

CHAPTER ONE

English Renaissance Drama and Metatheater:

An Introduction

This is a study of theatrical self-reflexivity or metatheatricality through close textual analyses of five English Renaissance plays: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*,¹ with references to some contemporary plays. The metatheatrical perspective will highlight the theatrical self-reflexivity common on the Early Modern stage. Why these five plays? I include the most popular plays for the discussion of metatheater: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. Risking myself in the danger and disgrace of repeating the excellent precursors, I wish to dig further into the depth of the metatheatrical mine from where they left. I wish I had accomplished this goal with this dissertation, though I know it might be only a fantasy or dream. I also include plays that are seldom associated with metatheater: *Doctor Faustus*, *Othello*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. With these plays, I want to broaden the field of metatheatrical criticism. If this effort is valid, I could prove that metatheatricality is not as narrow as it appears. It is also present in plays that are not overtly metatheatrical. Before launching

¹ The play was first published anonymously in 1607. After fifty years, Edward Archer ascribed it to Cyril Tourneur in a play list published in 1656. But this attribution has been challenged in recent studies, which strongly argue that the play should be ascribed to Thomas Middleton based on internal evidence. However, not enough external evidence is available to settle the issue beyond doubt. The internal evidence critics propose also raises skepticism because of its incompatibility to fit into Middleton's much more detached moralistic stance (McAlindon 135; Foakes 1996: 1-3). Since the authorship controversy of this play is not settled yet, I choose not to assign it to either Cyril Tourneur or Thomas Middleton.

a textual study on these plays, a survey of the Renaissance view toward dramatic art is in order.

I. From Mimesis to Anti-mimesis

Play metaphors, in a diversified spectrum from ubiquitous theatrical imageries, manipulative playwright-characters, cunning and deliberate role-playing, to full-length plays-within-the-plays, are dominant and conspicuous in the Shakespearean canon in particular, and Renaissance drama in general, calling attention to the self-reflexive impulse of the genre in this period. Anne Richter makes emphatic three-fold functions of the use of play metaphors:

They [play metaphors] express the depth of the play world. Secondly, they define the relationship of that world with the reality represented by the audience. Used within the “reality” of the play itself, they also serve to remind the audience that elements of illusion are present in ordinary life, and that between the world and the stage there exists a complicated interplay of resemblance that is part of the perfection and nobility of the drama itself as a form. (86)

With its representational and mimetic potential, dramatic texts become ideal playgrounds for playwrights to experiment on the complex interaction between reality and illusion, truth and appearance, or substance and shadow.

Renaissance drama, or to put it more specifically, Renaissance metadrama (plays that demonstrate a self-conscious and self-reflexive impulse) often

attends to the exploration of the nature of the theater, thereby drawing our attention to the dialectics between drama and life. In this chapter, an overview of the notions circulating in Shakespeare's time about the purpose of plays, the effect of dramatic texts, the function of actors, the audience's response, and the relation of actors and audience to dramatic characters will be given.

Before giving a survey of the metatheatrical critical theories that this study adopts, I would like to begin with a quick review of some related Renaissance literary theories, which are rooted in classical philosophy. A poet, that is a writer of poetic drama (or drama in poetry), in Plato's *Republic*, is regarded as a mere imitator of appearances, who is twice removed from the truth in his imitation of the shadow. As Hazard Adams puts it, Plato

locates reality in what he calls "ideas," or "forms," rather than in the world of "appearances" that we experience through the senses. He regards objects we perceive through the senses as merely copies of the ideas. Our rational powers acquaint us with the ideas and with truth. The poet, restricted to imitating the realm of appearances, makes only copies of copies, and his creation is thus twice removed from reality. (11)

In brief Plato regards the world as already a copy of the world of "forms" and "ideas." The poet, in representing the phenomenal world, is only making an imitation of an imitation.

Aristotle disagrees with Plato in many respects. As Adams puts it

succinctly, he

does not believe that the world of appearances is merely an ephemeral copy of the changeless ideas; he believes that change is a fundamental process of nature, which he regards as a creative force with a direction. Reality, for Aristotle, is the process by which a form manifests itself through the concrete and by which the concrete takes on meaning working in accordance with ordered principles. The poet's imitation is an analogue of this process; he takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different matter or medium. This medium, which the form does not inhabit in nature, is the source of each work's inward principle of order and consequently of its independence from slavish copying. The poet is thus an imitator *and* a creator. It is through his peculiar sort of imitation that the poet discovers the ultimate form of actions. (47)

Thus, in modifying Plato's theory of imitation into "mimesis," Aristotle tries to save artists from banishment. He infuses a sense of originality and creativity into an artistic work based on imitation. Aristotelian "mimesis" becomes one of the most fundamental principles for various artistic representations.

Madeleine Doran elucidates the significance of Aristotelian "mimesis" within a theatrical context:

Aristotle borrows the idea of "mimesis" as the defining characteristic of art Aristotle seems to mean by

imitation a representation of human habits, feelings, and actions in all their diverse modes of manifestation; yet he sees them in their particularity making manifest universal and general truth. (71)

Overshadowed by the revival of Plato's condemnation of poetry as an imitation of an imitation, many Elizabethans feel the urgency to justify or defend the purpose of literary works. The predominant view of the function of poetry in the Early Modern England is Horatian in nature, namely, to teach and to delight. For example, Philip Sidney defines poetry in terms of Aristotelian "mimesis" and Horatian teaching:

Poesie therefore is an arte of imitation, for so *Aristotle* termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring forth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight. (Smith 1904: I, 158)

Two main topics are especially highlighted in this definition. The first one is the mimetic nature of artistic creation; the second, the artistic purpose of teaching and delighting. Though Sidney refers to poetry in particular, he is talking about literature in general.

For the Elizabethans, drama is primarily mimetic. Sidney uses "representing," "counterfetting," and "figuring forth . . . a speaking picture" in turn to gloss "Mimesis." Hamlet provides a classic example of the Renaissance view of drama's mimetic nature. To him, the end "of playing . . . both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature"

(3.2.20-22),² regarding drama as a reflection of nature, a representation of reality. A faithful rendition is the objective of drama. George Puttenham, Shakespeare's contemporary, follows the Aristotelian model, and defines the nature of a poet and his art in a similar vein. He proclaims in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589):

[A] Poet may in some sort be said a follower or imitator, because he can express the true and liuely of euery thing is set before him, and which he taketh in hand to describe: and so in that respect is both a maker and a counterfaior: and Poesie an art not only of making, but also of imitation.

(Smith 1904: II, 3)

In this passage, Puttenham brings in not only the aspect of imitation in the art of poetry, but also the dimension of creation (“making”).³ Roger Ascham, in *The Scholemaster* (1570), distinguishes two kinds of imitation. The first one, Aristotelian imitation, is the literary representation:

The whole doctrine of Comedies and Tragedies is a perfite *imitation*, or faire liuelie painted picture of the life of euerie degree of man. (Smith 1904: I, 7)

The second kind is emulation, or the following of excellent models of the best authors in learning of tongues and sciences (7).

In sum, most Elizabethan *literati* hold a mimetic view toward art, upholding a truthful representation of nature as the ultimate goal of an artwork.

² References to *Hamlet* are to the Arden edition, Ed. Harold Jenkins.

³ For Robert Egan, Puttenham puts an enthusiastic stress on the Poet as a “maker,” and only secondarily on the Aristotelian definition of the Poet as an “imitator” (Egan 3-4).

Mimetic illusion and verisimilitude are thus what dramatists attempt to achieve in their plays.

Shakespeare's conception of art and drama, however, is much more complicated and multivalent. It is mimetic at times, but dramatic at others; realistic, fantastical. Using Shakespeare's works to summarize the bard's view to art, James Calderwood briefly generalizes the poet's attitude to the function and value of his art.

It is enough to note that in the sonnets art has the power of conferring immortality upon its subject, that in *Hamlet* dramatic illusion becomes the instrument of truth after truth has become illusive, that in *King Lear* the artist-actor Edgar calls upon a lyric evocation of the heights at Dover to translate Gloucester into an actor in a brief drama of redemption, that in *The Winter's Tale* art gives birth to reality as Hermione materializes out of the statue, and that in *The Tempest* Prospero's art returns everyone to himself "when no man was his own." (1965: 509)

For Pauline Kiernan, a Shakespearean play is not an imitation of life or an illusion of reality, but a mere fiction, or a theatrical construction. Therefore, she denounces the mimetic illusion, and advocates the dramatic illusion instead, declaring that Shakespearean drama unashamedly affirm itself as a "liar" (12).

In fact, both positive and negative views are associated with English Renaissance conception of artists, and by extension, of dramatists and actors. Negative views on artists, or dramatists and actors in particular, are abundant in

Puritan polemic pamphlets written by Philip Stubbes, and the like.⁴ In contrast to the idea of a degraded status of an artist, that of an elevated version is also emerging. The positive view on artists is developed from the English Renaissance literary critical theory to regard an artist as a godlike maker, whose artistic creation is analogous to that of God. Philip Sidney, in *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595), proposes that

Neyther let it be deemed too sawcie a comparison to balance
the highest poynt of mans wit with the efficacie of Nature:
but rather giue right honor to the heauenly Maker of that
maker, who, hauing made man to his owne likenes, set him
beyond and ouer all the workes of that second nature, which
in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie, when with the
force of a diuine breath he bringeth things forth far
surpassing her dooings (Smith 1904: I, 157)

He even commends the poet's creation as a golden world, which surpasses the brazen world of nature:

Nature neuer set forth the earth in so rich tapistry as diuers
Poets haue done, neither with pleasant riuers, fruitful trees,
sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too
much loued earth more louely. Her world is brasen, the
Poets only deliuer a golden. (156)

For Sidney, the fictive world not only is independent of the world of nature, but also in its delicate beauty excels the mundane world. Moreover, he

⁴ See Jonas Barish for the discussion of Puritan attacks on theater.

accentuates the power of an artifice to shape, influence, or even change our perception of the world of nature: to “bestow a *Cyrus* vpon the worlde, to make many *Cyrus*’s” (157). Likewise, George Puttenham calls a poet a maker:

A Poet is as much to say as a maker Such as (by way of resemblance and reuerently) we may say of God; who without any trauell to his diuine imagination made all the world of nought Euen so the very Poet makes and contriues out of his owne braine both the verse and matter of his poeme, and not by any foreine copie or example The premises considered, it giueth to the name and profession no smal dignitie and preheminance, aboue all other artificers, Scientificke or Mechanicall. (Smith 1904: II, 3)

The Elizabethans also stress the moral function of literature by emphasizing its powerful influence. For example, echoing Sidney’s “to teach and delight,” Hamlet points out the didactic function of the theater: “to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.22-24). This is the most effective justification of drama, which pinpoints the function and purpose of theater to show the world what is the attraction of virtue, and what is the repulsion behind scorn. This is a defense of the theater in line with the Renaissance literary theory to regard literature as a form of teaching. In sum, the ultimate objective of literature is to improve the world (Vickers 10; Ringler 201-11). Or as Brian Vickers puts it, when he analyzes the prescriptive tradition in the Renaissance,

The writer was supposed to arouse the reader’s emotions by

his representation of life, in particular by showing human goodness as admirable, evil as detestable. By so doing the writer would also help to “form” or shape the reader’s character, “inflaming” him to emulate virtue. (9)

But this passage, besides emphasizing the didactic function of literature, also touches upon the somewhat controversial issue regarding the powerful influence of illusion on reality.

While the Renaissance literary criticism asserts the mimetic theory that “art imitates life,” dramatic representation can be very effective as to change or influence the reality it represents. Again and again, English Renaissance metatheatrical works illustrate a possible reversal of this formula: “art imitates life” is turned to “life imitates art.” Anne Righter argues,

The play, holding a mirror up to nature, was bound to reflect the reality represented by its audience. Yet this audience was also forced to recognize the encroachments of illusion upon its own domain. Certain spectators in a theatre might, for a moment, mistake illusion for reality; other playgoers carried the language and gestures of the drama away with them at the conclusion of the performance, for use in the world outside In sermons and song-books, chronicles and popular pamphlets, Elizabethans were constantly being reminded of the fact that life tends to imitate the theatre. (83)

The Puritans attack the theater precisely on the basis that actors have the power

to change and fashion the shape of reality. Philip Stubbes, for one, warns playgoers against receiving the dissembling art from the actors, in his *Anatomie of the Abuses* (1583). He tells playgoers to go to the theater,

if you will learne falshood; if you will learne cosenage; if
you will learne to deceive; if you will learne to play the
Hipocrit, to cogge, lye, and falsifie. (qtd. Righter 82)

This attack on the theater and players reflects a worry over the confusion, and identification, of illusion and reality possibly found in some theatrical audience; but it also testifies to the persuasiveness and effectiveness of dramatic illusion. Both champions and enemies of the theater believe the theater can change men's lives and actors have power over reality (Righter 82-83).

An art of pretense, drama, attracts a variety of heated philosophical inquiry and debates of the dialectics between appearance and reality. Shakespeare, Anne Righter maintains, tackles and delves deeply into this issue throughout his career. In a dramatic production actors impersonate different roles, pretending to be someone else in this play world. And sometimes these characters, themselves disguises, might assume disguises or role-playing to deceive his fellow characters. Wolfgang Clemen digs into the multiple possibilities of the dialectics between appearance and reality in Shakespeare's works. He argues,

We notice that the contrast between the outward and the
inward, between what man pretends to be and what he really
is, between what he says in the presence of others and what
he thinks alone—that this contrast pervades Shakespearian

drama in a multiplicity of different forms. (1980: 165)

The representations of the relationship of reality and appearance, as Clemen observes, are multiple and, even, contradictory.

A straightforward division of reality and appearance can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*. The casket scenes dramatize episodes in which appearance and reality diverge from each other. The Prince of Morocco makes his choice on the assumption that the golden chest, in accordance with its magnificent outward, surely contains Portia's picture, while the leaden casket, with its debased quality, could not possibly hold Portia's image. Likewise the Prince of Arragon is cozened by the external symbolism of the silver casket which bears the inscription: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (2.9.50).⁵ In an inspired rumination over the significance of the three chests, Bassanio delivers a moral commonplace on the deception of outward show:

So may the *outward shows* be least themselves—
The world is still deceiv' d with *ornament*.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being *season' d* with a gracious voice,
Obscures the *show* of evil? In religion,
What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair *ornament*?
There is no [vice] so simple but *assumes*

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, references to Shakespeare's works are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Ed.

Some mark of virtue on his *outward parts*. . .

The *seeming truth* which cunning times *put on*

To entrap the wisest. (3.2.73-101; emphases added)

Bassanio moralizes on the common folly to be taken in by appearances.

Deception, dissimulation, hypocrisy, and disguise are devices that dramatize the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Such discrepancy could imply the insufficiency of mimetic representation.

But the distinctions and boundaries between appearance and reality, shadow and substance, or pretense and truth are not usually as clear-cut as those in *The Merchant*. To Lear's painful question, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.230), the Fool replies: "Lear's shadow" (231). The Fool substitutes the shadow for the substance. Clemen concludes his study of the interaction between appearance and reality in a note full of uncertainty:

Thus we see finally that the examination of the contrast between exterior and interior, between appearance and reality, develops and expands into just this recognition of the ambiguity, the diversity and the problematic character of human nature. (1980: 187)

The explorations of dubious interaction of appearance and reality can also be found in the Renaissance philosophy. Montaigne expounds the impossibility to distinguish the false appearance from true nature in "How One Ought to Govern His Will":

Most of our vacations are like plays. *Mundus universus*

G. Blakemore Evans.

exercet histrioniam: “All the world doth practise stage-playing.” Wee must play our parts duly, but as the part of a borrowed personage. Of a visard and appearance, wee should not make a real essence, nor proper of that which is another. Wee cannot distinguish the skinne from the shirt; it is sufficient to disguise the face without deforming the breast. (III, 298)

This passage not only touches upon the encroachment of appearance upon reality, but also brings out a popular analogy of life and drama: *Theatrum mundi*.

Theatrum mundi, or the world as a theater, is an ancient idea (Righter 65, 168; Greer 35; Curtius 138-44) that becomes quite popular in Renaissance (Righter 84, 165).⁶ Righter cites many examples from this period in her book.⁷ Thomas Heywood in his preface to *An Apology for Actor* (1612)

⁶ E. R. Curtius traces permutations of the theatrical trope from Plato to Hofmannsthal, and argues the “Totus mundus agit histrionem” idea was revived by John of Salisbury in the twelfth century (139). For further critical explorations of the idea, see E. R. Curtius 138-44, Anne Righter 59-62, Herbert Weisinger 58-70, Thomas B. Stroup 7-36, Jackson I. Cope 1-13, and Kent T. van den Berg 23-40.

⁷ Here are some examples from Righter 166-67, 172-3.

- (1) The White Queen’s Pawn: [T]he world’s a stage on which all parts are play’d.
(Thomas Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 5.3.19)
- (2) Doll: The world’s a stage, from which strange shapes we borrow:
Today we are honest, and ranke knaves tomorrow.
(Thomas Dekker and John Webster, *Northward Ho!*, 1.2.102-3)
- (3) Boy actor: Not play two parts in one? away, away; ’tis common fashion. Nay if you cannot bear two subtle fronts under one hood, Ideot goe by, goe by; off this world’s stage.
(John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, Induction)
- (4) Prologue: [T]his megacosm, this great world, is no more than a stage, where every one must act his part. (Thomas Middleton, *A Faire Quarrell*, Prologue)
- (5) Prologue: All have exits, and must all be stript in tiring house (viz. the grave), for none must carry any thing out of the stock. (Thomas Middleton, *A Fair Quarrell*, Prologue)
- (6) Philomusmus: Sad is the plott, sad the Catastrophe.
Studioso: Sad are the Chorus in our Tragedy.
Philomusmus: And rented thoughts continuall actors bee.
Studioso: Woe is the subiect:
Philomusmus: Earth the loathed stage,

adopts this theatrical topos:

The world's a theatre, the earth a stage,
Which God and nature doth with actors fill:
Kings have their entrance in due equipage,
And some their parts play well, and other ill
All men have parts, and each man acts his own.
Some citizens, some soldiers, born to adven-
ture,
Shepherds, and seamen. Then our play's begun
When we are born, and to the world first enter,
And all find exits when their parts are done
He that denies then theatres should be,
He may as well deny a world to me. (qtd. Salinger 267)

This sounds very much like Jacques' remarks in *As You Like It*. Heywood also draws a parallel between a man's real identity in life and a player's dramatic role on the stage. For Heywood, the world is a theater in which each man plays a part. On this premise, it would be strange to reject theaters, for such rejection would, by implication, deny the world as well. Similarly, the host of

-
- Whereon we act this fained personage.
Studioso: Mossy barbarians the spectators be,
That sit and laugh at our calamity.
(*The Return from Parnassus*, Part II, 561-68)
- (7) Malfi: I account this world a tedious Theatre,
For I doe play a part in' t' gainst my will.
(John Webster, *Duchess of Malfi*, 4.1.99-100)
- (8) All our pride is but a jest;
None are worst and none are best.
Grief and joy and hope and fear
Play their pageants everywhere;
Vain opinion all doth sway,
And the world is but a play.
(Philip Rossiter's "Book of Airs," *The Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*, Ed. E. K. Chambers, 845)

the Light Heart in Ben Jonson's *The New Inn* (1629) draws an analogy between life in the world and life on the stage:

Where I imagine all the world's a play;
The state and men's affairs all passages
Of life, to spring new scenes, come in, go out,
And shift, and vanish; and if I have got
A seat to sit at ease here i' mine inn,
To see the comedy; and laugh, and chuck
At the variety and throng of humours
And dispositions that come jostling in
And out still, as they one drove hence another:

Why, will you envy me my happiness? (1982: IV, 1.3.128-37)

As can be seen, English Renaissance dramatists are fascinated by this *theatrum mundi* analogy, and use it to pinpoint connections between the play world and the real world where men and women assuming social roles in life as players adopting dramatic roles on stage.

Beyond the obvious similarity brought forth by this theatrical trope, Jonson also elaborates on a fundamental transformation involved in such imitation in daily life implied by the play metaphor:

I have considered, our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee so insist in imitating others, as wee cannot (when it is necessary) returne to our selves: like Children, that imitate the vices of Stammerers so long,

till at last they become such; and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten. (1925-52: VIII, 597)

This passage indicates Jonson's belief in the transformative power of such imitation (Kastan 120), and makes clear the impossibility to distinguish reality from illusion. A dynamic transformation can be perceived in certain tragedies of the period, where dramatic characters are often changed, for better or worse, by the roles they assume in disguises.

The association of the world with the stage, an overwhelming feature of Renaissance drama, offers us a chance to reflect upon the nature of the theater, the dialectics between illusion and reality, the reception and manipulation of audience, the theatricality of life, and the like. Also, the recurring play metaphors accentuate the self-analytic and self-reflexive tendency in the plays, exposing further their movement away from mimesis. For Van den Berg, moreover, the self-conscious impulse in these metaplays illustrates the emerging "dual consciousness" (Bethell 1944: 81)⁸ of an inner self and a public role:

Shakespeare uses his theatrical medium as a metaphor to explore the new self-consciousness that was emerging in the urban heterocosm. The actor in the character embodied the duality of inner self and public role; the stage and fictive setting illustrated the difference between reality and the symbols used to describe reality; and the playhouse itself

⁸ Bethell uses the term to differentiate the player as player and as character. Similar ideas can also be found in William E. Gruber (33) and William B. Worthen (307). Another related idea, the "third eye," is advanced by Gao Xingjian. See Mei-shu Hwang and Chi-jui Lee for their analyses of Gao's

offered an architectural emblem of the interlocking subjective and objective worlds within which everyone must play his or her part. (40)

For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the age-old notion of *theatrum mundi*, or world-as-theater, not only refers to the theatricality of life, but also denotes theater-as-world, which emphasizes the mimetic representation of dramatic works. The distinction or boundary between theater and life, or the play world and the real world, is not always clear-cut. In many cases, the boundary is blurred or even disappears: life becomes a form of theater, a form of acting; theater becomes a way of life. The present study, by elaborating on the impingement of appearance and reality upon each other, aims at achieving the goal of metatheater itself: to make the theater “a symbol for making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon” (Forker 217).

II. Context of Metatheatrical Criticism

Since the 1960s the metadramatic tendency in Shakespeare’s plays has been a popular concern in Shakespearean criticism. Many scholars have noticed the predominance of the play metaphors and dramatic imageries in Shakespeare’s works well before the term “metatheater” came into being. For example, in *Play within a Play* published in 1958, Robert J. Nelson examines the functions of the internal plays in playwrights from Shakespeare to Anouilh.

concept.

Anne Righter points out the predominant role of the play metaphors in Shakespeare's works (89). She traces Shakespeare's changing attitudes toward the relation of illusion and reality, and toward the theater itself from the first tetralogy till the end of his career in her widely read *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, first published in 1962. The play metaphors, she maintains, "remind the audience of the playlike nature of its own life" on the one hand, and "lend an ominous, portentous quality to the action on the stage" on the other (92). Moreover, they function more as rhetorical flourishes in Shakespeare's early plays, while assuming structural and thematic significance in his mature works (92).

Maynard Mack, in "Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays," investigates the audience's response in relation to the playwright's application of dramatic imagery in the play. He cites three examples to contend the importance of "detachment" in the theater: Sartre's comments on the necessity for the playwright to control the effect of dramatic illusion to achieve self-knowledge rather than self-indulgence (1962: 276), Brecht's "alienation" principle to help spectators remain reflective (276), and James Shirley's observation of the Renaissance spectator's increasing engagement on the one hand, and his awareness of such engagement on the other (277). The bare stage, open daylight, jostling crowd, acting style (with more recitation), inept actors, among others, are factors that pull in the direction of detachment (277). Whereas the "well-graced actor" (*Richard II*, 5.2.24), effective props, splendid costumes and a dramatist's powerful imagination pull toward engagement (277-78). He believes both forces are functioning to maintain a balance:

The crux of the matter . . . is that this stage [the Elizabethan stage] and the style of drama played on it enjoyed a system of built-in balances between the forces drawing the spectator to identify with the faces in the mirror and those which reminded him that they were reflections. (277)

In short, a “dual consciousness” (Bethell 1944: 81) or “seeing double” (Hornby 32) is advocated in a spectator’s mind.

But it is Lionel Abel who laid the foundation for metatheatrical criticism. In his ground-breaking book entitled *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963), he advocates “metatheatre” as a distinct genre. With his emphasis on the fictiveness of plot and character, which he calls “the playwright’s invention” (Abel 59), Abel foregrounds the illusion of theatrical reality created by a dramatic performance. For Abel, all “metaplays” or “works of metatheatre” (61) “are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized”; the metatheatrical heroes are different from other theatrical figures in that “they are aware of their own theatricality” (60). He concludes his study of metatheatre with two observations: (i) The world is a stage; (ii) Life is a dream (105). The first statement implies that “the world is a projection of human consciousness” (113): it is a man-made artifice, created by imagination. The second one emphasizes the flexibility and malleability of fate, and the dream-like nature of existence (113).

From a modern point of view, metaplays are interesting because they acknowledge their inherent theatricality: they “have the quality of having been thought, rather than of having simply occurred” (Abel 60-61). Abel believes

“the playwright has the obligation to acknowledge in the very structure of his play that it was his imagination which controlled the event from beginning to end” (61). He himself provides an example of metatheatrical criticism on some dramatic works, including a metadramatic reading of *Hamlet*, in which he classifies Claudius, Polonius, and Hamlet as playwright-characters who compose scripts for others and themselves.

Robert Egan, with his *Drama within Drama* (1975), endeavors to show Shakespeare’s concept of his art during the last years of his career by examining *King Lear*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*. He shows that the success or failure of Shakespeare’s characters’ attempts to try “to control or alter reality directly through the exercise of dramatic illusion” functions as an indication of the attempts to shape the relationship between the art of the play itself and the real world of its audience (1). Prospero, comparable to Shakespeare himself, substitutes his dramatic illusions for reality in his spectators’ eyes. The onstage audience do not know they are watching an artificial play-within-a-play staged by Prospero, mistakenly taking the illusion for reality. For Egan, through this manipulation of a play’s “aesthetic boundaries, internal and external,” Shakespeare attempts to “actualize in reality the vital patterns of order inherent in art,” rather than to dissolve the distinction between reality and drama (3).

James L. Calderwood, another influential critic in Shakespearean metadramatic criticism, persistently focuses on the exploration of the idea of self-consciousness in Shakespeare’s works. He finds that Shakespeare often includes his own comments on, and observation of, the art of drama in the

plays, constantly drawing our attention to the medium itself. Calderwood advocates the importance of metatheatrical concerns in his criticism of Shakespeare's texts. He points out the dominant Shakespearean theme of a constant and never flagging concern of the dramatic art itself in his first book-length study in *Shakespearean Metadrama* (1971), including "its materials, its media of language and theater, its generic forms and conventions, its relationship to truth and the social order" (5). In *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad* (1979), Calderwood delves into the dialectics of truth and falsehood involved in the dramatic representation of historical reality. In *To Be and Not to Be* (1983), he goes on to demonstrate the significance of theatricality in *Hamlet* for the character, the audience, and the playwright.

Richard Hornby, in *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (1986), provides a concise and form-oriented analysis of the genre, pinpointing several easily recognizable forms of metadrama, such as the play-within-the-play, role playing, self-reference, and so on. He supplies a "broader overview of metadrama as a phenomenon," and expands his study to playwrights such as Sophocles, Büchner, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Pinter (31).

In the early 1990s, Judd D. Hubert's *Metatheater: The Example of Shakespeare* (1991) conducts a performative approach to six Shakespearean plays "to show how the medium operates, by means of latent comparisons, away from, though not necessarily in opposition to, mimetic representation, which paradoxically relies on staging" (1). Hubert argues that, metadrama, with its self-exposing devices, "frequently serves to enhance its most intense moments" (2), and also encourages "a more active participation" and

“identification with a character” (3). For Hubert, metadramatic impulse in a play tends to disrupt the mimetic illusion, freeing a play from being a mere copy of the reality. Moreover, the disruption of illusion through self-exposing devices engages the audience even more deeply and persuasively.

In the simplest and broadest term, metatheater is theater about theater, or drama about drama (Hornby 31; Newey 87; Chiu 2000: 2). Richard Horby furnishes the following definition:

Briefly, metadrama can be defined as drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself. (31)

He argues that “*all* drama is metadramatic, since its subject is always . . . the drama/culture complex” (31). But to define all drama as metadrama will not clarify the issue at hand. Some qualifications are in order if we want to establish a common basis for further discussion.

In her *Metadrama: Shakespeare and Stoppard* (2000), Chin-jung Chiu defines metadrama as follows:

Technically, any play which has as its subject other play(s) or drama in general, or which attempts to describe and analyze dramatic practice and theatrical connections and to establish general “poetics” for this particular genre qualifies as metadrama. (2-3)

While these ideas constitute a simple definition of the metatheater, I would like to emphasize that one of the most important criteria is the self-consciousness of the drama’s exploration of itself in every possible aspect, ranging from its

medium, convention, form, function, status, and so on. The self-conscious references and reflexivity are explicit and unmistakable.

Hornby's list of the varieties of conscious metadrama includes: (i) the play within the play, (ii) the ceremony within the play, (iii) role playing within the role, (iv) literary and real-life reference, (v) self reference, and (vi) drama and perception (32). Except the last item, which is too general to designate any specific category, the first five items, though sometimes under different names, can be easily identified, and are commonly discussed in metadramatic criticism. With this list, Hornby presents an easy-to-follow model for later critical practice. In the light of these considerations, a wide range of manifestations can all be categorized as "metadramatic": a play-within-a-play (dumb show, inset playlet, masque, pageant, interlude), a framed structure (induction, prologue and epilogue, chorus), uses of play metaphors and theatrical imageries, playwright-characters (characters that tend to manipulate other fellow characters like a director or a playwright setting up his play), and audience manipulation. On the top of these, Katherine Newey adds plays that "have for their subject matter the theatre and the theatrical profession . . . [and] rely on the spectators' knowledge of current theatrical practices for the full impact of the humour, satire, or pathos" (87). But as Hornby emphasizes, "the *manner* in which a given play is metadramatic, and the degree to which the metadramatic is *consciously employed*, can vary widely" (32).

It would be wrong to suppose metatheatrical critics have reached a consensus on these topics. Far from it. Different, sometimes contradictory, arguments to key issues are quite common. For example, some regard the

self-reflexive impulse in metadrama as a means to encourage reflection (Mack 1962: 280-81), while others deem the impulse a manifestation of its narcissism (Chiu 2000: 16; Fly 124). In sum, as Tobin Nellhaus observes, three related but different views toward metatheater or metatheatricality can be identified. First, critics like Dieter Mehl and Richard Hornby tend to focus on the metatheatrical forms and devices, but fail to explain the historical significance of these strategies. Second, other critics, such as Lionel Abel and Judd Hubert, concentrate less on the formal aspects (for example plays-within-the-plays or theatrical self-references), but emphasize the self-conscious exploration of theatricality of the dramatic characters (for instance their self-dramatization and acting as playwrights, directors or actors). Third, some critics assert that “theatrical self-reflexivity has few or no historical boundaries . . . [and] results from the very nature of art, or in some versions, from the nature of discourse” (Nellhaus 4). For Jacques Derrida, Nellhaus argues, self-reference is “an inherent part of writing, perhaps writing’s only meaning” (4).

Richard Fly characterizes the effort of the critics in the “metadramatic school” (138) as a tendency

to view his [Shakespeare’s] masterpieces not simply as
“windows” opening out upon a richly-textured panorama of
general human experience, but as “mirror” reflecting the
artist’s ongoing struggle to understand and master the
expressive potential of his medium. (124)

Fly’s “mirror” metaphor reminds us of Hamlet’s view of drama, though with a twist. According to Hamlet, the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up

to nature. He highlights the mimetic nature of dramatic art, considering drama as a representation of nature, or of reality. By asserting this mimesis, the Prince of Denmark brings out the reflective nature of acting, which is like a mirror reflecting the reality. In line with the Renaissance literary theory to regard literature as a reflection of reality, Hamlet uses the mirror metaphor in the tradition of mimesis. In contrast, Fly plays up the self-reflexive nature, rather than the reflective nature, of the mirror metaphor. He underscores the predominance of the role of the medium and the metaphor of the theater in these metadramatic criticisms. For Fly, the mirrored image is the medium, not the reality.

As can be seen in this brief survey of some key arguments from earlier metadramatic criticisms, a metatheatrical reading of the Early Modern drama is basically a performance-oriented criticism. It also offers a reconsideration of the philosophical and ontological debates concerning the genre of drama. The purpose of the present study is, first of all, to illustrate the interpretive forces of a metatheatrical perspective on the English Renaissance texts. Richard Fly stresses the tendency toward self-indulgence in metadrama: “the drama in [such] plays becomes dislodged from plot and character and situated in the playwright’s self-conscious interaction with himself, his medium, and his audience” (124). A metadramatic reading of dramatic works tends to concentrate on excavating the self-reflexive, self-analytic, and anti-mimetic aspects. I want to explore the extent to which the metadramatic elements are thematically incorporated into the dramatic texts examined. Furthermore, I would like to apply this metadramatic reading to some non-Shakespearean

works in the hope of determining the extent to which such self-conscious and self-reflexive impulse is represented on the Early Modern stage, a consciousness related to Stephen Greenblatt's observation of an emerging "self-fashioning" tendency in this period (1980: 3).

III. Chapter Description

This study adopts the metatheatrical perspective as outlined above to explore the theatrical self-reflexivity and metatheatricality in five English Renaissance plays: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, with references to related plays if necessary. The metatheatrical critical perspective will highlight the theatrical self-reflexivity common on the Early Modern stage. To supply a more systematic examination of the metatheatrical elements in these plays, this study organizes the following chapters in accordance with different metatheatrical topics: role-playing, playwright-character, inset play and audience perception after a brief summary of the Renaissance view toward dramatic art and a brief account of the metatheatrical criticism. These topics are the most fundamental issues in the discussion about metatheatricality. In each chapter a survey and discussion of metatheatrical theory and practice related to the assigned topic will be provided first to set up the critical framework for the reading of dramatic works, followed by in-depth analyses of two plays that may provide a contrast to the same issue, while drawing on other plays in the hope of bringing

out a much fuller description of the issues at hand.

