

# Meta-theatricality in Elizabethan Era: Its Origin and Employment

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**Abstract**— *Meta-theatricality refers to the self-referential aspects of a theatrical performance, in which the play draws attention to itself as a work of art and to the audience's role in the performance. The concept of Meta-theatricality has been present in theatre throughout history, especially during the Elizabethan era, in the works of Shakespeare and contemporary playwrights. Meta-theatricality can be used to challenge and subvert traditional theatrical conventions, to explore issues of identity, power, and representation, and to create a sense of playfulness and engagement with the audience. This article discusses the development of Meta-theatricality as a common dramatic trope during the Elizabethan era which offers a unique and dynamic way of exploring the nature of theatre and its role in contemporary society.*

**Keywords**— *meta-theatre, meta-theatricality, theatre, theatrical, drama, dramatic, self-referential, performance, art, artifice, actors, audience, stage, Elizabethan era, characters, nature, play, players, playwright, play-within-a-play, reality, illusion*

“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players”  
(As You Like It, II.vii, 139-140)

To begin with the definition, meta-theatre is a “self-reflexive drama or performance that reveals its artistic status to the audience.” (Pellegrini, 2005)

Or in simple words, Metatheatre refers to the self-referential and self-aware elements in a theatrical production that make the audience aware of the artificiality of the performance and its relationship to the real world. During the Elizabethan era in England, meta-theatre was a common and highly valued aspect of dramatic production, and it played a significant role in the development of English Renaissance drama.

The Renaissance dramatic stage was a complex and disputed space, especially the position of the players who occupied it. Prior to the establishment of acting companies and the permanent physical theatres in London, the English actors of the 16th century used to

travel and perform at diverse locations. There were few troupes that were patronized by noblemen and magistrates. But, sometimes to supplement their incomes, the players often shifted their performances from the halls of rich houses to the courtyard of an inn whenever needed. Hence, the players were often seen to be some noble servants acting as a rogue.

But the 16th century was an age of strictly demarcated social classes, where such social mobility was offensive. The English government had decided to get this problem under control. Hence, in 1572 came the “Acte for the punishment of Vocabondes and for Relief of the Poore & Impotent”, which declared:

“... all Fencers Bearewardes Comon Players in Enterludes & Mynstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realme or towards any other honorable Personage of greater Degree; all juglers Pedlars Tynkers and Petye Chapmen; whiche seid Fencers Bearewardes Comon Players in Enterludes Mynstrels Juglers Pedlers Tynkers & Petye Chapmen, shall wander abroad and have not Lycense of two Justices

of the Peace at the leaste, whereof one to be of the Quorum, when and in what Shier they shall happen to wander ... shalbee taken adjudged and deemed Roges Vacaboundes and Sturdy Beggars.

(qtd. in Chambers, IV, 270)

Most importantly, this Act made a distinction between the amateur actors and the skilled professional actors, thereby leading to the formation of professional dramatic troupes in London for which stalwarts like Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson and others wrote. Within thirty years, there was an enormous development in the theatrical profession in England, where the adept professionals procured “enormous financial investments backing them and a position in London guaranteed by the King himself” (Andrew Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 39).

But the social status of the Renaissance player still remained ambiguous. In their daily performances, they impeccably switched roles and mimicked the appearances and manners of their social betters and inferiors – something that was both appealing and dangerous for their profession.

This ambiguous status of the actor was often manifested through the staging of the character as a player/playmaker. The playwrights created characters who were figuratively similar to their creators and fellow players they worked with. Such figures appeared in many Renaissance dramas like Marlowe’s ‘The Jew of Malta’ or Ben Jonson’s ‘Volpone’. These characters used to transmute their appearances, manipulate the situations and actions of people around them and often directly addressed the audience. Ironically, such portrayals highlighted the social ambiguity of the player as well as the prevalent issues regarding the detrimental effects of theatre as a whole.

