Plays-within-Plays and the Struggle of the Dramatists

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Synopsis: Some early modern English dramas feature plays-within-plays, in which characters are "actually" murdered. By embedding a "play" within the main plot, the playwright can give the semblance of truth to the play proper, which is the onstage equivalent to the real auditorium. The inner death which turns out to be "real" in the outer plot thus becomes the ultimate "reality" a play can achieve. Literal murdered "bodies" in the inset plays may be able to assert the "reality" of the theater to the outside world with their horrifying physicality. Meanwhile, inset deaths in other plays indicate the dramatists' conflict with the audience and actors. Dramatists were working under various kinds of pressure. They must have struggled to vindicate their legitimacy through their stage performances. Thus, the inset deaths discussed in this paper exhibit the traces of such attempts.

Introduction

Criticism focusing on metatheater or metadrama started around the early half of the 1960s. Lionel Abel's *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963) is the first to use the term "metatheater." In the chapter titled "Shakespeare and Calderón," republished in *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* (2003), he broadened the scope of the study of theatricality to the entire spectrum of "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (134). Abel's innovative but rather esthetic concept of "life seen as already theatricalized" has been more fully elaborated upon by researchers such as James Calderwood, who has described metatheater as an arena in which the boundary between art and life is "dissolved" (4). This obliteration of the distinction between reality and illusion is most clearly visualized at the moment when characters "actually" die in a play-within-a-play, for

example, in works such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587), Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626), and Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (c.1621). This actual killing surprises not only the onstage audience but also the real theater audience because what has been supposed to be fictional is suddenly revealed to be "real." If, as Anne Righter observes, play metaphors determine the relationship of the world of the play with the real world of the audience (86), this death in the frame of a play-within-a-play forces the theater audience to reconsider this relationship, which might not be as stable and as definite as is usually assumed.

In this paper, I will mainly discuss these "inset" deaths, along with contemporary prose and theatrical pieces. Such framed deaths have their own meaning not only in terms of the plot and dramaturgy but also of (meta)theatrical consciousness. As A. B. Kernan points out, a play-within-a-play was a device for dramatists to reflect on the act of playwriting and to re-examine the medium of theater itself (3). During the first century of English professional theater, it was natural for playwrights to develop occupational self-consciousness and represent it "dramatically" on stage. Although they constitute only a small number of early modern dramatic pieces, the above-mentioned self-referentially structured plays feature deaths in the playlets set within them as the culmination of contemporary self-conscious theatricality. By analyzing plays-within-plays and the deaths within them, I would like to explore evidence for the theatrical consciousness of playwrights in the process of their dramatic creation.

I

In *The Spanish Tragedy,* the protagonist Hieronimo composes a revenge tragedy and, in the playlet, really kills two princes who had murdered his son. In *The Roman Actor,* the tyrant Domitian kills his favorite actor, Paris, in an inset play, on the false assumption that he is

having an affair with his wife. Generally speaking, there might be several reasons why dramatists were motivated to present such "real" deaths in plays-within-plays. One reason is related to the structure. A play-within-a-play simply recalls the ancient *theatrum mundi* motif which is basically related to death. Pierre Boaistuau, a French Huguenot, in the "Epistle Dedicatorie" to *Theatrum Mundi* (1581, 2nd ed. of John Alday's English translation first published in 1566), describes the world and man's life as follows:

> . . . what else is this world but a Theatre? Whereas some playe or vse the state of Artificers and men of base condition and calling, & others do represent the state of kings, Dukes, Earls, Marquises, Barons, and others, constituted in dignities. And neuertheless when al these haue cast of their visards & masking garments, and that death commeth and maketh an end of this bloudie tragedy, they acknowledge themselues al to be mortal men. (qtd. in Christian 115)

In the "Theatre" of life, we are proved to be "mortal" at the "end" of our human "tragedy" and face our "death." Likewise, Macbeth pessimistically summarizes the course of life:

> . . . all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (*Mac.* 5.5.19–25)

The theatrical imagery is evoked in conjunction with "death." The world theater is nihilistic to an annihilating extent that it signifies "nothing."

