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Staging the Emergence of Metadrama in "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

Peter Goldman

Abstract

In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the addition of the various framing devices to *Pyramus and Thisbe* begins with Bottom's desire to monopolize the stage. The craftsmen's metadramatic speeches motivate the courtly audience's sustained commentary on the play, by which they imitate the players in their absurdly literal interpretation of the play action and enter into competition for the attention of everyone present. Metadrama emerges as prominent feature of Shakespearean drama in order to address the potential rivalry and resistance of the audience—effects of a nascent free market and the declining respect for divine hierarchy.

Keywords: Shakespeare, metadrama, self-reference, mimetic rivalry, authority, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, René Girard, Robert Weimann, Michael Tomasello.

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> Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. -Victor Turner

Authorial figures in Shakespearean drama are much given to apology and self-effacement. In *The Tempest*, Prospero promises to "break my staff, . . . drown my book," abjuring "this rough magic" and (in the epilogue) conceding all power to the audience (5.1.54,57,50).[1] Feste, at the end of *Twelfth Night*, admits failure in all his life's endeavors, "For the rain it raineth every day"; he humbly promises, nonetheless, "we'll strive to please you every day" (5.1.404,408). The Prologue to *King Henry the Fifth* apologizes for the disparity between the vast magnitude of the play's action and "the flat unraised spirits that hath dared / On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth / So great an object" (Prologue 9-11). And Puck, at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* asks for the audience's pardon "If we shadows have offended," promising to "mend" and "restore amends" in return for applause (5.1.418,425,433). We could easily multiply examples from Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The prologue and various interjections made by the craftsmen staging *Pyramus and Thisbe* belong to the same category of speeches, asking the audience's indulgence for such "dreadful" things as the appearance of a lion and the slayings by sword, as well as the imaginative difficulties of presenting moonshine and a wall on stage. The mechanicals' production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* parodies not only the naiveté of amateur players, it is, in effect, a self-effacing parody of Shakespeare's own theatrical technique. To publicly parody oneself can be viewed as a form of apology, so it appears that Shakespeare is apologizing for apologizing, and indeed apologies can never go far enough for a resistant audience. The Shakespearean stage evidently suffered from a problem of authority (despite, or perhaps because of, its popularity), which the various devices I've mentioned here strive to negotiate, with grace and humor.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the amateur players' specific fears are not realistic, of course, but they are still symptomatic of a larger issue, the problematic relationship of Shakespearean drama to its audience. What the staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* suggests is that the ascendance of metadrama during the Renaissance was a response to a perceived (and real) resistance among the audience, a resistance of which the well-known attacks on theater were only one symptom.

Many critics have discussed the multifarious controversies surrounding theater in Renaissance England. Louis Montrose proposes that Shakespeare responded by asserting a "reciprocal relationship between his work and the world," by presenting "a dramatistic view of human life" and thereby holding "the mirror up to nature," that is, sixteenth-century London society (52-3).[2] What Montrose fails to recognize is that reciprocity is actually the problem, to which metadrama is the answer, which responds not simply by holding the mirror up to nature but rather by staging, exploring, and defusing the potential for rivalry. An emergent market economy and the weakening of any divine sanction for traditional hierarchy were liberating for competition and social change. The demand for reciprocity (fair exchange in social relations) appears when individuals perceive themselves as equals, which, ironically, stimulates offense at any perception of disparity.[3] Sir John Cheke, tutor to Prince Edward (future King Edward VI), argued that pursuing "equalitie in the common-wealth" must needs be a violent rebellion against the ordained social order (990). Reciprocity is an ideal that is rarely achieved in practice; the failure of its perfect realization facilitates an iconoclastic skepticism that always proves corrosive to all public, ceremonial authorities: political, religious, and theatrical. Such rivalry was not limited to the opponents of theater but was also found within the London amphitheaters and private playhouses.

The precise way in which metadrama responds to the problem of authority has not been well understood. What the craftsmen staging *Pyramus and Thisbe* recognize on some level is that the spectators of their play need to be acknowledged and included in their production. Not only do their metadramatic speeches anticipate and authorize the potential response of the audience, they also provoke a sustained commentary on the action—so much so that the courtly audience has nearly as many lines as the actors during the performance. Theseus, Hippolyta, Lysander, and Demetrius succeed in competing with the craftsmen for the attention of everyone present, on- and off-stage. Since the performers insist on a literal interpretation of the play action (the lion is actually Snug the joiner), the courtly spectators take them at their word and interpret everything even more literally. They hyperbolically imitate the mechanicals in their interpretation of the play, making what is already absurd even more so. The craftsmen are perfectly correct in anticipating a resistant audience, and their strategy for incorporating and containing that resistance works brilliantly. In a similar way, those in the larger theater can identify with the onstage audience in their assumed superiority to the mechanicals, serving to authorize both audience and performers on every level. Because the amateur players are so incompetent (as tragedians, at least), they become supremely worthy of our attention. *Pyramus and Thisbe* (both in rehearsal and performance) is a highlight of the larger play and Shakespearean comedy overall.

