THE PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY AS A MODEL OF FICTIONALITY

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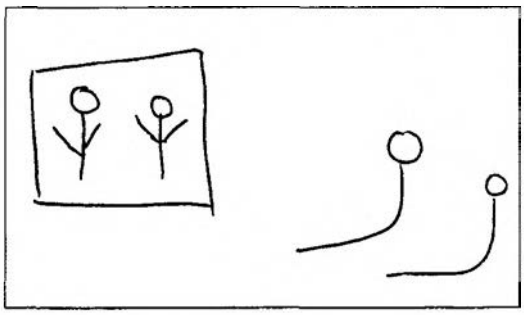
Rudiments of a play within a play structure date as far back as the Greek theater's chorus. They appear in Medieval times as part of Christian liturgy as in *Quem Quaeritis,* a representation of the Passion. The existence of plays within plays in the Renaissance, when theater began to separate from liturgy, has been preserved in Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* (1497) and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1589). Shakespeare employs the device in at least a fourth of his plays. Embedded plays become ubiquitous in Spanish, French and German Baroque theater for reasons which I shall delineate later on. And even though plays containing plays have appeared continuously since their proliferation in the seventeenth century, ours again manifests a prevalent liking for this theatrical device, or shall I say, metatheatrical philosophy.

Nowadays, the study of plays within plays may interest theorists and critics of drama because, even though these embedded structures are in themselves a conscious fictional device, they nevertheless afford an unparalled opportunity to observe salient issues of theatrical fictionality from a vantage point. From the perspective of the framing play, the pliable and permeable nature of fictional boundaries becomes readily apparent, and one is able to analyze more accurately how, when and why the said boundaries are streched or broken.

As embedded structures, plays within plays dispose of their own chronology and theatrical space, independent of the frame play's yet carved out of the space of the frame, establishing a temporal and spatial simultaneity on the scenic and dramatic levels (Schmeling 7-8). More immediately obvious, at a certain point in the course of a play, some of the characters become actors of an inner play and others become its audience.



Clear cut distinctions between the inner play's characters and its audience are not obvious in instances in which the action of the play within the play is tightly engaged with that of its frame. Hamlet's suspicions, for instance, prompt the selection of the "entertainment" piece, therefore, is he its director, producer, co-playwright or member of its audience? In the case of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, determining the extent of the theatrical company's involvement in the story represented by the characters is tantamount to solving the ultimate ambiguity. A mimetic rather than a metatheatrical interpretation of the final suicide and drowning may suggest that the presence of an audience allows the tragedy to concretize upon the stage, but a naturalistic interpretation, that the adult characters are crazy, and the pressure of being dragged in front of an audience prompts the Boy to "really" commit an act of suicide planned as part of the Father and Stepdaughter's harmless exhibitionism. Even if we assume that the presence of the members of the theatrical company as audience has no impact upon the Characters' tragedy, Pirandello's themes compell us to question the degree of engagement between the fictional actors and audience. The same is true of the rest of his 'theater about the theater' trilogy.(1) In Jean Anouilh's plays, even in *La Répétition*, where an existing play by Marivaux is being rehearsed, the cast of the inner play also constitutes its audience, and the action, style and characters of each level are so intertwined that what takes place in the frame play does impinge upon the direction, interpretation, and production of the inner play.

To conceive thus of the play within the play implies that for the sake of the scholarly game one pretends that character-directors, character-actors and character-audiences within their fictional world do enjoy the freedom of action of their flesh and blood counterparts; it implies ignoring to a certain extent that representations of plays only have the life that the words of the script has given them. Yet how can we otherwise speak freely of the play within the play as a metatheatrical device, as a technique that may point out interesting facets about theatricality?