The idea of the theatre as a space of corruptive falsehood was quite prevalent in those days. Many claimed that the stagecraft of the players led the miserable audience into decadence. John Northbrooke in his 1579 tract wrote,

“If you will learne howe to bee false and deceive your husbandes, or husbandes their wyves howe to playe the harlots, to obtaine anie ones love, howe to ravishe, howe to beguyle, howe to betraye, to flatter, lye, sweare, forswear, how to allure to whoredome, howe to murder, howe to poyson, howe to disobey and to rebell agaynst Princes ... Shall not you learne, then, at such Enterludes howe to practice them?”

Such critics of the theatre argued that the theatre distracted the common masses from the more important matters of life and society and urged them to indulge in immoral practices.

Amidst such existing views of the theatre, Renaissance literature features varied defenses of the theatre. One of the tropes to make the audience aware of the pretentious nature of theatre was to incorporate meta-theatrical elements in the play. This element served to remind the audience that they are watching a staged production and could create a sense of self-awareness or reflexivity. As opposed to Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” where the emphasis is on the role of the creator, meta-theatricality emphasized the active engagement of the viewer.

According to many writers, art as well as theatre delivers a moral and spiritual judgment, thereby providing an educative value to the audience. The playwrights of the Renaissance era often made use of the meta-theatre to delineate the good and the evil. Martin White’s ‘Renaissance Drama in Action’ discusses how early modern playwrights “ensured that audiences were alert both to the nature of the fiction presented before them and its correspondences to their own world—to the theatricality of everyday life”.

The engagement of the actors with the audience was seen in the epilogues and prologues at the beginning and end of the plays. These dramatic strategies accentuated the boundary between the world of the play and that of the audience. As an eminent scholar notes that it was also “a particularly strategic choice by players and playwrights to appeal to the critical faculties of their audiences, allowing theatrical companies to guide them (subtly or not) towards the desired responses, while providing (at least rhetorically, if not otherwise) excuses for any failures or dangerous missteps on the performers’ parts.”

Ben Jonson in his play ‘Every Man out of his Humour’ (1599), designs each act of the play as discussions between two critics “seated onstage with the wealthier members of the audience” (Cave 35).

The presenter of the play, Asper, addresses two critics Cordatus and Mitis to judge the play:

“Observe what I present, and liberally  
Speak your opinions upon every scene,

As it shall pass the view of these spectators,”

- and the two critics swiftly comment at the beginning, at the end, and at times during the ongoing performances.

Jonson here makes use of the metatheatrical mode to underline the performative and artificial nature of the stage.

Then again, at the play's end, Cordatus before leaving the stage, re-emphasizes the role and presence of the audience, saying to the principal character Macilente,

".....here are those round about you of more ability in censure than we, whose judgments can give it a more satisfying allowance; we'll refer you to them".

Through this dialogue, Cordatus reassesses the boundaries between the world of the play and the real world. The instance of an actor breaking away from the other characters on the stage and directly addressing the spectators was a way to make conscious those watching and listening. Meta-theatricality thus led to a symbiotic relationship between the play, the players, the playwright, and the spectators.

A theatrical setting that time and again reminds both the audience and the players of the artificiality of the performance, couldn't be called fully unrealistic.

The Spanish Tragedy written by Thomas Kyd in the late 16th century is considered one of the most influential works of Elizabethan drama. One of the most distinctive features of this play is its meta-theatricality, that not only provides a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of theatre and the dramatic art form but also serves to enhance the dramatic effect of the play. This is done through the use of characters who comment on the action of the play or break the fourth wall, as well as the play's use of the "play-within-a-play" device, where a play is performed within the larger play.

The play begins with a prologue delivered by a figure known as Revenge (the personification of revenge), who announces that he will tell the story of the Spanish Tragedy. This opening sets the tone for the rest of the play, which is framed as a performance. The Spirit of Revenge is not a character in the play, but rather a representation of the vengeful spirit that drives the action of the play. This device creates a sense of detachment between the audience and the action of the play as if we are watching a performance rather than experiencing real events. In this sense, the character of Revenge also becomes like that of a playwright or stage director who has control over the stage space.

In the prologue, a ghost (of Andrea) appears and explains that he has been killed by his rival, Balthazar, and Revenge promises him that by the end of the play, his death will be avenged. This prologue is followed by

the main plot of the play, where we see Hieronimo trying to avenge his son Horatio's death.