The second chapter explores the subtle and cunning disguises embodied in the practice of role-playing especially in *Hamlet* and *Vindice*. Deception, dissimulation, hypocrisy, and disguise are some important manifestations and representations of the complex mechanism of role-playing. By exposing the cunning manipulation behind a character in disguise, dramatists make manifest the underlying calculation and playacting, laying bare the fiction of the theatrical illusion and, by extension, the theatricality of life. Through a character's metatheatrical sensitivity, a playwright could bring forth the dialectics of drama and life, illusion and reality, seeming and being, acting and doing illustrated in the mechanism of role-playing.

The third chapter traces a type of playwright-character, a character "employing a playwright's consciousness of drama to impose a certain posture or attitude on another" (Abel 46). Like a playwright inventing plots and arranging dramatic action, a full-fledged playwright-character tends to manipulate his fellow characters with carefully wrought illusion. *Mephostophilis* and *Iago* are such playwright-characters. *Faustus* and *Othello*, on the other hand, are a different type of playwright-characters. They indulge in self-dramatization, constantly casting roles and dramatic action for themselves. They want to be the authors of their own destiny. Moreover, in these different playwright-characters, a theatrical parallel between the gradual formation of their plots and that of a dramatic piece is established.

Chapter Four examines the significance of inset plays, including a play-within-a-play. A play-within-a-play can lend a fuller insight into the

interplay of illusion and reality, presenting two, sometimes even more, different planes of dramatic illusion. It mirrors the larger play in some detail, from the casting of roles, rehearsing, playacting on the same stage, to matching a play to an audience. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* bring up the subject of theater and theatrical performance in their dramatic action, the internal theatrical practices reflecting the self-conscious and self-reflexive impulses common in this period. By bringing in a group of (touring) players, both plays draw our attention to the whole business of theater.

Hamlet, in particular, plays up the nature of dramatic performance, including the impersonation of the player and the falsification of feelings. The Prince questions the genuineness of the First Player's playacting pretense, a gesture underscoring his own theatrical impersonation and pretense. The play-within-the-play functions not only as a weapon to rip open the illusory appearances in the Danish court, but also as a reminder to the play proper's own pretense.

Chapter Five dissects the dramatic mechanism of audience engagement and detachment in some metaplays. A Johnsonian attitude of detachment indicates the spectator's "constant awareness 'that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players'" (Shapiro 146). In contrast a Coleridgean response of engagement represents the spectator that responds in "a state of rapt absorption in the work of art, as in a dream" (146).

Asides and soliloquies are two common devices that playwrights use to engage their audience. On the other hand, metatheatrical devices, including the use of dramatic imagery, disguise, role-playing, plot repetition and imitation,

and inset plays, draw our attention to the play's plotting, and expose the play's artificiality and its status as an artifact. In general, dramatists use metatheatrical devices to encourage "detachment"—to maintain a balance of perception. Thus, these devices are generally considered to be distancing for the benefit of increasing reflection on the meaning of what we see (Mack 1962: 281). But, interestingly, it appears that the more an audience is reminded of the fiction, the more it falls for the invention. The more a dramatist emphasizes the illusion, the more an audience believes it.

This study concludes with an exploration of the mirror metaphor and its self-reflexivity. The purpose of dramatic art, according to Hamlet, is to hold a mirror up to nature, reflecting life and reality. Renaissance metadrama illustrates its function as a mirror, which reflects the dramatic medium and its limit and capability of capturing reality. With an external mediation, it is easier for a person to behold himself. Metadrama supplies that means of external mediation, through whose help we can see the image of the appearances of reality, which in turn is an approach to self-knowledge. The self-reflexivity of metatheater denotes the theater's self-conscious reflection on itself as a medium where illusion, reality, imagination and truth meet and interact.

This study hopes to illustrate that a metatheatrical reading of Renaissance drama not only helps a reader to better grasp the dramatic medium, but also lends depth and substantiality to the insight and understanding of the dramatic meaning. The quintessence of theater bordering reality and illusion becomes a niche for playwrights to explore the dynamics of the onstage and offstage

worlds. It is hoped that the findings of this study can shed light on the metadramatic implications in these plays with a constant attention to the playwrights' dramaturgy.

CHAPTER TWO

“Forms to His Conceit”⁹:

Role-playing in *Hamlet*¹⁰ and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

Perdita Methinks I play as I have seen them do
In Whitsun pastorals. Sure this robe of mine
Does change my disposition.
(*Winter’s Tale*, 4.4.133-35)

Hamlet ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. (*Hamlet*, 1.2.77-83)¹¹

Hamlet Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann’ d,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
(*Hamlet*, 2.2.545-51)

After a survey of different views toward dramatic art and artist in the Renaissance England and a general summary of the context of metatheatrical criticism in the past few decades, the second chapter now explores the subtle

⁹ This is from *Hamlet*, 2.2.551.

¹⁰ A Chinese version of an early draft on this play was published in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 31.1 (2002): 35-58.

¹¹ References to this play are from *Hamlet*, The Arden edition, Ed. Harold Jenkins.

and cunning disguises embodied in the practice of role-playing. Deception, dissimulation, hypocrisy, and disguise are some important manifestations and representations of the complex mechanism of role-playing. By exposing the cunning manipulation behind a character in disguise, dramatists make manifest the underlying calculation and playacting, laying bare the fiction of the theatrical illusion and, by extension, the theatricality of life. Through a character's metatheatrical sensitivity, a playwright could bring forth the dialectics of drama and life, illusion and reality, seeming and being, acting and doing illustrated in the mechanism of role-playing.

When an actor, through costume, gesture, and voice, impersonates a dramatic role, be it a king or a beggar, a Romeo or a Juliet, he acts on a primary or dramatic level. When an actor impersonates a dramatic role, who then assumes playacting to disguise himself and deceive others, as in the form of cross-dressing, he acts on a secondary or metadramatic level. A dramatic character sometimes assumes a gesture of self-dramatization, a mixture of both the dramatic and metadramatic modalities, investing a tinct of artificiality and theatricality in his action. *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are filled with role-playing throughout. Critics have emphasized the transformative effect upon the characters adopting role-playing in both plays (Hall 1-19; Mack 1955: 44-46). Based on their findings, this chapter intends to focus on self-conscious explorations of the dynamics of role-playing by the dramatic characters themselves, and elaborates on both the positive and negative possibilities arising from it.

By nature an actor, Hamlet is addicted to self-dramatization, be there

on-stage audience or not. He casts himself in many roles: a mourner, a mad man, a malcontent, or an avenger. The other characters in the Danish court also play roles when dealing with Hamlet. With all these different forms of role-playing, the play delves into the nature of acting, the dialectics of appearance and reality, and the theatricality of life. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* Vindice also dramatizes himself as a satirist, a melancholiac, a malcontent, and a revenger respectively as the plot develops, constantly changing his roles. He manipulates his fellow characters and the dramatic action in his pursuit of revenge. Through a careful metatheatrical design, the play delineates the gradual transformation of Vindice, unlike Hamlet, from a seeker of justice to a cold-blooded killer. In this way, the play reflects upon the inadequacy of private justice and illustrates the transformation of role-playing on the avenger's true self; metatheater is articulated with the presentation of a major theme.

I. From Social Roles to Dramatic Roles

Role is a term commonly used in both daily life and theatrical contexts, wonderfully coalescing the social and dramatic dimensions of a person's identity. In the popular Renaissance concept of *theatrum mundi*, men are conceived to be players improvising their multifarious social roles in their daily performances and appearances on the stage that is the world. Michel de Montaigne, in "How One Ought to Govern His Will," emphasizes "All the world doth practise stage-playing" (III, 98), a popular analogy that elaborates on the theatrical dimension with men and women adopting roles in life just like

players assuming roles in a playhouse. In a study of character-types in city comedy, Theodore B. Leinwand writes of the overwhelming discussion of social roles in the early modern England:

The drama, pamphlets, letters and proclamations of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries constitute an unceasing discussion of social roles: the role of the sovereign and that of the gentry as gentlemen or as gallants, the role (and so the status) of the newly wealthy merchant and that of the usurer, and every other conceivable role, from city wife to courtier. (10)

Leinwand's major interest is on the interaction of a social role and a dramatic representation of that role, mutually shaping and reshaping each other. His concern of the relation between role and self is especially relevant to the present study:

This discourse of social roles both on and off the stage suggests a variety of relations between an often unspecifiable self and the enacted role of a given moment. At times, we want to ask whether a role or a repertory of roles has altogether replaced the self: when identity reifies, "a total identification of the individual with his socially assigned typifications" may result. (11)

A substantial and sometimes permanent metamorphosis of the self may be brought about by the assumption of a role, as illustrated in changes in a character's psychology. We recall Ben Jonson's warning:

I have considered our whole life is like a *Play* wherein every man forgetfull of himself, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it is necessary) returne to our selves: like Children, that imitate the vices of *Stammerers* so long, till at last they become such; and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten. (1925-52: VIII, 597)

This passage indicates that a role may sometimes corrupt, contaminate, change, or replace the self—as illustrated in some dramatic characters we will examine in this chapter. In Joan Lord Hall’s words,

Frequently the plays focus on the protagonist as actor, suggesting how histrionic awareness, or a conscious dramatisation of self, can enhance or undermine identity. But they also portray in some depth characters who assume personae and are subsequently changed by them. (1)

For certain dramatic characters, fundamental transformations in their selves take place when they engage in role-playing. At times, they become “others” and can no longer return to their original self. For example, Vindice in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* tells his brother they “are made strange fellows” (1.3.170)¹² and he is “hired” to kill himself (4.2.207).

In many cases, role-playing comes with changes of clothes. The costume metaphor is essential in the sense that it gives an airy nothing a form or shape.

¹² All references to this play are to *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Ed. R. A. Foakes, who, though admitting to much uncertainty about the author, assigned the play to Cyril Tourneur in his 1966 edition. But, taking in the recent criticism of the play, he added Thomas Middleton as a candidate of the author in

Jacobean tragedies in particular, Hall argues,

by visually correlating moral or spiritual change with
physical disguise, show the converse movement: how
appearance can turn into reality. (19)

When Vindice changes his clothes in his disguise as Piato, he “quickly turn[s] into another” (1.1.134), a “base-coined pander” (1.1.81). His brother Hippolito guarantees that he is completely another man: “As if another man had been sent whole / Into the world, and none wist how he came” (1.3.2-3). He is indeed “far enough from [him]self” (1.3.1). The development of the play suggests that change of costume denotes a subtle moral and psychological metamorphosis, which is manifested in Vindice’s deterioration into a corrupt revenger, taking pride in his ingenious intrigues that destroy his enemies.

Actors are often associated with chameleons or Proteus, capable of changing shapes and playing different roles. Richard of York is one of such arch-players, who is very proud of his acting expertise:

Why, I can smile, and murther whiles I smile,
And cry “Content” to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.
I’ ll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall,
I’ ll slay more gazers than the basilisk,
I’ ll play the orator as well as Nestor,
Deceive more slily than Ulysses could,

his 1996 edition. For the authorship controversy, see David J. Lake.

And like a Sinon, take another Troy.
I can add colors to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murtherous Machevil to school.

(3 *Henry VI*, 3.2.182-93)

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, to trick Sly into believing himself a Lord, the “real” Lord assigns his page to playact Sly’s wife:

Lord Sirrah, go you to Barthol’ mew my page
 And see him dressed in all suits like a lady.
 That done, conduct him to the drunkard’s chamber,
 And call him “madam,” do him obeisance
 I know the boy will well usurp the grace,
 Voice, gait and action of a gentlewoman.

(Induction I, 101-04, 127-28)

To be exact, this is an example of a “role-playing within the role” (Hornby 67). Similar to the transvestite practice in the theater of the period, the Lord assigns his young page Batholomew a female role, bringing our attention to how a boy actor impersonates a female character with acting skills incorporating voice, gait, costume, and movement.

Coriolanus supplies another view toward actors and role-playing.

Volumnia, along with Roman patricians, instructs her son, as an actor, to play a role in order to save himself from the revolting plebeians masterminded by the wily and hostile tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius. Like a director, she gives very detailed acting instructions, including the precise prop, gesture, lines, and facial

expression Coriolanus should put on.

I prithee now, my son,
Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand,
And thus far having stretched it—here be with them—
Thy knee bussing the stones—for in such business
Action is eloquence, and the eyes of th' ignorant
More learned than the ears—waving thy head,
Which often thus correcting thy stout heart,
Now humble as the ripest mulberry
That will not hold the handling. Or say to them
Thou art their soldier, and being bred in broils
Has not the soft way which, thou dost confess,
Were fit for thee to use as they to claim,
In asking their good loves; but thou wilt frame
Thyself, forsooth, hereafter theirs, so far
As thou hast power and person. (3.2.74-88)

Despite his unwillingness to playact a role, Coriolanus nevertheless persuades himself to take up the assigned role. His struggle mainly stems from a negative view of playacting which conflicts with his own disposition, with honesty and integrity on which he prides himself. Yet, he has an extensive, if primarily negative, understanding of acting:

Well, I must do 't.
Away, my disposition, and possess me
Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turned,

Which choired with my drum, into a pipe
Small as an eunuch or the virgin voice
That babies lulls asleep! The smiles of knaves
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up
The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue
Make motion through my lips, and my armed knees,
Who bowed but in my stirrup, bend like his
That hath received an alms! (3.2.112-22)

The theatrical ingredients Coriolanus uses to envision his histrionic mission include changes of spirit and voice, facial expressions (smiles, tears), ways of speaking, and gestures. But since his playacting aims at deceiving his audience, the plebeians, these theatrical reminders carry negative implications, including insincerity, deceit, falseness, and hypocrisy. His self-image as a hero is replaced by that of a harlot, a eunuch, a knave, a schoolboy, and a beggar, all of whom he surely despises.

II. "Action is eloquence":

The Dynamics of Role-playing¹³

This chapter does not intend to arrive at a psychologically realistic view of roles and characters in drama, but rather at revealing the dynamic interaction between a role and a self when a dramatic character takes up disguises. This chapter does not treat dramatic characters as if they were real persons, but rather regard them as "imagined persons" (Murray 1) endowed with

¹³ "Action is eloquence" is from *Coriolanus*, 3.2.78; "The Dynamics of Role-playing" is from Joan

psychological depth and generic conventions. The abundant theatrical reminders that inform the audience they are watching a play serve to disrupt their possible response to take dramatic characters as real persons. As some recent studies invoke, a non-representational, or metatheatrical awareness that we are watching actors perform on a stage could even facilitate our involvement with representation and deepen our understanding of it.¹⁴

In its essence, a dramatic performance is a feat of role-playing, which is an essential aspect not only in the theatrical representation of the play proper, but also in the devices of any theatrical disguise within the play world. On a primary or dramatic level, an actor, through costumes, gestures, facial expressions, body movements and voice, impersonates a dramatic character, be it a king or a beggar, a Romeo or a Juliet. On a secondary or metadramatic level, an actor impersonates a character, who then assumes another role (or roles) to disguise himself/herself and deceive others, such as the cross-dressing heroines. Another subtle form of role-playing is self-dramatization, a mixture of both dramatic and metadramatic modalities. A dramatic character is sometimes apt to assume a gesture of self-dramatization, investing a tinct of artificiality and theatricality in his/her action.

Role-playing sways the spectators the way oration sways the listeners. Peter B. Murray believes

The principles of oratory taught an actor that by vividly imagining the events which move the character and responding fully to the script's language, he could "force his soul so to his

Lord Hall's title of her book.

own conceit” that he would be carried into the thoughts and emotions of the character. Indeed, actors were commonly praised for appearing to *be* the characters they played and for moving the audience. (2)

The example of *Hamlet* illustrates at least two kinds of acting styles available to the English Renaissance adult companies: one is a stylized and formal presentation, exemplified in the First Player’s Priam and Hecuba speech and *The Mousetrap*, which resembles Brecht’s “separation of actor from persona” (Hall 4); the other is a more naturalistic and realistic impersonation, illustrated in the play proper, which is closer to Stanislavki’s “immersion of the actor in his role” (4). But we need to realize that an Elizabethan view toward “natural” acting is quite different from ours:

Elizabethans praised as natural or “to the life” an acting style that used heightened poetic language to make the expression of emotion seem authentic and thereby moved the audience. (Murray 3)

An actor’s immersion into his dramatic character, no doubt, brings forth a life-like representation, which in turn increases an audience’s sense of illusion and engagement with the character and dramatic action. A formalistic and stylized mannerism of acting, on the other hand, will remind an audience of the theatricality and artificiality of the theatrical performance, thereby increasing their sense of detachment from the action. Also, a character’s self-conscious alienation from his role cautions an audience from a complete identification

¹⁴ See, for example, Cartwright 1-39, Grainger 17-22, Styan 185-205, and Parry 1990: 99-109.

with the theatrical illusion.

This chapter mainly focuses on self-conscious explorations, positive or negative, of the dynamics of role-playing by the dramatic characters themselves. This is the metadramatic aspect of role-playing. Through a character's metatheatrical sensitivity, a playwright brings forth the dialectics of drama and life, illusion and reality, seeming and being, acting and doing in the mechanism of role-playing. In some cases, a character assuming role-playing can even be transformed by his adopted role, making a fiction into a reality. Alan Kennedy's remarks on the "protean self" created in modern fiction are relevant:

[I]t is possible for the fictional roles, the invented roles, to mould the Self. That is, fictions can remake the individual; we can and do become what we pretend to be. (22)

Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines create new identities with their physical disguises to impersonate men. Viola-Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, for example, remains passive and submissive when s/he is with Orsino, mainly a feminine-like position trapped in "her" seemingly hopeless passion. In contrast, when s/he takes up the part Cesario, a male surrogate wooer, to court Olivia for Orsino, s/he becomes creative, resourceful, and aggressive, a much more masculine-like temperament.

The explorations of role-playing help to illustrate different possibilities arising from it: it can be destructive, bringing a corruption to the self; or creative, acting out a fuller realization of self (Hall 1). From an even more subversive perspective, role-playing facilitates a route of "transgression" (Hawkes 28). For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom the

weaver in the play within plays acts a heroic lover, crossing his social boundary to an upper level. Role-playing, in Terence Hawkes' analysis, "has always contained an obvious potential for transgression, particularly in a society regulated by rigid social hierarchies" (28). Besides this, he goes on to point out the self-exposing acts of transgression when crossing boundaries. Using the "Wall" in *Pyramus and Thisby* to expound this, he argues,

Walls traditionally support, separate and thus preserve by division. A wall both recognizes difference and proposes its maintenance: it is a bulwark against change All societies make use of walls, literally or metaphorically deployed, and they obviously supply a major means of generating and reinforcing meaning in any culture. To breach a wall, or to transgress the boundary it marks, risks challenging the structure of differences on which meaning in a society is based. (29)

The next sections, by contrasting two revenge plays, *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, explore the mechanism of role-playing represented in dramatic texts. A reading of *Hamlet* is first provided.

III. *Hamlet*: "Action that a man might play"¹⁵

In *Hamlet* role-playing is an exceptionally conspicuous thematic concern not only in the theatrical reality of the play-within-a-play, but also in the every day life in the court of Denmark. Charles R. Forker, for one, explores the

¹⁵ This is from *Hamlet*, 1.2.84.

theatrical symbolism in *Hamlet*, and argues that “The very court of Denmark is like a stage upon which all the major characters except Horatio take parts, play roles, and practice to deceive” (217). The explicitness of role-playing in most of the characters in the Danish court highlights the theatricality of court life. Shakespeare reflects a contemporary interest in this kind of court life in *Hamlet*. People become interested in following the more and more sumptuous court life in late Elizabethan and ensuing Jacobean courts.

The first court scene, in sharp contrast to the bleakness and gloominess of the previous ghost scene, introduces strange antitheses into the world of Denmark. The newly crowned king Claudius, a “master of rhetoric” (Hubert 93), delivers a public announcement of the royal marriage in ceremonious language and long-winded syntax embedded in the form of syllogism in an attempt to tone down the problematic nature of such an instant marriage. His speech, marked by elaborate rhetorical figures, Latinate sentence structure ending with verbs and syntactical balance, is an example of “the grand style” (Adamson 571) in classical rhetoric, a style with sweeping power of persuasion. It also demonstrates his theatrical performance of the kingly role in highly rhetorical language that is very formal if seen against other speeches or dialogues.

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature

That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife. (1.2.1-14)

Claudius stuffs his major clause of “our sometime sister have we taken to wife” with lots of subordinate clauses full of antitheses and oxymorons to create suspense to the simple fact of the marriage. His use of syllogism imposes a seemingly rational ground for the hasty marriage with his sister-in-law shortly after his brother’s death. His opening speech touches upon two important recent events: the death of old Hamlet, his brother; the marriage with Gertrude, his brother’s wife. The timing and the incestuous nature of the marriage are factors that Claudius endeavors to neutralize in his flourishing language (Perng 2001: xlvi-1; Booth 1992: 65). But, ironically, the oxymorons he uses underline the unintended disclosure of his hypocrisy: an auspicious and a dropping eye, mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage, delight and dole.¹⁶ The excessive use of antitheses only exposes his explicit intention to divert attention from his self-interest. Though covered under the sugarcoated

¹⁶ Jenkins points out: “It was proverbially said of the false man that he looks up with one eye and down with the other To laugh with one eye and weep with the other . . . which was traditionally applied to Fortune . . . in indication of her fickleness” (434).

rhetoric, the hidden political and moral corruption can still be perceived, because the more Claudius tries to cover the more he reveals.

In contrast with the dolefully delighted newly-weds, Hamlet is overwhelmed by mournful sorrow over his father's death, and a bitter sense of betrayal by his mother's inconstancy, the forgetfulness of the courtiers, and the hypocrisy of his uncle. His insistence on dressing in a black suit is an intentional outward signification of his inner feelings, a gesture to defy the hypocrisy he discerns in the people surrounding him. In addition, he is consciously playing the role of a mourner, "costumed in black, a virtual *memento mori* to the glittering, opulently dressed court of Denmark" (Wilds 142).

Seeing Hamlet in deep mourning for his father's death, Gertrude requests him to "cast thy nighted colour off" (1.2.68). For her, Hamlet's wailful countenance is like his black cloak that can be cast off at will. And through her metaphor of costume, she means, in one aspect, to encourage him to throw away the sorrows like discarding a piece of unwanted garment. But in another respect, she seems to accuse him of being hypocritical. In addition, she wants him to play the role of an obedient son. But he continues obstinately to play the role of a melancholiac and a malcontent. Thus, the use of costume as a metaphor of mourning brings the operation of role-playing into the foreground.

Hamlet angrily rejects the metaphor of costume. For him, as Greenblatt points out, "his grief is not a theatrical performance, a mere costume to be put on and then discarded" (1997: 1660). He bitterly and sarcastically rejects Gertrude's metaphor of costume.

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.76-86)

Hamlet purposefully amplifies the costume image to dramatic performance. This speech touches upon a central issue: the dialectics of reality and appearance. Anne Righter regards the play metaphor in this passage as an expression of the difference between real and merely exterior, calculated grief (160). The idea underlying this passage can be briefly summarized as follows. Theoretically, in real life, people are identified by who they “are,” and what they “do.” In this aspect, both “being” and “doing” are words that characterize people in reality. In contrast, people (actors) in the theater, not in the real life, pretend to be someone else, and act (in the sense that they pretend to do something). Both “seeming” and “acting” are words to describe actors in the theater.

What Hamlet tries to make clear is that he feels what he feels. But he also realizes that the expressions of feelings are external actions that people can

take on even if they do not necessarily feel the way they show. Peter Mercer analyzes this passage as follows:

What he might mean by this is that, because even the expression of true sorrow is so necessarily stylised, bound up with the conventional garments and rhetoric and gestures of woe, it is impossible to tell it from the impersonation. The show of grief is by no means a certain sign of true sorrow, while it is also, unfortunately, its only sign. So the reality lies always beyond all shows, all signs. (144-45)

The inky cloak, sighs, tears, dejected visage—these external emblems of mourning are mere “forms, moods, shapes of grief” and are “actions that a man might play.” These are the “marks of sorrow which a tragedian might have employed to create an illusory impression of grief” (Righter 160). Hamlet is genuinely sorrowful, but he has a dilemma: it is impossible to tell whether a person is a hypocrite or not merely from his outward behavior, especially in the court where people are often involved in complex political connections and power struggle, and thus tend to pretend to one another in order to serve self-interests. He sighs, he cries, he wears a black suit. All these are indications of his sorrow over his father’s death. But he realizes, if he is to pretend to be sorrowful, he can do exactly the same things as he does. There is no way to judge from the outward appearance. Thus this passage opens up the idea of the theatricality of life, an area the play explores in further detail. On the one hand, he rejects the pretense of acting associated with the metaphor

of costume and role-playing as an analogy to his genuine and heart-felt sorrows. On the other hand, he realizes that for other people, it is impossible to judge whether he is really sorrowful or he merely pretends to be sorrowful.

This passage also brings out a very interesting metatheatrical aspect. The actor who plays the role Hamlet puts on all these “trappings” and “suits of woe” to playact the melancholic prince. He pretends to be Hamlet. The role Hamlet and his supposed genuine feelings are indeed “actions that a man might play” (Thorne 113). There is no “being,” as he proclaims, only “seeming.” This aspect of metatheatrical ontology, or the nature of being, will be explored in an even more explicit and daring way in Hamlet’s reflection on the player’s performance of the speech about the slaughter of Priam in Chapter Four.

Moreover, in keeping with the metatheatrical engagement in the characterization of Hamlet, this passage, like his many other speeches, is addressed to the theater audience, the other character(s) and himself. The audience can usually recognize a Hamlet earnestly sharing with it his inner self and inner world while talking to the other addressee. For example, in this speech, Hamlet repudiates Gertrude’s response to his external signs of mourning, and draws her attention to his inner feelings, demonstrating a tendency toward self-examination. He knows he has “that within which passes show,” but cannot quite articulate what it is yet. This quest and inquiry of selfhood will recur in his soliloquies in particular, and in some of his speeches, gradually forming a much clearer picture of himself and achieving a better self-understanding. The mixed levels of Hamlet talking to the characters and to the audience frequently occur in deepening the metatheatrical

engagement between Hamlet and the audience.

In this early part of the play Hamlet sees others as essentially playing parts whereas he “is” what he shows. But, for others, he is the embodiment of “ambiguity of the actor” and “confusion of appearance and reality” (Wilds 142):

Although he tells his mother he knows not “seems,” his words are belied by his patent awareness that he is indeed outfitted like the mourner in the “trappings and the suits of woe,” that he is in fact performing “actions that a man might play.” (142)

Ironically, a few scenes later, Hamlet will have to playact a mad man after seeing his father’s ghost and learning of his father’s foul murder by his uncle Claudius. The meeting with the ghost draws a sharp division between Hamlet and the rest of Danish court into two oppositional camps, with Hamlet and Horatio on one side, Claudius and the rest on the other. The ghost reveals the cruel and unnatural murder Claudius commits in order to seize the crown and the queen. Hamlet’s intuition of something rotten in Denmark when he compares the world of Denmark to “an unweeded garden” (1.2.135) is confirmed: the breaking of family bonds embodied in the unnatural fratricide and lascivious adultery. The knowledge of the secrets deepens his sense of betrayal by close relatives, and intensifies his awareness of pretense in the court. From his point of view, the people in Denmark, with the only exception of Horatio, are all hypocrites. The situation in Denmark forces him to distrust all, except Horatio, especially after his meeting with the ghost.

Hamlet has to take the role of an avenger. His father's ghost precisely assigns him the mission: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). He tries to live up to the role, though with difficulty. For Judd Hubert, Hamlet "shows so much reluctance in performing his assigned and indeed solemnly sworn part that his behavior resembles that of an overly sophisticated actor, reluctant to go through with his role in a trite revenge play to which he feels superior and which he does his utmost to redirect if not rewrite" (14). The role as a revenger involves a different level of acting than that of his madness. It is a role that should be kept secret. And he has to assume other pretenses to divert his uncle's suspicion.

The first step of Hamlet's strategy for revenge is to feign madness, a pretense involving highly skillful acting and performance. He becomes an actor assuming the role of a mad prince (Righter 161; Wilds 145; Wilson 178). His tactful manipulation of his appearance shows he is an excellent actor. It is very interesting that his madness is first narrated to Polonius (and to the audience) by the greatly shocked Ophelia. Lillian Wilds observes that on traditional stage Ophelia acts out Hamlet's actions when she delivers her encounter with the prince (146). Unlike Hamlet's, Ophelia's performance is true and genuine because she truly believes what she has perceived.

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all umbrac'd,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,

And with a look so piteous in purport

As if he had been loosed out of hell

To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.77-84)

Hamlet's pretense of madness demonstrates his competence in acting, displaying "the proper physical symptoms of the madman" (Wilds 146). As can be seen from Ophelia's narration, he assumes "actions that a man might play" with the help of "all forms, moods, shapes" of lunacy. The costume plays a key role in authenticating his pretense: unbraced doublet, hatless head, and fouled, ungartered and down-gyved stockings. Moreover, his skillful manipulation of outward appearance and actions also contributes to his successful acting: his paleness, his knocking and trembling knees, his piteous and terrified look. Ophelia gives a vivid report of his performance:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard.

Then goes he to the length of all his arm,

And with his other hand thus o'er his brow

He falls to such perusal of my face

As a would draw it. Long stay'd he so.

At last, a little shaking of mine arm,

And thrice his head thus waving up and down,

He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound

That it did seem to shatter all his bulk

And end his being. That done, he lets me go,

And with his head over his shoulder turn'd

He seem'd to find his way without his eyes,

For out o' doors he went without their helps,

And to the last bended their light on me. (2.1.87-100)

It is worth noting that, instead of showing this incident in front of the audience, Shakespeare chooses to present it through Ophelia's narration, thus making us see the mad prince through Ophelia, who suspects no pretense in Hamlet.

Seeing Hamlet's madness through Ophelia's eyes tends to increase the degree of genuineness of it. No wonder that, some critics believe Hamlet's madness, at least here, is not a pretense, but a true manifestation of his thwarted love (Wilson 109-12). The performance, though in second-hand report, convinces Polonius that the cause of Hamlet's madness is nothing but "the very ecstasy of love" (2.1.102).

Thus Hamlet puts on "an antic disposition" (1.5.173), manifested in his disarray of clothes and in the "wild and whirling words" (1.5.139). To distract his uncle's precaution and to minimize his uncle's suspicion of revenge, playing mad is necessary. Yet, as Mercer points out, Hamlet's antic disposition attracts, rather than diverts, other people's attention:

His performance of distracted melancholy may serve as a mask for his knowledge and his grief, and, above all, for his intention, but his manner of wearing that mask, his stylish display of it, encourages the very scrutiny it is intended to avert. (174)

In contrast to his earlier insistence on genuineness and unity of outward appearance and inward feeling, he takes up a pretense of "lunatic lover," whose appearance is summarized by Rosalind when she chastizes Orlando:

[T]hen your hose should be ungarter' d , your bonnet
unbanded, your sleeve unbutton' d, your shoe untied, and
every thing about you demonstrating a careless desolation.
But you are no such man (*As You Like It*,
3.2.378-82)

For Ophelia and Polonius, his madness is not “seeming,” but “being.” It thus illustrates the impossibility to judge a person merely from his outward behavior. When compared with Ophelia’s madness later in the play, it is impossible to tell from the external manifestations that his madness is a pretense whereas hers is not.

An examination of Hamlet’s soliloquies gives us a glimpse to the most popular dramatic character’s complex mind. Hamlet delivers his first soliloquy after the public court gathering where the King and Queen both urge him to abandon his seeming self-indulgence in mourning. When he vehemently responds to his mother’s request to cast his “nighted colour” off, he insists that all “the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2.86) cannot denote him truly, and he has “that within which passes show” (85). His very first appearance in the play in inky cloak and dejected visage explicitly denotes him a mourner. But in a sharp contrast to the King’s jovial opening speech in this scene, though tinged with some hypocritical sorrow, he is overwhelmed by the horrible fact of his mother’s inconstancy and forgetfulness. He calls Claudius and Gertrude “uncle-father and aunt-mother” (2.2.372), these titles aptly reflecting a disorder and confusion hidden in their marriage. And from his first soliloquy, we can see that Hamlet’s discontent arises not from his father’s

death, but from his mother's inconstancy. This makes his mourning and black suit indeed a kind of performance.

The first sentence of Hamlet's first soliloquy expresses a wish for the dissolution of his flesh, drawing attention to the physical reality of body. His weariness and disdain of all the "uses of this world" (1.2.134) actually spring from one very specific "use," that is, his mother's sexual appetites. The metaphor of Denmark as "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed" (135-36) again points to the physical corruption. Next, Hamlet "can hardly hold a sentence together" with the subject ("he" or "my father") and the verb permanently lost in a series of adjectival phrases and further subordination (Mercer 149). This fragmented syntax indicates a possibility that his preoccupation is not his father's death, but his mother's remarriage. He finally manages to verbalize his obsessed disdain with some difficulty:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow' d my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears—why, she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn' d longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother—but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. (147-53)

He gives a verbal reality to his obsession, "she . . . married with my uncle," in the midst of other allusions, images, and comparisons. The second time is easier. Witness the smoothness and clarity of his reiteration:

Within a month,

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married—O most wicked speed! To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (153-57)

The “incestuous sheets” explains his earlier comparison of the world as an “unweeded garden.” Garden is a traditional emblem of female body. The images of rankness and grossness are linked to the wicked and incestuous lust Hamlet associates with Gertrude and Claudius.

In this early stage of the play, we see Hamlet playing roles. To the King and Queen, and to the rest of the court, Hamlet is a mourner overwhelmed by the sorrow of his father’s death. But here, we can see that, he is also a malcontent, who is bitterly disdainful of women, because his mother has betrayed his father by an instant remarriage. This soliloquy is an example of how our perception is shaped by it, and also serves to exemplify the effect of theater to reach out to us in real life, and seriously alter our perception. The power of soliloquy is so huge that it fits us completely into a character’s point of view. For example, our perception of Gertrude is totally shaped by Hamlet’s judgment. Gertrude is probably the most trapped character in the play, because she is cast in Hamlet’s perception of her, having no soliloquy to defend herself, or to communicate to us what she really thinks. If we see the play in a more objective perspective we can infer some other positive reasons for her remarriage. Also, Laertes is not more evil than Hamlet if we consider what Hamlet has done to Polonius or to Ophelia. But we seldom think in this way about Hamlet, because we are forced into aligning ourselves with Hamlet’s

judgment on things through the influence of soliloquy.