Can theorists and critics of drama learn about the nature of theater and the dynamics of a given work by observing these in a fictional construct such as the play within the play? Robert J. Nelson studies individual playwrights' conceptions of the theater by analyzing their use of plays within plays, keeping in mind that both inner and outer plays are equally art in the hands of the dramatist. Nelson mentions in his bibliography that two well-known early treatises on the play within the play (Hans Schab's *Das Schauspiel im Schauspiel zur Zeit Shakespeares* (1896) and Antonie Mersmann's *Das Schauspiel im Schauispiel im französischen Drama des XVII Jahrhunderts* (1925)) "are limited by what might be called the triumph of illusion... The authors pay little attention to the relationship between [the inner] and the outer play which is, after all, itself an illusion" (166).

In a structuralist study of seventeenth century French drama, Georges Forestier (1981) certainly avoids confusing the frame play with reality and the inner play with a representation of theater within it. Nevertheless, from detailed analysis and classification into typologies, Forestier reaches the conclusion that the prevalence of the play within the play structure in Baroque theater stems from the contemporary philosophical world view dramatized by Calderón de la Barca in *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* (1635), and epitomized in Shakespeare's famous "All the world's a stage/And all the men and women merely players"(*As You Like It*, II.vii). In a nutshell, this phi-

1 *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), *Each in His Own Way* (1924) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1929) are discussed by Pirandello as "'a trilogy about the theatre within theater'" (J.D.Campbell and Leonard G. Sbrocchi, "Introduction" to *Tonight We Improvise*. Op. Cit. p. 9)

losophy implies that the world is conceived as a theater where humans act a role prescribed and observed by God. In addition, the Baroque mentality, dealing with a Renaissance heritage still negotiating residues from the Middle Ages, was obsessed with all aspects of true and false resemblance, and it therefore favored manifestations of self-reflexivity and doubling such as theater within theater (341-346).

In our century, the renewed interest in metatheatre and the prevalence of self-reflexive embedded structures results not only from the freedom to experiment, which characterized Baroque aesthetics as well as ours, but also, according to Forestier, from a sense of desillusionment that once again causes humans to feel as mere actors in the world's stage (344). No previous epoch has been as passionately interested in the function of language and writing: formal literary games, intertextuality and, as in the case of mise en abyme, autotextuality (346). As Robert J. Nelson puts it,

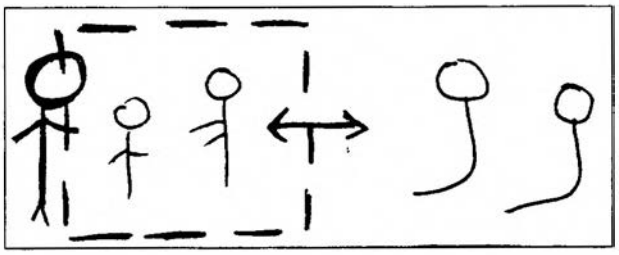
> In a world in which all values are examined, it is inevitable that the instrument of evaluation be itself examined... The theater mirrors this introversion in that literary form of self-consciousness called the play within the play. (10)

In such an environment, it is natural that literary theory should also seek to evaluate its conclusions and test its tools in as many forums as possible, especially if several approaches can be brought to converge in a single forum. Even while keeping in mind that it is a fictional device within a fictional world, the play within the play, conceived as model of theater-in the-making, offers an interesting and exciting textual site in which activities related to the conception, preparation, production and reception of a play interact, inviting a convergence of metafiction, audience response theories, and close textual and performance analysis. The "juiciness" of such an application, and the insights that it certainly brings into dramatic theory as well as to the study of individual plays justifies incurring the danger of perpetrating a mimetic fallacy.

