

# The Death of the Stage and the Death of the State :

Theater, Power, and the Audience in *The Roman Actor*

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## Introduction

Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626) opens with a scene where three actors enter the stage and complain of the decline of the theater. The very first line, spoken by Aesopus, is, "What do we act today?" (1.1.1). The fact that the first scene should open in this way with actors speaking about what they are about to perform succinctly sums up the metadramatic quality of the tragedy (Thomson 415 ; Brown 45). Like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587), it contains three plays-within-the-play, and it is because of the extreme dramatic self-consciousness of the play's *theatrum mundi* structure that almost all criticism has focused on the play's theatrical imagery, the power of the drama, and the relationship between the theater and the authorities. Because the three inset plays seem to contradict the supposed didactic power of the stage, some consider the play as indicative of the ineffectiveness of the theater, or even as antitheatrical (Barish 197-98, 201 ; Butler 159-60). In addition, since *The Roman Actor* is a play that shows "the absolute continuity . . . between politics and theater" (Goldberg 203), critics are keenly conscious of the political significance of its

theatricality. Rebecca W. Bushnell notes the interdependence between the state and the theater which, by the end of the play, leads to the destruction of both (173, 179). David A. Reinheimer, more specifically, interprets the murder of the actor Paris at the hands of the emperor Domitian to signify the destruction of the theater itself by the imperial hand ; the final assassination of Domitian, then, is the result of the death of the theater (326).

The aims of this research are to clarify the importance of the strain of metatheatricality in *The Roman Actor* that has escaped the notice of previous critics, and, drawing upon former studies, to reconsider the fall of the theater in this tragedy. First, significant metatheatrical incidents are examined in order to investigate the connection between theater and politics, at both its rhetorical and substantial levels. The discussion also focuses on the characteristics shared by Domitian and Paris. The theatrical characteristics of the emperor are discussed in comparison with the professional actor. The final analysis focuses on the reasons for the fall of the theater in order to illuminate the interrelation among death, the drama, and the authorities, as well as the significance of the audience in the theater of the world.

## I

In *The Roman Actor*, as in other plays of the period, the word “act” is not only concerned with theatrical experience but also with how men behave in the real world. When summoned to the Senate for staging a comedy which allegedly satirizes people of high rank, the leading actor and the protagonist Paris encourages his fellows as follows :

We that have personated in the scene

The ancient heroes and the falls of princes  
 With loud applause, being to act our selves,  
 Must do it with undaunted confidence. (1.1.51-54)

Paris likens himself and his company to “ancient heroes,” dramatic characters whom they have “personated.” Their behavior in reality must follow the example of the “scene” of such heroes. Moreover, his company of actors must even “act” as themselves, which is a form of “identity as representation” (Goldberg 205).

The connection between the “real” world and the theater is emphasized by the entrance of the politicians. When the three actors start to leave the stage led by the lictors, three senators—as if to replace them—enter the scene. As the actors complain of the declining economy of the theatrical industry, the senators too lament the oppressive society in which they live. The unhappiness of both parties with their surroundings, one with the theater and the other with politics, marks the link between the theater and the real world. According to one senator Rusticus, the world is full of “bad acts” (1.1.70) and all their “actions / Are called in question” (1.1.72-73). It is an age when another senator Sura resigns opportunistically, declaring “For my part / I will obey the time” (1.1.112-13); his friends agree. Even the politicians, who live apart from the theatrical enterprise, by using metatheatrical language unwittingly stress the continuance of the *theatrum mundi* spirit established by the three actors. What deserves attention here is that the actors are still on the stage when the statesmen enter. It seems natural that the actors should make their complete exit, and that the senators then come in. The two groups, however, do meet on the stage, with the players greeting the senators. It indicates the conjunction of the theater and the world more effectively than each party had been presented in separate scenes.

The theatrical metaphors do not just connect the stage with the real world of politics but also could invest theatricality in the authority figures with a tinge of mockery. The entrance of Caesar, the emperor Domitian, who is a tyrant but also a sympathetic patron of actors, is sarcastically described in metatheatrical terms. When Domitian, in his first appearance, returns victorious from the war and commands a severe punishment for the captives he brought with him from the German tribes, the senator Rusticus mutters in an aside, "A bloody entrance!" (1.4.20). Here, Rusticus diminishes the power and authority of the emperor by comparing his triumphant "entry" to a theatrical "entrance", thus suggesting that he is only an "actor" in the theater of the world. The consul Aretinus, Domitian's spy, catches this belittlement of regal authority by means of theatrical metaphor and reports to Domitian that Rusticus and other senators speak of Caesar's triumphs as "mere pageants" (2.1.117).