Next, I would like to look at the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Hamlet begins this famous self-inquiring meditation with the form of a “question” involving a difficult choice between two alternatives thereby inducing a debate. In such a dialogue with oneself, in theory, he needs not playact or take up roles since he is all alone. But, in practice, the presence of audience in the playhouse makes a soliloquy a performance. Thus, it is interesting to examine to what extent Hamlet acts in this soliloquy. Since this soliloquy is probably the most famous one in this popular play, it is recognized at once as a performance when the player impersonating Hamlet speaks the very first line.

This soliloquy is the most argued among Hamlet’s soliloquies. Some critics argue “to be or not to be” means “to live or not to live,” and thus regard this soliloquy a revelation of Hamlet’s suicidal inclination.¹⁷ Others assert the question should be “to act or not to act” or “to revenge or not to revenge,” an indication of his reluctance to revenge.¹⁸ Mercer finds the question transforms with the argument of the soliloquy from “to act or to die,” then “to endure or to act,” and finally “to endure or to die” (202). In appearance, Hamlet seems to argue that two choices are available—to suffer or to end, to endure or to die (Jenkins 487). But it turns out that man does not really make a choice because he can only passively accept the option to suffer and endure the hardship inherent to all mortals for fear of the other alternative—to die. Hamlet generalizes his personal calamity into some impersonal predicaments:

¹⁷ The line of tradition to regard this soliloquy a speech about “self-murder” passes from Malone, Bradley, to Dover Wilson (Jenkins 484).

¹⁸ The critics include Irving T. Richards, Alex Newell, Eleanor Prosser, and John Middleton Murry

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz' d love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? (3.1.70-76)

Based on this list, we can suppose that part of Hamlet's suffering rises from the impossibility to achieve justice through the system of law itself, since the law-enforcer is the criminal. Hamlet is also tortured by his own inaction, his broken relation with Ophelia, and the intrusive prying of the king's flatters. But all these predicaments have only tenuous connections with his experience in the play (Mercer 203). He goes even further to identify with the lowest order of farm laborers who "would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life" (76-77) instead of seeking relief in oblivious death. On the one hand, he transforms personal misfortune into more general calamity to engage the audience. On the other, he slides into role-playing again. This time he is a scholar, or more precisely, a philosopher, a mouthpiece for all humanity.

For T. S. Eliot, Hamlet's transformation of personal misfortune to general calamity in this soliloquy, in particular, is an example of emotional excess (61). Eliot's criticism of *Hamlet* is a very interesting example of dispassionate response to the play. Unlike most members of the audience overwhelmed by the play, Eliot, as a cold and dispassionate reader, regards the play as a failure

(Jenkins 484-86).

for its lack of “objective correlative”—the emotion generated in the play is too great for the facts of the play (61).

Hamlet concludes his meditation in the vein that is similar to his action in the play:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. (83-88)

In terms of what goes earlier in this soliloquy, an irresolvable incongruity rises. The main argument in earlier part is about the longing to find rest and release in death and the fear to face the unknown kingdom of death. Here, the descriptions of “resolution,” “enterprises of great pitch and moment,” and “action” seem odd if applied to the meditation on self-murder. These terms belong to description of heroic deeds, for example, the action of revenge. It is then possible to suggest that, after so many generalizations and impersonal considerations, Hamlet finally brings out the issue he needs to confront. He is fully aware that his revenge mission requires immediate action more than careful thought. In his own words, his enterprises of revenge “With this regard, their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action” (87-88). His decision not to kill Claudius in prayer on his way to meet his mother in Act 3 Scene 3 is a case in point. Instead of killing Claudius on the spot, he carefully considers the consequences of his intended action, and reaches a conclusion

that he does not revenge his father if he kills Claudius in prayer, sending the latter to heaven, not hell. At this point he halts his action, and ruminates the matter thoroughly. Compared to Laertes who would “cut [Hamlet’s] throat i’ th’ church” (4.7.125) to avenge his father and sister, Hamlet is unlike traditional revenge heroes who believe “No place indeed should murder sanctuarize; / Revenge should have no bounds” (4.7.126-27) as Claudius puts it.

Moreover Hamlet’s concluding remarks are not applicable to Laertes, Claudius, or even Pyrrhus in the Player’s speech. Their resolutions do not disappear with careful thought before taking action. Some of Hamlet’s own actions are the opposite of the pattern here. His immediate thrust with his sword in killing Polonius behind the arras and his jumping into Ophelia’s grave to wrestle with Laertes are two obvious cases. Thus an incongruity between the text and the action in the play is produced.

This soliloquy exemplifies the typical pattern of action in the play. Instead of answering his own question, he chooses to evade the issue at hand by considering something else. Clarke argues that the problem of conflict between the longing for the release of death and the fear of its consequence “represents Hamlet’s own misreading of a deeper dilemma” (22). His real problem “has to do with his unexpressed and only half-acknowledged reluctance to arouse himself to the condition necessary for the acting of revenge” (Mercer 204). Thus, his failure to carry out the revenge properly lies in his revulsion, emotionally unacceptable to himself, to the assigned role.

All these represent one form of criticism, concerning the study of

characters, motives, and morality. But there is also metatheatrical issue involved. When watching a theatrical performance, most members of the audience are emotionally involved or caught up in the action. But we are aware of the people sitting around us. We are also aware of the structure of the play, and the fact that we have to sit in the theater for three hours. There is a structural need for Hamlet to soliloquize, to ruminate, to keep changing his mind, and to delay his revenge. If Hamlet acts and revenges, for example, if he kills Claudius when he is praying, the play is over. We are aware of this structural need for the story to continue, and have a sense of getting into a rhythm of development, a sense of things changing or evolving. So we know the play has to extend and continue the development of the story. And Hamlet is the moderator of the rhythm through the play.

Hamlet starts with impersonal infinitives, “to be” and “not to be,” and uses plural pronouns “we” and “us” throughout to include the audience in his process of reasoning, making this meditation part of the audience’s too. Most critics argue that Hamlet’s argument is “general, not personal” (Jenkins 485). Also, in terms of metatheatrical perspective, it is obvious that Hamlet directly addresses the audience by using “we” to include them. His reference to the heart-ache, or natural shocks that any mortal inevitably experiences also makes his reasoning sound impersonal, appealing to universal experience. Given the impersonal touches in this soliloquy, he possibly delivers this in a way as if exchanging his view with the audience.

In this way, Hamlet’s soliloquies build a great intimacy between him and the audience so much so that the audience completely identifies with him. A

comparison of Hamlet and Laertes will illustrate the effect of soliloquies on the audience. Like Hamlet, Laertes has justifiable reasons to avenge his father and sister in killing Hamlet. But the audience never feels sympathetic as it does with Hamlet, and usually regards Laertes an accomplice of Claudius, and thus a villain.

Hamlet, though possessing excellent acting skills, does not play his chief role, a revenger, successfully. Always keeping a distance from his revenge role, he reveals an abhorrence to private justice. With his intense self-consciousness and sensitivity to his pre-conceived role, he is able to retain his moral integrity, without being engulfed by the savagery of retribution as most of other traditional avengers often do, thereby transcending the generic constraints upon a revenge hero.

Other characters also play roles (Forker 217; Fisch 1969: 83; Mack 1955: 44-46). Claudius, for one, is an excellent actor. In public, he performs his kingly role efficiently as can be seen from his political pragmatism in handling the Fortinbras crisis. On a public level, Claudius as a king demonstrates the theatricality of power and its operation. On a private level, he pretends to be a benign stepfather to Hamlet. In reality, he tries many ways to pry into Hamlet and then sets up traps to kill him when he recognizes the threat. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play roles in order to probe the nature of Hamlet's sudden insanity for the king and queen. Polonius also plays roles to investigate the real cause of Hamlet's lunacy.

Ophelia is forced into role-playing by Polonius and Claudius, a situation alienated from her nature, as it is embodied in her clumsy interaction with

Hamlet. In the painful “nunnery” scene, she is used to test Hamlet, and is forced to tell a lie when asked the whereabouts of her father. Extremely alert to role-playing, Hamlet immediately suspects Ophelia and attacks her on the ground that she is a hypocrite. His obsession with people’s honesty culminates in his question: “Are you honest?” after hearing her intention to return the “remembrances.” As Jenkins notes, here Hamlet interrogates, on a primary level, her truthfulness and sincerity in what she says (281). But he quickly passes on to a secondary level to question her chastity, another obsession he displays with woman’s chastity. He heaps insults upon her for the sin his mother commits: “Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (3.1.139-41). He goes on to accuse her (and all women) as being hypocritical:

I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath
given you one face and you make yourselves another.

(144-46)

From Hamlet’s point of view, Gertrude is false, therefore Ophelia is false. But we know his perception of Ophelia is wrong. On a metatheatrical level, his reference of women’s application of cosmetics to make another face also brings out the theatrical reality of the practice of cross-dressing on the stage: the boy actor’s assumption of the female part Ophelia.

The stage convention from the nineteenth century onward often prefers to presume that Hamlet knows at some point he is being eavesdropped when he suddenly poses the question about Ophelia’s honesty out of context (Jenkins 496; Wilds 171). No stage direction is available to confirm this possibility.

But the suspicion of being overheard on Hamlet's part is built into this question and his subsequent outburst addressing obviously not to Ophelia, but to Polonius and Claudius instead: "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house" (133-34) and "Those that are married already—all but one—shall live; the rest shall keep as they are" (149-51). For Hamlet, Ophelia is as false as other characters, who all try to spy on him or pry into his secrets.

Most characters have to play roles to some degree in dealing with Hamlet. But the extent to which Gertrude plays roles remains enigmatic. The ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius seduces Gertrude before the murder takes place:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (1.5.42-46)

Gertrude is "seeming-virtuous," because she betrays her husband and marriage vows. As Shakespeare's sonnets 134 and 135 illustrate, the word "will" carries polyvalent values. It is ordinarily used in reference to "the faculty by which a person decides on and initiates action." In the context of "incestuous," "adulterate," "seduce," and "lust" in the ghost speech, the obvious primary meaning of "will" may be colored by the sexual implication of "carnal appetite" (Booth 1977: 463). Gertrude's lust is unmistakably singled out in her relation with Claudius. The ghost goes on to make the adultery even clearer:

O Hamlet, what a falling off was there,
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine. (1.5.47-52)

The adultery is committed before old Hamlet's murder. This accusation against Gertrude brings out her wickedness even further than her short-lived grief and inconstancy at which Hamlet rails in his first soliloquy. In spite of these hints of her wickedness, however, we do not know whether she is an accomplice in old Hamlet's murder. The ghost does not accuse her on the ground that she is complicit with Claudius to murder him. But it explicitly instructs Hamlet to leave her alone:

Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. (86-88)

It is uncertain that the nature of Gertrude's guilt is restricted to adultery alone. Hamlet seems to imply her guilt is greater than adultery seen from the suggestions in the dumb show and the play-within-the-play. The description of the dumb show is filled with hints of pretense, such as "makes show of protestation," "makes passionate action," "seem to condole with," and "seems harsh," three of which are linked to the Queen. These phrases give prominence to the Queen's pretense, making her seem to be complicit with the murderer in the dumb show. The play-within-the-play again hints at the

Player Queen's guilt of the murder. The Player Queen, a double of Gertrude, seems to be an accomplice of the murderer, since she lulls the Player King to sleep, thus preparing the ground for the murder. Also, she protests against the Player King's urge of remarriage after his death:

O confound the rest.

Such love must needs be treason in my breast.

In second husband let me be accurst;

None wed the second but who kill' d the first. (3.2.172-75)

Later in the closet scene, Hamlet even compares his own "rash and bloody deed" (3.4.27) to that of killing the old Hamlet by Gertrude:

A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king and marry with his brother. (3.4.28-29)

Two different sins are mentioned: kill a king and marry with his brother. But she reacts to the revelation of the murder in a strangely surprising exclamation: "*As kill a king?*" (3.4.30; emphases added). Her bafflement of what acts on her part may have incensed Hamlet's sweeps aside the stark disclosure of the most foul and unnatural fratricide, a hideous sin much more detestable than an ordinary murder. Her question seems to indicate her innocence in the murder. But it is very difficult for us to explain why she reacts in such a reserved manner to the murder itself, which involves two persons most closely connected to her: her former husband, and her present husband.

Hamlet's advice to Gertrude to assume the semblance of virtue confirms the transformative power of role-playing.

Assume a virtue if you have it not.

That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on. (162-67)

Here, he argues that “seeming” may become “being,” admitting a fundamental connection between them, rather than attributing them to a clear-cut dichotomy.

We do not know why Gertrude marries Claudius in such a hurry. Her adultery and “o’er hasty” marriage may indicate her stronger sexual tie with Claudius. In the closet scene Hamlet vehemently accuses and shames her on the ground of her lustful appetites. She finally recognizes the hideous nature of her lust. And, it could be her love of power. After old Hamlet’s death, she can still enjoy her power by marrying the new king. Besides these factors, she may also marry Claudius for the sake of Hamlet, to protect him from the threat of Claudius. But all these remain our guesses.

To sum up, role-playing in most characters is explicitly obvious. Their motives and behaviors are easily perceived by the audience. Claudius plays roles to please Gertrude and to maintain his power. Polonius plays roles to investigate the nature of Hamlet’s madness to please the king and queen. Ophelia plays roles, in obeying her father and the king, to test the credibility of Hamlet’s madness in relation with her rejection of him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern betray their friendship with Hamlet to secretly pry on Hamlet and report their findings to the king and queen. Hamlet plays roles to confound his enemies. The theatricality of their engagement is explicit. But

Gertrude's role-playing, alone, is uncertain. We do not know whether she is real and genuine, or she is a hypocrite and merely plays parts.

With all these different role-playings, *Hamlet* delves into the nature of acting, the dialectics of appearance and reality, and the theatricality of life. It excavates the content, the meaning, and the significance of the form, brimming with intensity of psychological depth and emotional involvement of characters involved. By contrast, *The Revenger's Tragedy* presents a more superficial interplay of role-playing among characters. The device of role-playing is usually much more mechanical and repetitive so much so that it lacks the kind of density and intensity that are present in that of *Hamlet*.

IV. *The Revenger's Tragedy*: "Brother, we lose ourselves"¹⁹

Role-playing and disguises are ubiquitous in the Danish court of *Hamlet*. They are even more ubiquitous, or rather excessive, in the Italian court of *Revenger's*. A single character, Vindice, adopts role upon role. Other characters assume disguise after disguise. Roles and disguises seem to multiply in an incomparable speed when each character tries to outwit one another by intrigues and counter-intrigues.

In *Revenger's*, Vindice dramatizes several roles, including a satirist, a Puckish schemer, a corrupting pander, a melancholiac, a malcontent, a knave, and a revenger, and manipulates his fellow characters and the dramatic action in his pursuit of revenge. Through a careful metatheatrical design, the play delineates the gradual transformation of Vindice, from a seeker of justice to a

¹⁹ This is from *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 4.3.203.

cold-blooded killer, highlighting the metamorphosis effect of role-playing. The play ruminates on the inadequacy of private justice through abundant ironies. And the pronounced emphasis of artificiality of plotting in Vindice's revenge reflects a reconsideration of the revenge genre itself. The various metatheatrical elements and impulses in the play also contribute to a re-evaluation of the significance of the play.

Like Hamlet, Vindice plays many roles. His first role is that of a satirist. Like a presenter in a morality play, Vindice, with a skull in his hand, opens the play with a highly stylized soliloquy, at the beginning of which a train of the ducal family passes through the stage. This is a spectacular procession in itself for its conspicuous artificiality. First, they are members of the royal family, probably dressed in flamboyant costume, an unmistakable social marker. Secondly, as the stage direction indicates, the procession is followed by a train of servants carrying torchlight, which enhances the visual effect on the stage with more illumination, and makes an "artificial noon" (1.4.27) of the night. Finally, Vindice's commentary on each character heightens the audience's interest in them. This soliloquy is in a very stylized form, and therefore theatrical. It is unnaturalistic in comparison with Hamlet's soliloquies which are usually embedded into the action, coming out of it, and fading back into it. It is also metatheatrical, because in the soliloquy, Vindice first aligns himself with the audience, observing his fellow characters in the play:

Duke, royal lecher; go, grey-haired adultery;
And thou his son, as impious steeped as he;
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil;

And thou his Duchess, that will do with devil;

Four excellent characters! (1.1.1-5)

When he describes the Duke, his son, his bastard, and the Duchess as “Four excellent characters,” he speaks in a way as if he himself is not a character.²⁰ By saying this, he, like a member in the audience in a playhouse, observes his fellow players from a distance. This makes him a kind of indeterminate character, as he is neither a character nor a member of the audience, situating himself in and out of the play world from time to time. He is, in a sense, in the area between the play world and the audience’s real world. Also, his description of his fellow players as “Four excellent characters” has a ring of aesthetic judgement, as if to ensure the audience that the play to follow will be excellent with these cleverly defined characters in the cast.

Then he singles out the lascivious Duke, whose lustful desires are vehemently condemned.

O, that marrowless age

Would stuff the hollow bones with damned desires,

And ’stead of heat, kindle infernal fires

Within the spendthrift veins of a dry duke,

A parched and juiceless luxur. O God!—one

That has scarce blood enough to live upon,

And he to riot it like a son and heir? (5-11)

²⁰ “Character” is a technical word in drama referring to “A personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities, by a novelist or dramatist; also, the personality or ‘part’ assumed by an actor on the stage” (*OED*, Item 17). Since the first entry of this definition only dates to 1664, critics tend to interpret this word as “character type.” But it is possible that the meaning of a dramatic character could be already current, even though no recorded instance is listed in *OED*.

He gradually builds up a moral principle upon which all the court members are judged entirely through his perspective. As the play develops, he even turns into a kind of heavenly judge, sentencing those around him.

Next, with a touch reminiscent of Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull, Vindice speaks to Gloriana's skull in a strangely intimate way as if addressing an animate being.

Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
My study's ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
When life and beauty naturally filled out
These ragged imperfections (14-18)

The skull, almost functioning as a hallmark of the genre of revenge tragedy, is a symbolic figure of death. When Vindice holds it out to face the audience, he forces them to see it directly. It is used to blur the boundary separating the play world from the real world:

Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folks,
To have their costly three-piled flesh worn off
As bare as this; for banquets, ease and laughter
Can make great men, as greatness goes by clay,
But wise men little are more great than they. (45-49)

Unlike Hamlet's introspective reflection on death with the skull, Vindice pushes the skull forward, and uses it to confront the audience. At this point, he turns from commenting on the characters in the play to the "characters" in the audience. He observes and addresses the "fat folks" or people with "their

costly three-pil'd flesh" sitting in the playhouse. His satirical comments on vanity, luxury, wealth, and ostentation in this passage now extend to the audience. As this soliloquy indicates, he steps out of his role, and points out to the audience, using the skull, a *memento mori*, to convey the mortality and vanity of human existence, informing them they suffer from the same worldly sins at which the play's satire aims.

By the end of this stylized opening soliloquy, Vindice has situated himself as between the characters on the stage and the "characters" in the audience. He is a commentator upon both. The soliloquy also exposes the theatricality both on the stage and in the audience. Thus the play, framed by Vindice's opening soliloquy and his dying speech, sets up a metatheatrical pattern in which Vindice operates.

In some Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, the disruptions between character and role can take other forms, besides the commonly used device of a character stepping out of his dramatic role to address the audience. For example, in John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, when Piero finishes his passionate outburst in "I have been nursed in blood, and still have sucked / The stream of reeking gore" (2.1.19-20), Balurdo immediately rushes onstage "with a beard half off, half on," explaining that the "tiring man hath not glued on my beard half fast enough" (30-31). If considered from the fact that this play is first performed by the Paul's Boys, the divorce between a character and his role is even more pronounced. A sense of grotesqueness may arise when a boy actor impersonating a revenger coming on stage with a bloody knife.

For almost all of the court members, the play's Italian court is a site of

power struggle, like that of Hamlet's Denmark. The power contention mainly takes the forms of role-playing and disguises. The play's excessive ironies, arising from the various disguises and role-playing in the dramatic action (Bradbrook 165; Lisca 242-51), not only call attention to its artificiality as a work of dramatic art, but also ridicule the revenge genre itself by overtly exposing the absurdity of its multiple revenge plots.

Parallel to Vindice and his brother Hippolito's revenge plot, members of the ducal family also conspire against one another to an excessive extent. The multiple revenge plots in the play comprise a long list: Vindice and Hippolito's revenge on the Duke and Lussurioso, the Duchess' on the Duke, the Bastard Spurio's on the Duke and his half-brothers, Supervacuo and Ambitoso's on Lussurioso, Lussurioso's on "Piato," Ambitoso and Supervacuo's on Spurio and the Duchess, Ambitoso's on Supervacuo, Supervacuo's on Ambitoso, and Antonio's on Junior. Unlike the parallel revenge plots in *Hamlet*, which serve as foils to Hamlet's revenge, those in *Revenger's* are excessive and trivialized to the extent that they tend to cancel out one another.

The play is filled with role-playing moments just like *Hamlet*. The Italian court is a corrupted world of hypocrisy where almost every character assumes role-playing to serve self-interests. Several layers of role-playing can be perceived among the Duke's family members. In the trial of Duke's youngest son Junior, the underlying conflicts among the ducal family members are briefly sketched. The Duke's reluctance to interfere with the trial irritates the Duchess, who soon reveals a plan to cuckold her husband for his slowness in pardoning her youngest son.

Some second wife would do this, and dispatch
Her double-loathed lord at meat or sleep.
Indeed, 'tis true, an old man's twice a child.
Mine cannot speak; one of his single words
Would quite have freed my youngest, dearest son
From death or durance, and have made him walk
With a bold foot upon the thorny law,
Whose prickles should bow under him; but 'tis not,
And therefore wedlock faith shall be forgot.
I' ll kill him in his forehead, hate there feed;

That wound is deepest, though it never bleed. (1.2. 99-109)

She pretends to be in good terms with the Duke, while committing incestuous adultery with the Duke's bastard Spurio. The relation between the Dutchess and Spurio is also a pretense. In a seemingly allied adulterous and incestuous relation between the two, both foster their own revengeful plans. The Duchess uses Spurio mainly to get even with her husband who fails to save her youngest son. Though Spurio hates the Duchess and her sons, he decides to accept the Duchess' offer of love to take revenge on the Duke for his infamy as a bastard.

I feel it swell me; my revenge is just;
I was begot in impudent wine and lust.
Step-mother, I consent to thy desires;
I love thy mischief well, but I hate thee,
And those three cubs thy sons, wishing confusion,

Death and disgrace may be their epitaphs.

As for my brother, the Duke's only son,

Whose birth is more beholding to report

Than mine, and yet perhaps as falsely sown

(Women must not be trusted with their own),

I' ll loose my days upon him, hate all I;

Duke, on thy brow I' ll draw my bastardy. (1.2.190-201)

Spurio confesses his hatred for the Duchess and her three sons, and, aptly called himself "hate all I," hates everyone for the sense of depravity inherent in his bastard birth.

On the other hand, the Duchess' sons hate Lussurioso and Spurio. Ambitioso and Supervacuo both covet the dukedom. Thus they take the chance to kill Lussurioso when the latter is imprisoned for an attempt to kill the Duchess and Spurio in their adultery act, but only to find the Duke and Duchess in bed instead. Their hypocritical request for Lussurioso's pardon is easily seen through by the cunning Duke.

Here's envy with a poor thin cover o' er ' t,

Like scarlet hid in lawn, easily spied through.

This their ambition by the mother's side

Is dangerous, and for safety must be purged. (2.3. 104-7)

The Duke, on the one hand, gives his vicious step-sons the signet to condemn Lussurioso. On the other hand, he has Lussurioso released immediately to forestall the step-sons' plot.

Ambitioso and Supervacuo work against others as a team. They plot

against Lussurioso, trying to get rid of him by taking the advantage of his imprisonment. They also try to attempt Spurio's life for his incest with their mother. Though they cooperate to destroy their enemies, they plot against one another secretly in hopes of usurping the dukedom.

The play's indulgence in plotting is clearly reflected in these multiple revenge plots. Frank Kermode, in his introduction to *Hamlet* in the Riverside edition, comments on the repetitive patterns in *Hamlet* that things never happen once, they happen twice (1183). Compared with *Hamlet*, the repetition of revenge plots in *Revenger's* amounts to about ten times. These multiple revenge plots are so excessive that they highlight the play's tendency toward self-imitation and self-parody.

As seen earlier, Vindice plays several roles. In his opening soliloquy, he shifts from role to role. He first positions himself as a "morality play" presenter, commenting and delivering moral judgement on the Duke and his family members. He then turns to the skull, meditating on human mortality and moral depravity, and speaks like a satirist. And finally, he advocates "Vengeance" to help him attain his revenge, a self-conscious gesture to his mission as a revenger. In addition, such self-referential reminder constantly draws attention to its generic identity.

Vengeance, thou murder's quit-rent, and whereby
Thou show'st thyself tenant to Tragedy,
O, keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech,
For those thou hast determined!—Hum, who e'er knew
Murder unpaid? Faith, give Revenge her due,

Sh' has kept touch hitherto. Be merry, merry (1.1.39-44)

To proceed with his revenge, Vindice first disguises himself as a “base-coined pander” (1.1.81) to Lussurioso, the Duke’s eldest son, with a change of costume. His disguise goes deeper than a mere change of appearance, however, he is transformed to become “other,” not even recognized by his own mother and sister, not to mention Lussurioso, who has never seen him before.

Vindice What, brother? Am I far enough from myself?

Hipp. As if another man had been sent whole

Into the world, and none wist how he came. (1.3.1-3)

Hippolito’s assurance of his brother’s successful disguise somehow unwittingly spells out the irrevocable transformation of Vindice through his disguise, a central motif common in the revenge plays.

Vindice’s mission, to his amazement, is to procure his own sister Castiza for Lussurioso. Caught up in such an unnatural mission, he tells his brother Hippolito: “We are made strange fellows” (1.3.170), a foreboding statement to his later transformation in the process of revenge. Considering that other man may take up this foul office, if he rejects it, he decides to proceed with the task as a test for his sister and mother. Under the disguise of “Piato,” he goes to Castiza and Gratiana to execute his mission as a “base-coined pander.” To his surprise, his mother is easily moved by money and agrees to work on her unyielding daughter. In this confrontation with his sister and mother, a discrepancy of appearance and reality is conveyed through the use of asides.

Vindice No, I would raise my state upon her breast,

And call her eyes my tenants; I would count
My yearly maintenance upon her cheeks,
Take coach upon her lip, and all her parts
Should keep men after men, and I would ride
In pleasure upon pleasure . . .

.....

Gratia. O heavens!

This overcomes me.

Vindice [*Aside*] Not, I hope, already!

Gratia. [*Aside*] It is too strong for me. Men know that know us;

We are so weak, their words can overthrow us.

He touched me nearly, made my virtues bate,

When his tongue struck upon my poor estate.

Vindice [*Aside*] I e' en quake to proceed; my spirit turns edge.

I fear me she's unmothered, yet I' ll venture.

(2.1.95-100, 104-11)

In this passage, three asides are used by two characters. An aside is the equivalent of a character's thought which is not meant to be overheard by other characters also on the stage. This dramatic practice enables the audience to enter the character's mind, and see what he is thinking. Vindice's "Not, I hope, already!" and Gratiana's "It is too strong for me" are two examples. But Vindice's second aside is a little bit different from the two. It is an address to the audience. He thus engages the audience through the aside, crossing the boundary between the play world and the real world. This also

enables us to distinguish between these characters. In this context, Gratiana does not have relationship with the audience as Vindice does. In a sense, they are in different levels of realities in terms of their relationship with the audience: Gratiana remains in the play world, while Vindice stands in-between the play world and the world outside the play, travelling back and forth in both.

Vindice's asides also serve to build up the gap between his assumed role as a pander and his real self as Gratiana's son and Castiza's brother. But his magic power to overcome his mother with moving eloquence on the courtly extravagance illustrates the transforming influence of the adopted role upon the character. Playing Piato brings forth the aspect of evilness in him. He plays the role of devil's advocate so well that his mother Gratiana uses it as her excuse of being tempted:

I' ll give you this, that one I never knew

Plead better for, and ' gainst, the devil than you. (4.4.87-88)

When Castiza realizes her mother Gratiana tries to turn her into a prostitute, she cries:

I cry you mercy, lady, I mistook you;

Pray, did you see my mother? Which way went she?

Pray God I have not lost her. (2.1. 161-63)

For Castiza, she pretends not to recognize her mother because of her lack of motherhood. Gratiana's lack of motherhood is unnatural, but Vindice's excitement as a pander when he delineates the luxurious court life is even more unnatural, given the fact that he is here tempting his own sister to turn prostitute.

O, think upon the pleasure of the palace;
 Secured ease and state; the stirring meats
 Ready to move out of the dishes that
 E' en now quicken when they' re eaten;
 Banquets abroad by torch-light, music, sports,
 Bare-headed vassals that had ne' er the fortune
 To keep on their own hats, but let horns wear ' em;
 Nine coaches waiting,—hurry, hurry, hurry! (199-206)

Vindice's excitement is captured in the liveliness of the sensual pleasures in court, but is easily deflated by Castiza's reply: "Ay, to the devil" (207). This reply seems to confound Vindice-as-Piato when he mistakes Lussurioso for the Duke after an aside:

Vindice [Aside] Ay, to the devil—[To her] To th' Duke, by my faith.
 Gratia. Ay, to the Duke. Daughter, you' d scorn to think o' th' devil
 and you were there once. (208-10)

Asides are abundantly used throughout the play by more than one character, creating a kind of rhythmic movement in which characters move to other characters in dialogue and move away to the audience in an aside. The characters' movements are very carefully programmed in a form of choreography. So the artificiality of the play is emphasized. In this aspect, the play is highly stylized and artificial, because its characters use asides in a choreographic way. They move and speak very precisely. Their rhythmic movements are very carefully set up.

In Act 3 Scene 5, the base pandering role of Piato brings Vindice a chance

to fulfil his role as a revenger when offering his “pandering” service to the Duke. In this (anti-)climatic scene, Vindice is to kill the Duke with the skull of Gloriana. Role-playing is even imposed on the inanimate object. He disguises the skull in attires, headdresses and mask, and has it playact a country lady as a means to poison the lascivious Duke. He addresses the dressed-up skull as if it were alive:

Madam, his grace will not be absent long.

Secret? Ne’er doubt us, madam; ’twill be worth

Three velvet gowns to your ladyship. Known?

Few ladies respect that! Disgrace? a poor thin shell;

’Tis the best grace you have to do it well. (3.5.43-47)

Vindice assumes the tone of a satirist when he unmask the skull to his brother Hippolito:

Here’s an eye

Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;

A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to dissemble.

Methinks this mouth should make a swearer tremble,

A drunkard clasp his teeth, and not undo ’em

To suffer wet damnation to run through ’em.

Here’s a cheek keeps her colour, let the wind

Go whistle;

Spout rain, we fear thee not; be hot or cold,

All’s one with us; and is not she absurd,

Whose fortunes are upon their faces set,

That fear no other god but wind and wet? (54-65)

Holding a skull in his hand, Vindice unveils the truth about the disguised country lady: a stark, grim figure of death. Unlike Hamlet's meditation upon the mutability and mortality of human destiny when he holds Yorick's skull, Vindice takes the chance to inveigh against female hypocrisy and wantonness exemplified in women's application of cosmetics.

Vindice moves on to the famous "silkworm" speech:

Does the silk-worm expend her yellow labours

For thee? For thee does she undo herself?

Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships

For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?

Why does yon fellow falsify highways,

And put his life between the judge's lips,

To refine such a thing? keeps horse and men

To beat their valours for her?

Surely we are all mad people, and they

Whom we think are, are not; we mistake those;

'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes. (72-82)

Again, like a satirist, he berates the vanity of sensual pleasures. He scolds, on the one hand, male members in the audience ("yon fellow") who risk in criminal activities to procure illicit money to please the ladies. On the other hand, the beauty of ladies is nothing more than a veil upon a skull. He goes on with his tirade against women and their short-lived beauty:

Does every proud and self-affecting dame

Camphor her face for this? and grieve her maker
In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves
For her superfluous outside—all for this?
Who now bids twenty pound a night, prepares
Music, perfumes and sweetmeats? All are hushed;
Thou mayst lie chaste now. It were fine, methinks,
To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts,
And unclean brothels; sure, 'twould fright the sinner,
And make him a good coward, put a reveller
Out of his antic amble,
And cloy an epicure with empty dishes.
Here might a scornful and ambitious woman
Look through and through herself;—see, ladies, with false forms
You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms. (84-98)

The materiality and commodity of female bodies, illustrations of Jacobean extravagances, are severely attacked.

When he finally has his fill in venting this rant on women's corruption and lust, he returns to his role of a revenger. The language is full of theatrical images. It not only points to the performative aspects of his revenge at hand, but also highlights the self-referential impulse. The self-reflexively theatrical imagery in this passage draws attention to its own theatricality and artificiality. It echoes the playwright's manipulation of plot, actor's use of property, actor's assumption of roles, and the play's revenge theme.

Now to my *tragic business*. Look you, brother,

I have not fashioned this only for *show*
And useless *property*; no, it shall bear a *part*
E' en in it own *revenge*. (99-102; emphases added)

On a dramatic level, he manipulates the skull, imposing the role of a country wench upon it. The disguised skull, though inanimate and senseless, is given a new identity and is able to execute its own revenge. On a metadramatic level, the self-reflexive play metaphor dwells on Vindice's and the skull's fictitious ontology imposed by their generic conventions.

Vindice's corruption by his role as a revenger can be seen from the episode of the Duke's murder. He plots to poison the Duke with the skull:

This very skull,
Whose mistress the Duke poisoned, with this drug,
The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged
In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death.
As much as the dumb thing can, he shall feel:
What fails in poison, we' ll supply in steel. (102-7)

When the Duke does fall by the poisoned kiss. Vindice tortures him further by the sight of adultery between his Duchess and his bastard son Spurio.

Puh, ' tis but early yet, now I' ll begin
To stick thy soul with ulcers. I will make
Thy spirit grievous sore; it shall not rest,
But, like some pestilent man, toss in thy breast—
Mark me, Duke:
Thou' rt a renowned, high and mighty cuckold.

(174-79; emphases added)

“Mark me, Duke” is metadramatic: it echoes the ghost’s “Mark me” (1.5.2) in *Hamlet*. But in *Hamlet* it prefaces a father’s command, here it is a prelude to a series of sadistic torture on the revenger’s victim. Not able to brook the hideous sight, the Duke is forced to watch it with daggers pointing at him:

Now with thy dagger
Nail down his tongue, and mine shall keep possession
About his heart. If he but gasp, he dies.
We dread not death to quittance injuries.
Brother,
If he but wink, not brooking the foul object,
Let our two other hands tear up his lids,
And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood;
When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good.