Unlike the figure of Revenge, the Ghost lacks foreknowledge of the plot of the play. He observes the succeeding events with a blend of responses and emotions similar to that of the audience who are watching the play. As Baker writes,

"Kyd seems to be the first writer to stress the ghost's wonderment at what he sees. The Ghost ... becomes an amazed spectator of happenings in a realm completely different from his own. In these happenings he can foresee nothing; he shows no inclinations toward vengeance until, late in the play, he sees his friend murdered and his enemies flaunting their prosperity. The Ghost proves himself the most curious member of the audience."

Andrea is an entity who is crucial to our understanding of the play: he is more of an audience than an actor. Anne Barton opines that "the usefulness of the ghost, however, does not really depend upon its intimate connection with Hieronimo's revenge .... (Andrea) is a link between the two worlds of audience and actors, combining within himself certain elements drawn from each. As such, he helps to define the relationship between reality and illusion".

Both the Ghost and Revenge not only watch the play unfold but more importantly while doing so they are watched by the spectators.

The play-within-a-play is introduced in Act III, where Hieronimo stages a play in front of the king and court. This play is a fictional re-enactment of the murder of Horatio, and it serves as a way for the characters to explore the themes of revenge and justice. Here are the three visible dramatic frames: the enactment of 'Soliman and Perseda' (within the play) by Horatio which is staged in front of the Spanish court, which is watched by the Ghost and Revenge as spectators, which in turn is watched by the audiences at the theatre.

What is more significant about Kyd's employment of Meta-theatricality is the portrayal of the fictional character of Hieronimo as an actor and playwright. This trope allows the playwright to remind the audience that they are sitting within the walls of the theatre, watching a fictional entertainment.

The use of the play-within-a-play structure in The Spanish Tragedy serves to highlight the theme of appearance vs. reality. The play is full of characters who wear masks and hide their true intentions, and the play-within-a-play is a perfect example of this. The play

staged by Hieronimo appears to be a harmless entertainment, but it is, in fact, a reflection of his own desire for revenge. This theme of appearance vs. reality is further emphasized in Act 5, where the climax of the play takes place. Hieronimo has prepared a trap for his son's murderers, and they are lured into a room where they think they will find treasure. However, the treasure turns out to be the bodies of their own sons, whom Hieronimo has murdered. This scene is a powerful demonstration of the idea that things are not always as they seem, and that appearances can be deceiving.

Meta-theatricality in the Spanish Tragedy is a defining characteristic of the play. By drawing attention to the theatrical nature of the events, Kyd creates a sense of detachment between the audience and the action of the play, which allows us to reflect on the themes of revenge and justice. The use of stage directions, self-aware characters, and a play-within-a-play all contribute to the meta-theatricality of the play and remind us of the artificiality of the theatrical experience.

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest playwrights in history, and his plays are known for their richly complex characters, intricate plot lines, and sophisticated language.

One of Shakespeare's favorite meta-settings is the stage world, and, as recent studies have shown, his stylistic reflexiveness offered him a useful metaphor. This means more than simply suggesting that all the stage is a world, since the play-within motif allows him to depict major characters as role-players, sometimes as ranters or poor players whose actions imitate mankind abominably and transform their plots into knavish pieces of work.

One of the most common forms of meta-theatricality in Shakespearean plays is the use of the prologue or epilogue. In many of his plays, Shakespeare uses a character or a chorus to deliver a prologue that sets the stage for the play or an epilogue that reflects on the events of the play. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers the prologue that summarizes the play's plot, and in *The Tempest*, Prospero delivers the epilogue that acknowledges the artifice of the play and asks the audience to release him from the play's enchantment.

Another form of meta-theatricality in Shakespeare's plays is the use of stagecraft to create a sense of artificiality. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses the character of Puck to

comment on the illusionary nature of the play's events. In one scene, Puck turns to the audience and says, "If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended: that you have but slumbered here while these visions did appear." This use of stagecraft to create a sense of artifice within the play is a common device in Shakespeare's works.