A similar case is found in the theatrical metaphors applied to the paragon of action, Paris himself. Speaking of Paris' eloquent apology for the theater during the trial, Latinus, one of his fellow actors, says, "I never saw him / Act an orator's part before" (1.3.143-44). By suggesting the histrionic artificiality in Paris' speech, such praise of his abilities can only sound ironical and insincere (Angus 453; Butler 170; Pastoor 13). Latinus' comment detracts from the force of Paris' words by unwittingly suggesting that they are not genuine utterances but just "lines" spoken in a performance. In the case of both Rusticus and Latinus, the metadramatic lines are spoken by characters who act as observers, that is, as spectators, indicating their power to determine the value of the "show."

Metatheatrical utterances, however, are not necessarily depreciating. Actually, Domitian's order at the end of Act 1 to the players to prepare an

entertainment to “give it action” (1.4.80) is the impetus that drives the whole play forward. The matter that the players have been discussing (“What do we act today?” (1.1.1)) is finally going to be implemented by the emperor himself. As if the preceding part of the first act has been just an induction, Domitian’s cue sets the play into motion. By opening the first act with players (the theater) and ending it with the monarch (the state), both talking about “action” and something to “act,” Massinger links the theater with the state and tactfully establishes the metatheatrical worldview.

## II

Indeed, although sometimes derided as a “bloody entrance” (1.4.20) or “mere pageants” (2.1.117), the theatricality used for the display of Domitian’s authority is what forms the basis of his rule and his tyranny. According to A. P. Hogan, Domitian’s appearance from Act 1 through to Act 4 is a performance that is both written and produced by Domitian himself (275). He is a kind of playwright of most of the “actions” until the last act, where he is deprived of that omniscient power by his kinsmen and vassals. The symbolic moment comes when, while asleep, he has his table-book stolen by his wife, Domitia (5.1.178). According to Stephanos, a servant of Domitilla, Domitian’s cousin, who witnesses Domitian opening and writing Domitia’s name on it, the “fatal book / Was never drawn yet but some men of rank / Were marked out for destruction” (5.1.99-101). In other words, it is a notebook on which he writes down the names of important personnel he decides to sentence to death. Judging from the fact that he orders the execution of the senator Lamia and the consul Aretinus at a moment’s notice without bothering the table-book (2.1.234-

35 ; 4.2.159), the book is of no judicial or political necessity. It is simply of ritualistic importance and, in a sense, is a “script” of the empire of Domitian on whose pages the most severe punishment is prescribed. When he is robbed of the “script” by his subordinates, he is symbolically robbed of his absolute power and is no longer the playwright of his country. Before stabbing Domitian, Parthenius produces this table-book and terrifies the emperor :

PARTHENIUS. Behold this book.

CAESAR. Nay then, I am lost. (5.2.69-70)

There is no logical connection of the forfeit of the table-book with Domitian’s hopelessness. Domitian’s “*then*, I am lost,” however, suggests some metatheatrical cause and effect. The loss of the script means the end of his reign. The quoted dialogue between Parthenius and Domitian shows the interrelation of the fall of both the theater and the state.

Interestingly, the image of Minerva, who has been the object of Domitian’s devotion and source of his power, is also taken away from him just after the table-book is stolen (5.1.180 SD 4). Since then, Domitian “hath not / One spirit to command.” Minerva, the deity of art and wisdom, has helped Domitian manage his life in the form of theater (Hogan 280-81). Domitian’s cry for help, “Assist me, great Minerva” (5.1.95), when he writes Domitia’s name on the notebook, therefore, is a kind of invocation to his “Muse.” Therefore, the loss of the notebook and the abduction of the effigy of the goddess of art appear to be related in terms of their theatrical and artistic attributes.