It is surely significant that Jaques in *As You Like It* (1598–1600) explains the life of man in terms of a play: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players. / They have their exits and their entrances" (2.7.140–42). Apart from the metrical convenience, it is strange for men to have "exits" before "entrances," but this cynic puts priority on leaving the stage, namely "death," over the entrance, namely "birth." Similar to Macbeth, Jaques also seems to regard the stage of men as "nothing," because the "Last scene of all" is "mere oblivion, / *Sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything" (2.7.164, 166–67, italics original). It seems quite reasonable that inset plays which visually produce *theatrum mundi* on stage before the audience should end with the deaths of characters, and not fake ones but "real" ones too, that are more suitable for connecting fiction with reality as the world theater metaphor does.

Another reason for "real" deaths in inset plays is related to the authenticity and power of the theater. This can be summarized in the phrase repeated six times in *The Roman Actor,* "to the life." (1.1.23, 1.3.90, 2.1.92, 2.1.434, 3.2.217, 4.2.223). In order to advertise the power of drama, the prominent actor Paris speaks of his past production which had elicited a confession of murder:

> In a tragedy of ours, in which a murder
> Was acted to the life, a guilty hearer
> Forced by the terror of a wounded conscience
> To make discovery of that which torture
> Could not wring from him. (2.1.90–95)

According to him, the play, or more correctly, the "murder" in it, was "to the life" enough to evoke a confession from a guilty spectator. In other words, a play has to be "real" to be effective. In this way, a "real" death in a play-within-a-play might be the ultimate means of presenting this verisimilitude, as it actually destroys the "reality" of the play proper in

which the inset is embedded.

In the case of *The Spanish Tragedy,* the inset deaths are the results of the playacting through which the courtier Hieronimo manages to conquer the highly stratified power structure of the Spanish court. When he achieves his goal of killing his aristocratic opponents in his own tragedy, he uses the play and the dramatic role-playing to make his actions look like mere stage business while in fact causing actual damage to his opponents and even the royal spectators who watch the playlet; here, the inset play invades the play proper (Hornby 37). This is a performance used to drastically change reality. This necessarily leads to the common Elizabethan recognition of "the encroachments of illusion" upon the reality of the audience (Righter 83).

From a metatheatrical point of view, Hieronimo's conduct can be interpreted as a dramatist's retaliation against the intruding reality which has been exerting pressure of various kinds—religious, royal, civic, and spectatorial—upon the theater. In May 1593, presumably about six years after *The Spanish Tragedy,* the author Kyd himself fell foul of the Privy Council concerning xenophobic libels and heresy. He was arrested and probably tortured (Freeman 26–29). In his letter to Sir John Puckering, the Keeper of the Great Seal of England, Kyd asserts that he has "alredie geven some instance . . . of my [Kyd's] reverend meaning to the state" (qtd. in Freeman 182). He also asks him "some speaches from yo^{u} [Puckering] in my favor to my lorde, whoe (though I thinke he rest not doubtfull of myne inocence) hath yet in his descreeter iudgm^{t} feared to offende in his reteyning me" (qtd. in Freeman 181). He hopes to "reteyne the favo^{rs} of my lord, whom I haue [s]ervd almost theis vj yeres nowe," and without which he is "vtter[l]ie vndon" (qtd. in Freeman 182). Though it is not political censorship of his plays, what Kyd defends himself against is the power of the "state" that can, in his own words, inflict "paines and vndeserved tortures" on a dramatist (qtd. in Freeman 182). In addition, as a playwright, he needs the "favo^{rs}" of his "lord" to make a living, or he is "vndon."

In spite of his two letters to Puckering, however, Kyd seems to have failed to regain the protection of his former patron (Freeman 33).[1] The situation vaguely refers back to Hieronimo, who endures the cruelties of the authorities but has to put up with them because of his position as a King's servant. Kyd's unsuccessful attempt to get back the favor of his protector also recalls Hieronimo's lament for his vain solicitation of the help of the gods. In his terrible grief, he asks "the brightest heavens" for "justice and revenge," but they are "impregnable" and give his "words no way" (3.7.13–14, 17–18). Just as the heavens prove themselves "impregnable" to Hieronimo's "words," Kyd's "lorde" also seems to have remained unmoved. Nor can Hieronimo receive justice from the King despite his desperate plea, "O justice, justice, gentle king!" (3.12.63). Moreover, born to a "scrivener, a 'Writer of the Courte Letter,'" Thomas Kyd had been a student at Merchant Taylor's School before he was presumably apprenticed to his father (Freeman 1, 6, 10, 12). This fact clearly speaks of the middle class background similar to Hieronimo, the Knight Marshal of the Spanish court. When the helpless Hieronimo as an inner playwright, without either divine or regal assistance, achieves the "real" deaths of the lords in a playlet, he seems to look forward ironically to what will happen to Kyd himself six years later. Of course, Kyd does not kill anyone, but considering the suffering and insecurity borne in his final years, it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that such deaths are in a way a form of wish fulfillment on the part of the dramatist to display the power of his profession over an ever oppressive reality.