Perhaps I go too far in anticipating a lack of sympathy for an approach to the play within the play that actually does little more than give a close reading of certain portions of given plays, focusing on what a play within the play is best known for exposing: the seams of theater. Even Nelson, who condemns 'the triumpth of illusion', acknowledges that plays within plays "show the seams of dramaturgy" (2). Why not take full advantage, then, of the seams that we are being shown? Approaching the play within the play as metatheater, that is, as a reflexion of theater within itself, I propose to focus on the **interaction** between actors and script, or actors and projected theatrical production, on one end of the theatrical process; secondly, on the interaction between projected production and actual performance (in the cases when the play within the play is actually performed rather than rehearsed); and last, between production and audience on the other end of the theatrical process. The interaction between production and audience has already received much scholarly attention, but rarely as one facet of a process which must be treated globally.[2] Such a reconstructive approach would highlight the artisans as actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* —to illustrate with an example— from the moment that they declare their intention of putting on a play, through their casting and mimetic problems, choices and solutions, through their rehearsals, then the actual performance in front of Duke Theseus and the other character-spectators, and finally, the reception of the play by these characters. Each stage of the the-

2 See M. Nicolaescu and A.B.Kernan. Also, Lorraine Wynne, "The Poetic Function of the Stage Audience and Embedded Performance in Drama," in *Semiotics 1980*, Herzfeld and Lenhart, Eds. (New York and London: Plennum Press, 1980).

atrical process is interpreted dynamically in relation to the other facets rather than in a privileged relation to the action and characterization of the frame play. In other words, the inner play is analyzed as an independent fictional world, yet unlike non-embedded cases of fictionality, the play within the play exists in a context which affords a perspective from which to observe a variety of approaches to and techniques of fiction.



As opposed to studies of metatheater which attempt to work with the abstract bulk of drama, and end up largely speculating, this approach has the benefit that, once abstracted from the text, the play within the play's dynamics can be taken in at a glance. The various facets of a theatrical production become more readily apprehensible and can be toyed with as if the inner play's dynamics were a Rubik cube.

From such a perspective, the following questions can be easily pursued:

- What type of character **creativity** surfaces through dramatized choices (or mischoices) of subject matter, casting, style of performance, decoration, props?

- Do we have an explicit explanation or statement of purpose behind the play? Whereas none can ascertain Shakespeare's intention, everyone can point to Hamlet's explicit purpose for producing "his" play, which from an analytical point of view, provides us with a useful common frame of reference. Naturally, such a reductive observation about a fictional world from the point of view of the fictional world itself, is only a step that relates to other less obvious facets of metatheatrical dynamics. To note that Hamlet produces a play in order to justify his projected revenge, or to delay that revenge, has to do with reading *Hamlet*; interpretation, of course, must be brought a step further, and inquire why there is a play within a play in the first place. Is it a type of comic relief? Is it a mise en abyme that dramatizes the core of Hamlet's imagination? Most important, couldn't Shakespeare have found a different trick for Hamlet to catch the conscience of the King? Is a play within a play so much more dynamic and amusing, or is it that Hamlet's characterization can be best unfolded and shown by means of a theatrical performance which he "directs"? And, of course, the inclusion of a play within a play allows Shakespeare to dramatize a poetics of the theater, in *Hamlet* more thoroughly than in his other plays, with a staged inner performance.

- What type of interaction occurs between characters and script, and how is character or the script moulded as a consequence of the contact between them?

- What type of interaction goes on between characters as they rehearse and otherwise prepare the production of their play?

- Once the play is staged, does it reflect the stylistic and mimetic problems aired out during rehearsal? Does something new happen to produce a play different from what it was supposed to be/do? For instance, certain mimetic choices are made in the course of rehearsing 'Pyramus and Thisby' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. During performance, however, the actors jump out of

their roles to counter their audience's retorts or explain things, with the result that the original conception of the play would have to be 'extracted' from what occurs at its actual performance. In the cases of Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or Anouihl's *Léocadia*, to mention but a few, the inner play destroys its frame, jumps over its conventional fictional boundaries, and takes over the main play: the inner play steps 'out of character' as performance, and becomes the reality of the inner audience and actors: it becomes the outer play. Since the transformation occurs as the play within the play is being performed, the borderline of illusion and reality lies exposed, and the sense of an illusion stumbling into reality creates the effect of "actual happening" in the theater, of event.