Following this theft, the dictator does not and cannot order to “give it action” (1.4.80) as he previously did metadramatically to the events of the play. It is his men and relatives that act out the final “scene.” The theatrical nature of Domitian’s assassination is already shown as early as

in Act 3, Scene 1. Domitian's niece Julia hints at possible treason against the emperor, which she hopes to "put into act" (3.1.73). Stephanos replies that he is willing to "execute" (3.1.75) the plan, suggesting that he will "play" the part and "carry out" the direction to "assassinate" the tyrant. When they actually discuss murdering Domitian, too, the conspirators' conversation implies an element of performance to their actions (White 42-43). First, it is his wife Domitia who wishes to "give it [i.e. assassination] action" (5.2.4). Ironically enough, when referring to the assassination, she uses the same phrase that the emperor used in 1.4.80 (White 43). When Entellus, one of the conspirators, professes to "put in / For a part" (5.2.14-15), this treason is clearly defined as a sort of theatrical execution in which "[a]ll the art" is to keep the guards away from the emperor (5.2.8), "art" being the word used by Domitia when she boasts of her talent as an amateur playwright (3.2.135). When one of the guards, dismissed by Domitian, leaves the stage immediately before the assassination, saying he will "observe the sequel" (5.2.64), he concludes the series of theatrical metaphors Massinger used in relation to the murder of Domitian (Burt 340).

### III

As the monarch of a theater state, Domitian is not only the author of his empire but also a figurative player. In fact, in the play-within-the-play "The False Servant," he even becomes a "real" actor. Domitian, as well as Paris, is a "Roman actor" (Davison 51). The metaphor of acting binds Paris and Domitian throughout (Hogan 276). For example, when Domitian "put[s] off / The deity" of Caesar to discuss the suspected infidelity of Domitia (4.1.132-33), he "puts off" his authority like a theatrical costume.

Here, Domitian admits that the deity of the ruler is merely a part that he plays (White 36). This temporal abandonment of his role is expressed yet more emphatically when he plays the lord in “The False Servant” to kill Paris : “Off with my robe and wreath” (4.2.224). His taking off his “robe” and “wreath” clearly speaks of his disregard for the appropriate conduct as the prince. Meanwhile, Paris, as a professional actor, always recognizes the double identity of assumed dramatic characters and the actors behind them :

How glorious soever, or deformed,  
I do appear in the scene, my part being ended  
And all my borrowed ornaments put off,  
I am no more nor less than what I was  
Before I entered. (4.2.48-52)

In his account, Paris explains the discrepancy between the seeming and the real. As Domitian “enter[s] Rome” (1.1.45) (“A bloody entrance!” (1.4.20)) “in his triumphant chariot” (1.4.13 SD 2), Paris “enters” the “scene” in his “borrowed ornaments.” Moreover, Davison notes the following analogy (47) : while Domitian “put[s] off” his authority and robe when time demands, Paris “put[s] off” his ornaments when his “part” in a play ends. Paris answers, “The whole world being one [i.e. a stage]” (1.3.50), when asked by Aretinus, “Are you on the stage, / You talk so boldly?” (1.3.49-50). His reply suggests that the world is a stage (Pastoor 13), which is borne out by a fictional murder turned into a real one in the third playlet (Davison 51).

This oneness of the player and the dictator can also be seen in Domitian’s repetition of “my good Paris” (4.2.284) or “My Paris” (4.2.292) in his eulogistic speech after he has killed him. He also speaks of “my study” (4.2.290) to glorify Paris and “my plot” (4.2.297) to kill Paris “in



action” (4.2.298) with “an applause enduring to all times” (4.2.299) to “crown” his death (4.2.298). In this extremely histrionic show of affection, the emperor seems to identify himself with his favorite player or to identify the player with himself, and even seems to bestow the sovereignty upon an actor when he “crown[s]” his end. The actor Paris might be seen as something like Domitian’s alter ego. The emperor’s attempt to identify with and “crown” an actor signifies the importance of theatricality for this monarch.

#### IV

Domitian and Paris are in a sense alternatives to each other, and the world and the stage are “one.” As Reinheimer observes, the killing of Paris in the play-within-the-play symbolizes the death of both the theater and the profession of acting; it also triggers the death of the emperor himself (325-26). In other words, the decline of the stage portends the decline of the state (Reinheimer 317). I would like to add something to his argument by tracing the course of the play’s theatricality and its loss in the development of the plot. There are three elements in *The Roman Actor* that lead to the death of the theater: the blurred line between reality and illusion; the act of censorship; and the elimination of the audience.