This relationship between the theater and the authorities is portrayed more clearly in *The Roman Actor*. While in *The Spanish Tragedy,* the histrionic figure Hieronimo kills his superiors in the play-within-the-play, in *The Roman Actor,* it is the prominent actor himself who is "theatrically" killed by the monarch. Here we can see the inversion of the paradigm in the two plays: the use of acting to resist authority compared with the tyrant's abuse of the theater to liquidate

his subject. Of course, even though few members of the audience or readers would sympathize with the cruel acts of the Emperor Domitian, this "real" murder in Massinger's tragedy also argues for dramatic reality by presenting a "real" death in the playlet. As I have mentioned, the phrase "to the life" used as many as six times supports this point. This phrase is concerned with authentic styles of acting intended to edify the audience. The expression as it is used by Paris serves to defend the theater at the impeachment of the players. This use of the idiom indicates the importance of the idea of authenticity in asserting the value and merits of the theater. According to Andrew Gurr, the acting style became increasingly realistic from the 1580s, with words such as "lively" and "life" used as the standard by which the worth of the action was measured (149). The repetition of "to the life" in *The Roman Actor* reflects this trend.

However, it also alludes to the problem of being too real, because the theater itself is symbolically and actually terminated when Paris the actor is "really" killed during a performance. When Domitian, as an amateur actor, plays in the inset play, "The False Servant" and really stabs Paris to death, the player utters, "Oh! I am slain in earnest" (4.2.283). The expression "in earnest" is often associated with reality in contrast to the illusion of playacting. Paris has used this phrase already in Act 3, Scene 2, where, also during a play-within-the-play, the Empress Domitia impulsively interrupts the performance to stop Iphis acted by Paris from committing suicide. Paris apologizes to her, not as a dramatic character but as an actor: "I ne'er purposed, madam, / To do the deed in earnest" (3.2.285–86). In these instances, the reality of things "in earnest" is seen to disrupt the drama. Illusion is destroyed by reality, and so is the play itself, because it is illusion that sustains the drama as its basis—without illusion, it is mere reality, not drama. From the latter half of the sixteenth century, drama began to become renowned as an art of "illusion" (Righter 63). While the theater aimed to be as "realistic" as possible, it could never be really "real." After all, as

Ben Jonson quips, a "poet never credit gained / By writing truths, but things (like truths) well feigned" (*Epicene* Another [Prologue] 9–10).

II

Even Paris, who asserts the "to the life" quality of the drama, knows all too well that deaths in plays are not real. Actually, to die and live again is one of the unique qualities of the theater as shown in Hieronimo's speech in *The Spanish Tragedy* about a play which is "counterfeit" and actors who "die today" and soon "starting up again, / Revive to please tomorrow's audience" (4.4.77, 79, 81–82). This resurrection and repetition is the quintessence of the power of theater, as the spirit of Revenge declares at the end of Kyd's play: "For here [on earth] though death hath end their misery, / I'll there [in hell] begin their endless tragedy" (4.5.47–48). On the other hand, this "counterfeit" or "starting up again" also potentially mars the drama's strength in just the same way as Falstaff's fake death to save his life in battle ("*falls down as if he were dead*" (5.4.75 SD, italics original)) and his comical boast of cunning in Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* (1596–97):

> 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termagant Scot [i.e. Hotspur] had paid me, scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie; I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit but the true and perfect image of life indeed. . . . Zounds, I am afraid of this gunpowder Percy, though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too and rise? By my faith, I am afraid he would prove the better counterfeit. Therefore I'll make him sure, yea, and I'll swear I killed him. Why may not he rise as well as I? Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. (5.4.112–26)