Spectatorship is one of the most common topoi of Shakespearean drama, by which he explores how centrality—theatrical, political, and social—on a public scene is created, defended, deconstructed, and validated even in its destruction. His plays underline the dependence and vulnerability of centralized figures in relation to an audience. Prospero acknowledges that he is helpless without the mindful attention of his audience (now his fellows)—an important truth not only of theater but also our life as social animals. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents us with a parable of how and why metadrama becomes a leading element of English Renaissance theater.

In his book *A Theater of Envy* René Girard finds mimetic rivalry driving all of the conflicts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: between Hermia and Helena, Demetrius and Lysander, Oberon and Titania. Likewise, the rivalry among the artisan players, according to Girard, motivates their absurd dramatic inventions including the uncanny half-man, half-lion to be presented by Snug. Girard notes that Quince first suggests the danger of frightening the ladies in order to discourage Bottom's desire to play the role of the lion (and all the roles) in addition to Pyramus (*Theater* 58): "And you should do it [roar] too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all" (1.2.68-70). The addition of the various framing devices begins with Bottom's desire to monopolize the stage. Bottom enters into rivalry with Quince by finding ever more things that might frighten (or puzzle) the audience, and he begins another competition of adding metadramatic speeches to address these supposed dangers. Girard argues,

> All devices intended as precautions against the supposed panic of the ladies are actual symptoms of the real panic brewing among the craftsmen themselves. They all exhibit their hysterical symptoms to one another and imitate them most compulsively. They are projecting their own fears upon the weaker sex . . . . (*Theater* 60)

Girard sees the supernatural "translation" of Bottom as a dramatic metaphor for the transformations created by a mimetic crisis. For Girard, however, the fear of conflict with the audience is purely imaginary on the part of the mechanicals, a projection of their own internal hysteria. It's true that the mechanicals' fears, as they express them, are not realistic, but the potential for rivalry with the audience is real and important. As we'll see, Bottom's competition with the other players for the attention of their audience is paradigmatic for the London theaters. The issue addressed by the staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is not so much a sacrificial crisis, as Girard proposes, but rather a crisis of authority—including the authority of the theater and the plays presented there, an increasing resistance to figures who dominate the collective scene of representation. Antitheatricalists, in several cases, were not opposed to the private reading of plays; it was only their public performance to which they objected.[4] What is at stake here is the larger issue of public authority in Renaissance England.

1. **Background and Context**

Before the advent of the London amphitheaters, most of the existing drama had significant religious associations that gave it considerable authority for its audience. Medieval drama and ancient Greek tragedy were largely religious or mythic in subject matter, and their productions shared many formal features with religious ritual, including scripted speech and action, poetry, song, dance, personation, and mimetic, symbolic actions.[5] The relationship of celebrants and laity during certain rituals bears comparison to that of the actors and audience in theater.

Ritual is the prototypical form of human symbolic activity, as evidenced by paleolithic burial practices and cave paintings, which are generally agreed to have religious/magical functions.[6] Historically, religion has been the typical basis of human social order, affirming communal solidarity and the subordination of humans to the gods (although such subordination can take a great variety of forms).[7] Marshall Sahlins observes that nominally egalitarian hunting-gathering tribes perceived themselves as governed by larger supernatural forces and agents.[8] Ancient and medieval religions gave supernatural sanction and authority to the social distinctions that serve to structure human interactions and prevent conflict. Medieval drama included certain tensions between the representations of rulers and those governed, as I'll discuss, but relatively speaking, the authority of medieval drama was not particularly problematic due to its religious content and the sanction of religious/political authorities. Jonas Barish writes,