The key to the first, the blurring of the line between reality and fiction, lies in the phrase “to the life” used six times in this play (1.1.23, 1.3.90, 2.1.92, 2.1.434, 3.2.217, 4.2.223). As Patricia Thomson points out, it is “significantly” repeated in conversations about playing (426). In all these instances (except in 3.2.217), “to the life” is used to describe the “authentic” or “realistic” style of acting. Rod Wilson astutely notes that the contents of the three plays-within-the-play gradually change from the

theatrical to the real, ultimately resulting in the intermingling between theater and reality (16). If so, Paris' favorite phrase, "to the life," is exemplified by the series of inset plays. Of course, it is also a prophetic dramatic irony because, when the last playlet is broken as Paris is actually killed, the drama is not only equal "to the life" but also reaches "to the life" of Paris. Paris' following apology for the drama, then, is quite ironical :

I once observed  
 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)

As far as Paris himself is concerned, when "a murder was acted to the life," the drama is not a miraculous catalyst for a confession of guilt but a "murder" itself. When Domitian proceeds to the presentation of the murder "to the life," he annuls the boundary between reality and illusion. At this moment, the real world invades that of the stage (Clark 71-72).

It is truly ironic that action "to the life," which supposedly teaches its spectators lessons can be fatally dangerous even to drama itself. This action "to the life" also means the death of the theater. *The Roman Actor* shows the demise of the drama by turning action into reality.<sup>(1)</sup> The obliteration of the boundary between the real and the dramatic aims at dramatic verisimilitude, but, if the reality of politics forces the dramatic illusion to be "real," it is not an improvement on the authenticity but an infringement on the autonomy of the theater.

In addition, the actual onstage murder of Paris signifies the end of the regenerative spirit of the theater. Domitia, following the slaying of Paris,

grows extremely scornful of Domitian and derides him for his dotage of her saying, “thou [Domitian] . . . shalt wish my actor [Paris] / Did live again, so thou mightst be his second, / To feed upon those delicats when he’s sated” (5.1.67-69). This observation by Domitia indicates the potential of repetition and resurrection of the theater. When she speaks of Paris “liv[ing] again,” the audience is reminded of Paris’ resolution in Act 1 not to be afraid of the sentence that awaits him for presenting the satirical comedy that angered several high-ranking statesmen :

We that have personated in the scene  
 The ancient heroes and the falls of princes  
 With loud applause, being to act our selves,  
 Must do it with undaunted confidence.  
 Whate’er our sentence be, think ’tis in sport ;  
 And though condemned, let’s hear it without sorrow,  
 As if we were to live again tomorrow. (1.1.51-57)

These lines not only reveal the world-as-stage metaphor discussed earlier but also manifest the ritualistic resurrection of the theatrical activity. This repetitious and reproductive nature of the theater asserted by Paris echoes *The Spanish Tragedy*, in which Hieronimo confesses to his audience that the murder in the drama “actually” happened :

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)

Paris is slain “in earnest” by Domitian in “The False Servant” (4.2.283),

and, deprived of the “counterfeit” playacting, cannot play again. When Domitian kills an actor, and in a play, too, he reduces the character to the man behind the character and symbolically kills the potential of theater for resurrection. Quite naturally, Domitian’s state collapses after the fall of the theater because his is a “theater state” whose existence depends on theatrical spectacles—from his heroic triumphal procession in Act 1 to his display of tyranny by torturing disobedient senators in Act 3.

## V

The second violation of theatricality, that is, censorship, is first directly displayed through the trial of Paris and the other actors for producing a satirical play (Patterson 87). As Annabel Patterson notices, Paris’ repeated use of the word “censure” in his eloquent apology for the theater also helps to build on the theme of censorship (90-91). Censorship, however, is also figuratively presented in this play. As Reinheimer aptly observes, the contraction of three plays-within-the-play by the imperial hands of Domitian and Domitia is an act of censorship (323-25). Preceding the performance of “The Cure of Avarice,” Domitian dictates :

Let them [players] spare the prologue,

And all the ceremonies proper to ourself,

And come to the last act. . . . (2.1.274-76)

Domitia, too, proudly informs Caesar of the second inset play, “Inphis and Anaxarete” :

. . . I have been instructing

The players how to act, and, to cut off

All tedious impertinency, have contracted

The tragedy into one continued scene. (3.2.131-34)