He then stabs the already dead body of Hotspur. In his dishonorable but comic fashion, Falstaff reveals the existence of an actor who "counterfeits" (feigns) death and then rises when the scene ends (Kastan 332n). In addition, "to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth" is also a reference to professional actors who make their living by "counterfeiting" various kinds of death in tragedies and histories. When Falstaff is "afraid he [Hotspur] would prove the better counterfeit" or he may "rise as well as [he]," the man playing Falstaff might also be "afraid" that the man playing Hotspur might be a "better counterfeit" or actor, and he may "rise" or succeed better than he. Besides, the phrase "To die is to be a counterfeit" could also suggest, "To die (on stage) is to be a (histrionic) counterfeit." In this theatrical self-referentiality, he unconsciously alludes to the fact that, on stage, even a "real" death, like that of Hotspur, is essentially "fake," as his own pretended death is. Falstaff's repetition of the word "counterfeit," combined with his unconscious reference to the theatrical practice of "counterfeit" dying, possibly deprives all deaths on stage of their verisimilitude which is at the heart of all tragedies. If "the purpose of playing . . . is to hold . . . the mirror up to nature" (*Ham.* 3.2.19–21), plays must be "natural" or persuasively authentic. Any possibility of metatheatrical suspicion about the validity of stage deaths and, by extension, events on stage in general, will be enough to arouse anxiety about that purpose.

This might be the anxiety in the dramatists' minds about the power of drama as essentially a "counterfeit" to influence the "reality" of the audience. When Hamlet deplores his own indecision when he is moved by an actor's performance in the role of Hebuba, he hints at this anxiety:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his whole conceit
> That from her working all his visage wanned,

> Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do,
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have? (2.2.539–50)

Here, the regretful prince apparently seems to admire the player's authentic acting. He does indeed, yet his praise of the performance is based on an assumption, which is not necessarily correct, that "reality" excels "fiction." That is why he is embarrassed with himself, who has a "real" motive, when he observes the actor playing frantically in a mere "dream" or illusion. This assumption is essentially deprecatory of the medium of drama, so that Hamlet supposes the actor plays a passionate scene only for "Hecuba," that is, "nothing"—like Macbeth who thinks life is a "shadow; a poor player" "Signifying nothing" (*Mac.* 5.5.24, 28)—which is emphasized in the prosody by the catalectic after "Hecuba." Likewise, Hamlet's famous precept of the theater partially cited above also appears vague and indefinite: "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (3.2.19–21). In addition to the precedence of "nature" over "playing," the roundabout construction of the sentence with various words inserted into the basic structure, "the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up to nature," makes the statement sound somewhat irresolute compared to the straightforward appreciation of the power of drama expressed by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595–96):

> 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. (5.1.12–17)

It is noteworthy that Theseus, too, considers what "the poet" produces as amounting to "nothing," like Hamlet and Macbeth. What differentiates him from the two princes is that he recognizes that the poet also gives that "nothing" a "local habitation and a name," that is materiality. As the words like "bodies forth," "forms," and "shapes" indicate, what dramatists create is here endowed with physicality in contrast to the essentially "airy" qualities of dramatic illusion.

This tension between nothingness and substance in Elizabethan drama is very well expressed in the dialogue between Poetry and Truth in the anonymous play, *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third* (1588–92):

> POETRIE. Truth well met.
> TRUTH. Thankes Poetrie, what makes thou vpon a stage?
> POETRIE. Shadows.
> TRUTH. Then will I adde bodies to the shadowes,
> Therefore depart and giue Truth leaue
> To shew her pageant.
> POETRIE. Why will Truth be a Player?
> TRUTH. No, but Tragedia like for to present
> A Tragedie in England done but late. . . . (507)

The dichotomy of poetry as "shadows" and truth as "bodies" is a succinct summary of Theseus' idea of the "shapes" created by "the poet's pen" out of "airy nothing." "Shadow" in the above dialogue represents the theater itself with its "insubstantial" and unreliable nature of performance (Walsh 126). Of course, it also refers to actors as indicated by Macbeth's

"shadow; a poor player" above and Puck's line in the epilogue of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* "we shadows" (5.1.414). The truth as "bodies" may confer authenticity upon such "insubstantial" playing. Truth virtually tries to banish Poetry from the stage but, when this really happens, the situation would be that of the inset tragedy in *The Roman Actor* which finally deracinates the spirit of the theater. The following question of Poetrie for Truth, "Why will Truth be a Player?", and the latter's denial, represent the apparently incongruous combination of the real and the poetic (Walsh 127). This apparent incompatibility of performance and truth, when both are indispensable in the dramatic creation, is exactly what early modern English dramatists struggled with.