- Are the mimetic choices made during rehearsal successful? Do they work upon the audience? Does the play meet with a sympathetic, appreciative audience willing to suspend disbelief, be amused or otherwise cooperate? What does it mean to be an appreciative audience of a play such as the artisans' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Does it mean to appreciate the drollness of the these actors' ineptness or, as Theseus insists yet fails to carry out, to present a counter-performance of "simpleness and duty," kindness and thanks, "to take what [the actors] mistake/And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect/Takes it in might, not merit." (V.i.32-105)?

- If members of the audience declare a position towards the play about to be presented, as in the above example, how does this contribute to their characterization? Once confronted with the actual play, is this position altered? On the other hand, how does the character audience's interference alter the performance?

This brings us well into the threshold of the relationship between the frame and inner play, at this point we can take a step back from the dynamics of the play within the play as a model of fictionality, and pose questions concerning the dynamics of the main play as one which employs an inner performance device. A number of theoretical studies of the play within the play focus precisely on this area of interaction between inner and outer levels. Forestier classifies the type and degree of engagement between plays within plays and their frames, and in a separate section of his book enlarges upon the signification of the inner plays as metatheater and as a reflection of the characters or events of the frame play. Schmeling and Nelson give readings of a series of plays containing inner plays, focusing on the interaction between their inner and outer levels as a perspective from which to interpret a play individually and as a manifestation of a particular type of dramatic aesthetics.

From here, an additional critical step would be to incorporate the degree of engagement between the play, its play within a play, and the real audience. Dramatic irony, for one, plays a distinct role in determining the real audience's perspective, as, for example in *Hamlet* where we know more about the inner show and its purpose than do the royal spectators. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, on the other hand, there is no degree of complicity between the six characters and the real audience. We are as surprised, drawn-in and bewildered as the actors and Producer of the theatrical company.

It seems likely that character-audiences have the potential of awakening their counterparts' interest merely because both are in a similar situation at the "same" moment (Nicolaescu, 57-60). Audiences on stage, as far back as the ancient Chorus, marshall at least to some extent the real audience's immediate reactions and interpretation. The fundamental difference, however, as Schmeling points out, is that a character-audience is confined to a script while a real audience may react in any number of ways (7).

Yet as today's 'political consciousness' reminds us, even real audiences are to a great extent preconditioned in their reactions to theatrical productions. Aware of this, seventeenth century

playwrights employed character audience's responses and especially the prologues to many plays within a play —which sometimes did little more than introduce them— as a device to orient public taste and educate real audiences about the nature of theater. At the time it was necessary to legitimate and consolidate a secular theater's position as an acceptable form of public entertainment.

Yet in Shakespeare there is no portrayal of an ideal audience (Kernan, 152). Theseus proposes one, as quoted above, but greater is the contrast when as soon as the Prologue speaks his part, the Duke himself is the first to challenge the actor's competence. If such a gauche or ridiculous play within the play were the central event of its frame play, one might imagine that a character-audience that makes mirth and minced-meat out of it, would take the sting out of the real audience's displeasure and act as a buffer to its tomatoes. But since Shakespeare's inner performances are not the frame play's central event, it seems that their main function is to provide comic relief and an added dimension of jest, fun, theatrical game.

One of the funniest aspects of the plays within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labor's Lost* is their dramatized permeability of boundaries. Actors step out of their roles, respond to spectators' complaints, match wit by wit or by apology, jumping freely from one fictional world into another. This lack of observance of boundaries conventionally set up to create a mimetic illusion, deflates the possibility of mimetic illusion at the level of the inner play's subject matter, its fictional world. The play within the play as a whole, however, still stands as a more or less convincing representation of what producing a play 'must be like'. There is, then, a heightened mimesis of theater-behind-the-scenes as subject matter, and the **process of attempting** to create an illusion steals the show.

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