Shakespeare uses a play-within-a-play to comment on the themes of his plays. In *'Hamlet'*, for example, the play-within-a-play that Hamlet stages is used to comment on the nature of guilt and justice. This technique is also used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the play-within-a-play is used to comment on the nature of love and illusion.

Shakespeare's *'Hamlet'* is a play that emphasizes the conflict between reality and illusion and comments on the nature of theatre itself. Hamlet arranges for a group of actors to perform a play that mirrors the murder of his father, to confirm his uncle's guilt. Hamlet delivers a soliloquy in which he comments on the nature of theatre. He says, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king," referring to his plan to use a play to reveal his uncle's guilt. This device creates a sense of self-awareness, as the characters in the play are seen to be acting out a play themselves, highlighting the artificiality of their situation. This also prompts the audience to question the nature of reality, as the lines between the performance and the reality of the play become blurred.

One of Hamlet's extended speeches – "Seems Madam ? Nay it is" (I, ii) provides a substantial catalog of the mannerisms and costumes needed for an actor playing the role of a grieving son: an inky cloak, a black suit, heavy and disturbed breathing, tears, a downcast expression, "Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief". Hamlet himself says: "For they are actions that a man might play". The principle upheld here is that true emotions are beyond theatrical expression; no objective correlatives provided by the actor, director, or costume can portray real grief.

Hamlet's address to the players is often read as encapsulating Shakespeare's own view of how his plays should be enacted. Hamlet cautions the actors to speak their speeches "trippingly on the tongue". Throughout the performance that follows, Hamlet makes frequent interjections that are irritating in a typically adolescent way. Shakespeare has aristocratic audiences interrupt and mock actors in the inset performances in *'Love's Labour's Lost'* and *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*, and

one might suppose that as an experienced actor himself, he resented such behavior.

Uncertain at times, whether drama is a metaphor for life or life a metaphor for drama, it becomes hard to divide the play of illusions from the illusion of a play. With Ophelia “acting” for Hamlet in the Nunnery Scene, and Hamlet acting for the King and Polonius, and the King, Polonius and all acting for the audience, the fiction of theatricality engages with our experience in the theatre. In this context, James L. Calderwood comments, “On one hand, the play seems to draw us into its illusions of life in the Danish castle; on the other hand, its explicit meta dramatism functions as a Brechtian “alienation device” to erase its illusions and make us see it at least momentarily from a curious aesthetic distance as a purely theatrical construct”.

Not separable from life, acting and the theatre it establishes, become “the mirror up to nature”. “Hamlet’s obsession with theatre and the play’s own pervasive theatricality gives a special emphasis to the Renaissance commonplace: all the world’s a stage and the stage is a little world. The characters move in a seemingly substantial world that, in reality, is nothing more than the momentary “collusion” of actors and audience. Our knowledge that we are attending a play thus feeds into this sense of theatricality”, comments Robert F. Willson.

Meta-theatricality in Shakespearean drama is a defining characteristic of his plays. Through the use of prologues, stagecraft, self-aware characters, and plays-within-plays, Shakespeare draws attention to the artifice of his plays and invites the audience to reflect on the themes that underlie the action on stage. This technique has contributed to Shakespeare's enduring popularity and his reputation as one of the greatest playwrights in history.

Meta-theatricality didn't rely on a “suspension of disbelief” on the part of the spectators, as there used to be an interaction between players and audiences. Rather it was a multifaceted and actively participatory interaction of the audiences with the performances they experienced. This is how it helps to enhance the audience's experience of the play by creating a sense of engagement and immersion in the theatrical world.

In conclusion, meta-theatre was an important aspect of Elizabethan theatre, playing a significant role in the

development of English Renaissance drama. It was used to create a sense of spectacle, engage the audience, and comment on the society and politics of the time. Today, meta-theatre remains a valued aspect of theatrical production, serving as a means for playwrights to draw attention to the artifice of performance and make observations about the world.

It would be appropriate to end the discussion with the words of Shakespeare's Polixenes in "Winter's Tale", where he states, "This is an art which does mend nature, change it rather, but the art itself is nature." This line highlights the artifice of the play and serves as a reminder to the audience that what they are witnessing is a performance, not reality.

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