III

One tentative solution might have been "bodies" as the words of Truth suggest. The literal murdered "bodies" in the inset plays may be able to assert the "reality" of the theater to the outside world with their horrifying physicality. If the drama tried to follow the example of reality to influence reality in turn, it is quite reasonable that dramatists would have worked hard to infuse whatever realistic elements they could into the plays so as to attain such power. Moreover, as Theseus suggests, materiality is what can be set against the anti-theatrical idea of the drama's nothingness. It is when a stage death is turned into a "real" death that the theater can most powerfully assert its power in its fusion of illusion and reality, its physicality, and the termination of its repetitive nature of the theater. By "actually" killing the dramatic characters in an inset play and thus denying the resurrection unique to the theater, the dramatist can assert a certain reality that is not counterfeit. Of course, the "actual" death which occurs within the play-within-the-play, which transcends its own fictional representation to become part of the reality of the larger plot, remains a fiction from the

audience's point of view. Nevertheless, by embedding a "play" within the main plot, the playwright can create a tableau which visualizes the relationship between the stage and the real theater audience. He is then able to give the semblance of truth to the play proper, which is the onstage equivalent to the auditorium, and can present it as relatively "real" compared to the framed narrative. The inner death which turns out to be "real" in the outer plot thus becomes the ultimate "reality" a play can achieve, perhaps because of its dissolution of the distinction between reality and illusion.

Indeed, the frame structure often functions to blur the boundary between reality and illusion, not to fixate it by "framing" the illusion. In *Pericles* (1607–08), when the Poet Gower ceases to tell the story for the audience just as the title role himself appears on stage, the frame of Gower's narration surrounding the play proper disappears, and the distinction between the "reality" of Gower and the "illusion" of Pericles' adventure dissolves. This dramaturgy recalls George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale* (1588–94), in which three apprentices are listening to an old woman telling them a story, whose characters immediately appear on stage (Righter 193). In Peele's play, the narrator the Old Woman cries out, "who comes here?" (1.108), to which the apprentice Frolic replies, "here some come to tell your tale for you" (2.1), while in *Pericles*, Gower sees the entrance of Pericles and says, "And here he comes" (2.0.39). The word "here" is significant because it indicates the undeniable specificity that binds the illusion and the reality. The characters of an ancient legend and the Old Woman's tale are no longer fictitious, being present on the stage "here," together with the "real" figures like Gower and the three apprentices. The bodies of the fictive characters appear on stage in a way whose physicality is just as tangible as that of the "real" narrators in the outer plot. As far as the corporal reality is concerned, there is no difference between the "fictional" characters and the "real" ones, and the stage becomes an arena in which to present to the audience the "reality" of a framed fiction no less solid than the "reality"

of the frame.

This "hereness" might be the source of a theatrical power dramatists sought to achieve. When we look back on *The Spanish Tragedy,* Hieronimo in his "discovery" of his dead son urges the bewildered onlookers to recognize the materiality of the body:

> See here my show, look on this spectacle:
> Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end:
> Here lay my heart, and here my heart was slain:
> Here lay my treasure, here my treasure lost:
> Here lay my bliss, and here my bliss bereft:
> But hope, heart, treasure, joy and bliss,
> All fled, fail'd, died, yea, all decay'd with this.
> From forth these wounds came breath that gave me life,
> They murder'd me that made these fatal marks. (4.4.89–97)

"Here" is used nine times altogether, with two "this's" and two "these's." What Hieronimo highlights is the present substantiality of his son's body, existing "here" with "these" wounds. In addition, at the same time as he stresses the material actuality of the corpse, he also calls it his "show" and "spectacle," making it an amalgamation of fiction and reality. Here, Hieronimo brings up the body he has borne off stage earlier (2.5.80 SD). This strange "resurrection" of the corpse not only physically asserts the death of his son but also both its reality and theatricality.

IV

Expectations and pressures from not only the authorities and anti-theatricalists, but also the audience and the actors, combined with other types of obstacles significantly influenced dramatists and their works. Some inset deaths imply some of the obstacles that they were forced to

overcome. When it comes to the audience, Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) deals with this problem the most extensively. Actually, it is a play about the audience. Through the exaggerated representation of demanding spectators, Beaumont tries to assert the autonomy of the theater. The actors struggle to protect the original plot of the play "The London Merchant," but the civic audience (Citizen the grocer and his Wife) and their apprentice Rafe overbear the actors. Rafe thrusts himself onto the stage and confuses the plot at the request of his master and his wife. The final resolution of the dramatist is to "kill" Rafe, the apprentice-turned-knight-errant. The plot induces the Citizen and his Wife to wish for Rafe's death spontaneously by showing them the happy ending of the inner play which they want Rafe to share. Finally, the onstage citizen audience voluntarily asks for the "death" of their apprentice (5.279), and the incongruous element in the plot is at last eliminated.