Finally, as for “The False Servant,” Domitian declares, “We’ll have but one short scene” (4.2.233). Both Domitian and Domitia use the royal prerogative to cut “ceremonies” or “impertinency” to make plays shorter. The emperor and empress certainly “censor” the plays and thus interfere in the region of the theater. What also should be noted here is the word “ceremonies.” As Domitian himself admits, “ceremonies” are for “ourself,” that is Kings and emperors. Davison cites some uses of the words “ceremony” or “ceremonies” attached to the royal authority from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* to show the importance of theatrical elements to kingship (48). Although he does not mention this reference to “ceremonies proper to ourself” by Domitian, considering the interrelation between theatricality and royalty throughout this tragedy, the meaning of his cutting off the dramatic “ceremonies” is quite apparent: by shortening plays, Domitian, despite himself, allegorically shortens his own reign. Therefore, in this tragedy, the stage as well as the state is ruined, because Paris’ performance and Domitian’s reign are both cut short by eliminating “ceremonies.”

Massinger’s career as a professional dramatist began during the time of strict censorship under James and Charles (Gross 284-85). In fact, Massinger himself once suffered the censorship of the King Charles in 1638 for his now lost play, *The King and the Subject* (Bawcutt 204). According to the record of Sir Henry Herbert, the King was offended by the following lines:

The Caesars

In Rome were wise, acknowledging no lawes  
 But what their swords did ratifye, the wives  
 And daughters of the senators bowinge to  
 Their wills, as deities. . . . (qtd. in Bawcutt 204)

This evidently recalls a number of situations in *The Roman Actor*, written twelve years before the reported censorship. For example, when Domitia, one of “the wives . . . of senators,” doubts the legitimacy of her becoming Domitian’s mistress, Parthenius objects, “When power puts in its plea, the laws are silenced” (1.2.44) or “his [Domitian’s] will, / Stands for a thousand reasons” (1.2.47-48). Of course, Domitia soon yields to Domitian’s “will.” In addition, Domitian presumes himself to be invested with “deity” (4.1.133), but, as a tribune says, is one of the Caesars who “governed only by their will” (5.2.91). At the time that *The Roman Actor* was performed, the royalty was exerting considerable control over plays (Bushnell 179). Peter Womack observes that this was the first play Massinger wrote as the King’s Men’s principal playwright; it reflects how difficult it was to serve the king as an unoffending and entertaining man of the theater (237). Paris’ connection with the emperor and his subsequent misfortune might mirror the inevitable dilemma dramatists must have faced during the reign of Charles I.

## VI

The third and the most important element, the elimination of the audience, is paradoxically alluded to throughout the play through the response of the onstage audience. Since Domitian employs the theater to overawe and control his subjects (Dallett 31), he is always anxious to know how a performance is received and continually tries to control the audience. When he summons Lamia, the ex-husband of Domitia, whom he has taken away, he presents Domitia singing on the upper stage—a scene reminiscent of a play-within-the-play—and asks for his opinion: “Say, Lamia, say, / Is not her voice angelical?” (2.1.228-29). Insulted, Lamia

does not respond satisfactorily as a “spectator,” and the angry emperor commands his execution. In the case of “The Cure of Avarice,” he asks Domitia for an opinion on the content of the play, “How approve you, sweetest, / Of the matter and the actors?” (2.1.409-10). He also inquires of Philargus about the possibility of correcting his avarice, but, when the miser professes himself to be “past cure” (2.1.436), the impatient tyrant orders his death by hanging.<sup>(2)</sup> Moreover, before the torture of the two senators, Rusticus and Sura, a play-within-the-play-like set piece (Thomson 414), Domitian’s informer, Aretinus, instructs the guard to “carefully observe / The people’s looks” and to punish those who show signs of compassion for the condemned senators (3.2.47-48). Thomson argues that here, Domitian seems to dictate the behavior of the audience (414).

In addition, the torture of Rusticus and Sura in Act 3 is interesting for its portrayal of Domitian’s disturbed behavior. Confronted by the unyielding determination of the two senators, Caesar’s mind wanders, and in his distraction, he thinks out loud about his unrest. His outward reaction, which publically reveals his inner agitation, is most unbecoming for the monarch. This torture is a kind of “show,” but Domitian, in his excitement, forsakes the conduct appropriate for a royal spectator. According to Stephen Orgel, in theatrical performances held before the king, his reaction and conduct draw the attention of other spectators as does the content of the play itself; the monarch sees and is being “seen” (Orgel 9, 13-14, 16). Here, Domitian is not only a member of the audience but also an actor. In his preface (1603) to *Basilikon Doron*, King James astutely explains this:

Kings being publike persons . . . are as it were set . . . vpon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the

beholders eyes are attentiuely bent to looke and pry in the least  
circumstance of their secretest drifts. . . . (4, italics removed)

If the “secretest drifts” of a king are “looke[d]” and “pr[ied]” in by his people, Domitian’s discomfiture is far from an ideal reaction as the emperor of an absolutist state theater.