(197-205; emphases added)

This murder is sadistic. Vindice does not kill the Duke just to avenge his father and his *fiancée*. He kills him for the pleasure of violence. He prolongs the torture. Moreover, his reflexive remark on the tragedy’s politics to meet the audience’s taste is self-conscious and self-complacent. But it is also ironic because it only reflects some vulgar audience’s injudicious taste that evaluates the achievement of a tragedy on its didacticism.

Later, when things go wrong with his disguise of Piato, Vindice has to discard this disguise as if removing an item of clothing. Symbolically, identity can be trivialized to a piece of clothing, easily assumed and discarded,

in parallel with an actor's assumption of different roles. Vindice's second "disguise" before Lussurioso is interesting because, this time, he appears in his "own shape" (4.1.59), and is recruited to kill Piato, his former disguised persona. It is a disguise in the sense that he plays a role, not showing his genuine identity to Lussurioso. The playacting nature in his supposedly real self is obvious in the exchange about the disguise with Hippolito:

Hippo. How will you appear in fashion different,
As well as in apparel, to make all things possible?
.....
You must change tongue—familiar was your first.

Vindice Why,
I'll bear me in some strain of melancholy,
And string myself with heavy-sounding wire,
Like such an instrument that speaks
Merry things sadly. (4.2.22-23, 26-31)

To "be" himself before Lussurioso means to playact a role, here a melancholiac, and to assume new clothes and a different tongue. In an introductory exchange with Lussurioso, Vindice's ultimate identity is confirmed and emphasized:

Luss. Thy name, I have forgot it.
Vindice Vindice, my lord.
Luss. 'Tis a good name, that.
Vindice Ay, a revenger.
Luss. It does betoken courage; thou shouldst be valiant,

And kill thine enemies. (176-79)

When Vindice learns of his employment to murder “Piato,” he describes his dilemma in a funny but revealing way: “I’ m hired to kill myself” (207). He does kill himself with the assumption of the revenge role, because he degenerates into a savage killer, losing his moral integrity when he proceeds into the depth of evil retribution.

Like the episode of using the disguised skull to murder the Duke, the role-playing motif is twisted again with Vindice’s invention to dress up the Duke’s corpse in the disguise of Piato. Vindice comes up with an ingenious solution to his dilemma to kill “himself” by putting up the Duke’s body in Piato’s disguise. It is even more complicated than his earlier plotting in poisoning the Duke, when Vindice multiplies the complication of his plotting by more disguises—Vindice as a hired killer is to murder his earlier disguised persona “Piato,” who is now cast in disguise of the dead Duke with Piato’s clothes.

When setting up the Piato-disguise on the dead Duke, Vindice repetitively describes the situation in an ironic way. He first says “I must kill myself” (5.1.4), and again “I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder” (5-6), and finally “I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself” (6-7). He even emphasizes “I could vary it not so little as thrice over again” (7-8). On the theatrical presentation of this scene, the dead Duke is disguised as Vindice’s former self “Piato.” Role-playing is again imposed on an inanimate body. The dead Duke, though only in disguise, is a projection of a part of Vindice’s multi-sided self. In killing the fake “Piato,” Vindice kills a part of himself as

he jokingly repeats. In addition, critics have long noticed the play's multiple ironies. Vindice, here, says things explicitly to highlight the play's many ironies. In doing this, he draws our attention to the play's plotting. His repetitive remarks on the disguise plot, on the one hand, embody his vanity and pride of his own cleverness. On the other, they expose his indulgence in villainous plotting, which in turn mirrors the play's artificiality, its status as an artifact. He draws our attention to his plotting, and in analogy, to the play's plotting. This exposure and emphasis of the play's own artificiality is in sharp contrast to the more naturalistic drama which endeavors to divert an audience's attention away from its plotting. Though many revenge tragedies, like *Hamlet* or *The Spanish Tragedy*, revolve around plotting, *Revenger's* is different from them in that it is deliberately self-conscious about its plotting to an excessive extent, and draws an audience's attention to its more and more complicated plotting. In this most important sense, it indulges, and even delights, in its artificiality.

Near the end of the play, Lussurioso becomes Duke when his father's death is finally revealed, and like Claudius, turns a funeral into a revel. The antithesis of happiness and grief is not as elaborately built as that in Claudius' opening speech in *Hamlet*. Yet, a similar, but debased, sentiment turns to self-derision, comically burlesquing the kind of pretense and hypocrisy veiled in sugarcoated language.

3 Noble

In the mean season,

Let us bethink the latest funeral honours

Due to the Duke's cold body—and, withal,

Calling to memory our new happiness
 Spread in his royal son. Lords, gentlemen,
 Prepare for revels.

Vindice [*Aside*] Revels?

3 Noble Time hath several falls;
 Grievs lift up joys, feasts put down funerals.

Luss. Come then, my lords; my favours to you all.
 [*Aside*] The Duchess is suspected foully bent;
 I' ll begin dukedom with her banishment! (5.1.159-69)

This scene is framed into layers of relationships with the court divided into various groups, each plotting against another. When Lussurioso leaves the stage with his nobles, Hippolito and Vindice come forward.

Hipp. [*To Vindice*] Revels!

Vindice [*To Hippolito*] Ay, that' s the word; we are firm yet.
 Strike one strain more, and then we crown our wit.
 (169-71)

Hippolito and Vindice, following the innermost group of the new Duke and his nobles, give a twist to the meaning of the intended revels, and prepare us for the upcoming murdering masques. After Hippolito and Vindice comes Spurio the Bastard, always alone, in contrast to others in pair or group.

Spurio [*Aside*] Well, have at the fairest mark!—so said the
 Duke when he begot me—
 And if I miss his heart, or near about,
 Then have at any; a bastard scorns to be out. (172-75)

Young Duke's half-brothers, Supervacuo and Ambitioso, step forward when Spurio steps down.

Super. Note'st thou that Spurio, brother?

Ambi. Yes, I note him to our shame.

Super. He shall not live, his hair shall not grow much longer;
in this time of revels, tricks may be set afoot. See'st thou
yon new moon? It shall outlive the new duke by much;
this hand shall dispossess him, then we're mighty.

A mask is treason's license, that build upon;

'Tis murder's best face when a vizard's on. (176-84)

Supervacuo and Ambitioso, always plotting against others as a team, are also in conflict with each other, unlike another pair of brothers, Vindice and Hippolito. Here, Supervacuo makes explicit his plan to murder Lussurioso in a masque. Finally, Ambitioso is left alone after his brother exits. As the final person left on the stage, Ambitioso seems to have a greater chance to outwit his enemies in this successive chain of plotting. But, as the final scene suggests, it is a circular chain of violence which comes back to him as well.

Ambi. Is 't so? 'Tis very good.

And do you think to be duke then, kind brother?

I'll see fair play; drop one, and there lies t' other. (185-87)

Like a nest of Chinese boxes, these different groups of characters enclose one after another in a frame by succeeding each with very precise movements. Again, these characters speak and move in a choreography, in careful measure in relation to one another.

The masques in the final scene are also carefully choreographed, fittingly capturing the characteristics of dances of death. In the first masque, Vindice and Hippolito take the lead in the murder.

Luss. [Aside] Ah, 'tis well;

Brothers, and bastard, you dance next in hell.

The revengers dance; at the end, steal out their swords, and these four kill the four at the table in their chairs. It thunders.

Vindice Mark, thunder!

Dost know thy cue, thou big-voiced cryer?

Dukes' groans are thunder's watchwords.

(5.3.40-43; emphases added)

Lussurioso's intention to murder his half-brothers and bastard-brother right before himself being murdered makes the irony in an overtly mechanical way, and ridicules his abortive plotting. The thunder "timely" strikes after the murder, effectively underscoring the use of sound effects in a dramatic production. Vindice's comments on theatrical imagery also highlight the self-mocking elements in the play. The theatrical use of thunder claps indicating a heavenly or providential voice in realistic drama is here ridiculed. And the "cue" and "watchwords" draw attention to the use of a clap of thunder at a particular point during a theatrical production. The use of thunder clap, in Jonathan Dollimore's words, represents that "the conception of a heavenly, retributive justice is being reduced to a parody of stage effects" (140).

The second masque group, consisting of Ambizioso, Supervacuo, Spurio

and a noble, becomes even more absurd. When they find Lussurioso and his nobles have been murdered already, a series of murders occur as if in a competition of imitation.

Ambi. Here's a labour saved,
I thought to have sped him. 'Sblood, how came this?
Supe. Then I proclaim myself; now I am duke.
Ambi. Thou duke? Brother, thou liest. [*Stabs Supervacuo.*]
Spurio Slave, so dost thou. [*Stabs Ambitioso.*]
4 Noble Base villain, hast thou slain my lord and master?
[*Stabs Spurio.*] (51-55)

In an almost mechanical repetition, these murders take place one after another in a strangely comical way, bringing out a sense of self-mockery in the outcome of the complicated plotting of each character in the play. The mechanical repetition of the “indiscriminate slaughter” (Bradbrook 165) highlights the imitation of the revenge action of the characters involved in such an extreme excessiveness that we are reminded of the play’s artificiality and the playwright’s unnatural imposition of the final resolution. The play concludes with Vindice’s self-destruction when he exposes his crime, in a self-complacent manner, to Antonio: “’Twas we two murdered him” (5.3.98).

The issue of role and self is acutely probed with the characterization of most protagonists in revenge tragedies. Hall points out the existential problem these characters face:

The ontological challenge for the main protagonist is how to commit himself to retaliation and still retain his integrity:

how to assume the role of revenger without becoming engulfed in savagery. (23)

The examples of *Revenger's* illustrate that the characters tend to be entrapped by their chosen roles as avengers. They are gradually destroyed by their adopted roles, unable to get rid of the bondage of such role-playing. This aspect of role-playing in revenge plays could be interpreted as an illustration of the genre's own moral commentary in enacting its tragic hero's limitation and slavery to his assigned and inescapable role to seek "wild justice" (Bacon 16).

Self-fashioning or the "shaping of one's identity" (Greenblatt 1980: 3), with role-playing as a means to achieve it, is surely a preoccupation in the Renaissance drama (Hall 8). Elizabethan drama shows that identity in this period is more closely connected to social ranks, explicitly illustrated in the transforming effects of adopting behaviors and clothes. But a study of role-playing shows us a potential and a means of social mobility in a still stratified hierarchical society in which each man has a fixed place.

Both positive and negative moral outlooks are inherent in the mechanism of role-playing. On the one hand, man is equipped with creativity, a god-like attribute, to assume earthly or even heavenly forms through impersonations, creating diversified possibilities for his identity. Role-playing can also be a means to define oneself: the quest to "possess genuine identity, to achieve a free and unbewildered clarity of being, to define oneself through action" (Goldman 156-57). Similarly, Louis Adrian Montrose argues that Shakespearean drama explores "the complex, adaptive, or inquiring self,

created and discovered in performance” (66). And James Driscoll plays up the possibility of self-discovery through conscious role-playing:

Truly, we become real persons, that is, attain fully individuated human consciousness, only when our imaginations are educated to grasp consciously the roles we play and the stage upon which we perform. (183)

However, from the negative perspective, a man’s true self is covered by roles he adopts, fragmenting his identity into undistinguishable pieces. In a book-length study on role-playing in Jacobean tragedy, Hall submits that adopting new roles in most cases proves to be degenerative and corruptive: “the chosen role dissipates any controlling identity, or traps the player in a limiting version of self” (19). A good actor or an excellent disguiser is chameleon-like, but not god-like. He epitomizes “the art of pretension and dissimulation to trick others” (Righter 100). Montaigne clearly pictures this constantly changing nature of human personality:

Our ordinary manner is to follow the inclination of our appetite this way and that way, on the left and on the right hand; upward and downward, according as the winde of occasions doth transport us: we never thinke on what we would have, but at the instant we would have it: and change as that beast that takes the colour of the place wherein it is laid Every day new toyes, each hour new fantasies, and our humours move and fleet with the fleetings and movings of time. (II, 3)

Puritans of the seventeenth century attack theater on the ground that plays and role-playing are threats to men's fixed, and God-given, identities in society (Barish 331; Hall 13). William Prynne, for one, believes acting warps identity and undermines the "uniforme, distinct, and proper being" that God has assigned to each human being (qtd. Barish 333). Montaigne praises role-playing on the stage, but not play-acting in real life:

It is true that Montaigne admires histrionic talent, but strictly that of the professional actor on the stage. He may . . . be one of the "most vigorous advocates of the theatre" in the Renaissance, but only provided that the theatre does not threaten to engulf the reality of the everyday world. (Hall 13)

Montaigne is skeptical about taking up roles in the world outside the theater. It is, in many cases, a sign of moral degradation and hypocrisy. He goes further to point out that play-acting degenerates our true self:

I have also seen some women, who to divert the opinions and conjectures of the babbling people, and to divert the fond tatling of some, did by counterfet and dissembled affections overshadow and cloak true affections. Amongst which I have noted some, who in dissembling and counterfeiting have suffered themselves to be intrapped wittingly and in good earnest; quitting their true and originall humour for the fained: of whom I learne that such as finde themselves well seated are very fooles to yeelde unto that maske. (III, 61)

Men become what they pretend to be, and, as Ben Jonson warns, cannot return to themselves (1925-52: VIII, 597).

CHAPTER THREE

The Power of Illusion:

Playwright-characters in *Doctor Faustus* and *Othello*

Iago

Devinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
As I do now. (*Othello*, 2.3.345-48)²¹

In Chapter Two we examine the complex interaction between a character and his assumed role(s), an interaction that often brings about a substantial and permanent change of the self because of the assumption of roles. In this chapter I am going to trace the type of playwright-character, who employs “a playwright’s consciousness of drama to impose a certain posture or attitude on another” (Abel 46). Like a playwright inventing plots and arranging dramatic action, Faustus manipulates illusion and reality to serve frivolous ends with his dearly bought magic. In the end, however, he is seen manipulated by Mephostophilis, a prototype of a line of manipulative characters that follow, including Iago, Hamlet, Vindice, and Vincentio, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. These full-fledged playwright-characters tend to manipulate their fellow characters with carefully wrought illusion. Iago, for one, carefully and calculatingly conducts his action with a playwright’s consciousness, composing scripts for all of his fellow characters. A theatrical parallel between the gradual formation of Iago’s plot and that of a dramatic piece is established with each of his soliloquies. He manipulates the illusion to the extent that it

becomes reality for Othello, who is taken in by false appearances and smothers Desdemona in fits of jealousy and rage initiated and intensified by the malicious fiction staged by Iago. The tragic death of Desdemona illustrates the powerful influence of illusion over reality. The illusory appearances not only encroach upon the reality, but also overthrow it in an irreversible manner.

I. Playwright-character:

Devil, Vice, Machiavellian Figure, or Artist

The relation of a playwright-character and other fellow characters in a play is analogous to that of a playwright and his invented characters. A playwright-character, like a dramatist, composes a script or scripts, sets up plots, dramatizes situations for his fellow characters. He tends to manipulate his fellow characters with carefully wrought illusion, and conducts their action more or less with “a playwright’s consciousness.” In Abel’s study of *Hamlet*, the Ghost, Hamlet, Polonius, Claudius, and even Death are, to different degrees, all dramatists (46-49). They are all busy with script-writing, engaging themselves in manipulating plots for others. Among these characters, Hamlet is, no doubt, the paragon.

Hamlet’s “dramaturgic temperament” (Ross 55) stands out against his fellow characters. In a book-length study on “character-dramatists” or “actor-playwrights,” as she calls them, Lillian Wilds submits that “Hamlet is Shakespeare’s greatest and most complete actor-playwright, the culmination of his earlier experiments in the character as dramatist” (139). For Wilds,

²¹ References to *Othello* are to the Arden edition, Ed. E. A. J. Honigmann.

character-dramatists “dramatize themselves,” “create roles,” and even create “plays-within-the-play for other characters” (139). In creating a host of roles for himself, Hamlet exhibits a careful attention to costume and behavior in the “precise imaging of a particular role”—a marked characteristic of his dramaturgy (Wilds 142). Besides creating roles for himself, he also instructs other characters, Horatio and Marcellus, Gertrude and the touring players, how to act and what to say in the manner of a playwright-director. Finally, he mounts a play-within-a-play to entrap Claudius in his revenge tragedy, and rewrites Claudius’ letter to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed instead.

From the example of Hamlet, it can be seen that it is sometimes difficult to confine discussions within the script-writing art itself when examining a playwright-character because s/he is often involved in role-playing (to conceal his/her intended plotting), improvisation (to make good use of any available raw materials), self-dramatization (to cast himself/herself in roles), manipulation (to cast others in roles to serves his/her ends), and disguise (to create illusory scenes or situations). Yet, this chapter will mainly focus on the play-writing career, rather than the playacting expertise, of a playwright-character.

A playwright-character is sometimes associated with the Devil of the Mystery cycles, the Vice of the Morality plays, a Machiavellian villain or hero, or an artist. The Devil in some extant Mystery cycles, to begin with, can be regarded as the forefather of an artful seducer (Scragg 1968: 54-57).²² Leah

²² Leah Scragg, analyzing the affinity between Iago and the Devil, traces the similar characteristics in

Scragg argues that the Devil, implicitly and explicitly motivated, is an earlier figure than the much discussed Vice figure, engaging in the corruption and destruction of man with insinuating devices combining mirth and malice. The attributes and missions of a typical Devil in the Mystery plays are:

The Devil is naturally unsuccessful [in bringing men to sin] and his actions are limited by the necessity of following the Biblical narrative, but nevertheless, in this earliest surviving dramatic presentation of a tempter on the English stage, the attitudes of the later Vice figure are already evinced. The intimacy with the audience, the self-explanatory, demonstrative role for homiletic effect, the attitude to the attack on the spiritual welfare of the victim as “sport,” the device of posing as the friend of the person to be betrayed, are all present. (Scragg 1968: 54-55)

In a similar way, Vice, a later dramatic representation of a scheming villain often personified from the group of vices in medieval morality plays after 1500, tempts Mankind to sins and damnation. Both Vice and the actor

were essentially hypocrites. As counterfeits, deep dissimulators, they persuaded honest men of things which were not so and, to aid them in their task, assumed names and costumes not their own. (Righter 68)

In addition to his resemblance to an actor, Vice shares remarkable affinity with

the Devil in the York Mystery cycle (beginning from about 1362 to 1376 until 1568), the Wakefield cycle (starting from around 1390 and 1410), and the Newcastle plays (originated before 1462 until 1567-68).

a playwright, a “manipulator of plot” (Righter 55). Some Shakespearean villains, such as Richard (Duke of Gloucester), Edmund, and Iago, are offspring of the Vice figure (Righter 96). Scragg, following Bernard Spivack, generalizes the attributes of the Vice figure:

He was a gay, light-hearted intriguer, existing on intimate terms with his audience, whom he invited to witness a display of his ability to reduce a man from a state of grace to utter ruin. He invariably posed as the friend of his victim, often disguising himself for the purpose, and always appearing to devote himself to his friend’s welfare. He treated his seduction as “sport” combining mischief with merriment, triumphing over his fallen adversary and glorying in his skill in deceit He provided for his audience both humour and homiletic instruction. Above all, he was an amoral being whose behaviour was completely unmotivated—he simply demonstrated the nature of the abstraction he represented. (53-54)

Vice shares many similar characteristics with the Devil so that some Elizabethan dramatists sometimes confuse, or purposefully conflate, these two. Spivack, however, points out the distinct difference between them:

The purposes of the Devil are those of a complex moral being. The whole purpose of the Vice is to illustrate his name and nature and to reflect upon the audience the single moral idea he personifies. The former acts to achieve his desires,

the latter only to show what he is. Between the two no ethical continuity is possible because in the nature of a personification there is nothing that is subject to ethical definition. (134)

Apart from his/her affinity with Devil and Vice, a playwright-character is also a Machiavellian figure, the newly invented schemer in contemporary literature. The Machiavellian villain or hero, emerged from Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), uses unethical methods to seize power. He is characterized by his ability to adopt strategic devices, good or bad, to defeat opponents. He believes "the end justifies the means."

Playwright-characters are no doubt artists, or "artists in deceit" (Righter 96), capable of creating illusory reality to ensnare or entertain his fellow characters and arranging plots for them. Like a dramatist, a playwright-character creates play scripts, sets up plots, invents dramatic action, and improvises speeches and dialogues. In short, he is the author of a mini-play. The essence of a dramatist lies in his ability to create something from nothing. Theseus categorizes the poet with the lunatic and the lover, all of whom possess "shaping fantasies" (*Dream*, 5.1.5)²³ that can comprehend beyond physical phenomena. Theseus' remarks on the poet, are applicable to a dramatist:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth

²³ References to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the Arden edition, Ed. Harold F. Brooks.

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.12-17)

In the stage-world, a playwright can construct a believable world and reality from mere shadows, resemblances, or illusions.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, carefully and calculatingly conducts his action with a playwright's consciousness, composing scripts for all of his fellow characters on his way to the English throne. Besides committing cold-blooded murders to pluck out any hindrance, Richard attains his goal through a superb manipulation of illusion to deceive his onstage "audience." One episode in *Richard III* is especially illuminating: the wooing of Lady Anne. The wooing in the first act highlights Richard's persuasive rhetoric and skillful handling of theatrical illusion. The scene opens with a funeral procession: Lady Anne is on the way to bury Henry VI, her late father-in-law, butchered by Richard in *3 Henry VI*. Encountering Anne in the street, Richard begins to woo her on such an improper occasion.

Lamenting on the deaths of Henry VI and her husband Edward, Anne launches a tirade against Richard, the cold-blooded murderer, before she meets him on the way to the cemetery:

O, cursed be the hand that made these holes!
Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it!
Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence!
More direful hap betide that hated wretch
That makes us wretched by the death of thee

Than I can wish to wolves—to spiders, toads,

Or any creeping venom' d thing that lives! (1.2.14-20)

She then curses in a more specific term Richard's future offspring and wife.

But, unwittingly, her curse on Richard's wife becomes a curse on herself, as she later realizes (4.1.65-84):

If ever he have wife, let her be made

More miserable by the [life] of him

Than I am made by my young lord and thee! (26-28)

Anne's hatred and resentment toward Richard and his cruelty are doubtlessly definite and intense, if judged from her curses and her initial response and reaction to Richard when they encounter in the street. When Richard stops the burial procession, Anne calls him "fiend" (34), "devil" (45) and "dreadful minister of hell" (46), and accuses him of the butcheries of Henry and Edward. The initial opposition of the two takes the form of keen and witty exchanges between Anne's accusation and Richard's self-defense. But Richard employs a sophistic trick to force Anne into his alliance:

Your beauty was the cause of that effect—

Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep

To undertake the death of all the world,

So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom. (121-24)

Moreover, Richard turns the murder of Edward into a favor:

He that bereft thee, lady, of thy husband,

Did it to help thee to a better husband. (138-39)

Though Anne responds to these compliments and wooing with more invectives

and scornful spits, she somehow unconsciously grows captive to Richard's "honey words" (4.1.79) and artificial tears.

Those eyes of thine from mine have drawn salt tears,
Sham' d their aspects with store of childish drops:
These eyes, which never shed remorseful tear—
No, when my father York and Edward wept
To hear the piteous moan that Rutland made
When black-fac' d Clifford shook his sword at him;
Nor when thy warlike father, like a child,
Told the sad story of my father's death,
And twenty times made pause to sob and weep,
That all the standers-by had wet their cheeks
Like trees bedash' d with rain—in that sad time
My manly eyes did scorn an humble tear;
And what these sorrows could not thence exhale,
Thy beauty hath, and made them blind with weeping. (153-66)

Richard's flattery is effective because he heaps a supreme praise on Anne's beauty for its capacity to make him weep, in contrast with his restraint from weeping on the occasions of his brother's and father's deaths. In a somewhat perverse way, Anne is flattered to learn that her beauty has so much power that even the warlike, masculine Richard becomes a captive of her. She is so deceived that when she is offered the chance to stab Richard's naked breast with his sword she is unable to muster her initial vengeful spirit to revenge, no matter how Richard reminds her of his killing King Henry and Edward.

Richard cunningly utilizes Anne’s inability to stab him as a way to further his relation with her: “Take up the sword again, or take up me” (183). Though Anne tries to evade either alternative, she is forced to make a choice.

Anne Arise, dissembler! Though I wish thy death,
 I will not be thy executioner.

Richard Then bid me kill myself, and I will do it.

Anne I have already.

Richard That was in thy rage.
 Speak it again, and even with the word
 This hand, which for thy love did kill thy love,
 Shall for thy love kill a far truer love;
 To both their deaths shalt thou be accessory.

Anne I would I knew thy heart.

Richard ’Tis figur’ d in my tongue.

Anne I fear me both are false.

Richard Then never [was man] true. (184-95)

Anne is uncertain whether Richard is true or false. She intuitively infers Richard is false, but still submits herself to Richard’s feigning love. She is helplessly caught and enticed by a vanity that Richard arouses in her. Though the marriage of Richard and Anne is a historical fact, Shakespeare’s presentation of the wooing scene plays up the manipulative machination behind their encounter. When Anne accepts Richard’s ring and leaves Henry’s corpse to his disposal, she is completely taken in by the fiction that Richard is truly “penitent” (220) and genuinely loves her.

But after Anne's departure, Richard confides to the audience in triumph for his unparalleled manipulation and Machiavellism.

Was ever woman in this humor woo' d?
Was ever woman in this humor won?
I' ll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What? I, that kill' d her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit [at all]
But the plain devil and dissembling looks?
And yet to win her! All the world to nothing! (227-37)

This scene not only presents Richard's ability to win Anne's love with his witty speeches and histrionic show of love, but also lays bare the dramatization of illusion in all dramatic performances.

The following sections examine *Doctor Faustus* and *Othello*, with particular considerations of the playwright-characters and their manipulative procedures. From this perspective, many interesting connections and similarities between both plays emerge. First of all, the manipulative relation between the protagonist and the antagonist is a dominant aspect in both plays. The manipulation, closely connected to each character's distinct disposition, is built into his uses of language and his attitudes toward himself and others. Secondly, the villains directly engage with the audience in both plays,

confiding to and sharing with them their plans and thus forcing them to become involved in the trickery and destruction of the tragic heroes. The engagement compels the audience to become accomplices, in spite of their reluctance and revulsion, making them very uneasy and unsettled.

II. *Doctor Faustus*: The Legacy of the Devil

By nature a playwright, Faustus is addicted to set up plots for himself and others, seeking to create his own fate with unrestrained freedom. He indulges in self-dramatization: he often dramatizes his script with or without onstage audience. With his ill-acquired magic, he can create miracles to entertain his royal audience and friends. Like a playwright inventing plots and arranging dramatic action, Faustus manipulates illusion to serve frivolous ends and personal interests. In appearance, he seems to have full control of everything, including his own choice to sign the fateful contract with Lucifer despite many warnings. In short, he composes his own play. But as a matter of fact, he is unwittingly manipulated by Mephostophilis, another playwright-character with even more powerful control of the playwright's art. Mephostophilis is the advocate of Lucifer—a cunning and merciless devil endeavoring to damn a mortal's soul.

Faustus opens with a speech by Chorus, which gives the audience a sense of authorial perspective on the story that follows. It gives a brief overview of the career of the protagonist.

Only this, gentles—we must now perform

The form of Faustus' fortunes, good or bad:

.....

So much he profits in divinity,
The fruitful plot of scholarism grac' d,
That shortly he was grac' d with doctor's name,
Excelling all, and sweetly can dispute
In th' heavenly matters of theology;
Till, swollen with cunning of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And, melting, heavens conspir' d his overthrow;
For, falling to a devilish exercise,
And glutt'd now with learning's golden gifts,
He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;

Nothing so sweet as magic is to him (Prologue, 7-8, 15-26)²⁴

The Chorus pictures Faustus as an Icarus-figure, an over-reacher, and introduces a moral message with his inevitable fall. But, as the play develops, Faustus' fall may be partly attributed to the Devil's manipulation and temptation. And, "heavens conspir' d his overthrow" also hints at God's role in the tragedy of Faustus' damnation.

The episode of Mephostophilis' first appearance is full of discrepancy between reality and appearance. Faustus rejects the devil in his undisguised fiendish shape, and bids him to transform into a more acceptable outward form:

I charge thee to return and change thy shape;

²⁴ References to this play are from *Doctor Faustus*, Ed. John D. Jump. This edition differs considerably from the text of the play in some other editions based on A-text. Citing W. W. Greg's argument that B-text is "the more original" version than A-text, Jump bases his edition mainly, but

Thou art too ugly to attend on me.

Go, and return an old Franciscan friar,

That holy shape becomes a devil best. (III. 25-28)

Mephostophilis immediately complies with the command, showing external obedience and humility to impress Faustus that he is in control, a gesture reminding us of Iago.

How plaint is this Mephostophilis,

Full of obedience and humility! (31-32)

The devil could assume any outward appearance, including that of a holy and divine friar. The very figure of Mephostophilis in the shape of a holy friar gives a visual form of the discrepancy between reality and appearance: the lovely and beautiful appearance does not match the devilish and monstrous reality.

In answer to Faustus' question whether he is summoned by Faustus, Mephostophilis replies: "No, I came hither of mine own accord" (46), and deflates Faustus' vanity to be a "conjurer laureate" (34):

For when we hear one rack the name of God,

Abjure the scriptures and his saviour Christ,

We fly, in hope to get his glorious soul;

Nor will we come unless he use such means

Whereby he is in danger to be damn' d.

Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring

Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity

not exclusively, upon the B-text, first published in 1616 (66-67).

And pray devoutly to the prince of hell. (49-56)

Though Mephostophilis clearly points out the autonomy of his appearance before Faustus with the purpose to damn his soul, he assumes a subservient appearance to impress Faustus that he is master-like.

Mephostophilis' procedure to achieve a gradual control and manipulation of Faustus is to play the role of an honest friend and a repentant sinner, a pretense he adopts to persuade Faustus into selling his soul away by dissuasion.

Fau. Where are you damn' d?

Mep. In hell.

Fau. How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

Mep. Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think' st thou that I, who saw the face of God

And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,

Am not tormented with ten thousand hells

In being depriv' d of everlasting bliss?

O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,

Which strike a terror to my fainting soul.

(76-84; emphases added)

Mephostophilis is cold, cruel, and reserved; he is never passionate. But he pretends to be a passionate suffering soul to admonish Faustus, and gives an elusive account of the hell and damnation. He makes the account of hell somewhat like a state of mind, which then can be managed with one's will power. Thus Faustus arrogantly taunts his companion:

What, is great Mephostophilis so passionate

For being deprived of the joys of heaven?

Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude

And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess. (85-88)

Mephostophilis is misleading on purpose in an attempt to make little distinction between the hell and Faustus' present earthly condition. Faustus acquires a sense of superiority over his friend's diffidence, and resolves to enter into the bargain with the Prince of Hell to show his "manly fortitude":

Go bear these tidings to great Lucifer:

Seeing Faustus hath incurr' d eternal death

By desperate thoughts against Jove's deity,

Say he surrenders up to him his soul

So he will spare him four-and-twenty years,

Letting him live in all voluptuousness,

Having thee ever to attend on me,

To give me whatsoever I shall ask,

To tell me whatsoever I demand,

To slay mine enemies and aid my friends,

And always be obedient to my will. (89-99)

In the summit of pride and insolence, Faustus composes the script of his transaction with the prince of hell, believing that he is the author of his own decision and destiny. As long as he makes his own choice it is no matter that this could mean eternal damnation.

In the next scene, a comic counterpart of the conjuring of devils is provided to ridicule the seriousness and seemingly heroic action of Faustus'

conjunction in the main plot. Faustus' servant Wagner derides Robin that he "would give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton, though it were blood-raw" (IV. 9-10). But Robin retorts that "I had need to have it well roasted, and good sauce to it, if I pay so dear" (11-12). The clown's willingness to exchange his soul for a well roasted shoulder of mutton is not unlike Faustus' exchange of his soul for worldly pleasures and infinite knowledge, only in a different scale. Wagner's effortless conjuration of two devils, Bario and Belcher, also makes fun of the uniqueness of Faustus' dearly-bought magic.

In the contract-signing scene, Faustus is more than willing to offer a "deed of gift" (V. 36) signed with his blood.

Lo, Mephostophilis, for love of thee
Faustus hath cut his arm, and with his proper blood
Assure his soul to be great Lucifer's,
Chief lord and regent of perpetual night.
View here this blood that trickles from mine arm,
And let it be propitious for my wish. (53-58)

Faustus casts himself in the role of a relentless abjurer, and positions himself as a third person. But when he writes the deed, Faustus finds his blood congealed. He ponders on the omen, while Mephostophilis hurries away to fetch fire to dissolve it.

What might the staying of my blood portend?
Is it unwilling I should write this bill?
Why streams it not, that I may write afresh?

“Faustus gives to thee his soul”: O, there it stay’ d.

Why shouldst thou not? is not thy soul thine own?

Then write again: “Faustus gives to thee his soul.” (64-69)

Faustus reasons about his autonomy over his own soul. He must continue the interrupted contract-signing to prove that he is the author of his own destiny. In the meantime, Mephostophilis’ enthusiasm in securing a deed from Faustus to bind the latter to a contract is clearly revealed from his aside: “What will not I do to obtain his soul!” (73). This aside, in sharp contrast to Faustus’ eagerness to finalize the devilish contract in spite of visible signs of warning, discloses to the audience Mephostophilis’ manipulation on Faustus and his end to destroy the protagonist.

After the completion of contract-signing, Faustus asks Mephostophilis the whereabouts of hell.

Fau. Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?

Mep. Under the heavens.

Fau. Ay, so are all things else; but whereabouts?

Mep. Within the bowels of these elements,

Where we are tortur’ d and remain for ever.

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib’ d

In one self place, but where we are is hell,

And where hell is, there must we ever be (117-24)

This account, like the earlier one, makes Faustus conclude “I think hell’s a fable” (128). Seeing Mephostophilis in damnation and in hell as such, Faustus is convinced that stories about the pain after this life are “trifles and

mere old wives' tales" (136).

