performed to today's audiences. Social dynamics are challenged in this final scene of exposure, as cross-dressing or "the device of transvestism is also clearly exposed for the first time" (Cope 9).

This revelation attacks the social conventions within the play, as Epicoene "presents an economic struggle between a character who attempts to exert social power through procreation, and a character whose economic activism mocks the reproductive basis of patrilineage even as it allows him to buttress his position within a hereditary social order" (Swann 298).

As it is Dauphine that is mocking Morose and his social position, and he is the enforcer of metatheatre in this play, "This gentlewoman was lodged here by me o' purpose, and, to be put upon my uncle, hath professed this obstinate silence for my sake" (2. 4. 43-45), full responsibility for shaking social conventions and introducing shock revelations about Epicoene and cross-dressing can be placed upon him. He is the catalyst that forces the development of metatheatricality in the drama. The function of metatheatricality can be difficult to solidly define, yet is undoubtedly effective in assisting the performance of a play intending to mislead, shock and confuse the social dynamics and conventions among the characters.

Jonson uses the obscure art of concealment to puzzle and bewilder in *Epicoene*, as he explores the idea of cross-dressing as a method of deception. Also, the Renaissance opinion of women, that they should always be silent, obedient and chaste, is ignored from early in the drama, to allow Dauphine and *Epicoene* use *Morose* to the advantage of Dauphine's inheritance. *The Spanish Tragedy* demonstrates Kyd's portrayal of the woman as a devious creature, as *Bel-Imperia* easily encourages both *Horatio* and *Hieronimo* to assist her in avenging first *Andrea's*, then *Horatio's*, death.

The use of metatheatre in these plays demonstrates how an audience can be misled, and how characters can be manipulated. This makes evident how metatheatricality is reflected in reality, how easily people can be deceived or seduced by apparent attractive affairs, such as *Morose* and his silent woman. Performance alone has a basis in metatheatre, as the actor is conscious that he is playing a role, just as both *Epicoene* and *Bel-Imperia* are fully aware of their deceptive actions. Metatheatre is seen in a vast variety of ways, across a vast variety of Renaissance dramas, in particular.

Yet, Davis argues that; " Any theatrical device can work metatheatrically if we sense in it a certain deliberate reflexiveness, a tendency to refer to itself or to its context in a more general mode: to theatre itself; to art, artifice, and illusion; and perhaps above all to language as such". This would appear true in the dramas aforementioned, as the context is of utmost importance to the reactions of the characters and the audience. Illusion is at the forefront of both *Epicoene* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, and this is the main catalyst for the development of metatheatricality in the dramas.