Before James, Elizabeth used theatrical imagery to describe the state of the queen :

. . . we princes . . . are set on stages in the sight and view of all  
the world duly observed. The eyes of many behold our actions . . .  
It behooveth us therefore to be careful that our proceedings be  
just and honorable” (194)

While the metaphor is similar, Elizabeth’s speech is more interesting when viewed in its context: the speech was delivered before a deputation from parliament, which called for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. Elizabeth half reluctantly agrees to the petition. This is one of her “actions” as a “prince” on a public “stage,” in order to be seen “just and honorable.” In contrast, Domitian’s theatricalization of his government is immature and intemperate. Parthenius advises Domitian to torture the senators “in private” (3.2.19) because he wishes to keep Caesar’s “clemency admired, / Tempered with justice” (3.2.10-11). In addition, because of their popularity among the people, “the sad object [i.e., tormented senators] may beget compassion / In the giddy rout, and cause some sudden uproar / That may disturb” the emperor (3.2.22-24). Parthenius was undoubtedly aware of the power of the common people as “spectators” of the theater of the state. Although Elizabeth was advised to be severe, and Domitian was advised to be discreet, the intention behind the advice or the acceptance of the advice was to project a favorable image of the monarch. Just as Elizabeth was sensitive enough to appear “just



and honorable,” so also Parthenius was careful to project an image of Domitian’s “clemency” and “justice” (both of which he does not have). Domitian, however, refuses to “court the people’s love or fear / Their worst of hate” (3.2.26-27). This reckless decision, as Parthenius suggests, might have caused the “uproar” that finally led to Domitian’s fall.

Domitian’s curiosity and caution about the spectators’ reactions highlight one aspect of the theater: a performance is completed not by the “performers” nor by the “playwright,” but by the “audience” who applaud or hiss at what they see or hear. Through the repeated use of theatrical insets, Massinger stresses the importance of the audience on whose existence the power of the theater ultimately depends (Rochester 50). However, by threatening and even purging them, Domitian unwittingly undermines the dynamics of the stage.

The definite loss of the audience is indicated in the assassination and eulogy of the emperor. When Domitian is assassinated, tribunes “Force the doors” and come onto the stage (5.2.75). Their abrupt entry is reminiscent of that of Fortinbras and his army immediately following Hamlet’s death. In *Hamlet* (1600), however, by presenting Fortinbras as the probable successor upon whom Hamlet himself does “prophesy th’election lights” and who has his “dying voice” (5.2.308-09), Denmark, although “rotten” (1.4.65), now has some hope of a new beginning. In addition, Horatio’s suggestion that dead bodies “High on a stage be placed to the view” (5.2.331), or Fortinbras’ direction to “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage” (5.2.349), also sound metatheatrical (Richards 52). Of course, “stage” here means a “floor raised above the level of the ground,” but it is also “for the exhibition of something to be viewed by spectators” (*OED*, “stage” n, 4 a). Even after the disastrous play-within-the-play-like fencing match in which Death “so many princes at a shot / So bloodily

hast struck" (5.2.319-20), by crowning the death of the prince, who had a great fondness for the drama, as something to be "staged," the theatricality of the state and the theatricality of the stage are both compatibly preserved.

In *The Roman Actor*, however, this is not the case. The last few lines of one of the tribunes highlight death itself without a shred of the theatricality :

Take up his [Domitian's] body. He in death hath paid  
 For all his cruelties. Here's the difference :  
 Good kings are mourned for after life, but ill,  
 And such as governed only by their will  
 And not their reason, unlamented fall,  
 No good man's tear shed at their funeral. (5.2.88-93)

Whereas in *Hamlet*, the prince's body will "High on a stage be placèd to the view," Domitian's subjects will only "take up his body" with no spectators supposed.<sup>(3)</sup>

In addition, the comparison of the first and the last entry of Domitian Caesar clearly illustrates the "fall" or demise of the play's theatricality. Just before Domitian's triumphant entry into Rome, court ladies are fighting over the better places to greet the emperor. Following Domitia's arrogant assertion that she is the one "whom Caesar favours" (1.4.13), Julia comments skeptically, "Observe the sequel" (1.4.13). Of course, she means something like, "Let's see and judge whom the emperor loves most," but Caesar's entrance immediately following this line attaches another sense to her remark : "let's see the pageant of the emperor's entrance." This theatrical twist of meaning is made clear by the existence of the "audience" during the entry, that is, Paris and the other actors, senators and court ladies. The repetitious and ironical asides of three

“observing” senators, starting with Rusticus’ “A bloody entrance!” (1.4.20), reinforce the dramatic nature of the entry.