Three pairs of binary relations can be inferred from the dramatization of the role Faustus. First, Faustus is often presented with a split self. He constantly reveals his inner thought in a dialogue with himself, or addresses himself as if exchanging words with a second party. We see Faustus addressing himself in the first soliloquy:

Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin
To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess;
Having commenc' d, be a divine in show,
Yet level at the end of every art,
And live and die in Aristotle's works.

Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravish' d me! (I. 1-6)

His reasoning often takes the form of a dialogue, presenting his divided selves in conversation, a dramatization of the play of his inner world scripted by Faustus the playwright. Sometimes, he removes himself further to the level of a third party. Mark his arrogant assurance to Mephostophilis:

This word "damnation" terrifies not him,
For he confounds hell in Elysium:

His ghost be with the old philosophers! (III. 61-63)

Speaking in an exceedingly self-complacent manner, he is the author, the master, and the playwright of his own play.

Secondly, in the tradition of Morality plays, Good Angel and Bad Angel symbolically embody Faustus' inner conflicts. When Faustus shows signs of wavering, Good Angel and Bad Angel will appear to give physical forms to his

inner conflicts. These angels dramatize his mental struggle in a more visually perceptible way. Take the Angels' first appearance for example.

Good Angel O Faustus, lay that damned book aside
And gaze not on it lest it tempt thy soul
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head.
Read, read the scriptures; that is blasphemy.

Bad Angel Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all nature's treasury is contain' d:
Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements. (I. 69-76)

These angels endow not only a physical form to Faustus' inner struggle, but a spectacular show to the audience. Good Angel usually encourages Faustus to resist the devilish temptation and submit himself to God, while Bad Angel often encourages him to transcend mortal bondage and to become god-like. Faustus' inclination to take Bad Angel's council indicates his desire to be his own master, who writes his own script rather than be a servant to God.

Thirdly, and most interestingly, Faustus' evil self may be fully projected into the figure of Mephostophilis, a full-fledged "human" form in combat with him. The idea that the internalization of the figure of Mephostophilis as a mental projection of Faustus is encouraged by the following factors. One, the actual existence of Mephostophilis is unstable, and may have different implications in the comic and tragic parts. In the tragic part, Mephostophilis is presented more like a mental projection of Faustus, because nobody, except Faustus, sees him; whereas in the comic part, Mephostophilis is an objective

reality. Second, Mephostophilis is a supernatural entity, whose presence on stage is often indistinct—resembling a friar in appearance, fully covered under the black hood, he can easily merge with the darkness of the study. Third, the play begins and ends in Faustus' study, a small and confined space, which becomes even more enclosed when Faustus performs magic in the circle of Latin incantation. This enclosure of space thus heightens the sense that all Faustus' experience is only a mental journey, or a psycho-drama, invented by the playwright-character and staged on his mind-scape. As a playwright, Faustus attributes his fall to Mephostophilis' temptation to alleviate his own guilt.

These binary pairs endow the play with visual dramatizations and dramatic conflicts. And they intensify the sense of polarizations of characterization, which in turn reinforces the play's polarizing structure and further deepens the split and divided nature of the play to self-contradiction and self-mockery. The third binary relation, especially, gives lots of impetus to the play's dynamics, thematically and theatrically. On the thematic level, the unstable existence of Mephostophilis greatly complicates the implications of the play. First, if Mephostophilis is a major agent in the corruption of Faustus, he shares the responsibility for the latter's fall. But, if Mephostophilis does not exist or if he is only an *alter ego*, Faustus needs to take the whole responsibility for his own damnation in projecting a tempter in the figure of Mephostophilis. On the theatrical level, the confrontation of conflicts between Faustus and Mephostophilis may subtly take the form of a competition, with one playwright trying to outwit the other. In order to take in the opponent, both disguise

themselves under the masks of roles they play.

In a conflict with Lucifer, Faustus' relationship with the Prince of Hell takes on a conspicuous histrionic perspective when he is under the threat of Lucifer's punishment, because of signs of betrayal with his calling of Christ. Lucifer commands Faustus to "show thyself an obedient servant" (VI. 102), and will "show" (104) him some pastime "show" (110) if he behaves himself. The recurrence of the word "show" within this context puts emphasis on the playacting nature of Faustus' obedience to Lucifer, and considerably defines his later relationship with either Mephostophilis or Lucifer. Constantly casting himself in different roles (be it a magician, Paris or a learned scholar) makes Faustus indulge in the kinds of lives he desires at that particular moment, and effectively eases his intermittent onset of painful regret. It is an alternative he takes to repress his increasing despair.

Faustus is an outsider in his world, whose difference mainly stems from an internal factor: his intellectual superiority over his peers. What contents others does not content him. He is aware of his own uniqueness. This awareness makes him turn into internal resources by self-dramatization to achieve some sense of integrity. For example, by nature a dramatist, he is addicted to script-writing, composing plots for himself, and dramatizing his own damnation.

When he performs magic to entertain a royal court or friends, he is an artist with magical powers in his service, attracting his audience's attention to his amazing creation. Even when he is all alone, he is still apt to dramatize. Both his opening and closing soliloquies can be regarded as sheer performances,

addressing to the audience with different purposes. In a dramatic work, a soliloquy is usually meant to reveal the character's inner thought directly to the audience. In his opening soliloquy Faustus not only tells the audience the reasons why he rejects physics, law, and theology respectively, but also tries to explain to the audience his final choice of magic as the one and only alternative with his dramatic and moving performance. Wanting to be more than human, he aspires to be a magician, a demi-god figure:

O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis' d to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obey' d in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god;

Here tire, my brains, to get a deity! (I. 52-62; emphases added)

His ambition to be a demi-god is partly fulfilled with his effort to become an artist, or a playwright of his own destiny. Being a playwright, he can create scripts for himself and others in his play, turning himself and others into any shape or form.

Faustus' power of magic enables him to produce many sights, which are mostly visual shows to entertain royal courts or friends. As Duke of Vanholt

remarks on the sights, Faustus is “erecting that enchanted castle in the air” (XVII. 3). The illusory and evanescent nature of these magical sights makes Faustus’ pact with Lucifer even more worthless. The illusions produced by magic also call our attention to the theatrical illusion the play tries to establish. The play foregrounds the illusory and evanescent nature of all kinds of illusions, magical or theatrical.

Even when Faustus draws near to his end, he is still acting and writing scripts for himself in the final soliloquy. With only one hour left, he pleads: “let this hour be but / A year, a month, a week, a natural day, / That Faustus may repent and save his soul” (XIX. 139-41). If he really wanted to repent, his last hour would be sufficient; there is no need to ask for more time. His last hour is filled with playacting gestures. For example, he begins a pretense to pray: “O, I’ ll leap up to my God!” (145), whereas his ensuing remark cancels the effort: “Who pulls me down?” (145). The audience sees no one pulling him down, unless it is the invisible devils. As the scene opens, Lucifer and his followers state their intention to fetch Faustus’ soul away when the time comes. Before then they will “stay / To mark him how he doth demean himself” (9-10). The devils are standing behind to observe Faustus. This scene is very ironic. Faustus cries out for being pulled down, while the devils, not interfering, stand behind watching. It is possible, but quite unlikely, that the devils will intervene at this point, if, as they proclaim, they will *watch* Faustus in his final hour. It is possible this uninvited audience on the stage somehow interferes and blocks Faustus’ effort to pray with their black arts, which are beyond human perception. Yet, since no textual evidence other

than that spoken by Faustus is available to support this possibility, we need not suppose a devilish intervention is in effect. It is more likely that Faustus is pretending: He sees in his imagination as Macbeth sees the dagger. He once again constructs an illusion for the playhouse audience. It follows that Faustus' vision of Christ's blood is also a fantasy that he makes up to increase the credibility of his pretense:

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!—

Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ;

Yet will I call on him. *O, spare me, Lucifer!*

(XIX. 146-49; emphases added)

Contrary to his proclamation to call Christ, he calls Lucifer instead. A change indicates his belief that places more confidence on the devil's mercy than on Christ's salvation. If he is truly repentant, Christ will save him. Then, we begin to wonder why he is pretending even in his last hour?

Faustus cannot repent. This is dramatized earlier in Scene VI.

Good Angel Faustus, repent; yet God will pity thee.

Bad Angel Thou art a spirit; God cannot pity thee.

Faustus Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?

Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;

Yea, God will pity me if I repent.

Bad Angel *Ay, but Faustus never shall repent.*

Faustus *My heart is harden' d, I cannot repent.*

Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,

But fearful echoes thunders in mine ears,

“Faustus, thou art damn’ d!”

(VI. 12-21; emphases added)

Unable to truly repent, Faustus can only assume the role as a repentant, and stage his final expulsion from God’s kingdom at the expense of Christ, whose name as the Savior comes into question. As Faustus reveals, when his vision of Christ fades, he sees an angry God, in a gesture about to strike him:

Where is it now? ’Tis gone: and see where God

Stretcheth out his arm and bends his ireful brows.

Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,

And hide me from the heavy wrath of God! (150-53)

Later the clock, not God, strikes: “O, it strike, it strikes!” (183). It is possible that all these reported visions are nothing but fantasies created by Faustus to paint himself as wanting to repent. Scripting and casting himself in the role of a repentant is a gesture with which Faustus manipulates to cheat the world into believing that he cannot be forgiven and pardoned by the too stern Lord, even though he “does” try to (pretend to) repent.

Once the audience recognizes the script-writing and playacting mechanism behind all these seemingly true repentant gestures, they become very unsettled. They want to sympathize with Faustus, as a fellow creature, and experience “katharsis,” if there is any. But they find themselves being challenged in all these expectations. This unsettling feeling of play-watching must be very unusual.

Mephostophilis is characterized as the chief agent who corrupts Faustus.

He confirms his role in Faustus' temptation when the victim accuses him near the end of the play:

'Twas I that, when thou were i' the way to heaven,
Damn'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book
To view the scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves
And led thine eye.

What, weep'st thou? 'tis too late, despair, farewell! (XIX. 93-97)

In this passage, Mephostophilis proclaims his authorship in the manipulation of Faustus. Unlike Iago's constant self-revelation of his control of Othello, Mephostophilis' manipulation of Faustus before this verbal statement is less explicit for the audience. Here, he tries to reconstruct the history of Faustus' fall. Not until this revealing moment does the audience fully realize his manipulative corruption of Faustus. This realization, in turn, largely qualifies our interpretation of Mephostophilis, including his character, language, and behavior in earlier scenes. With this in mind, his seemingly "sincere" and "honest" admonition to discourage Faustus from selling his soul away when they first meet is merely a pretense: "O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands, / Which strike a terror to my fainting soul" (III. 83-84). Similarly, connecting himself to the devil's party, Iago hails his own cleverness and wickedness comparable to the devil's in a soliloquy:

Devinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
As I do now. (*Othello*, 2.3.345-48)

In this connection, Mephostophilis is never an “honest” friend, nor is Iago.

As this study shows, Mephostophilis discreetly manipulates Faustus, gradually corrupts him, and finally leads him to an eternal damnation. The manipulative relation between these two characters is delicately built into their dispositions. Mephostophilis is cold, rational, calculating, and cruel, while Faustus is passionate, emotional, moody, and arrogant. Very careful with his words, Mephostophilis always uses simple and terse language with calculated effects. His well-wrought web is aimed at enmeshing and subverting his opponent with an illusory fiction. In contrast, Faustus is very rhetorical and wordy, indulging in the delight of verbal eloquence. He tends to dramatize himself, often composing scripts for self-dramatization.

III. *Othello*: “The Forgeries of Jealousy”²⁵

Iago also manipulates Othello, only in a much more complex and delicate manner than Mephostophilis does Faustus. Iago’s affinity to Mephostophilis and the Devil is well recognized. Coleridge calls Iago “a being next to devil, and only not quite devil” (1926: I, 262). Elmer Edgar Stoll argues that Iago partakes of the nature of the Devil and concludes that, “He is a son of Belial, he is a limb of Satan” (97). G. Wilson Knight submits, “Iago is utterly devilish,” a “kind of Mephistopheles” (114), who aims at the soul of man. Maud Bodkin also considers Iago an archetype of the Devil who represents “in personal form the forces within and without us that threaten our supreme values” (223). For S. L. Bethell,

²⁵ This phrase is from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.1.81.

The play is a solemn game of hunt the devil, with, of course, the audience largely in the know. And it is in this game that the diabolic imagery is bandied about from character to character until the denouement: we know the devil then, but he has summoned another lost soul to his side. (1952: 72)

Like the dispositionally contrasted Mephostophilis and Faustus, Iago and Othello also display quite different temperaments, which are again reflected in their uses of language. Like Mephostophilis, Iago is cold, rational, calculating, and cruel; like Faustus, Othello is passionate, emotional, moody, and arrogant. Also, Iago tends to use simple and plain language; Othello likes to use flourishing and elaborate words in his speech. Iago endeavors to destroy Othello with carefully wrought illusion, whereas Othello, consciously aware of his uniqueness among his peers, has an inclination toward self-dramatization.

Iago cunningly insinuates Othello into a blind jealousy, which leads to the killing of Desdemona and himself in the end. Adequately swearing to Janus at one point, Iago is a villain who assumes an honest demeanor in front of his fellow characters except Roderigo, but secretly plots against Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio. He deceives everyone around him, and manipulates them one way or another to ensnare those he hates. He is the playwright who carefully composes a script of revenge, and sets up all dramatic actions and plots for those actors in his revenge tragedy. He is also an actor who plays a double role of an honest subject in appearance and a villain in reality. His manipulations of the other characters are cunningly built into every word he

says and every action he takes. His capacity to build illusion is deftly interwoven with his manipulation on Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello respectively.

Iago's dramaturgic expertise can be seen when he first appears with Roderigo. In appearance he allies himself with Roderigo, a character type of prodigal gallant common in Renaissance city comedy. He "confides" his hatred for the Moor on the ground that Othello rejects his supposedly well-deserved promotion. Iago links himself to people who can dissemble:

Others there are

Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and, when they have lined their coats,
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul
And such a one do I profess myself. (1.1.48-54)

Though seemingly working as a team with Roderigo, Iago deceives his partner as much as he does the other victims. Roderigo, whose unrequited love for Desdemona motivates him to ally with Iago, becomes Iago's tool and purse. Iago is his own master, not enslaving himself to Othello's service, let alone Roderigo's. As a matter of fact, Roderigo is purely an instrument to Iago, sometimes a mask for him to arouse provocative acts in his opponents without the risk of revealing himself, and sometimes a weapon to kill his enemy.

In the opening scene, Iago precisely instructs Roderigo how to undermine Othello's good fortune:

Call up her father,
Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets, incense her kinsmen,
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies! (1.1.66-70)

They immediately put this into practice. Iago, hiding in the darkness of night, and Roderigo arouse Brabantio from sleep with their brawls about Desdemona's elopement, attempting to hinder Othello's marriage with the father's intervention. In this brief encounter, Iago demonstrates his typical dramaturgic preferences for obscene imageries. Mark his

Zounds, sir, you' re robbed, for shame put on your gown!
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,
Even now, now, very now, *an old black ram*
Is tuppng your white ewe! (85-88; emphases added)

and

Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God, if
the devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, and
you think we are ruffians, *you' ll have your daughter covered*
with a Barbary horse; you' ll have your nephews neigh to you,
you' ll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!
(107-112; emphases added)

Iago stains a lawful marital relation, though without fatherly consent, between Othello and Desdemona with debased bestiality marked with an illicit carnal desire to incense the unwitting father into a much greater fury. As the play

suggests later, the consummation will not take place until the newly-weds arrive Cyprus. But Iago's distorted picture of the lovers in the midst of sexual intercourse in animal images dramatizes the forbidden scene so vividly that it soon multiplies into another description of their offspring, again in animal images. A comparison with Roderigo's insipid description of the same event will yield more insight to Iago's maliciously inventive talent.

Rod.

But I beseech you,

If 't be your pleasure and most wise consent,

As partly I find it is, that your fair daughter

At this odd-even and dull watch o' th' night,

Transported with no worse nor better guard

But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,

To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor (118-24)

Lack of inventive imagination, Roderigo can only give a down-to-earth account, a sharp contrast to Iago's irritatingly exaggerated version.

Like his devilish predecessors, Iago takes his audience into his confidence, and reveals his hatred for the Moor on the ground that Othello probably has an adulterous relation with his wife Emilia, a much more secret motive not unfolded to Roderigo. But, more relevant to my study is the play-writing process in this soliloquy. Note this:

Cassio's a proper man: let me see now,

To get his place, and to plume up my will

In double knavery. *How? How? let's see:*

After some time to abuse Othello's ear

That he is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected, framed to make women false.

.....

I have't, it is engendered! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

(1.3.391-97, 402-3; emphases added)

He is in the heat of “writing” a play script, sharing his plot outline with his audience. This is only a rough draft, which will be gradually developed into a much clearer shape, similar to what he tells Roderigo earlier: “There are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered” (370-71). He concludes with an invocation to “hell” and “night,” muses appropriate for his black artistry.

Seeing Cassio extend courtly manners to Emilia and Desdemona with kisses, Iago, taking the audience into confidence with an aside, shares his plan to slander Cassio’s purely polite acts.

He takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper. With as
little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio
If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it
had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft,
which now again you are most apt to play the sir in. Very
good, well kissed, and excellent courtesy: ’tis so indeed!
Yet again, your fingers to your lips? would they were
clyster-pipes for your sake! (2.1.167-69, 171-77)

This is an example of Iago's ability to improvise. He is good at using any materials available to him. With this newly conceived "evidence," Iago then rehearses his invention about the adulterous relation between Desdemona and Cassio to Roderigo first. He pretends to tell Roderigo a secret: "Desdemona is directly in love with him [Cassio]" (2.1. 217). Roderigo, though not extremely clever, can tell that it is impossible: "With him? why, 'tis not possible" (218). But Iago is so convincingly inventive that he first argues Desdemona will not love ugly Othello for a long time. When she is sick of Othello, she will naturally fall in love with Cassio, who is not only young and handsome, but, in Iago's script, also sly and lascivious.

Now . . . who stands so eminent in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does? a knave very voluble, no farther conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming, for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection . . . besides, the knave is handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after. A pestilent complete knave, and the woman hath found him already.

(233-39, 243-46)

He is able to transform a mere polite act into a lecherous one. To make his story even more plausible, he degrades Desdemona from a gentle lady to a lewd woman. He fabricates a unspeakably lustful exchange between Desdemona and Cassio.

Iago Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his

hand? Didst not mark that?

Rod. Yes, that I did, but that was but courtesy.

Iago Lechery, by this hand: an index and obscure
prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts.
They met so near with their lips that their breaths
embraced together. (251-58)

Iago's invented plot of the illicit relationship between Desdemona and Cassio is well received by Roderigo, his trial audience. Being taken in by this plot, Roderigo is then cast in the role of a revenger, and assigned the task of overturning the fortune of his rival, Cassio. He follows Iago's instruction to arouse the drunken Cassio into a fight, the ensuing riots cause the latter's dismissal from the office.

In his soliloquy closing Act 2 Scene 1, Iago confides to the audience his motive to destroy Desdemona:

Now I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust—though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin—
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards . . .
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife (289-97)

Then he again tells the audience his next step: to overturn Cassio and deceive

Othello. To justify his hatred for Cassio, he accuses Cassio of committing adultery with his wife, again from his guesses.

If this poor trash of Venice, whom I trash
For his quick hunting, stand the putting on,
I' ll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,
Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb—
For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too—
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me
For making him egregiously an ass,
And practising upon his peace and quiet
Even to madness. *'Tis here, but yet confused:*
Knavery's plain face is never seen, till used.

(301-10; emphases added)

Once again, Iago exposes his knavery, still in its crude form, to the audience. He makes a general plot line to proceed, but is not quite sure how it will end or where it will lead.

Iago also sets up action for Cassio's part especially after his dismissal from the office of lieutenant. In the hope to be reinstated, Cassio is advised to implore Othello through Desdemona—a reasonable and appropriate advice indeed, if not distorted. Right after Cassio's departure, Iago congratulates himself on his own ingenuity, and triumphs over his seeming honesty.

And what's he then that says *I play the villain?*
When this advice is free I give and honest,
Probal to thinking and indeed the course

To win the Moor again? (331-34; emphases added)

In this very self-consciously reflexive moment about his role in the play proper, Iago jokes about his seeming honesty. Seconds later, he deflates his boast of honesty by evoking his kinship with the devil:

How am I then a villain

To counsel Cassio to this parallel course

Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows

As I do now. (343-48)

Then taking his audience into confidence again, he outlines his next step to slander Desdemona:

For whiles this honest fool

Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,

And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,

I' ll pour this pestilence into his ear:

That she repeals him for her body's lust.

And by how much she strives to do him good

She shall undo her credit with the Moor—

So will I turn her virtue into pitch

And out of her own goodness make the net

That shall enmesh them all. (348-57)

In Act 3 Scene 3, the great temptation scene, Iago shows his unparalleled dramaturgic skill to make up a fiction accusing a faithful wife of betraying her

husband, who, at first free from any suspicion, is completely taken in at the close of the scene. Iago is a magician of language, who can conjure up the unseen and the unheard with mere words. He plants “seeds of doubt” (Scragg 1968: 59) into Othello’s mind, which within a short time grow into a gigantic tree of evilness.

Let us take a look of his first bout. Cassio, meeting Desdemona about the possibility of his reinstatement of office, hurries away when he sees Othello returning. Iago infuses Othello’s neutral description of Cassio’s departure from his wife with an illicit element, thereby introducing a suspicious connection between Cassio and Desdemona.

Oth. Was not that Cassio *parted from* my wife?

Iago Cassio, my lord? no, sure, I cannot think it

That he would *steal away so guilty-like*

Seeing you coming. (3.3.37-40; emphases added)

His malicious substitution of “parted from” with “steal away” brings in the seed of suspicion into Othello’s mind. This is hinted from Othello’s strange outcry after he requests Desdemona to “leave [him] but a little to [him]self” (85) when getting impatient with her persistent suit on Cassio’s behalf:

Excellent wretch! perdition catch my soul

But I do love thee! and when I love thee not

Chaos is come again. (90-92)

At this point, nothing much about Cassio and Desdemona is suggested from Iago. If Othello were merely unhappy with Desdemona’s interference, he would not have pronounced these strange remarks about his love to

Desdemona.

Iago's manipulation of Othello involves very subtle insinuation with excessive repetitions of words such as "think" ("thought" and "thinkings"), "honest" ("honesty"), and "jealousy" ("jealous").²⁶ Take a look of how Iago insinuates a sense of dishonesty into the character of Cassio with his typical "close dilations" (124).

Oth. Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not *honest*?

Iago *Honest*, my lord?

Oth. *Honest?* Ah, *honest*.

Iago My lord, for aught I know.

Oth. What dost thou *think*?

Iago *Think*, my lord?

Oth. *Think*, my lord! By heaven, thou echo'st me
As if there were some monster in thy *thought*
Too hideous to be shown.

.....

If thou dost love me

Show me thy *thought*. (102-111, 118-19; emphases added)

Iago plays with Othello's uncertainty and eagerness. Instead of a straightforward slander on Cassio and Desdemona, he inches in with very slow but deadly pace, which proves to be much more effective and indelible, casting doubts and ill omens on his seeming reticence.

²⁶ A total of 25 "think's," 11 "honest's," and 7 "jealousy's" used by both Iago and Othello in this scene

In layers of qualification, Iago cautiously states his opinion of Cassio: “For Michael Cassio, / I dare be sworn *I think that he is honest*” (125-26; emphases added). A sense of unsureness about Cassio’s honesty is indirectly implied by the qualification of “I think,” which indicates a personal opinion susceptible to faulty judgement. Therefore, Othello insists,

Nay, yet there’s more in this:
I prithee speak to me, as to thy thinkings,
As thou dost ruminare, and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words. (133-36)

Effectively setting up Cassio’s dishonesty, Iago then works on the picture of a jealous husband.

O beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (167-69)

Hearing Iago’s seemingly sincere advice, Othello questions with misgiving:

Why—why is this?
Think’st thou I’d make a life of jealousy
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions?

.....

No, Iago,
I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove,
And on the proof there is no more but this:

from lines 34 to 283.

Away at once with love or jealousy! (179-82, 192-95)

Othello seems to be the master of his own judgement. But Iago's discreet manipulation of Othello's judgement indicates that he is only a puppet under Iago's control. Successfully working Othello's mind to accept any story, Iago then pours his fiction into Othello's ears:

I speak not yet of proof:

Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio.

Wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure;

I would not have your free and noble nature

Out of self-bounty be abused: look to' t.

I know our country disposition well—

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave' t undone, but keep' t unknown. (199-207)

Iago does not supply any solid or factual proof for his accusation. But he somehow manages to gather some effective “evidences”: Desdemona's betrayal to her father, Desdemona's unusual and unnatural choice of husband, and later Cassio's supposed dream.

When left alone, Othello soliloquizes:

She's gone, I am abused, and my relief

Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage

That we can call these delicate creatures ours

And not their appetites! (271-74)

He already condemns Desdemona as guilty, and treats her rudely when she

shortly appears. He rejects Desdemona and her offer to bind his “painful” forehead with the fateful napkin, which is dropped and found by Emilia, who then gives it to Iago. With this handkerchief, Iago again confides in his audience how he will proceed his plot.

I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. (324-27)

Like an experienced playwright, Iago deftly employs a prop to enhance the illusion. His intuitive foresight into the effective and precise destruction of the blind and jealous husband with such a trifle exemplifies an unusual omniscience, though malevolent, of his creation, which is essential for any successful playwright.

When Othello meets Iago again later in the same scene, he delivers a “farewell” speech to his past heroic self and glorious career, after which his language degrades from an epic mode to a satirical mode, a mode typical of his villainous companion.

O now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! O farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th’ ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,

Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war! (350-57)

In response to Othello's insistence on seeing "the ocular proof" (363), Iago questions

Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?

Behold her topped? (398-99)

and

It is impossible you should see this

Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,

As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross

As ignorance made drunk. (405-8)

Iago dramatizes the supposed and supposedly obscene tryst of the two with vivid, hideous animal images, thus incensing Othello's fury and passion to the utmost. He further dramatizes a dream he overheard from Cassio, very probably made up, to "thicken other proofs / That do demonstrate thinly" (432-33):

In sleep I heard him say "Sweet Desdemona,

Let us be wary, let us hide our loves,"

And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,

Cry "O sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o' er my thigh,

And sign, and kiss, and then cry "Cursed fate

That gave thee to the Moor!" (421-28)

In his narration, he dramatizes Cassio's supposedly illicit dream with

the plot, Othello mistakes the appearance of what he sees in this arranged playlet.

Do but encave yourself

And mark the fleers, the gibes and notable scorns

That dwell in every region of his face;

For I will make him tell the tale anew

Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when

He hath and is again to cope your wife. (82-87)

In reality Iago asks Cassio about his relation with Bianca, but Othello is taken in by the mere appearance and believes this confession is Cassio's admission to his adultery with Desdemona. Cassio's sneers at Bianca's love for him are also misinterpreted by the unwitting Othello. A quick view of Othello's sarcasm in his remarks on the show will indicate his affinity with Iago in terms of language and mindset.

Oth. Iago beckons me: now he begins the story.

Cas. She was here even now, she haunts me in every place. I was the other day talking on the sea-bank with certain Venetians, and thither comes the bauble and, by this hand, falls me thus about my neck—

Oth. Crying "O dear Cassio!" as it were: his gesture imports it.

Cas. So hangs and lolls and weeps upon me, so shakes and pulls me! Ha, ha, ha!

Oth. Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber.

O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall
throw it to. (131-42)

Othello, the spectator of this staged show, comments intermittently like a low-born and foul-mouthed groundling. Citing Hilda Hulme, Jenkins glosses “nose” as “penis” (263). Othello becomes more and more like Iago, whose “jealousy / Shapes faults that are not” (3.3.150-51).

That Iago is an unparalleled playwright is even more obvious when he improvises with Bianca’s sudden appearance railing about the handkerchief in his playlet.

Iago Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?
Oth. O Iago!
Iago And did you see the handkerchief?
Oth. Was that mine?
Iago Yours, by this hand: and to see how he prizes the
foolish woman your wife! She gave it him, and he
hath given it his whore. (168-74)

Iago may have preconceived how to stage this inset play with Othello as an onstage spectator, but the episode of Bianca’s sudden appearance, purely coincidental, is deftly infused into Iago’s playlet.

Though manipulated most of the time, Othello displays a tendency to self-dramatization like Faustus, often casting himself in roles. Othello’s involvement with role-playing is embedded earlier in the imagery he uses in his language to stop the impending conflict between Brabantio’s men and his (Van Laan 180):

Hold your hands,
Both you of my inclining and the rest:
Were it my *cue* to fight, I should have known it
Without a *prompter*. (1.2.81-84; emphases added)

“Cue” and “prompter” are two theatrical terms. Othello compares himself to an actor in performance.

Othello stands out from the other characters as an outsider just like Faustus, because of his race and high-ranking position. Ethnically distinct from other Venetians, Othello is extremely aware of his outward uniqueness in Venice, or later, in Cyprus. His black complexion, in sharp contrast to Desdemona’s whiteness, is often associated with moral defectiveness by his opponents. Brabantio, reluctant to accept the fact of his daughter’s affection for Othello, insists that Othello must have used drugs and spells to charm Desdemona into falling “in love with what she feared to look on” (1.3.99). Even Othello himself is wrought to believe that Desdemona’s betrayal possibly stems from his blackness among other personal imperfections:

Haply for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years—yet that’s not much—
She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. (3.3.267-72)

His high position also situates him under the social spotlight. The sense of uniqueness and otherness makes him acutely aware of his being the object of

attention, which, in turn, endows a performative quality to anything he says or does. He describes himself “Rude am I in my speech” (1.3.82). But his expertise in performance is partly revealed from the enchanting power of his speech: “This only is the witchcraft I have used” (1.3.170), after a detailed account of his visitations to Brabantio with the stories of his wondrous adventures. Othello, in this attempt to dismiss Brabantio’s prejudice, somehow invests a magical power in his discourse. He relates to the Duke and the senators how his story of the adventures woos Desdemona:

This to hear

Would Desdemona seriously incline,
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
She’ d come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse . . .

.

She thanked me

And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story
And that would woo her. (1.3.146-51, 164-67)

In a sharp contrast with Iago’s plain language, Othello tends to be more rhetorical, making his speech a performance.

While Faustus’ self-dramatization satisfies his vanity to make himself a spectacle, Othello’s self-dramatization feeds his hunger to turn himself into a charming Petrarchan lover first, a self-pitying and deceived husband later. In

the final scene where he kills Desdemona, and later, himself, he emphatically calls himself a revenger, not a murderer, and deliberately plays the role of revenger:

Oth. If you bethink yourself of any crime
 Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
 Solicit for it straight.

Des. Alack, my lord, what may you mean by that?

Oth. Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by.
 I would not kill thy unprepared spirit,
 No, heaven forbid, I would not kill thy soul. (5.2.26-32)

He dramatizes himself as a wronged husband who still deeply loves his unchaste wife, in order to indulge in self-pity:

O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! Once more, once more:
Be thus when thou art dead and I will kill thee
And love thee after. Once more, and that's the last. (16-19)

When he wakes Desdemona, he resumes his role of revenger. His words become terse and cruel, in sharp contrast with his long-winded and flourishing speech as a lover.

Oth. Had all his hairs been lives
 My great revenge had stomach for them all.

Des. Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone.

Oth. Out, strumpet, weep'st thou for him to my face?

Des. O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Oth. Down, strumpet!

Des. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!

Oth. Nay, if you strive—

Des. But half an hour!

Oth. Being done, there is no pause—

Des. But while I say one prayer!

Oth. It is too late.

Des. O Lord! Lord! Lord! (73-83)

These exchanges between the murderer and the victim are very powerful.

Othello kills a bit of Desdemona with each simple word he uses: “Out,” “Down,” “Nay,” and “So, so” (88), building action into each word to destroy Desdemona and rejecting her piteous appeals.

Both Faustus and Othello are absolutely certain of their destiny to go to hell after death, though they display quite opposite attitudes in facing their final fortune. For Othello the vision of purgatorial torture is not as unbearable as the sight of the murdered Desdemona. To purge his sin, Othello is prepared to undergo punishment in the purgatory.

When we shall meet at compt

This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
 And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl,
 Even like thy chastity. O cursed, cursed slave!
 Whip me, ye devils,
 From the possession of this heavenly sight!
 Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,

Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!

O Desdemon! dead, Desdemon. Dead! O, O! (271-79)

Unlike Faustus' fear to be driven away to hell, Othello readily embraces hellish torture because for him "'tis happiness to die" (287). His suicide then is an inevitable choice. Before he kills himself, he wants Lodovico to report the misfortune truthfully:

I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,

Albeit unused to the melting mood,

Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinable gum. (338-49)

And he describes his blow on himself as if he were striking a third party by calling himself "the circumcised dog" (353) and "him" (354). He is split into a victim and an executioner. His curious projection of his sinful self into a "circumcised dog" reveals a thread of identification with his devilish tempter, Iago, who is called a "Spartan dog" (359).

Set you down this,

And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus! (349-54)

Othello composes a tragic ending for himself, and stages his own death in a very theatrical way. He is both the protagonist and the antagonist, the murderer and the victim, the judge and the sinner. His downfall may be attributed to Iago and his vicious manipulation, but his death is his own choice and is completed by his own hand. This is a deed to regain his autonomy.

In sum, Iago manipulates a fictional world with his dexterous control of language, using it to build up an illusion and to contaminate Othello's mind. Othello is poisoned to a blind jealousy, and finally commits a violent murder because of Iago's insinuating slander on the "supposed" adultery between Desdemona and Cassio. He is contaminated with Iago's malicious slander of his wife, and is turned into a revenger to kill his wife for the humiliating cuckoldry. Othello's mind is contaminated by Iago in the form of visual and hearing deception. Iago first plants a tiny seed of jealousy into Othello's mind; the seed then grows into a monstrous beast of jealousy, which devours the man himself and his beloved one. He manipulates the illusion so much so that it becomes reality for Othello, who is taken in by the false appearances and smothers Desdemona in fits of jealousy and rage initiated and intensified by the malicious fiction carefully wrought by Iago. The tragic death of Desdemona illustrates the powerful influence of illusion on reality. The illusory

appearances not only encroach upon the reality, but also overthrow it in an irreversible manner.