The theater cannot do without its audience no matter how unruly they are. Rafe is kicked out of the plot, but the boy actors of the troupe, despite their nuisance, never attempt to oust the Citizen and the Wife from the stage and the theater. The company continues to obey their orders, albeit reluctantly, and they continue to remain onstage when every other character makes an exit at the "Epilogus." In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the epilogue is assigned to an actor who returns to his "real" self from his character Puck (5.1.414–29), and in *The Tempest* (1611) to the maneuvering playwright figure Prospero (Epilogue 1–20). In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle,* however, it is the audience Wife who speaks the epilogue to conclude the whole play (Epilogus 2–12). When the "professional" actors have all left, she and her husband, who are but spectators, now claim possession of the stage, both visually and verbally. This ending vividly articulates the delicate dynamics between the stage and the auditorium and the anxiety felt by the dramatists and players.

Actors can sometimes oppose the will of dramatists as well. In

Women Beware Women, the corrupted Florentines who seek revenge on each other perform in an inset masque and—ignoring its original plot—kill, and are killed, during the performance (5.2.73–168). With their repeated use of theatrical terms such as "plot(s)" (4.2.210, 5.2.21, 151, 163), "perform(ance)" (4.2.157, 164), and "act(ed/s)" (2.1.238, 4.2.147, 159), these characters are depicted as fallen players who willfully disregard the dramatists' scripts. The deaths of these "actors" in the masque might possibly represent a form of theatrical punishment for their disobedience. Although actors and playwrights both belong to the theater, the latter, as implied in Hamlet's admonition to the overacting players (*Ham.* 3.2.36–42), might have held patronizing sentiments towards the former. This superiority is well expressed in Robert Greene's famous tirade against players:

> . . . vnto none of you (like mee) sought those burres to cleaue: those Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. . . . Yes trust them not: for there is an vpstart Crow, beutified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde,* supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you . . . O that I might intreat your rare wits to be imploied in more profitable courses: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and neuer more acquaint them with your admired inuentions. . . . it is pittie men of such rare wits, should be subiect to the pleasure of such rude groomes (45–46, italics original).

Greene thus warns other playwrights, namely Marlowe, Nashe (or Lodge?), and Peele (Melnikoff and Gieskes 11), to abandon playmaking because actors are base, callous and ungrateful. They are "burres," "Anticks," "grooms," and "Puppets." They, like Shakespeare in a "*Players hyde*," are far beneath writing blank verse, and even if they do, are "Apes" that can only "imitate." Even given his pride as one of the

University Wits and his resentful grievance against the players who abandoned him in his poverty, his opinion might represent the pride of creators in general.

This superiority felt by dramatists is very explicitly scripted in Robert Tailor's *The Hog Hath Lost His Pearl* (1613). Haddit, a gallant and jig-maker, pretends to be working hard when his servant tells him that a player has come to speak with him:

> HADDIT. About the jig I promised him—my pen and ink! I prithee, let him in, there may be some cash rhymed out of him. *Enter* PLAYER.
>
> PLAYER. The Muses assist you, sir: what, at your study so early?
>
> HADDIT. O, chiefly now, sir; for *Aurora Musis amica.*
>
> PLAYER. Indeed, I understand not Latin, sir.
>
> HADDIT. You must then pardon me, good Master Change-coat. . . . (1.1.102–07, italics original)

Haddit is a jig-maker, not a playwright, but his use of Latin before the uncomprehending player, along with his desire for money "rhymed out of him" and the mocking title of "Master Change-coat," speaks of the author's mean contempt for players. This condescension is more explicit in the conversation between Haddit and his beloved Rebecca, the daughter of the usurer Hog, from whom he borrows money. Talking about the plan to sneak Hog's treasure out of his chamber, they discuss the details:

> REBECCA. . . . how many have you made instruments herein?
>
> HADDIT. Faith, none but my cousin Lightfoot and a player.
>
> REBECCA. But may you trust the player?
>
> HADDIT. O, exceeding well. We'll give him a speech 'a understands not. (3.3.16–19)