However, the theatricality of Domitian’s first entrance seems lost or is at least maimed in his last entrance. Deceived by Parthenius into believing that it is one hour past five, his prophesied hour of death, Domitian dismisses the tribunes, saying, “Know your distance” (5.2.61), and they reluctantly follow his order. One of the military tribunes makes his exit, promising that he will “observe the sequel” (5.2.64). He uses exactly the same phrase “observe the sequel” as Julia in Act 1. The case here is completely altered, however, since the tribunes do not actually “observe” what follows as Julia and other members of Domitian’s court did at his triumph, but, in a fatalistic and indifferent manner, acquiesce to the tyrant’s command and leave the scene. Unlike his first “bloody entrance” with many audience members, Domitian’s last “entrance” has no “audience.”

Although the preparation for Domitian’s assassination is clearly metatheatrical, “action” without spectators cannot be called strictly theatrical. The repetition of the phrase “observe the sequel” emphasizes the contrast between both of Domitian’s entrances, thus underlining the fall of the “theater” of his empire. When he has threatened and finally displaced the audience (tribunes) who can “observe” the turn of events from the stage, he ends up alone, with no subjects around to help or advise him. Through his acts of domineering oppression and the elimination of his audience, Domitian finally deprives his theater of its audience before the “show,” and consequently deprives himself of his reign and life. This outcome argues that the audience is a necessary part of the theater and that their elimination or threat of elimination can yield no good results. After all, a theater without an audience is incomplete and

defective. So is the theater state.<sup>(4)</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has shown how the theater of *The Roman Actor* is destroyed, and how the politics of the emperor, which were closely associated with the theater, also collapse.<sup>(5)</sup> As shown in the beginning of this paper, Domitian's empire represents a typical theater state, replete with various ceremonies designed to impress the people with his authority. In accordance with his theatrical governance, his subjects internalize the idea of the world theater and behave like actors on his horrifying stage. Because Domitian's power is a "theatrical construction," which is also implied by his identification with Paris, the death of Paris symbolically suggests Domitian's own end. Domitian's failure lies in his overconfidence in his mastery over his world stage and his inability to see the frailty of his "theatrical" sovereignty. When the state invades the stage and the audiences are not allowed liberty, the world itself is destined to decline. In a sense, *The Roman Actor* is not "antitheatrical" as has sometimes been suggested but, paradoxically, seems to emphasize the efficacy of the theater(ical) as an integral part of a society. *The Roman Actor* most skillfully portrays the symbiosis between the theater and the state from a political and (meta) theatrical point of view.

### Notes

- (1) It does not seem irrelevant that, when this "to-the-life" theater is realized to an extreme extent and the phrase itself disappears, it is substituted by a new set of words, "I am lost." This is an expression used exclusively by the emperor Domitian when he despairs of his survival and thus predestines the fall of his empire (5.1.81, 199, 263, 5.2.70). In other words, when "authority/

reality" (life) invades "theater/illusion," "to the life," a phrase indicative of the end of the theater, is succeeded by the repetition of "I am lost," a phrase predicting the end of the reign.

- (2) John E. Curran, Jr. analyzes this cruelty of Domitian as the expression of his desire to equate reality (stingy Philargus) with the stage (the miser in the inset play) (339).
- (3) Also notice the couplets and the consonance of the "l" sound in the last four lines. This is clearly designed to mime the sound of the funeral knell which stresses the death of Domitian and his empire.
- (4) The third inset play, "The False Servant," prefigures this absence of the audience because there is no one on stage to see it. According to Erik Dunnum, Massinger clears the performance of its spectators in order to negate the alleged efficacious influence on them and, consequently, destroys the theater itself (534-35)
- (5) For an alternative or complementary reading of the play that sees the collapse of Domitian's world theater superseded by the gods' theater of justice, see Thomson (414) and Ira Clark (76-78).

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