Critics rack their brains to locate Iago's motives, a frenzy reflecting a critical anxiety to resolve the difficult mystery. Coleridge calls this critical frenzy the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity" (1930: I, 49). Iago's jealousy, professional disappointment, personal hatred of Cassio, homosexual desire and misogyny—these have been proposed to explain the nature of his motivation (Sanders 25; Muir 16). But, quite interestingly, a close affinity of Iago's manipulative process with that of Shakespeare's own art may be identified (Sanders 25; Bradley 198). Hazlitt regards Iago as an artist who

takes the bolder and more desperate course of getting up his plot at home, casts the principal parts among his nearest friends and connexions, and rehearses it in downright earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution. (42)

Swinburne, citing Carlyle, calls Iago "an inarticulate poet" (qtd. Bradley 198). To explore this exposition further, Bradley postulates that we can recognize a curious analogy

between the early stages of dramatic composition and those soliloquies in which Iago broods over his plot, drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work. (198)

The theatrical parallel of the gradual formation of Iago's plot to that of a dramatic piece is illuminating. We can clearly see that Iago develops his plot

step by step in each soliloquy.

Unlike the retrospective remarks Mephostophilis makes in concluding his role to the corruption of Faustus, we are informed of every step with which Iago comes up to deceive the other characters. His composition of the revenge tragedy gradually shapes into a more concrete form with each step he takes to further the story line. He does not exactly know how things will end. He just follows the lead of each circumstance he devises earlier and improvises according to the situation to suit his overall plan of revenge. The sheer pleasure of invention and construction of plots and of seeing how it works, among other motivations of Iago's villainy, must also be taken into account. It is a pleasure of form.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Play’s the Thing”,²⁷:

Inset-plays in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*²⁸

Hamlet For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
(*Hamlet*, 2.2.552-60)

In the previous chapter we have seen some playwright-characters and their manipulation or deception of their fellow characters. These playwright-characters dramatize roles for themselves and others, create mini-plays or inset playlets to deceive others, and improvise action or scene with any available resources. They are truly artistic, but also extremely dangerous. We have seen how Mephostophilis viciously manipulates illusions using simple and careful language with calculated effects to recruit Faustus. His well-wrought web is aimed at enmeshing proud Faustus with the most desired magic power at his victim’s disposal. Iago, a much complicated playwright-character, also cunningly insinuates Othello into a blind jealousy with a mere fiction. He manipulates the illusion so much so that it becomes

²⁷ This is from *Hamlet*, 2.2.600.

²⁸ A Chinese version of an earlier draft of the part on *Hamlet* was published in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 31.1 (2002): 35-58.

reality for Othello, who is taken in by the false appearances of Desdemona's infidelity and smothers the poor woman in fits of jealousy and rage.

The present chapter will dwell on the significance of inset plays, the *crème de la crème* of metadrama. A play-within-a-play can instill a fuller insight into the interplay of illusion and reality, presenting two, sometimes even more, different planes of dramatic illusion. It mirrors the larger play in some detail, from the casting of roles, rehearsing, playacting on a stage, to matching a play to an audience. The plays, with a play-within-a-play arranged on the inner stage watched by onstage spectators, are quite common on Early Modern stage (Lee 2002:1).²⁹

Like many other Renaissance plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* bring up the subject of theater and theatrical performance in their dramatic action, the internal theatrical practices reflecting the self-conscious and self-reflexive impulses common in this period. Take *Hamlet* for example. It not only has a designated play-within-a-play, but also actors as characters, and a rehearsal. By bringing in a group of touring players, the play draws our attention to the whole business of theater. Beginning with some comments on the contemporary fashion of boy actors, the reception of a group of touring players, an improvised performance, a dumb show, and a play-within-a-play, the play makes theater one of its major subjects.

Through Hamlet's reflection upon the First Player's impromptu performance of the episode of Priam's murder, the play plays up the nature of

²⁹ According to Wei-yao Lee, different forms of "shows within" (such as plays-within-the-plays, masques, dumb shows, and pantomimes) "carried over 35% of all the plays produced in English Renaissance Period in 1550-1642" (1).

dramatic performance, including the impersonation of the player and the falsification of feelings. The Prince questions the genuineness of the First Player's playacting pretense, a gesture underscoring his own theatrical impersonation and pretense.

The Murder of Gonzago is Hamlet's device to "make mad the guilty" (2.2.558), an example of the influence of theater on reality. The inset play, however, brings forth a two-way transaction. To Hamlet, Claudius' abrupt abandonment of the onstage playlet signifies his fear and torture intensified by the dramatic representation of a murder in every way similar to old Hamlet's foul death. To other onstage spectators, in contrast, the inset play discloses Hamlet's threat to murder his uncle, in parallel to Lucianus' murder of Duke Gonzago, his uncle.

In addition, the framing structure produced by a play-within-a-play draws an analogy to the play-watching framework in a playhouse. The Danish courtiers as audience on the stage watching *The Murder of Gonzago* are closely observed by Hamlet. Hamlet, in turn, is also observed by the audience in the theater. For the audience, three levels of performance simultaneously exist: *The Murder of Gonzago*, the on-stage audience's, especially Claudius', response to the inset play, and Hamlet's interaction with other members of the onstage audience and his continuous comments and interruptions.

I. Definition and Variations of Inset-plays

Theatrical imageries, plays-within-the-plays, playwright-characters, and role-playing are some of the most fundamental manifestations of the

metatheatrical concerns in Renaissance drama. Among them, a play-within-a-play can lend a fuller insight to the interplay of illusion and reality, presenting two, sometimes even more, different planes of dramatic illusion/reality. It is regarded as one of “the most versatile and adaptable dramatic conventions” and thus a “highly complex and not easily definable dramatic technique” (Mehl 60-61). In terms of its dramatic form, Richard Hornby distinguishes two kinds of plays-within-the-plays: (i) the “inset” type, in which the inner play is secondary, a performance set apart from the main action, for example, *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet* and *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; (ii) the “framed” type, in which the inner play is primary, with the outer play as a framing device, for example, the taming story of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and George Peele’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* (33-34). By contrast Dieter Mehl classifies two devices of plays-within-the-plays according to the composition of the players of the inset play. The first type is the introduction of a group of touring players, who then perform before an onstage audience made up of characters from the main play (43). Examples are *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Antonio’s Revenge*, *A Mad World, My Masters*, *Sir Thomas More*, and *Hamlet*. These may provide, for Mehl, comic relief, interaction between the two levels of dramatic performance (especially the reaction of the onstage spectators), moral lessons, comment on contemporary stage practices and conventions, or the dramatist’s own view on the function of drama (43-45). The second type of a play-within-a-play is that performed by characters from the main play (46). Examples of this type are abundant, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Women*

Beware Women, and *The Roman Actor*. They may offer, according to Mehl, a satire on dramatic conventions employed in the main play, a deliberate blurring of the dividing line between reality and dramatic illusion with the common players in both the inner and outer plays, an exploration of the nature of dramatic illusion and its bearing on reality, a sharp contrast between a person's assumed role and his real character, a means of deception and mischief, or a way of finding out reality and actuality (46-51).

Thus we can see that a play-within-a-play can take many forms. A dumb show, an interlude, a pageant, a masque, or an inset playlet is a type of it. At times, a long story, a set speech, a report, a song, a dance, or a choral speech can also be regarded a variety of a play-within-a-play (Hornby 33). In all these, metadramatic tendency is not necessarily present. This chapter will examine only the metadramatic play-within-the-play that explicitly deals with the dramatic art in an overtly self-conscious manner. Hornby sets forth the requirements for such a play-within-a-play:

that the outer play have characters and plot (although these may both be very sketchy); that these in turn must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance. In other words, there must be two sharply distinguishable layers of performance.

(35)

First, a rudimentary definition of a play is in order to clarify the concept of a play-within-a-play.

A play is the product of human activity in which x

impersonates *y* in the presence of *z* In a play in performance an *actor* impersonates a *character* (*x* imitates, or pretends to be, or stands in for, or dresses up as *y*) in front of an *audience* (Parry 1998: 2)

Similarly, a play-within-a-play would also involve impersonation and audience perception. In brief, a play-within-a-play refers to a play where an inset play or a dramatic encounter is staged on the inner stage with onstage spectators watching it (Lee 1985: 15; Perng 1988: 63). It not only brings forth a dynamic interaction with the play proper, but also exposes a self-reflexive impulse of a playwright's art.

At times, a play-within-a-play can take even more subtle forms; it can simply be a dramatic encounter or an eavesdropping situation in which the characters involved do not necessarily assume self-conscious disguises or role-playing, and may not be aware of being watched or observed. The opening pageant of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a simple case. Like a presenter in the morality play, Vindice introduces, not without bias, the Duke and his family members in a stylized manner while they travel across the stage in a spectacular train followed by servants carrying torches. The audience gain some preliminary impressions of these characters through Vindice's perspectives, and see them from his eyes. A similar case is Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, when Pandarus introduces the Trojan warriors to Cressida when they "pass toward Ilion" (1.2.178-79). There comes Troilus, the star of the procession:

Enter Troilus [and passes over the stage].

Pan. Mark him, note him. O brave Troilus! Look well upon him, niece. Look you how his sword is bloodied, and his helm more hack'd than Hector's, and how he looks, and how he goes! O admirable youth! he never saw three and twenty. Go thy way, Troilus, go thy way! Had I a sister were a grace, or a daughter a goddess, he should take his choice. O admirable man! Paris? Paris is dirt to him, and I warrant Helen, to change, would give an eye to boot.

(231-39)

Pandarus builds up an intense expectation in the minds of both Cressida and the audience for the appearance of Troilus with his successive introductions of Aeneas, Antenor, Hector, and Paris. It is not surprising that we hear Cressida confess before the scene closes, "But more in Troilus thousandfold I see / Than in the glass of Pandar's praise may be" (284-85).

Philip Massinger, in *The Roman Actor*, also explores various inserted performances. The first inset play is, like *The Murder of Gonzago*, a moral weapon to hunt some hidden sinner in the audience without any success. The second playlet exemplifies the confusion of appearance and reality. Domitia mistakes the drama for reality when she tries to stop Paris from committing a "fictitious" suicide in the playlet.

Paris [*as Iphis*] ". . . at your gate,
As a trophy of your pride and my affliction,
I' ll presently hang myself."

Wrapp' d in sweet clothes, rings put upon his fingers,
A most delicious banquet by his bed,
And brave attendants near him when he wakes

(Induction I, 37-40)

Thus, the “real” Lord, like a director, casts the unwitting beggar as a Lord and his page Batholomew as Sly-Lord’s lady, and gives precise and detailed instructions to his followers about the gesture, lines, costume, and prop to be adopted in their playlet.

In the second scene of Induction, the Lord’s playlet is set in motion. Sly is manipulated as the Lord has planned. And he is convinced that he is a Lord, a new identity successfully imposed upon him, if only for a moment, when this scene ends. Similar to the transformation of Kate in the story of taming of the inner play, Christopher Sly is transformed; he takes up a new identity with the illusion constructed by the Lord and his followers. Sly asks confusedly,

Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?
Or do I dream? Or have I dream' d till now?
I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak;
I smell sweet savors, and I feel soft things.
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,
And not a tinker, nor Christopher Sly. (Induction II, 68-73)

As he willingly assumes this role, he adopts a royal air and speaks in a more elevated style: “Well, bring our lady hither to our sight” (74), illustrating the “illusionary powers of art” (Egan 6). But his calling the disguised page “Madam wife,” disregarding the Lord’s reminder of just “Madam,”

immediately disrupts the lofty linguistic pretense he employs to match his newly gained royal status. A new identity of a royal lord is shaped and imposed upon him through a theater-like performance in which the real Lord directs his followers, each playing a part, to playact different roles in this dramatic world. The Lord adopts a theatrical device to fabricate a dramatic world through the operation of which a new identity for Christopher Sly is fashioned.

Thus, the play sets up a metatheatrical pattern with the Induction, which serves as a frame to the ensuing inner play, performed by a group of players. The playacting nature of the framed play is played up. Leah Scragg points out,

The play within a play structure establishes the inset drama as art rather than life, while the social relationships that the shrew play projects function both as an aspect of Sly's dream, and as an extension of the species of Bacchanalia that is in progress in the Lord's household. (1992: 79-80)

Near the end of Act 1 Scene 1, some characters of the outermost framework of the play appear for the last time, and then are heard no more, giving a sense of incomplete framing structure. But the metatheatrical pattern does not disappear with the Induction, it is subsumed under the following dramatic action in its framing device, uses of disguise and intrigue, dream-like vision, and references of acting and performing. The formal device of the induction, says Marjorie B. Garber,

has a considerable effect upon the play as a whole, and its

importance is closely linked with the fact that it purports to tell a dream. The frame performs the important tasks of distancing the later action and of insuring a lightness of tone—significant contributions in view of the real abuse to which Kate is subjected by Petruchio. Its most important single advantage, however, is the immediacy with which it establishes the deliberate metaphorical ambiguity of reality and illusion. (1974: 28)

Thus, the play incorporates layers of illusion into the dramatic action with the use of a frame.

The dramatic action of the play within is also framed with another layer of dramatic action. Take the opening scene for example. After a brief exchange between Lucentio and his servant Tranio about their trip to Padua, they, receding to background, welcome a “show” (1.1.47) staged by Baptista, his daughters Katherina and Bianca, and Bianca’s suitors Gremio and Hortensio. The theater audience observes Lucentio and Tranio, as onstage audience, observe the commotion caused by the rivaling suitors of Bianca, and the noisy and piercing brawl of Katherina. In this manner, the dramatic form clearly defines the opening incident as a kind of performance, a “show” or “a good pastime” (1.1.68) as Tranio describes it. And, in this brief encounter, we can also find that Baptista’s daughters are each cast in a stereotype: Katherina a scold daughter, Bianca a docile one, stereotypes first imposed on them by their environment, then willingly assumed by both as a protective shield of their real self.

Petruchio is a highly theatrical role. He makes it clear right at the beginning that “I come to wive it wealthily in Padua” (1.2.75). As long as the woman is rich enough, he does not mind any drawbacks in her:

Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,
As old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrowd
As Socrates' Xantippe, or a worse (1.2.69-71)

The taming strategy he adopts is that of acting. As he puts it,

I' ll attend her here
And woo her with some spirit when she comes.
Say that she rail, why then I' ll tell her plain
She sings as sweetly as a nightingale;
Say that she frown, I' ll say she looks as clear
As morning roses newly wash' d with dew (2.1.168-73)

It turns out that the contention for power between Petruchio and Katherina is closely connected to their ability to playact; it is a dramatic contest initiated by Petruchio, who is a better actor in terms of his capacity to improvise.

Katherina, on the one hand, too adhesive to her role as a shrew, is defeated in the first few rounds. On the other hand, she spots a chance to free herself from the detested role of a shrew, a role she is more than willing to discard if she can, in the marriage settlement.

Petruchio's performance reaches a climax on the day of marriage. He first appears in outlandish clothing, turning the “solemn festival” (3.2.101) into a funny, but ridiculous, spectacle. Biondello reports Petruchio's arrival to the expectant father-in-law.

Petruchio is coming in a new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of
old breeches thrice turn' d; a pair of boots that have been
candle-cases, one buckled, another lac' d; an old rusty sword
ta' en out of the town armory, with a broken hilt, and
chapeless; with two broken points (3.2.43-48)

Dressed more like a clown than a bridegroom, Petruchio deflates Katherina's pride by turning a wedding ceremony into a farce. According to Gremio's report, Petruchio, described as a "mad-brain' d bridegroom" (163), behaves no less eccentrically in the church. His mad behavior is a public performance to upstage Katherina in shrewishness: "Petruchio is Kated" (245), as Gremio cleverly observes.

The play's sub-plot also provides stage audience opportunities with the double disguised courtship, for example, in the lesson scene (3.1) and the overheard courtship scene (4.2). The use of intrigue and disguise is weaved into the courtship plot to such an extent that no one seems to know any better than the other. And the devices to bracket the taming story within layers of framing structure with Sly episodes or other onstage audience make interpretation even more difficult, resulting "an unusual open-endedness" (Thompson 31).

That Katherina may be playacting a role of an obedient wife in the speech that concludes the taming story is suggested in an earlier scene when she takes mischievous pleasure in the mistakes over Vicentio's identity, calling him a "[y]oung budding virgin" (4.5.37) first, and then an "old father" (45). More and more critics spot an ironic and satirical tone in Kate's final lecture on

female submission and male supremacy (Thompson 37-41; Novy 276-77; Kahn 112-13), thus problematizing and ridiculing the supposed “truth” of patriarchal values the speech advocates. The speech, though not an overtly inset playlet, is brimming with playacting elements. Katherina, with onstage audience listening to her, holds the center stage all to herself. Her lecture on female subjection is filled with instructions and demonstration of acting:

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband’s foot;
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease. (5.2.176-79)

Novy plays up the performing possibility in Kate’s speech:

When she concludes by offering to place her hand below her husband’s foot in an hierarchical gesture of submission, his answer sounds less like an acceptance of tribute than praise for a successful performance in a game: “Why, there’s a wench! Come on and kiss me, Kate.” (276-77)

The speech is coated with playacting touches, adding a richer texture to the fabric of the play.

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* also contains inset plays: a framing structure, two dumb shows (one about three historical conquests of Portugal and Spain by the English forces in Act 1 Scene 4, the other about a prophetic show of the development of the play proper in Act 3 Scene 15), and an inset playlet. It sets up a framing structure with the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge watching the episodes of revenges and counter-revenges in the Spanish court,

and a play-within-a-play, *Soliman and Perseda*, with Hieronimo, Bel-imperia, Lorenzo, and Balzazar as actors. Revenge tells Andrea what they are going to see in the coming tragedy:

Then know, Andrea, that thou art arrived
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,
Don Balthazar the prince of Portingale,
Deprived of life by Bel-imperia.
Here sit we down to see the mystery,
And serve for Chorus in this tragedy. (1.1.86-91)³⁰

Revenge and Andrea, functioning as both chorus and audience, prepare (us and) the playhouse audience for the tragedy, in which Don Balthazar dies at Bel-imperia's hands. The play metaphor underscores the character's self-reflexive impulse. Unlike the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Andrea and Revenge scenes, chorus-like, insistently interrupt and comment on the development of the play proper from the beginning till the end. This frame with the presence of onstage spectators, in a sense, makes the play proper a play-within-a-play (Wilds 190), which encompasses another inset playlet stage-managed, directed, and performed by Hieronimo in the closing scene. Also, the frame's supervising perspective of the pagan gods represented by Revenge and Proserpine corresponds to the Christian view in regarding the human world as a stage with providential supervision: man and woman are mere actors, each fulfilling his or her predestined role according to the Script, written by the ultimate Master-dramatist.

³⁰ References to this play are from *The Spanish Tragedy*, Ed. David Bevington.

Unable to obtain justice from the court, Hieronimo, like other revenge heroes, resorts to private justice and seeks chances to kill his enemies. It is interesting that most avengers do not confront their enemies in a direct duel, but employ a dramatic encounter to combat and destroy their enemies. The dramatic encounter, whether in a masque or a playlet, inevitably enhances the sense of theatricality and spectacle. Like most heroes of revenge plays, Hieronimo is obliged to plot incessantly to hunt out the hidden enemies. Meanwhile his enemies are cunning schemers engaged in their counter-revenge. The play is, therefore, filled with plotting, role-playing, and disguise. In addition, the play includes some incidents with significant metatheatrical implications. In what follows, I would like to concentrate on two hangings in the play.

Commenting on the Elizabethan fashion to make a death execution a spectacle, Molly Easo Smith connects the onstage hangings of Horatio and Pedringano to contemporary “cultural practices” (71) of public executions and hangings in Elizabethan England, an unusual fascination with the hanged man and the corpse, as can be seen from the recurring descriptions of Horatio’s gruesome murder in the bower and Hieronimo’s preservation of Horatio’s bloody napkin and corpse. Smith finds a close affinity between the scaffold and the stage: “theatre and public punishment provided entertainment to upper and lower classes and . . . both events were generally well attended” (72). Public punishment as a spectacle offers an example of “life as theater.” Stephen Greenblatt also brings the theater and the world together when he argues,

Similarly, the playwrights themselves frequently called attention in the midst of their plays to alternative theatrical practices. Thus, for example, the denouement of Massinger's *Roman Actor* (like that of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*) turns upon the staging of a mode of theater in which princes and nobles take part in plays and in which the killing turns out to be real. It required no major act of imagination for a Renaissance audience to conceive of either of these alternatives to the conventions of the public playhouse: both were fully operative in the period itself, in the form of masques and courtly entertainments, on the one hand, and public maimings and executions, on the other. (1988: 15)

Smith, however, strives to draw a distinction between the public execution and the theater. For her,

Theatre establishes distance between spectacle and spectators, and festivity implicitly or explicitly invokes the frame to separate itself from everyday living However, the authenticity in the enactment of public punishment makes its distance considerably more nebulous. In fact, participants in public executions and hangings remained acutely aware of their profound relevance both to the authorities who orchestrated the performance and to the spectators who viewed it. (74-75)

The two hangings in the tragedy, Horatio's and Pedringano's, function differently in relation to the theme of death as spectacle. Horatio's gruesome murder, with the onstage spectators including Bel-imperia and Balthazar, is purely horrible. Horatio is suddenly taken in the midst of his secret amorous encounter with Bel-imperia. He is not only hanged, but also stabbed to death. Quoting Foucault, Smith calls attention to the voyeuristic interest behind this spectacular drama of violence:

Foucault's argument that in early modern Europe, "in the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real presence was required for the performance" proves especially appropriate to this hanging performed on a raised stage for an audience whose arrangement in "the pit" and the balconies above recalls the scaffold, and which certainly indulges the spectators' voyeuristic interest in death as spectacle. (78)

The grotesque and spectacular murder of Horatio is constantly repeated later in many different ways, making the victim a central concern in later development, whose revenge takes precedence over that of Don Andrea in the very beginning of the play.

Pedringano's hanging, by contrast, is comic. Deceived by the false promise of pardon from the death penalty by Lorenzo, Pedringano jests throughout the whole trial and hanging scene, mocking the judge and the hangman. He scornfully defies the hanging as mere fiction, believing himself soon to be delivered by the King's pardon, which is supposedly placed in the

page's box. Having stealthily opened the empty box before seeing Pedringano, the page vividly pictures the possible situation in the execution scene:

I cannot choose but smile to think how the villain will flout
the gallows, scorn the audience, and descant on the hangman,
and all presuming of his pardon from hence. Will 't not be
an odd jest, for me to stand and grace every jest he makes,
pointing my finger at this box, as who would say, "Mock on,
here's thy warrant." Is' t not a scurvy jest, that a man should
jest himself to death? (3.5.11-17)

Since Pedringano mistakes reality for fiction, he could jest himself to his death, not realizing the hanging could be real. His last words before being turning off by the hangman are "Why, rascal, by my pardon from the King" (3.6.107), still clinging to the belief that the execution is only a game.

Hieronimo, as Master of the Revels, director, and actor, stages an inserted playlet, *Soliman and Perseda*. Like other masques in revenge tragedies, it is mainly used as a tool to achieve the desired revenge. For example, in *Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice and his fellows disguised under the masks in a masque have easy access to assassinating the newly crowned duke and his flatterers. But Hieronimo's masque is much more complicate. It is not only a disguise to hide the revengers' identities and their malicious weapons. It is the killing weapon itself. The supposed fiction turns out to be reality in which the fictitious deaths are real, bringing forth a grotesque sense of dramatic irony when the onstage spectators, including King of Spain, Viceroy of Portugal and Duke of Castile, all applaud the acting: "this was bravely done" (4.4.68) before

realizing the supposed players “have already overstepped the limits of the play and executed their revenge in earnest” (Mehl 47). Hieronimo scornfully taunts his audience’s complacency of the theatrical tragedy:

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,
That this is fabulously counterfeit,
And that we do as all tragedians do:
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer,
And in a minute starting up again
Revive to please tomorrow’s audience. (4.4.76-82)

With this most clearly self-reflexive moment, Kyd’s tragedy indulges and exposes its own theatricality. The deaths of Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Bel-imperia in the masque are real, not fiction, in the dramatic world, bringing the drama of death to a spectacular *coup de théâtre*. The significance of this scene lies in its “deliberate blurring of the dividing line between reality and dramatic illusion” (Mehl 47), and implies further “a resemblance between play and life” (Wilds 192). But from a metatheatrical level, these deaths are still fiction, just like that of Horatio, and these actors can still “[r]evive to please tomorrow’s audience.”

Similarly, Thomas Middleton also makes use of this inserted performance in *Women Beware Women*. In the final scene, a playlet is staged by some characters of the main play, who then take this chance to murder their enemies. When the first death takes place, the onstage spectators do not realize what really happens:

Livia [As Juno] “Now for a sign of wealth and golden days,
Bright-eyed prosperity which all couples love,
Ay, and makes love, take that!
[Throws flaming gold upon ISABELLA, who falls dead]
Our brother Jove
Never denies us of his burning treasure,
T’ express bounty.”

Duke She falls down upon’ t;
What’s the conceit of that?

Fabritio As over-joyed, belike.
Too much prosperity overjoys us all,
And she has her lapful, it seems, my lord. (5.2.115-22)

The Duke senses a deviation from the scripted argument (123), but Fabritio takes the real death as mere fiction. Seconds later, Guardiano falls into the trap-door by accident. And Livia is overcome by the poisonous fume, offered by Isabella before she is murdered. Then, Hippolito, shot by Cupid’s poisonous shaft, runs into a pointed weapon to quicken his painful death. And the Duke, having drunk by mistake a poisonous cup that his wife Bianca prepares for the Cardinal at the beginning of the masque, also dies when the staged presentation runs wild. In a gesture not unlike Juliet’s, Bianca follows the dead Duke by drinking up the remaining poison: “Yet this gladness is, that I remove, / Tasting the same death in a cup of love” (220-21).

In this succession of deaths, the boundary between reality and illusion is disrupted to such an extent that illusion turns reality. The scene is excessive

in heaping death upon death, making it a spectacle. The excessive programming of multiple deaths also highlights the artificiality of the drama, consciously drawing our attention to its choreography by the dramatist. Like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the final scene calls attention to the dramatic irony of some characters' self-complacency of their villainies, which often turn back on themselves: "vengeance upon vengeance, / Like a set match, as if the plagues of sin / Had been agreed to meet here all together" (157-59), as the dying Hippolito finally realizes.

II. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: The "Shaping Fantasies"³¹

Different forms of inset playlets are also quite common in Shakespearean works. Here, I would like to examine two examples: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Hamlet*. In contrast to the professional touring players of *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*, a bunch of rustic mechanics put up a play, called "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (1.2.11-12), in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to entertain an onstage audience of the newly wed royal couple and courtiers. Unlike Hamlet's morally instrumental intention to use *The Murder of Gonzago* to catch his uncle's conscience, *Pyramus and Thisbe* is purely a sport that Theseus requests "To wear away this long age of three hours / Between [their] after-supper and bed-time" and "To ease the anguish of a torturing hour" (5.1.33-34, 37). The popular critical assumption to regard *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a

³¹ This is from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.5.

dramatic epithalamium to grace an aristocratic marriage adds even more framing structures to the play itself: with real-life wedding nobles watching onstage royal couples watching *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Brooks lxxxix; Muir 151; Foakes 1984: 2-3; Calderwood 1965: 510). It claims to be only an entertainment, a sport, an occasion for delight. Besides Quince and Bottom's playlet, another metaphoric play-within-a-play directed and collaborated by Oberon and Puck is also woven into the main plot bridging up the fairy world and the mortal world. *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in many ways, provides a burlesque version of a theatrical production, mirroring the larger play in some details. It enacts certain theatrical practices on the stage, including the casting of roles, rehearsing, playacting, and matching a play to an audience.

Inbetween the love stories of the main plot, some Athenian rustics are busy with the mounting of a play. In their first meeting, they have a preliminary preparation for the playlet *Pyramus and Thisbe*, including an ineffective assigning of cast, a sparse discussion of line delivery, a quick consideration of audience reception, and an appointment for a rehearsal in their next meeting. Their piteous ineptitude, and earnest enthusiasm give rise to an interesting and funny burlesque of a theatrical production. First, the title of the playlet. Peter Quince tells his "company" their play is "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (1.2.11-12). This descriptive title indicates a common practice in the naming of a play at that time. But to call the play a comedy is simply a blunder, indicating Quince's ignorance of the dramatic genre.

Secondly, the resistance in the process of role-assigning and the power

struggle between a director and his actors are interesting. Bottom keeps challenging Quince by offering to play all available roles:

If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes: I will move
storms, I will condole in some measure. To the rest—yet
my chief humour is for a tyrant And I may hide my
face, let me play Thisbe too Let me play the lion too.
I will roar, that I will do any man's heart good to hear me.

(1.2.22-24, 47, 66-67)

Even Flute refuses the role of Thisbe, not wanting to crossdress a woman: “Nay, faith, let not me play a woman: I have a beard coming” (43-44). Peter Quince has to impose his domination and authority as a director all the time, not to be overturned by his fellow actors.

Also, the issues of dramatic illusion and audience perception come up when they fear that the lion's roar might scare the Duchess and other ladies: “And you should do it too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek: and that were enough to hang us all” (70-72). To moderate the effect of illusion, they opt for a disruption of dramatic illusion, a solution they later adopt in rehearsal and formal performance in the final scene.

For rehearsal, they all travel to the forest where reality and dream merge, where the human world and fairy world interact with one another, and where imagination and fantasy predominate over reason and reality. Some technical considerations of a theatrical production are further exposed in the process of their rehearsal. First, the stage. Coming to a spot in the forest, Quince tells the others to rehearse their play in this green plot, which will serve well as a

stage:

Pat, pat; and here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house; and we will do it in action, as we will do it before the Duke. (3.1.2-5)

In this seemingly casual arrangement, Quince incidentally exposes the make-believe mechanism underlying all theatrical productions: the audience is willing to take the stage as a green plot first, and then, as requested, a stage. The willingly imaginative collaboration among the players, the audience and the director not only facilitates the development of any dramatic action, but also contributes to the establishment of a fictional world.

Bottom poses a question about the audience response: "Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?" (9-11). Not waiting for Quince's answer, he himself proposes a solution:

I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (15-21)

They solve the problem of audience engagement with the disruption of dramatic illusion, if only in a burlesque way, a gesture reminiscent of Shakespeare's own self-referential devices disrupting the illusion common in his works. These amateur players either overrate their acting skills or underrate the audience's

imagination (Chiu 2000: 55). Their adherence to the literal meaning of the presence of moonlight when Pyramus and Thisbe meet indicates their inflexibility and ignorance to the power of imagination. In a somewhat self-contradictory way, they regard their audience “both over- and under-imaginative” (Dent 126). Dent points out their self-contradictory efforts:

Thus, to avoid the threat of over-imagination, they resolve by various ludicrous means to explain that Pyramus is not Pyramus and that the lion is not a lion; then, to counteract the audience’s under-imagination, they will create Moonshine and Wall. (126)

This burlesque produces an interesting contrast to the play proper whose audience, from the beginning, is asked to imagine the existence of diminutive fairies, the foggy and dark forest in broad daylight (if it was performed in the afternoon before the playgoers in the Globe), the transformation of Bottom with an ass-head, and the magic power of the juice of love-in-idleness, to name just a few instances.

The rehearsal is aborted when Bottom is suddenly transformed.

Snout O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?

Bot. What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own,
do you? (3.1.109-12)

Bottom’s transformation and his subsequent love affair with Titania the Fairy Queen could be compared to a dramatic encounter directed by the Fairy King. Not overtly drawing parallel to a dramatic production, Oberon and Puck, a director-playwright and his assistant, busy themselves with the interference of human affairs, setting up actions and scripts for the mortals as well as for the

Fairy Queen (Calderwood 1965: 512; Perng 1988: 60-64). On the one hand, the forest incidents help us to recognize “the prevalence and power of illusion and fantasy in human experience” (Egan 7). This manipulation of human destiny, on the other, has a hidden implication of the biblical analogy that the world is but a vanity, overseen by God.

Dreams are essential in the forest world, and are used to generalize the lovers’ strange experience. The forest episode is not a mere illusion, but another form of reality. Yet, the only actual dream is Hermia’s when she starts up from a dream just after Lysander, being affected by the powerful influence of the love juice, has stolen away from her. Not knowing Lysander has already gone, she cries for help:

Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best
To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!
Ay me, for pity! What a dream was here!
Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.
Methought a serpent ate my heart away,
And you sat smiling at his cruel prey. (2.2.144-49)

She soon finds out the dream becomes reality. Lysander is the serpent that stings her heart.

Helena regards the sudden reversal of courtship in the forest as a show that Lysander, Hermia, and Demetrius put on to make fun of her:

Ay, do! Persever: counterfeit sad looks,
Make mouths upon me when I turn my back,
Wink each at other; hold the sweet jest up;

This sport, well carried, shall be chronicled. (3.2.237-40)

She mistakes reality for fiction, and insists on disbelieving the whole episode.

Waking up from their forest experience, the young couples are all confounded. Trying hard to recollect what has happened, they can only vaguely recall:

Dem. These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.

Her. Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.

Hel. So methinks;
And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,
Mine own, and not mine own.

Dem. Are you sure
That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. (4.1.186-93)

Their strange encounters in the forest are dismissed as fantasies by the all-too-rational Theseus, who never believes in “antique fables” or “fairy toys” (5.1.3). But, quite interestingly, he is the person who makes a famous speech on imagination supplying a wonderful definition of the term:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.7-17)

As some critics point out, this play is one of the most imaginative works in Shakespearean cannon (Dent 125). Quite appropriately, imagination is the central focus of this play. What happens in the forest is basically magical, resorting to imagination, rather than cool reason. Bottom's speech after awakening from the forest experience is marked by its "misassignment of sense-experience", to borrow from Brooks (cxix). This points up the limits of man's empirical experience. Bottom's dream is inexplicable—it is beyond language, and beyond empiricism. He is not equipped—like Shakespeare—with the wit and verbal competence to expound the significance of his dream.

The formal performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* toward the end of the play explores further some theatrical and metatheatrical issues, including audience response, playacting, engagement and disruption of dramatic illusion, permeability and impermeability of illusion and reality through a dramatic performance.

The inset playlet is marked by an outmoded style with archaism ("certain"), trite comparisons (Thisbe's beauty to flowers), lines padded out with expletives or redundancies, multiplied alliteration, and fustian apostrophes (to Furies and

Fates, to Night, to Nature, and to Wall), all of which might mock works by poetasters (Brooks cxviii-cxix). The personifying of characters and the awkward prologue burlesque the interludes still popular then (Brooks cxix).