Haddit's mocking remark about the player's lack of understanding and Rebecca's anxiety about his trustworthiness shows a common contemptuous suspicion about actors.[2]

Conclusion

Dramatists possibly hoped to attain absolute control over their plays. The inclination to identify playwrights with God Almighty can be found in the writings of philosophers, for example, of Guillaume Du Vair, a French Neo-Stoic, which was translated into English by Thomas James in 1598 as *The Moral Philosophie of the Stoicks*:

> Let vs consider that we come into the world as to a comedie, where wee may not chuse what part we will play, but onely looke that we play that parte well which is giuen vs in charge. If the Poet bid vs play a kings part, we must take care that we doe it well, and so if he charge vs with the porter or clowns part, we must do it likewise. . . . (qtd. in Rev. of *The Moral*)

Here God Almighty is likened to the "Poet" or playwright. Moreover, Epictetus, a Greek philosopher, expresses a similar belief in his book *Enchiridion,* compiled by his pupil Arrian and translated into English as *The Manuell of Epictetus* by Ia (James) Sandford in 1567:

> Thou muſt remember that thou arte one of the players in an enterlude, and muſt plaie ẽ y parte, which the authour thereof ſhall appoint, thou muſt play be it lõg, be it ſhorte. If he appointe thée to play the begger, ẽ y Creple, ẽ y Prince, or the private perſon, do it well and wittilie, for it lieth in theé to play that part, wherunto thou art appointed, and in an other to chwſe and appoint thée. (Ciiv-Ciiir)

The imagery of the world theater employed by philosophers emphasize that the parts we human beings play are "giuen" or "appointed" and that we are not in a place to "chuse/chwſe" our parts for ourselves.

Thus, a self-consciously framed theater in the tradition of *theatrum mundi* could be a site where the author's wish to identify himself with an omnipotent God and to control all the (sometimes intractable and threatening) factors associated with the making of a play is to be exhibited. Hieronimo, in *The Spanish Tragedy,* as a paragon of (role-) playing and as the metaphorical figure of a playwright, in the face of the precarious, class-conscious situation he finds himself, pursues and achieves his own ends within his own playlet. Paris, in *The Roman Actor,* through his dramatic and literal death at the hand of the tyrannical Emperor Domitian, warns about the danger of invasive authority and reality on the stage.[3] Inset deaths in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *Women Beware Women* subtly speak of the difficulties in satisfying both spectators and actors, respectively. The authors of these works must have attempted to vindicate their legitimacy through the representation of their "dramas macabre." Deaths in the "frame" and any other attempts to confer a physical entity to the performance reveal a common struggle, desire and anxiety through which the dramatists materialized their idea of a play.

Notes

[1] The exact identity of the "lorde" in Kyd's letter is uncertain. For a detailed discussion, see Lucas Erne 228–30 and Freeman 32–37.

[2] Rebecca's comment echoes the distrust of players expressed in Anthony Munday's *A Second and Third Blast of Retreat from Plays and Theaters* (1580). According to Munday, they are "shameless enactors" who are "as variable in heart, as they are in their parts" (79). In this manner, he continues to identify the personalities of actors with the villains' parts they play: "Are they not notoriously known to be those men in their life abroad as they are on the stage: roisters, brawlers, ill-dealers, boasters, lovers, loiterers, ruffians? So that they are always exercised in playing their parts, and practicing wickedness; making

that an art, to the end they might the better gesture it in their parts" (80).

3 This invasion of authoritative reality is also a metaphor for censorship. For example, in the anonymous *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1582), toward the end of the play, the supernatural characters Venus and Fortune, who have previously appeared in the interludes framing the whole plot, suddenly intrude on the main action and intervene in the secular affairs of men:

> Venus and Fortune ſhew themſelues and ſpeak to Phizantius, while Hermione ſtandeth in a maze.
>
> VENUS. Hye time it is that now we did appeare,
>
> If we deſire to end their miſerie:
>
> FORTUNE. Phizantius ſtay, and unto us giue eare,
>
> What thou determineſt perfourmed cannot be. (1739–44)

This abrupt appearance is astonishing in its effect. Venus and Fortune destroy the boundary demarcating divines and mortals, and, wielding their absolute power and authority as gods, control the human events. Another such instance is found in the last act of *The Spanish Tragedy,* when Hieronimo tries to hang himself at the end of the play-within-the-play but is prevented by the lords who break in (4.4.152–56). These are possible examples of the invasion of political influence on the stage.

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