The onstage audience derive their enjoyment from the amateurs' ineptitude: "Our sport shall be to take what they mistake" (5.1.90). With this in mind, they intrude the playlet with their sarcastic comments or exchanges from time to time, not respecting it as a self-contained artifice. The actual mounting of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is full of interruptions. For example, on hearing Theseus' comment that "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again" (5.1.180-81), Bottom jumps out of his role to reply,

No, in truth sir, he should not. "Deceiving me" is Thisbe's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I told you: yonder she comes. (182-85)

In this direct address to the audience, Bottom breaks the boundary between the play world of *Pyramus* and the "real" world of Athenian court, coming in and out of his dramatic role (Perng 1988: 66). Or, to see from a metatheatrical level, the actor playing Bottom playing *Pyramus* shift between his roles as Bottom and as *Pyramus*.

Impatient with the silly playlet at first, Hippolyta cannot help but be drawn and moved by the dramatic illusion when *Pyramus* is convinced by the blood-stained mantle of *Thisbe's* death: "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man" (279). After the death of *Pyramus*, she is the only onstage spectator concerned about the plot while most of the others try their best to make fun of

Pyramus' dying speech. She wonders, "How chance Moonshine is gone, before Thisbe comes back and finds her lover?" (300-1). Throughout the whole performance, Hermia and Helena do not have a single line of speech. We do not know whether they are exactly like their insensitive husbands, failing to recognize in the play a dim similarity to their own story up until their safe return from the forest. Pyramus and Thisbe are Lysander and Hermia, only with different endings. Lysander and Demetrius amuse themselves greatly from the misfortune and silliness of the tragic lovers just like Puck derives great joy from watching these silly mortals fussing over "nothing" in their forest quarrels. Their inability to glean any hint of their own fortune from the tragic story shows the impossibility to shape reality with illusion—unlike the function of *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*.

Despite his dismissal of imagination, Theseus tries to appreciate the amateur players' good intention behind their inept performance. He tells Hippolyta when she complains: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (208-9). He believes, "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men" (211-12). In a similar vein, Puck humbly requests the playhouse audience to take the whole play as a dream when he delivers the epilogue:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber' d here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding but a dream,

Gentles, do not reprehend:

If you pardon, we will mend. (409-16)

That the playlet “hath well beguil’ d / The heavy gait of night” (353-54) inevitably calls our attention to the popular presumption that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is itself a play to “grace a wedding” (Brooks lxxxix). If so, the blessing of fairies on the stage could well disperse into the actual aristocratic house (Calderwood 1965: 510), merging illusion and reality, when Oberon and Titania give the command:

Through the house give glimmering light

By the dead and drowsy fire;

Every elf and fairy sprite

Hop as light as bird from briar;

.....

Hand in hand, with fairy grace,

Will we sing, and bless this place. (377-80, 385-86)

As Oberon’s ensuing lines make clear, the blessing is welcome and essential for an early modern marriage which is still vulnerable and susceptible to birth defects and difficult labors:

Now, until the break of day,

Through this house each fairy stray.

To the best bride-bed will we,

Which by us shall blessed be;

And the issue there create

Ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all the couples three
Ever true in loving be;
And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand:
Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar,
Nor mark prodigious, such as are
Despised in nativity,
Shall upon their children be. (387-400)

For Calderwood, Shakespeare plays up “the interpenetration of art and reality” (510):

In this way the play's openness of form serves the comic theme of social inclusiveness with wonderful felicity, the world of comedy expanding across the borders of fiction to embrace and absorb the social world beyond. (510)

Shakespeare's pen gives “airy nothing” (16), the fairies, a “local habitation and a name” (17), turning the popular belief in folklore into reality. And, if the play is an epithalamium to grace a real-life aristocratic wedding, the fiction invades into the reality when the fairies scatter to distribute their blessing.

In an overtly self-effacing manner, Puck's concluding remarks, however, seem to indicate that dramatic art is essentially unreal, and can hardly have a direct influence on the world (Egan 8). In contrast, Shakespeare in *Hamlet* uses dramatic fiction to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601), and meditates on the possibility of using drama as “an instrument to influence and

even shape reality” (Egan 9).

III. *Hamlet*: “By indirections find directions out”³²

Like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and many other Renaissance plays, *Hamlet* brings up the subject of theater and theatrical performance in its dramatic action, a theatrical practice reflecting the self-conscious and self-reflexive impulse common in this period. *Hamlet* not only has a play-within-a-play, but also actors as characters, and a rehearsal. By bringing in a group of touring players, the play dwells on the whole business of theater. Beginning with some comments on the contemporary fashion of boy actors, a warm reception of a group of touring players, an improvised performance, a dumb show, and a play-within-a-play, the play makes theater one of its major subjects, thoroughly investigating the idea of theater and the nature of actor and acting. It explores the experience of being an actor: to get prepared for a role, to think oneself into a role, to deliver one’s lines, to match gestures and body movements with words. It also shows the life of players beyond stage as real people. Moreover, it deals with the entire process of theatrical performance from putting on a play, rehearsing a play, developing a play, thinking about a play, to matching a play to an audience. It also compares different kinds of theaters and acting styles. In short, it peels away the mystery of theater.

Hamlet is closely related to the play’s exploration of the nature of dramatic art. Lillian Wilds briefly summarizes his interest in the theater:

Hamlet has a well-developed moral and aesthetic philosophy

³² This is from *Hamlet*, 2.1.66.

of drama, is able confidently to advise the professional actors on their craft, and demonstrates that he not only is on familiar and affectionate terms with the actors but also familiar enough with their repertoire to be able to quote from it at length (140)

Before the entrance of the “tragedians of the city” (2.2.327), Hamlet and Rosencrantz begin an exchange about the latest “fashion” (339) in the theater—the popularity of children players who “berattle the common stages” (340). The stage quarrel, or “War of the Theatres,” is a topical reference to quarrels among Ben Jonson, John Marston, and Thomas Dekker (Jenkins 256; Cain 30-36; Chambers 1923: I, 378-80). For example, Ben Jonson, in his *Cynthia’s Revels* (1600) and *Poetaster* (1601) for boy actors, attacks and satirizes the plays and players of public playhouses. This “real-life reference” (Hornby 95) disrupts the actors’ masks, for a moment, to reveal their real identities of actors.

The players episode is usually regarded as a “digression.” Mercer remarks on the disparity this episode brings up to the audience:

We certainly experience a very strange shuffling of perspectives as we watch these characters, who are not at all figures from a contemporary satire but prince and courtiers in a tragedy, suddenly begin to talk of an affair that concerns not them but the actors who speak their lines, and the audience whose favour is sought by both their arts—an audience, in fact, which is us. (186)

But is not that exactly the metatheatrical impulse of the play which tries to emphasize and draw our attention to its artificiality? The episode takes the actors away from their roles, and exposes their other identities.

The dramatic action seems to come to a halt with considerations of metadramatic issues. But a closer look will reveal their interconnections with the main dramatic development. First, I would like to discuss the first player's performance. The first player's improvised recitation of the slaughter of Priam provides contrasts and similarities to the larger play itself. Thematically, Pyrrhus, a son, avenges his dead father, echoing the revenge plot in *Hamlet*. And the temporary inaction of Pyrrhus mirrors that of Hamlet's before his "[a]roused vengeance" (2.2.484) activates his violence again:

Anon he finds him,
Striking too short at Greeks. His antique sword,
Rebellious to his arm, lies where it falls,
Repugnant to command. Unequal match' d,
Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide;
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
Th' unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. For lo, his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seem' d i' th' air to stick;
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,

And like a neutral to his will and matter,

Did nothing. (2.2.464-78)

But the mirror image is only temporary, since the avenging hero resumes his vehemence and action. Likewise, the mourning Hecuba (498-514) ironically reflects the image of Gertrude as Niobe, only Gertrude's grief is more short-lived than her mythical counterpart.

Stylistically, the player's speech represents a quite different form of theater. As Hamlet points out, the murder of Priam is acted, at most, just once, because it pleases "not the million" (432). It is "caviare to the general" (433) as Hamlet calls it; that is, too good for the common people. But Hamlet regards it "an excellent play" (435), and likes it tremendously. To compare it with the play of *Hamlet* itself, we will find it quite different in acting style. It is unnatural, highly rhetorical, static, verbose, and explicitly passionate. The Pyrrhus speech and the Mousetrap project are old-fashioned forms of drama, "parodying perhaps the outmoded formalism of sixteenth-century tragedy" (Hubert 92). The acting style is formulaic and stylized, a total contrast to *Hamlet*, the play proper (Replogle 153). Thus we have two kinds of theater: one is unrealistic, removed from life; the other natural, realistic, a part of life. The contrast of the artificiality in the Pyrrhus play and the naturalness of the play *Hamlet* brings our attention to the aspects of theatricality—natural or unnatural, realistic or unrealistic, stylized or life-like. The example of *Hamlet* illustrates at least two kinds of acting styles available for the Renaissance adult companies: one is a stylized and formal presentation, exemplified in the first player's Priam and Hecuba performance and *The Murder of Gonzago*, which

resembles Brecht's "separation of actor from persona" (Hall 4); the other is a more naturalistic and realistic impersonation, illustrated in the play proper, which is closer to Stanislavki's "immersion of the actor in his role" (Hall 4).

Most critics interpret Hamlet's immediate soliloquy after the player's speech as his blame on himself for inaction (Righter 162). In fact, it also offers a "weapon of illusion to penetrate the tangle of appearances around him" (Righter 162). It not only rips apart the pretense of the Danish court, but also shatters the pretense of the Globe theater (or other theaters presenting the tragedy). Hamlet's self-reproach is "an acknowledgement of the blurred line between the stage and life, between what seems and what is" (Wilds 153). His reflection on the nature of dramatic performance brings him back to the dilemma of "seeming" and "being" discussed earlier in Chapter Two. He comments on the player's acting and expressions of feeling:

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann' d,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing! (2.2.544-51)

The player playacts the grieving Queen Hecuba, showing all the external forms and gestures of mourning, in a mere "fiction." Only "in a dream of passion," the player can assume an appearance of feeling something that he does not

actually feel or experience. Acting is about expressions of feeling. This brings us back to Hamlet's "inky cloak" speech. The question is: to what extent are feelings real if they are expressed in words and gestures? Hamlet compares the player's passion to his own situation.

For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,

That he should weep for her? What would he do

Had he the motive and the cue for passion

That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,

And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,

Make mad the guilty and appal the free,

Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed

The very faculties of eyes and ears. (2.2.552-60)

In contrast to the player's passion for "nothing" (551), Hamlet, with genuine motives and true feelings, should do even more, yet he "can say nothing" (564).

From the player's example, he gathers a possibility that if feelings are expressed, then they are false. He feels much deeper than the player, but nobody can tell from his appearance. While the player merely takes up a passionate role in pretense, he is full of passion itself. He wonders if it is possible that the more a person expresses his feelings, the less he feels. The player's performance exemplifies his concern that any kind of expressions hides, rather than reveal, the reality. And expressions of feeling are acting, and performance. Thus, for Hamlet, persons who express their feelings are actually acting parts, whereas persons who do not express their feelings are

persons who really feel. That is why he identifies Horatio, an extremely stoic person, as an ideal figure. He praises Horatio,

for thou hast been

As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee. (3.2.65-74)

Hamlet praises Horatio for not being “passion’s slave,” not because Horatio does not have feelings, but because he does not express his feelings. Horatio controls his expressions of passion, so he is not “a pipe for Fortune’s finger / To sound what stop she please.” But, if we take the aspect of role-playing even further, the control of one’s feeling is also a form of acting. In this sense a stoic can be an ultimate actor.

Hamlet’s reflection on the player’s Hecuba performance also draws attention to the impersonation of the player and the falsification of feelings. Hamlet wonders: “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?” He underlines the aspect of the player’s impersonation of Hecuba, and questions the player’s pretense of passion. But this will encourage the audience to ask the actor-Hamlet the same question: What’s Hamlet to him, or

he to Hamlet?³³ The actor playing Hamlet impersonates the role Hamlet, just like the player impersonating Hecuba. But the actor who pretends to be Hamlet criticizes another actor who pretends to be Hecuba on the ground that he pretends to be Hecuba, and accuses him of his hypocrisy. Hamlet emphasizes how genuine his feelings are by drawing attention to the lack of genuineness of the actor. But he himself is an actor. And, by definition, his feelings are not genuine. He wonders: “What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?” The technical term “cue,” used here to contrast his genuine passion with the player’s false pretense, underscores the theatrical element in his own passion, and thus undermines his assertion to be more genuine than the player. Shakespeare is very daring, then, to take the risk to emphasize in this speech, which focuses on the genuineness of feelings and the creation of feelings by the professional actors, that everything on the stage is merely an invention. For he draws our attention to the theatricality of life, and in particular to the performance and acting of the expressions of feelings, on the one hand, and the artificiality of the plot the audience is now watching, on the other. Everything on the stage is a mere fiction. The First Player merely playacts; so does Hamlet.

The metatheatrical issue can be pushed even further to pinpoint the professional actor’s technical skills in particular, or the overall theatrical techniques in general, underlying the dramatic performance in the theater. Hamlet requests one of the players to recite the murder of Priam for him when he first welcomes them to Elsinore. Without any preparation, the player

³³ James Calderwood rewrites this: “For Hamlet? What is Hamlet to Burbage, or he to Hamlet, that

immediately “lives” the role he plays and works himself up to express the passionate feelings as fitted to the role. He fully demonstrates his professional expertise instantly. This technical skill to act gives Hamlet a chance to reflect on the disturbing social context he is in. If he is surrounded by people who are very good actors, he has no way to know whether they are genuine or they merely pretend to be genuine.

The player’s powerful acting also gives Hamlet an idea to “[m]ake mad the guilty” (2.2.558). Anne Richter points out the power of illusion and discusses the influence of theater on reality:

As the Elizabethan theatre matured, creating imaginary worlds of increasing naturalism and depth, its adherents came to believe quite firmly in the power which illusion could exercise over reality. (81)

The dramatic action creates an illusion for the spectators who are moved and cannot but be involved in the performance: unmitigated empathy is produced in the audience. With this in mind, Hamlet ruminates on the steps to execute his revenge:

About, my brains. Hum—I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim’ d their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak

he should weep for him?” (Calderwood 1983: 168).

With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick. If he do blench,
I know my course. (2.2.584-93)

That such effect on the people with guilty conscience sitting in the theater occurs is supported by contemporary references. "The idea that a play could force guilty spectators to confess their crimes was," Righter submits, "a favourite Elizabethan testimony to the influence of illusion upon reality" (162). Jenkins lists several sources and instances of these incidents in his long note to the passage:

North's Plutarch associates a "guilty conscience" with the unsuppressable emotion which caused Alexander of Pherae to leave the theatre during a performance *A Warning for Fair Women* . . . recounts how at Lynn in Norfolk a woman was so moved by watching a guilty wife in a tragedy that she confessed to having murdered her own husband Heywood adds another instance said to have happened at Amsterdam when some English players acted *The Four Sons of Aymon* (482)

With the reference of the sudden confessions from the murderers at theatrical productions, Hamlet decides to test his uncle by staging a play dramatizing a similar scenario of his father's murder: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.600-1). This is an instance of treating

theater as a “moral weapon” (Mehl 44). It also endorses actors’ power over reality, in shaping and changing the spectator’s view of reality (Righter 82).

Like a director and a drama critic, Hamlet delivers a lecture on the imitative nature of dramatic performance and illustrates his point by using the mirror metaphor when he coaches the actors how to act:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your
tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action,
with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the
modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the
purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now,
was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature; to show
virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age
and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2.16-24)

For Hamlet, the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up to nature. He emphasizes the mimetic nature of dramatic art, regarding drama as a representation of nature, or of reality. A faithful representation is the objective of drama. By asserting this mimesis, he brings out the reflexive nature of acting, which is like a mirror reflecting the reality. Many critics tend to identify Hamlet’s advice to the players (3.2.1-45) with Shakespeare’s own conception of stagecraft (Wilds 152). But this identification will no doubt eliminate the complexity and multiplicity of the Bard’s view toward the dramatic art if considered from his corpus. It would be more appropriate to limit Hamlet’s views to himself. And, as the inserted play will soon exemplify, the correspondence between dramatic representation and reality is not so

ideally achieved in practice. The metaphor of mirror itself produces paradox. The mirror reflection is already a distortion with the reflected image in complete left-right reversal to the original.

Apart from the mimetic theory, Hamlet goes further to point out the didactic function of the theater: to show the world what is the attraction of virtue, and what is the repulsion behind scorn. This is a defense of the theater in line with the Renaissance literary theory to regard literature as a form of teaching (Ringler 203-5; Vickers 9-10). Thus, the ultimate objective of literature is to improve the world (Vickers 10).

As “a man of the theater,” Hamlet can only “take refuge in the theater, to which he wholeheartedly belongs” (Hubert 99). Hamlet is hyper-excited during the staging of the inset play. The whole theatrical manipulation, from the mounting of the play to the trapping of the king, gives him a kind of formal pleasure that really engages him. Functioning like a chorus throughout the inset performance, Hamlet becomes the “star of the show” (Hubert 98), stealing the limelight from the players and from King Claudius and the Queen. His interaction with Ophelia in this scene further complicates the significance of the action. He assumes the role of a lover, a camouflage to conceal his intention to pry into his uncle through the inset play. Beginning with quibbles on “country matters” (3.2.115), he keeps twisting her innocent language with sexual implications. The audience sees Hamlet, lying on Ophelia’s lap, joking intimately with her apparently—much to her distress and discomfort. Besides the concern about whether Hamlet’s plot to catch the king’s conscience will work out or not, the audience is almost equally interested in the development of

Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia.

The inserted performance includes a dumb show and a play-within-a-play, thereby supplying two slightly different representations of the murder. In the dumb show, the Queen seems to have a share in the murder because she lulls the King to sleep, and thus prepares the ground for murder. Also, the Queen "makes show of protestation" to the King first, "makes passionate action" when she finds the King dead, and "seems harsh" when the Poisoner woos her, "but in the end accepts his love." These descriptions of the Queen underscore her hypocrisy and pretense, thus increasing the possibility of her conspiracy in the foul murder.

The play-within-a-play is highly stylized like the Priam's story recited by the First Player in an earlier scene. It is extremely rhetorical, employing devices such as "periergia" (a heightening of slight matter), "anastrophe" (an inversion of syntactic order), "cacosyntheton" (a more radical inversion, for example, an adjective after the noun it modifies), and "antimetabole" (repetition and inversion) (Replogle 154-55). It is, therefore, sharply divided from the main play in style. For Replogle, the inset play builds up a slow pace to achieve a "steady increase in tension" (159) until the mouse trap is finally sprung.

The Player Queen is interesting because she is a mirrored image of Gertrude. Her protest against the Player King's advice for a re-marriage after his death could sound extremely ironic, given the parallel act in the main play:

O confound the rest.

Such love must needs be treason in my breast.

In second husband let me be accurst;

None wed the second but who kill' d the first. (172-75)

Hamlet responds to the Player Queen with an aside: "That's wormwood" (176).

To prove her will, she swears:

Nor earth to me give food, nor heaven light,

Sport and repose lock from me day and night,

To desperation turn my trust and hope,

An anchor's cheer in prison be my scope,

Each opposite, that blanks the face of joy,

Meet what I would have well and it destroy,

Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,

If, once a widow, ever I be a wife. (211-18)

Hamlet responds again: "If she should break it now" (219). The inset playlet plays up the queen's protestation against re-marriage. Since the playlet is aborted, the Player Queen does not have the chance to break her promise, unlike in the dumb show and the main play.

Lucianus is also interesting. When Lucianus enters, Hamlet informs the king and other stage audience: "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King" (239). Thus, in re-enacting the murder scene, Hamlet casts Lucianus a double identity: one as a Claudius-figure who murders his kinsman, the other as a Hamlet-figure who assassinates his uncle. The playlet involves a double plot element (Kernan 99; Perng 2001: xxvi; Hansen 77). To Hamlet, it is a re-enactment of Claudius' supposed foul murder. And Claudius' intense reaction to the inset play indicates, for Hamlet, his guilt, thus confirming the

ghost's words. Not until his uncle's sudden abandonment of the theatrical production can Hamlet distinguish illusions from truth for sure (Righter 161). By contrast, to Claudius and other people in the court, it is Hamlet's public threat to assassinate the king. It enables Claudius to recognize Hamlet as a real, not just potential, threat.

The importance of the inserted playlet is commonly recognized. Anne Righter's praise is not unusual:

The play of the "Murder of Gonzago" is not only the strategic centre of the plot, the turning-point of the action; it is also the centre of the tragedy in a more symbolic sense, the focal point from which a preoccupation with appearance and reality, truth and falsehood, expressed in theatrical terms, radiates both backward and forward in time. (160)

The Murder of Gonzago, stage-managed by Hamlet, deviates from the intended reproduction of the fratricide:

I' ll have these players

Play something like the murder of my father

Before mine uncle. (2.2.590-92)

The play-within-a-play is a reflection, but with some ironic differences, of old Hamlet's murder. While it repeats the murder scene and the usurpation of the crown and queen in it the nephew kills his uncle-king.

Most critics focus on the impact of the spectacle on the guilty. For example, Philip Armstrong interprets Claudius' abrupt abandonment of the play-watching as a signal of his confusion of illusion with reality: "Becoming

aware of himself as the object of an accusing vision, rather than a spectator, Claudius loses his illusory mastery over the visual field” (227-28). Probably due to his own guilty conscience, Claudius cannot distinguish the play world (*The Murder of Gonzago*) from the “real” world (the world in the main play). He identifies the two worlds as one, and thus sees on the stage his own guilty murder of his brother. No longer able to bear witnessing what is acting on the stage, he stumbles bluntly, trying to get away from the performance as soon as possible.

But this interpretation cannot solve the mystery why Claudius does not react to the dumb show, a critical mystery arousing many guesses and inferences. Three explanations, at least, are available for this problem. The first notion supposes Claudius, who is busy whispering with the queen during the dumb show, does not see it. The second one argues that he sees the dumb show, but fails to recognize what he sees because of its highly stylized manner. The third theory proposes that he sees and recognizes the representation, but cannot stand the sight twice (Jenkins 501-5).³⁴ Besides all possible explanations available for the problem, dialogue is also a crucial aspect in untangling the confusion. As Jenkins points out, “What is peculiar in *Hamlet* is that the dumb-show exactly rehearses without dialogue what is then repeated with it” (501). The difference between the dumb show and the inset play lies in the absence and presence of dialogues. In a sense Claudius’ intense reaction to the inset play, but not the dumb show, indicates the effect of spoken language on him. From Hamlet’s perspective and observation,

³⁴ For a summary of the varieties of interpretation of the scene, see Robson.

Claudius is especially “caught” “[u]pon the talk of the poisoning” (3.2.283), because he presupposes the effect of the “mousetrap.” But from Claudius’ or the other courtiers’ point of view, he is possibly astounded by Hamlet’s open and public threat of assassination, and has to leave the play in order to abort Hamlet’s attempt to stage a *coup d’ état* because Duke Gonzago is murdered by Lucianus, “nephew to the King.”

In the anti-theatrical literature and pamphlets, the theater is often accused of inciting political sedition (Barish 329-34; Gurr 9). It is usually associated with political discontent. The politically offensive nature of theater is a much stronger element to the Renaissance audience alert to the political implications and threats in the staging of regicide than to the modern audience more inclined toward seeing Claudius’ reaction as an indication of his guilt. The example of *The Murder of Gonzago* illustrates the kind of metatheatrical concern that shows the intrusion of theater into life, increasing the possibility to use theater as a political tool. The deposition scene of *King Richard II* is another famous example. Andrew Gurr, in his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, includes this popular notion: that “Elizabeth was another Richard led the followers of the Earl of Essex to commission a performance of the play on the eve of the Essex rebellion, 7 February 1601” (3). No wonder the editions of the play “published in Elizabeth’s lifetime all lack the central deposition scene” (Gurr 9).

The framing structure produced by the inset play draws an analogy to the play-watching framework in a playhouse. The Danish court as audience on the stage who are watching *The Murder of Gonzago*, is being closely observed

by Hamlet. Hamlet the observer is also an observed by the audience in the theater. The inset play highlights the metatheatrical aspect of the play as a whole. For the audience, three levels of performance simultaneously exist: that of *The Murder of Gonzago*, that of the onstage audience's, especially Claudius', response to the inset play, and that of Hamlet's interaction with the other onstage audience and his continuous comments and interruptions.

Seeing his fabrication of the dramatic illusion work to catch the king's conscience must give Hamlet tremendous excitement. The audience shares Hamlet's excitement. It sees Hamlet observing Claudius watching the play-within-a-play. Its involvement partly hinges on the mousetrap plot, and partly relates to Hamlet's unusual hyper-excitement. As stated above, the excitement can be aroused by the prospective success in catching the king's conscience; it can also be evoked by the re-enactment of the murder scene.

Not only does Hamlet observe his uncle closely, he also mocks the king when the latter seems to be trapped by the playlet.

King Have you heard the argument? Is there no
 offence in' t?

Ham. No, no, they do but jest—poison in jest. No
 offence i' th' world.

King What do you call the play?

Ham. *The Mousetrap*—marry, how tropically! This
 play is the image of a murder done in
 Vienna—Gonzago is the Duke's name, his wife
 Baptista—you shall see anon. 'Tis a knavish

piece of work, but what o' that? Your Majesty,
and we that have free souls, it touches us not.

(227-37)

Finally, this scene is of great structural interest. *Hamlet* begins its action *in medias res*, and returns to the beginning of the story, the murder of old Hamlet, with the ghost's narration. With the play-within-a-play, it repeats the beginning again in dramatic form. Hamlet arranges the acting out of his father's murder by professional actors, enabling himself to see, not just to hear, the horrible event taking place before his eyes. Psychologically, the re-enactment of his father's murder serves a therapeutic purpose for Hamlet to internalize and digest what must be a traumatic experience. And the ability to recreate, in dramatic form, a horrible event in his domestic life which is so traumatic requires much self-control.

Hamlet is quite different from traditional revenge tragedies in many respects. For example, the conventional business of the skull is not only a reminder of the revenge mission so often seen in the revenge tragedy, but becomes a site of philosophical inquiry. It functions quite differently from, for example, Horatio's corpse or Andrea's blooded handkerchief from *The Spanish Tragedy*. As a matter of fact, Hamlet's reluctance to enact the role as an avenger for his father reflects a reconsideration of the genre of revenge tragedy itself. When he does force upon himself the role, it often goes wrong. His killing of Polonius is a case in point. In supposing the man hiding behind the arras is Claudius, Hamlet thrusts his sword right through him, only to discover he has killed Polonius, not Claudius. The moral is explicit when

Hamlet comments on his own rudeness:

For this same lord

I do repent; but heaven hath pleas' d it so,

To punish me with this and this with me,

That I must be their scourge and minister. (3.4.174-77)

Hamlet pictures himself not just a private avenger (“scourge”), but also a “minister” of public justice. As Hamlet intuitively realized earlier,

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,

That ever I was born to set it right. (1.5.196-97)

In contrast, Laertes represents a more conventional revenger. For Hamlet, the idea of revenge is expanded from seeking personal vengeance to achieving impersonal justice. His immediate reaction to the player’s recital of Pyrrhus’ revenge on Priam is not roused by the vengeance itself, but by the actor’s pretending passion invested in the role he plays. Thus the play is not about a personal vengeance; it goes beyond the individual need of revenge to achieving a higher order of justice. This corresponds to the Elizabethan concept of private justice, an act unacceptable for its transgression of God’s judgement. The recognition of a higher justice and a heavenly authority is obvious, and will bring Hamlet to a final submission to his destiny, realizing he is merely an “actor” (a person who does things), not a playwright (who composes the script of life), nor a director (who manipulates every detail in the play of life). His cryptic remarks before entering the duel with Laertes resonate with a sense of calmness and wisdom even though he intuitively feels uneasy about the outcome of upcoming event.

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it
be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is
all. (5.2.215-18)

Unlike his doubt and worry about uncertainty and death in earlier scenes, he now shows a much more tranquil attitude, submitting his personal will to a providential design, a design that he begins to grasp after his miraculous return from the sea voyage (Fisch 1969: 84). He sums up the lesson he has learned from the trip to England: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10).

Unlike traditional avenging heroes, Hamlet does not take the initiatory role in seeking private justice. On the contrary, his adversaries set the action in motion. He can only counter-act what his enemies set to work on him in a passive reaction. Claudius, using Laertes and his passionate impulse to avenge his father and sister, sets up a trap to kill Hamlet. The duel is a “playlet” directed by Claudius, who carefully devises necessary action in it. After composing a general plan of action to murder Hamlet in a wager duel, the King ponders his scheme in further theatrical terms:

Let’s further think of this,
Weigh what convenience both of time and means
May fit us to our *shape*. If this should fail,
And that our *drift* look through our bad *performance*,
'Twere better not essay' d. (4.7.147-51; emphases added)

“Shape” (the role we are to act) and “performance” both highlight the histrionic nature underlying his scheme, and explicitly define his and Laertes’ identities

as actors. Moreover, their playacting is vicious, involving evil intention and devilish pretense to poison Hamlet under a pretense of fatherly blessing and to stab Hamlet with an unbated and envenomed sword in the disguise of a brotherly combat. Claudius and Laertes rehearse and collaborate their dramatic *tour de force*, a viciously woven trap—which ironically turns to themselves as well—to capture and destroy Hamlet.

The duel is very much a public performance in itself, with many onstage court spectators. Forewarned of Claudius and Laertes' wicked purpose, the playhouse audience is fully aware of the discrepancy of what is shown and what is meant, and the gap between appearance and reality. But to the schemers' surprise, the playlet deviates from their script, and gets out of hands. Gertrude, not Hamlet, drinks the poisoned cup. In a scuffle, Hamlet takes Laertes' envenomed rapier and wounds the latter. Laertes, full of repentance moments before his death, confesses his own treachery and reveals the mastermind. Counter-acting the treachery, Hamlet wounds the King with the treacherous weapon and forces him to drink the poisoned wine:

Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane

Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?

Follow my mother. (5.2.330-32; emphases added)

Hamlet, spurred by the King's present treachery, kills Claudius to avenge his mother. Not mentioning anything about his father's murder, he only fulfils his role as a revenger for his father in a roundabout way.

Even in his final moments, Hamlet still clings to the theatrical imagery, making his death a final swansong.

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu.
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead,
Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied. (338-45; emphases added)

The trembling spectators to this bloody scene are the onstage courtiers and the playhouse audience. Highly aware of the gap between appearance and reality in his regicide to those onstage court spectators, Hamlet urges Horatio

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story. (353-54)

Fortinbras ends the play with the command to carry Hamlet's body on a stage:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov' d most royal; and for his passage,
The soldier's music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him. (400-5)

With the ceremonious procession, Hamlet is still a spectacular sight for both onstage and offstage audience. The ending of the play guarantees the narration of his story to the onstage audience through Horatio, Hamlet's

mouthpiece.

Dieter Mehl concludes his study of the plays-within-the-plays with a comparison of the device used in earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. The techniques of inset plays, in earlier plays, serve simple purposes: they either underline the didactic and moral function of the play, or introduce some playful experiments with dramatic conventions (60). In contrast, Jacobean dramatists employ plays-within-the-plays to give a detached view of certain characters and situations, and thus leave the audience unsure about their moral bearings (60). This may lead to different results in different genres:

In comedy this can lead to a bewildering confusion of identities and a grotesque distortion of reality. In serious drama it often means a deep probing into the very nature of reality and the validity of certain moral positions. (Mehl 60)

The application of a play-within-a-play calls into question the relationship between reality and fiction. Often the boundary between reality and drama is dissolved or disappears. In contrast to the use of inset play as a parodying device of some theatrical styles from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, the predominant employment of the inset play in the Renaissance period reflects a unique world view which finds that the boundary between reality and fiction is fluid, and even that life is an illusion, the Christian idea of *contemptus mundi* (Hornby 46).

Metadramatic plays-within-the-plays become popular again in the twentieth century. Notable playwrights and their works include Jean Genet's

The Balcony and *The Blacks*, Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, *Travesties*, and *The Real Thing*, and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Henry IV*, *Each in His Own Way*, and *Tonight We Improvise*. The revival of the play-within-the-plays reflects "a widespread feeling that life is false" (Hornby 47). Hornby tries to differentiate the significance of a play-with-a-play in the Renaissance and in the twentieth century:

The difference between us and previous ages is the additional element of breakdown between the layers of the plays within the plays. In the past, the inner and outer plays were clearly distinguishable, and one could always tell which of the two was primary. In the twentieth century we find the same characters moving between inner and outer play, the boundaries between inner and outer play becoming blurred and sometimes disappearing, and even confusion as to whether the inner or outer play is the main or "real" one. This is an expression of the extreme cynicism of our time; in previous ages, the world may have been an illusion, but there was something else framing it—nirvana, heaven, God, gods—that was the true reality. Today people often feel that there is nothing framing our illusory lives at all. (47)

This chapter has explored how Renaissance drama tackles the complicated relation of illusion and reality through the application of inset playlets. This self-conscious and self-reflexive device not only yields insightful evaluation of

the dramatic art itself, but also enables us to see human life through its representation.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The Mirror of Theatre”:³⁵

Audience Perception and Self-reflexivity

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.
(*Henry V*, Prologue 11-18)

[H]e could maintain that balance between intense participation and absolute detachment which distinguishes art from other forms of human activity.
(Clark 130, qtd. Mack 1962: 275)

An internal play, which I have discussed in the previous chapter, with its close affinity to the play proper supplies a very good opportunity to delve into the dramatic art itself. In those plays examined earlier, a self-reflexive and self-conscious impulse to excavate any possible aspect of the nature of drama is obvious. In both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*, full-blown internal playlets are staged from the very beginning with the casting and rehearsal, till the end with the formal performance in front of some onstage audience. Hamlet's reflection on the first player's recitation of the slaughter of Priam, for example, lays open the theatricality and artificiality of any

dramatic performance, and thus exposes the inset performance's, and by extension the play's, fictitious and illusory ontology.

With these constant disruptions of illusion in mind, Chapter Five intends to dissect the dramatic mechanism of audience engagement and detachment in some metaplays. A Johnsonian attitude of detachment indicates the spectator's "constant awareness 'that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players'" (Shapiro 146). In contrast a Coleridgean response of engagement represents the spectator responds in "a state of rapt absorption in the work of art, as in a dream" (146). Asides and soliloquies are two common devices that playwrights use to engage their audience. Asides can free an actor from the layer of theatrical illusion and projects him to that layer of reality from which the audience observes the play. Soliloquy, a conventional dramatic device in revealing a character's inner feeling and thought in the form of monologue, is also a powerful way to engage an audience.

On the other hand, metatheatrical devices, including the use of dramatic imagery, disguise, role-playing, plot repetition and imitation, and inset plays, draw our attention to the play's plotting, and expose the play's artificiality and its status as an artifact. In general, dramatists use metatheatrical devices to encourage "detachment"—to maintain a balance of perception. Thus, these devices are generally considered to be distancing for the benefit of increasing reflection on the meaning of what we see (Mack 1962: 281). But, interestingly, it appears that the more an audience is reminded of the fiction, the

³⁵ This phrase is from Bruce Wilshire (5).

more it falls for the invention. The more a dramatist emphasizes the illusion, the more an audience believes it.

I. Audience Perception:

Engagement and Detachment

Audience, whether onstage or offstage, is a vital link in the study of metatheater. Inset plays in the Renaissance drama usually bring along onstage spectators, who provide interesting parallels to those offstage. With these spectators' diverse reception, dramatists explore the psychology of perception.

Maynard Mack, in "Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays," investigates the audience's response in relation to the playwright's application of dramatic imagery in the play. Detachment refers to "the spectator's heightened self-consciousness": his aroused interpretations, removal from the point of view of any single character, awareness of illusion, and moral or intellectual judgments (Cartwright 14). The bare stage, open daylight, jostling crowd, acting style (with more recitation), inept actors, among others, are factors that pull in the direction of detachment (Mack 1962: 277). By contrast, engagement implies "the spectator's surrender of self-awareness": his emotional assimilation into a work of art, sympathetic response to character, acting, language or action (Cartwright 11-12). The "well-graced actor" (*Richard II*, 5.2.24), effective props, splendid costumes and a dramatist's powerful imagination pull toward engagement (Mack 1962: 277-78).

Michael Shapiro uses two fictional characters to illustrate a Johnsonian attitude of detachment and a Coleridgean response of engagement. Natasha in

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* "responds to the literal, physical reality onstage rather than to the theatrical illusion" (Shapiro 145). She represents a Johnsonian view of the spectator's "constant awareness 'that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players'" (146). In contrast, Partridge in Fielding's *Tom Jones* attends a performance of *Hamlet*, and "responds to the events onstage as if they were happening in real life" (145). He advances a Coleridgean position: the spectator assumes "some awareness of the artifice involved in any dramatic illusion . . . his ideal response is a state of rapt absorption in the work of art, as in a dream" (146).

Different degrees of audience engagement are noted in the representation of stage spectators. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Christopher Sly soon "disengages" himself from the play and falls asleep. He exemplifies the taste of the "unskilful" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.26), who "for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" (3.2.11-12). *Pyramus and Thisbe* furnishes a different picture of audience participation, which involves the breakdown of boundary between audience and players and illustrates a variety of audience responses. Unlike Sly, the onstage audience of *Pyramus and Thisbe* pay attention to the playlet, and often intrude it with their comments. They remain entirely aloof from the dramatic performance from the beginning till the end, and perhaps with the only exception of Hippolyta are not engaged by the dramatic illusion. Though impatient with the silliness of the playlet at first, Hippolyta grows engaged with the inset play and concerns about its development. But the male in the audience make fun of the awkward prologue, the actors' ineptitude and the personification of characters. They

probably regard themselves the “judicious,” “the censure of which one must . . . o’erweigh a whole theatre of others” (*Hamlet*, 3.2.26-28). *Tempest* presents yet another example of audience participation. Miranda is deeply engaged with the fiction. She, though knowing herself watching a magic show, cannot help but pity the suffering sailors tossed by the tempest.

If by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky it seems would pour down stinking pitch,
But that the sea, mounting to th’ welkin’s cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O! I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer. A brave vessel
(Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her)
Dash’ d all to pieces! O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart. Poor souls, they perish’ d.

(*Tempest*, 1.2.1-9)

Miranda is fully captivated by the dramatic illusion, and is frustrated by what she sees. She reacts in a similar way with those who do not maintain an aesthetic distance from an artwork.³⁶ These onstage spectators are reflections of those offstage. Their engagement with, or detachment from, the inset playlets are manifest representations of the processes of audience reception.

Dramatists, apart from presenting these surrogate-spectators, can also focus on the interaction between a character and his playhouse audience when

³⁶ Mack enumerates some examples of this kind of audience engagement: “A radio audience in the thirties. . . panicked when listening to an Orson Welles program dramatizing an invasion from Mars; several spectators are reported to have been carried out in a dead faint from Peter Brook’s production

they make the dramatic character directly addresses his audience. Usually only a few characters in a play enjoy this greater liberty in trespassing the boundary of the play world and entering the “real” world of the audience. By directly addressing an audience, a character removes himself or herself from the play world, and situates himself or herself in the audience’s “real” world. Direct addresses to an audience usually take the forms of an aside or a soliloquy, two common dramatic devices in Renaissance drama, which may result in an increasing engagement with the audience. A character may achieve any relationship—a manipulative, deceptive or intimate bond—with his audience through the uses of these devices. Asides can free an actor from the layer of theatrical illusion and projects him/her to that layer of reality from which the audience observes the play. For example, through the use of asides, Iago directly engages his audience, forcing it to become involved in his trickery and destruction of the tragic hero. The engagement compels the audience to become an accomplice, in spite of its reluctance and revulsion, making it very uneasy and unsettled (Garber 1978: 80). Soliloquy, a conventional dramatic device in revealing a character’s inner feeling and thought in the form of monologue, is also a powerful way to engage an audience. Iago directly engages his audience with many soliloquies, thinking and talking to it when shaping his plan. A theatrical parallel between the gradual formation of Iago’s plot and that of a dramatic piece is established with each of his soliloquies.

Hamlet and Iago are two interesting cases of audience engagement through the use of soliloquies. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, almost all

of *Titus Andronicus* at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1955 . . . ” (276).

characters in *Hamlet* are involved in role-playing. Role-playing and pretense permeate virtually all levels of interpersonal relation except that between Hamlet and Horatio. But with conventional soliloquies, a character reveals to the audience his innermost self, a self usually not consciously adopting any disguise. A soliloquy can be both natural and unnatural. It is natural because the dramatic convention makes the practice a standard device to communicate a character's thought to an audience. It is unnatural because it represents an act of speaking one's thought aloud when alone. And since in a soliloquy a character usually addresses an audience directly, he inevitably playacts to some degree (Chiu 1999: 236-38; Clemen 1987: 121). In asserting the playacting nature in the delivery of a soliloquy, a contradiction to the previous description of the soliloquy as a natural revelation of a character's innermost thought not adopting any disguise inevitably arises.

Not all soliloquies are the same. Take Iago's soliloquies for example. He technically speaks soliloquies, but he playacts very much in his engagement with the audience. To some extent, he treats his audience in the same way he does the other characters, manipulating it and playacting to it (Garber 1978: 79). On the other hand, Hamlet's soliloquies, in most cases characterized as philosophic introspective, do not need an audience. But Iago's need an audience, because he thinks and talks to it in getting his plan to shape; he even teases it and tries to see what its responses are. Though Hamlet does not need an audience for his soliloquies, he somehow reveals some kind of knowledge of the presence of an audience and builds an intimate relation with it. Even though his soliloquies are introspectively truthful, they have playacting

elements in them. And he delivers his soliloquies in a manner of sharing his thought and feeling with the audience, enabling it to participate in a process of self-examination in his meditation and to penetrate into his mind.

Also, Hamlet's soliloquies exemplify the typical pattern of dramatic movement in the play. Unlike other avenging heroes full of action, Hamlet frequently suspends his "action," and turns to "acting." A soliloquy gives him a chance to perform. With the whole stage to himself, he monopolizes the limelight. The tendency of self-dramatization in a soliloquy increases the playacting element in a supposedly natural revelation. Hamlet also soliloquizes when he is not alone on the stage. When he enters a situation of dialogues with other characters, such as Polonius, Ophelia, or Gertrude, he moves in and out of dialogue and "soliloquy." For example, when he talks to Polonius in Act 2 Scene 2, he suddenly soliloquizes, speaking as if he were alone.

Pol. Indeed, that's out of the air. . . . My lord, I will
take my leave of you.

Ham. You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will
not more willingly part withal—except my life,
except my life, except my life.

Pol. Fare you well, my lord.

Ham. These tedious old fools. (2.2.208, 213-19)

The repetition of "except my life" is not meant for Polonius. This dialogue is not technically a soliloquy, but part of it is nonetheless a form of soliloquizing. That element of playacting interestingly works in an opposite direction as that

in a soliloquy. The artificiality of a soliloquy is its theatricality when a character suddenly speaks out loud what he is thinking as if talking to someone else. In contrast, in a dialogue situation, which is considered a more natural device, a character behaves theatrically by not talking to other characters, but by soliloquizing. He behaves unnaturally because he is not talking to others but to himself in a dialogue. Thus, the theatrical element works in a reverse way in a dialogue situation. But the audience are so attune to a soliloquizing Hamlet, they feel it is natural.

Doctor Faustus provides a different spectatorial engagement—this time, with the villain. Mephostophilis informs the audience of his intention to obtain Faustus' soul in his aside. As mentioned earlier, asides are strategies an actor uses to remove himself from the layer of theatrical illusion to that from which the audience observes the play. With the aside, an actor breaks the boundary between the illusion and the reality, getting the audience involved in the dramatic action. In *Doctor Faustus*, Mephostophilis directly engages the audience with his asides, and makes it a part of the complicity in the destruction of Faustus. This makes the audience very uneasy, especially because Mephostophilis is the villain, not the tragic hero. And the breaking of boundary between reality and illusion makes the audience even more uneasy when it becomes aware of its involvement with illicit black arts. In an era when people believe in witchcraft and magic, the audience get worried that it is drawn into some unspeakable and forbidden practice taking place on and off the stage.

In *Othello*, the villain's direct engagement with the audience works in

much fuller detail and complexity, and involves a much more disturbing mechanism of manipulation and deception than that of Mephostophilis' sparse use of asides. Iago addresses the audience in a series of soliloquies and asides, which inform the audience of his revenge scheme gradually taking form in each soliloquy before he actually executes his plan. Thus he compels it to become a part of his complicity (Garber 1978: 80). Similar to the audience's engagement with Mephostophilis, the complicity with the villain in *Othello* also increases the feeling of uneasiness the audience may have in its play-watching experience.

Iago soliloquizes a lot, forcefully drawing the audience to his malicious trickery. The fore-knowledge of things to come places the audience in a superior stance about what is going to happen, and also makes it aware of the operation of illusion in a much more explicit way. But, this fore-knowledge also intensifies its emotional involvement with the characters. As recorded by the diarist Samuel Pepys, a female member of the audience was so emotionally agitated that she "cried out to see Desdemona smothered" (I, 264). Another Victorian playgoer loudly urged Macready, who played the title role, to "choke the devil!" (Sanders 17). The emotional involvement of the audience is not disrupted or reduced, even though it is fully aware of what is to come. Audience's continual interruption in the stage history of *Othello* indicates a disruption of the boundary between reality and illusion, a boundary that is fragile and vague, as the play's audience reception demonstrates.

Another factor that might influence an audience's perception is the incorporation of a subplot. *Doctor Faustus* fuses funny and comic elements

into the serious tragic action with its subplot, and thus challenges the audience's expectation of the play derived from the main plot, making consistent interpretation difficult. The comic subplot, incorporated as a part of the play's thematic structure, reflects the main plot in a funny, reverse, and degraded way, significantly qualifying our interpretation of the main tragic story.

In the beginning, the comic subplot with Robin, Dick and Wagner is mainly slapstick comedy, which serves as a parody of the main action in the tragic part about Faustus, who uses magic to fulfill his desires for knowledge, power, money and lustful pleasure. What Faustus gains with the magic is not as different as it may appear from what the clown conjures with the stolen magical book. As the play develops, Faustus gradually loses his heroic grandeur and is degraded into a clownish figure. He is corrupted with his indulgence in magic, and mostly utilizes his magic power to perform frivolous services to the royal courts or to achieve mercenary ends. His corruption, for instance, is epitomized in the slapstick episode with the Horse-courser, who pays Faustus forty dollars only to get himself a horse made of a bundle of hay (XV. 27-34). His trick on the Horse-courser turns him into nothing more than a clownish figure, a total reversal of his "heroic" part in the tragic section. As he becomes more and more corrupted and degenerate, he is presented as more comical as well, a generic transformation from a tragic hero to a comic clown.

Thus, the play polarizes the genres of comedy and tragedy, with the two parts working against each other. These contradictions, in turn, disrupt the seriousness and despair we might read into the tragic action. Another

fundamental difference between the comic part and the tragic one is Faustus' (lack of) regenerative ability. In the Horse-courser episode, Faustus is sleeping, and is incidentally torn off one leg by the poor Horse-courser who tries to wake him up by pulling his leg. His corruption is implied through the transformation of his physical condition. His easily falling-apart body parts become symptomatic of his degeneration, a condition reflecting his unnatural and inhuman physical composition. Whereas his body parts are capable of regenerating in the comic section, now he is torn into pieces, and unable to revive from the devil's violence when he is carried away to the hell, leaving only the debris of body parts in the study the next morning.

These conflicting elements co-exist in the play, and constantly disrupt an audience's genre expectations, challenging its tendency to settle on one definite and stable set of conventions. The parody in the comic part will often make an audience very uncomfortable for the plot's sheer frankness in exposing its own stupidity, thereby undermining the seriousness of the tragic story. The close parallels between the tragic and comic parts make consistent interpretation difficult, if not impossible.

Finally, a comment on the use of chorus in *Doctor Faustus*. The play uses a framing structure of chorus, which begins and ends the play with explicitly stated moral messages of the story. By using the chorus to speak directly to the audience about the main plot and moral messages of the play, the playwright teaches the audience the way to interpret the tragic story. But the play also brings in contradictions with this framing structure. The chorus begins with the introduction of Faustus' background, and ends with remarks

carrying a strong didactic message:

His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And, melting, heavens conspir' d his overthrow;
For, falling to a devilish exercise,
And glutted now with learning's golden gifts,

He surfeits upon cursed necromancy (Prologue 21-25)

Faustus is compared to Icarus, the classic paradigm of an over-reacher. What is very interesting is that the chorus attributes Faustus' fall to the punishment of the heavens for his transgression, shifting the emphasis from his transgression to heavenly punishment. The remark of "heavens conspir' d his overthrow" links the heavenly punishment with the Satanic temptation; it tincts the intended moral message with the color of a joint conspiracy of heaven and hell. If, as is usually the practice, the chorus represents the ultimate authority or the dramatic persona of a playwright, the choral message becomes unstable, being in contradiction with the main body of the play itself. In a sense, the play disrupts its seemingly authorial voice in the chorus.

Now I would like to return to Mack for a conclusion of this section. Mack cites three examples to contend the importance of "detachment" in the theater. He first paraphrases Sartre's comments on the necessity for the playwright to control the effect of dramatic illusion:

[I]f drama does no more for us than encourage unmitigated identification, it becomes an exercise in narcissism—a means not to self-knowledge, but to self-indulgence.

(1962: 276)

Likewise, Mack maintains, Brecht advocates an “alienation” principle as a necessary counterweight to “engagement” on the ground that if one is carried away by the dramatic work, he is no longer reflective (276). Finally, Mack finds in James Shirley’s preface to the first folio of Beaumont and Fletcher in 1647 the Renaissance spectator’s increasing engagement on the one hand, and his awareness of such engagement on the other:

in the same moment you find yourself grown insensibly the
person you behold, you also “stand admiring the subtle
Tracks of your engagement.” (277)

In short, a “dual consciousness” (Bethell 1944: 81) or “seeing double” (Hornby 32) in a spectator’s mind is advocated. As Wilshire suggests, “One is not just a being in the world but becomes aware that one is a being in the world. One becomes aware of oneself as aware, interpreting, and free” (xii).

Metatheatrical devices, including the use of dramatic imagery, disguise, role-playing, plot repetition or imitation, and inset plays, draw our attention to the play’s artificiality and its status as an artifact. The predominance of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in the Renaissance drama I have examined in the present study brings its self-analysis regularly to our awareness. In general, dramatists use metatheatrical devices to encourage “detachment”—to maintain a balance of perception. Thus, these devices are generally considered to be distancing for the benefit of increasing reflection on the meaning of what we see (Mack 1962: 281). However, the effect of the metatheatrical devices, Mack submits, would often pull in both engagement and detachment:

Not simply because devices that drew the audience into the play were matched by others that insisted on the consciousness of artifice, but because devices on either side could be used so as to exert an influence in both directions. (285)

And, interestingly, it appears that the more an audience is reminded of the fiction, the more it falls for the invention. The more a dramatist emphasizes the illusion, the more an audience believes it. The application of metadramatic devices can enhance, by way of disruption, the dramatic illusion.

Paradoxically, this kind of device, however contrived, insincere, and artificial it may appear, far from ruining the emotional impact of a tragedy, frequently serves to enhance its most intense moments, whereas the recounted event, however fascinating as a story, might have only a minimal effect without an overdetermination of the medium—of theatrical machinery. (Hubert 2)

All these examples illustrate that the audience's experience of a metaplay is "one of unease, a dislocation of perception" (Hornby 32). Mack believes both forces of engagement and detachment are functioning to maintain a balance:

The crux of the matter . . . is that this stage [the Elizabethan stage] and the style of drama played on it enjoyed a system of built-in balances between the forces drawing the spectator to identify with the faces in the mirror and those which reminded him that they were reflections. (1962: 277)

II. Self-reflexivity and the Mirror Metaphor

For the Elizabethans, drama is primarily mimetic. Philip Sidney uses “representing,” “counterfetting,” and “figuring forth . . . a speaking picture” in turn to gloss “Mimesis” (Smith 1904: I, 158). Hamlet provides a classic example of the Renaissance view of drama’s mimetic nature. To him, the end of dramatic art is to “hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature” (3.2.22), drama being a reflection of nature, a representation of reality. A faithful rendition is the objective of drama. Though admitting that a mirror may not be necessary for an observer of nature, Bruce Wilshire somehow strongly suggests that the use of the mirror of theater is the only way for men to grasp the features of human nature and themselves (4-5):

[T]here *is* no transcendent or ideal observer—or at least this observer does not communicate at all with us—and we humans stand together, along with other things of nature, facing in one direction only and toward a void. We cannot turn to look directly at each other. Then, for us to put the mirror of theatre up to nature, and up to our common nature, may be the *only* way (or perhaps the only first way) to see certain features of our own looking faces and selves. Reality, then, would be graspable by us only in and through appearances, some of which would be irreducibly artistic and fictional ones. (5)

Tobin Nellhaus cites Augusto Boal’s view of the relationship between

theater and reality:

Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself. . . . On stage, we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, *and* we see ourselves as we are seen. (qtd. Nellhaus 18)

Renaissance metadrama illustrates its function as a mirror, which reflects the dramatic medium and its limit and capability of capturing reality. In *Henry V* the Chorus' warning about the playhouse's physical inadequacy to mime reality is self-exposing:

And so our scene must to the battle fly;
Where—O for pity!—we shall much disgrace
With four or five most vile and ragged foils
(Right ill dispos' d, in brawl ridiculous)
The name of Agincourt. Yet sit and see,
Minding true things by what their mock'ries be. (IV, Chorus 48-53)

The Chorus lays open the insufficiency of stage pretense and requests its audience's collaboration. Similarly, the play extempore in *Henry IV* reveals a similar insufficiency.

Prince Do thou stand for my father and examine me upon
the particulars of my life.
Fal. Shall I? Content. This chair shall be my state,
this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown.
Prince Thy state is taken for a join' d -stool, thy golden

sceptre for a leaden dagger, and thy precious rich
crown for a pitiful bald crown! (2.4.376-82)

Falstaff endows a symbolic meaning on each prop, and endeavors to build up a theatrical illusion. However, Prince Hal disrupts the fragile illusion, and peels off the theatrical pretense of each prop. Despite Hal's distancing reminder, Hal and Falstaff's seemingly delightful pretense somehow points up the truth. As Peregil submits, "each in the guise of someone else, Falstaff and Hal become most honest to each other: Falstaff by voicing his concern about his future relationship with the heir apparent, and Hal by flatly rejecting him" (1990: 66).

The mirror is a common prop and literary figure in Renaissance drama. Hamlet confronts Gertrude with a mirror metaphor in the closet scene: "You go not till I set you up *a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you*" (3.4.18-19; emphases added). He not only speaks "daggers to her" (3.3.387), but also presents two pictures of "counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (3.4.54). Gertrude pronounces her ignorance to her sin at first: "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" (39-40). But after confronting with the mirror image of herself in Hamlet's verbal construction, she painfully achieves a self-knowledge, and penetrates deep into her soul:

O Hamlet, speak no more.

Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,

And there I see such black and grained spots

As will not leave their tinct. (88-91)

Hamlet's verbal mirror can reveal the hidden and unseen dimension of

unspeakable and unnamable desires buried deep in Gertrude's soul. Without the mediation of the mirror, Gertrude will not be able to probe into herself beyond delusive appearances. Nelson goes even further in his study of *Hamlet*,

It has been through illusion (the apparition sequence) and pretense (the play within a play) that Hamlet has explored reality, through them that he moves toward the definitive act by which he will revenge his father's murder and restore well-being to rotten Denmark. (27)

Again and again, Shakespearean metatheatrical works illustrate a possible reversal of the Renaissance formula: "art imitates life" is turned into "life imitates art." Anne Righter argues,

The play, holding a mirror up to nature, was bound to reflect the reality represented by its audience. Yet this audience was also forced to recognize the encroachments of illusion upon its own domain. Certain spectators in a theatre might, for a moment, mistake illusion for reality; other playgoers carried the language and gestures of the drama away with them at the conclusion of the performance, for use in the world outside. (83)

The distinction or boundary between theater and life, or the play world and the real world, is not always certain. In many cases, the boundary is blurred or even disappears: life becomes a form of theater, a form of acting; theater becomes a way of life. Metatheater teaches us that the boundary between

reality and fiction is not always clear-cut. Sidney Homan, using Genet's argument in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, advocates that the line between the world onstage and that offstage is illusive (14).

[T]he theater is "true" in that it is a self-confessed fakery, whereas life is "false" or unreal in that men there act as if they were not actors, forcing themselves and others to take a fiction as a fact. (13)

This present study, by elaborating on the impingement of appearance and reality upon each other, aims at achieving the goal of metatheater itself: to make the theater "a symbol of making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon" (Forker 217).

With an external mediation, it is easier for a person to behold himself. Metadrama supplies that means of external mediation, through whose help we can see the image of the appearances of reality, which in turn is an approach to self-knowledge. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles tells Ulysses:

The beauty that is borne here in the face
The bearer knows not, but commends itself
To other' eyes; nor doth the eye itself,
That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
Not going from itself; but eye to eye oppos' d
Salutes each other with each other's form;
For speculation turns not to itself,
Till it hath travell' d and is mirror' d there

Where it may see itself. (3.3.101-11)

Achilles uses the mirror metaphor, here the projection of oneself in the other's eyes, to illustrate the function of an external mediation for self-knowledge. In his evaluation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Calderwood praises the Bard's achievement of translating the "incommunicable" and "subjective" experience into a publicly available dramatic form (1965: 519).

The dramatic experience in which dramatist, actors, and audience all participate, whether in an aristocrat's manor house or the Globe theater, thus becomes a kind of secular ritual of communion, with the play itself a focal illusion whose existence and significance are created by a collective imaginative act and whose value, in part, lies in the fact that it enables a sharing of inner experience otherwise inaccessible. The play and the audience imaginatively unite and mutually transform each other in the act of knowledge. (519)

Richard Fly underscores the metadramatic critics' preoccupation with the materials and processes of art-making in drama:

They tend to view his [Shakespeare's] masterpieces not simply as "windows" opening out upon a richly-textured panorama of general human experience, but as "mirrors" reflecting the artist's ongoing struggle to understand and master the expressive potential of his medium. (124)

Fly plays up the self-reflexive nature, rather than the reflective nature, of the

mirror metaphor. He highlights the predominance of the role of the medium and the play metaphors in the metadramatic criticism, and stresses the tendency toward self-reflexivity in metadrama: “the drama in [such] plays becomes dislodged from plot and character and situated in the playwright’s self-conscious interaction with himself, his medium, and his audience” (124). A metadramatic reading of dramatic works tends to concentrate on excavating the self-reflexive, self-analytic, and anti-mimetic aspects. “With this redirection of the creative process,” Fly argues, “mimesis gives way to self-analysis, and drama is subsumed in ‘metadrama’ ” (124).

However, an implicit danger may come with the mirror metaphor. Shakespeare explores this pitfall in *Richard II*. In the deposition scene, Richard requests a looking glass that “may show [him] what a face” he has before finally being conveyed to the Tower (4.1.266), and insists that he will read his sins in the book of his face instead of the paper prepared by Earl of Northumberland.

Give me that glass, and therein will I read.
No deeper wrinkles yet? Hath sorrow struck
So many blows upon this face of mine,
And made no deeper wounds? O flatt’ ring glass,
Like to my followers in prosperity,
Thou dost beguile me! Was this face the face
That every day under his household roof
Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
That like the sun, did make beholders wink?

Is this the face which fac' d so many follies,

That was at last out-fac' d by Bullingbrook?

A brittle glory shineth in this face,

As brittle as the glory is the face,

[Dashes the glass against the ground.]

For there it is, crack' d in an hundred shivers.

Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport,

How soon my sorrow hath destroy' d my face. (276-91)

Richard laments the deception of his mirrored reflection: the reflection of a face not showing wrinkles and wounds that correspond to his present wretched state. He accuses the deceptive mirror reflection of not revealing the truth—like the blinding flattery of his followers in prosperity. For a moment, Richard seems to indulge in his misery at this highly self-pitying moment in a Narcissus gesture, and does not penetrate beyond the illusive appearances. But when he dashes the glass to the ground, he releases his bondage to the mirror image. He realizes the flickering vanity of his worldly glory in his reign. The mirror supplies a distancing mechanism for Richard to see himself from a third-person position, a relatively objective perspective.

Michael Shapiro summarizes the functions of reflexivity in a dramatic work as follows: (i) to control the audience's degree of involvement in the stage illusion, (ii) to provide a more active interplay between different planes of illusion, (iii) to add resonances to spectators' responses to dramatic illusions, (iv) to remind the audience that life too is a play, (v) to underscore the metadramatic proposition that plays are in part about dramatic art or the

responses of spectators (152-55). In addition to Shapiro's list, I would like to argue that self-reflexivity of the theater as a mirror brings forth complicated ontological and epistemological implications. First of all, the metadramatic devices unabashedly expose the theatrical lies and illusions, and clearly define a theatrical representation to be merely a reflection, image, appearance, duplicate or counterfeit. This poetics of pretense acknowledges the inherent insufficiency and inadequacy of the theater, which could only mirror itself and the image of reality. Secondly, as a mirror, the theater is a medium and a framework of representation. With the parallel structure of a play-within-a-play, a metaplay demonstrates the interaction of various planes of realities: the reality of the play-within-a-play, the reality of the play proper, and the reality of the playhouse audience. When a character trespasses his boundary within his dramatic world, the framework circumscribing each plane of reality dissolves. The distinction of inner and outer plays is no longer valid. In a sense, the inset play becomes the outer play, and the outer the inset. In addition, self-reflexivity denotes the theater's self-conscious reflection on itself. Not just a "window" through which reality is revealed, a metaplay keeps exploring its own ontological status, and defines itself as a medium where illusion, imagination, reality and truth meet and interact. Self-reflexivity of the theater will also incur a division or split of a subject into self and other. For example, the theater as a mirror is purely a medium to convey appearances and images of reality. It is marked or defined when it reflects. And a metaplay sees itself and sees itself reflecting on itself. This is captured when a spectator tries to delve into the self-reflexivity of a metaplay. And the

spectator may find that his gaze becomes the return of the theater's gaze.³⁷

The purpose of dramatic art, according to Hamlet, is to hold a mirror up to nature, reflecting life and reality. Renaissance metadrama illustrates its function as a mirror, which reflects the dramatic medium and its limit and capability of capturing reality. With an external mediation, it is easier for a person to behold himself. Metadrama supplies that means of external mediation, through whose help we can see the image of the appearances of reality, which in turn is an approach to self-knowledge. The self-reflexivity of metatheater denotes the theater's self-conscious reflection on itself as a medium where illusion, reality, imagination and truth meet and interact.

This study hopes to illustrate that a metatheatrical reading of Renaissance drama not only helps a reader to better grasp the dramatic medium, but also lends depth and substantiality to the insight and understanding of the dramatic meaning. The quintessence of theater bordering reality and illusion becomes a niche for playwrights to explore the dynamics of the onstage and offstage worlds. It is hoped that the findings of this study can shed light on the metadramatic implications in the plays with a constant attention to the playwrights' dramaturgy.

³⁷ This is a simple appropriation of Lacan's concept of gaze. Lacan emphasizes "the pre-existence of a gaze," and the relation of the subject with the gaze is: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (72). He insists that "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside,

CHAPTER SIX

The Return of the Theater's Gaze:

A Conclusion

As is clear from earlier discussions of these English Renaissance metadramatic plays, the interaction of the onstage and offstage worlds calls into question the distinction between reality and illusion. The recurring play metaphors that play up the artificiality of the dramatic works as man-made artifices accentuate the self-analytic and self-reflexive efforts, and move further away from mimesis. Role-playing offers a chance for a character to attain self-definition—it is a manifestation of the self-fashioning identity. Playwright-characters, through their manipulation of theatricality, fabricate a fictional world of their own. And inset plays of different forms exploit in different ways the interaction of reality and illusion, and foreground their artificiality and theatricality in the representation.

The predominance of self-reflexivity in the dramatic works examined in the foregoing pages insistently points up their ontological status as cultural artifacts—their limits and potentials inherent in such materiality. These metadramatic plays are the mirrors that bring in the unseen split of the subject, for they keep exposing their ontology: they see themselves seeing themselves reflecting on themselves. This self-reflexivity of the plays will also encourage *our* self-reflexivity: as audience, we mistakenly believe ourselves to be the viewers. Our gaze at the theater and its self-reflexivity bounces back to

I am looked at . . . I am a picture" (106).

ourselves. Theater indeed is a mirror—it reflects our face and our gaze. We see ourselves watching and being watched, again a split into self and other. Our knowledge of ourselves is objectified through the perspective of the other. Analogous to Lacanian mirrored stage, a subject learns of himself through the eyes of the other. Roger Frie explains Lacan’s earlier theory of subject:³⁸

For Lacan, the subject is from the very start linguistic, social, and intersubjective. He accounts for the formation of the ego in the preverbal register of the imaginary. The subject’s misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of itself in the mirror phase of the “imaginary order” results in a fracturing of self, which conceals a “lack of being” at the very heart of subjectivity. (12)

The subject’s knowledge of himself is obtained in a roundabout way with the perspective of the other through the mediation of a mirror.

To illustrate his concept of the gaze, Lacan relates an anecdote about a sardine can. In his early twenties, Lacan yearns to experience something practical and physical. He joins a family of fishermen on a small boat. Guiding his look to a floating can on the surface of the waves, his companion, Petit-Jean, jokingly remarks: “You see that can? Can you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you” (Lacan 95). Petit-Jean is highly amused with this incident, whereas Lacan keeps wondering why this remark amuses him less. Despite Petit-Jean’s words to the contrary, Lacan realizes that the can is looking at him all the same. He does not enjoy the joke because it makes him feel that he is

³⁸ Lacanian subject varies with different phases of his seminars. For example, it is a subject of desire

“rather out of place in the picture” (96); it makes him see the stain concealing and marking the existence of the gaze. This encounter dramatizes the gaze and brings the “given-to-be-seen” to the foreground. Being-looked-at-ness is like the sardine can he sees: “It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated” (95). The can Lacan gazes at returns a gaze upon him and makes him realize he is no longer someone who sees, but becomes part of the picture:

I am not simply that punctiform being located at the
geometral point from which the perspective is grasped.
No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is pointed.
The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the
picture. (96)

In defining the relation of the gaze to the subject, Lacan emphasizes the constitutive capacity of the gaze:

What determines me, at the most profound level, in the
visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze
that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its
effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the
instrument through which light is embodied and through
which . . . I am *photo-graphed*. (106)

Lacan uses the camera as a signifier of the gaze, giving “the camera/gaze a constitutive function with respect to him or her” (Silverman 131). By dividing the word “photograph” into “photo” and “graph,” Lacan underscores

in Seminar XI, and a subject of drive in Seminar XX (Liao 19).

the capacity of the gaze to “schematize” the subject-as-spectacle within light (Silverman 132), placing the subject on an object-like position. The gaze, as an *objet a*³⁹ and hence a cause of desire, “photo-graphs” the subject as a subject of desire.

Lacan underscores the exteriority of the gaze in relation to the subject: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (72). He insists that “in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at . . . I am a picture” (106). Such an exteriority places the gaze beyond the consciousness of the subject. The subject becomes a “subject-as-look” and a “subject-as-spectacle” (Silverman 133).

In this connection, *The Murder of Gonzago* is enlightening. When the playlet is mounted, Claudius mistakenly considers himself a spectator who watches. His abrupt abandonment of the playlet in the middle is the revealing incident that indicates his sudden realization of the fact that he is not a spectator at all, but a spectacle. Hamlet, himself also an onstage spectator of the playlet, watches his uncle closely. He seems to be in a much superior stance than that of Claudius. He prepares the Mousetrap for his uncle. But the stage mirror reflects his gaze back to himself likewise. His camouflaged flirting with Ophelia during the production of *The Murder of Gonzago* attracts all attention, instead of diverting unwanted attention. He is not just a spectator of Claudius’ response to the play within; he is the “most observed” of

³⁹ Lacan defines the *objet a* as “a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real” (Lacan 83). On the one hand, *objet a* is the leftover of separation, denoting a hole or lack in the subject. On the other, it is a stand-in of the lost object, enabling the subject to sustain the illusion of oneness and wholeness before being alienated and separated.

all onstage spectators. Claudius, Polonius, and court audience all pay close attention to his unusual behavior during the performance. He is also a spectacle. Even the audience or readers of the play become spectacles with the reflection of the stage mirror. Our projection of the supposed significance of this scene is only a duplicate of the image we thrust upon the play. Our gaze upon the theater and our reflection upon the theater become the return of the theater's gaze. The return of the gaze questions our perception, interpretation and projection of the theater.

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