> Despite the abundance and energy of mediaeval theatrical culture no sustained body of antitheatrical writing survives from the Middle Ages. Drama forms proliferated freely, in mimetic processions, paternoster plays, liturgical plays, scriptural cycle plays, and morality plays, but left behind no corresponding body of condemnatory theory. . . . The key to this forbearance lies of course in the fact that the theater this time had sprung not from an alien, hostile religion [as with Roman plays from the perspective of Christians] but from Christianity. It had originated in the church, and it maintained close links with the church. It took its subject matter from the central truths of religion. It reenacted the mysteries of the faith, and it made the very altars the stage, and it involved massive participation of the clergy. (66-67)

As the English Reformation gained strength, concerns about papist associations led to the demise of the Mystery plays, but the Protestant (usually anti-papal) drama that emerged (for a time) enjoyed considerable support from religious and political authorities.[9] In contrast, the drama presented at the London amphitheaters was notably lacking in any express religious sanction. The emergence of a relatively novel dramatic tradition with the largest ambitions and available to all Londoners made metadrama a necessary development. It's significant that "Attacks on the theater, the well-documented anti-theatrical prejudice, did not begin until the opening of the public theaters in 1576" (Falco 252).

We should note that the self-referential elements we find in Renaissance and modern drama are foreign to ancient Greek tragedy.[10] Classical scholar Oliver Taplin views metatheatricality in terms of "the relation of the world of the play to the world of the audience" (164). In the case of fifth-century tragedy, there was a strict separation between these two worlds. The chorus "always remains within the world of the play, never stepping outside it"; the chorus is typically the "all but helpless spectator" of events, required "to divert its frustrated urge to action into lyric expression" (Taplin 173). In a similar way, "however moved the tragic audience may be, whether by pity towards giving help or by anger towards revenge, or whatever, it knows it must sit quiet" (Taplin 173). Along the same lines, Nietzsche notes with approval Friedrich Schiller's view of "the chorus as a living wall that [Greek] tragedy pulls around itself to close itself off entirely from the real world and maintain its ideal ground and its poetic freedom" (Nietzsche 37).[11]

In contrast, spectatorship in Shakespearean drama plays an essential role in the dramatic action on every level. The craftsmen substantially modify *Pyramus and Thisbe* in anticipation to what they imagine (rightly or wrongly) will be the response of the audience, and the audience plays an active role during the actual performance. Self-reference is not a completely novel development, but it emerges as a dominant theatrical topos during Shakespeare's lifetime.

In the same vein as Taplin, Eric Gans writes, "The [ancient Greek] chorus itself has a naturalizing function opposite to that of the neoclassical play-within-a-play: it makes the esthetic scene itself appear as a communally rather than formally privileged locus" (*Originary Thinking* 132). Classical protagonists "are conscious of being observed by the world, not self-conscious of being watched by an audience" (Gans 133). They enjoy "a legendary or historical guarantee for centrality" (Gans 149). Their worthiness for the spectators' attention is a given. "Esthetic representation is their due, it depends on them, not they on it" (Gans 133). The lives of the heroic figures of ancient tragedy play out on a plane of reality hierarchically above everyday experience. But when the audience perceives themselves as "the potential equals in triumph and in suffering as the participants of the agon," due to the influence of Christianity, neoclassical drama finds it necessary to supplement its own authority by staging the theatrical scene within the work itself (Gans 148).

The emergence of metadrama reflects the larger problem of social order, which depends on the culture as a whole and all of its parts, not just the government, legal system, and economy. The religious and political institutions of medieval society were supported by an ideal of cosmic order, which was still promulgated during Shakespeare's lifetime.[12] The idea of a cosmic order is as old as social hierarchy itself; it attempts to graft the power of God or the gods onto the ruling class, along with the attendant religious feelings of awe, fear, wonder, and social belonging. The cosmic order is rooted in the ceremonies that play such an important role in medieval society. As a specific doctrine, it prescribes a hierarchy of estates and degrees, and it could take a variety of forms, some more authoritarian, as with the divine right of kings, and some emphasizing mutual obligations and duties, as with the metaphor of the commonwealth as a body. It tries to discourage social mobility, but everyone knew that individuals, by various means, could raise (or lose) their class status in Shakespeare's England.[13] Moreover, rulers could be resisted and overthrown without any intention of challenging the principle of cosmic order.[14] The Elizabethan Homilies on Obedience and Against Disobedience, classic statements of divine hierarchy, practically undermine their own argument by dwelling so insistently on the problem of an evil ruler, who are so common in the Bible.

Shakespeare was able to draw on the Elizabethan ceremonial order to motivate the content and aesthetics of his drama in powerful ways. Shakespearean drama has a certain natural affinity with political and religious ceremonies, by means of its form, elevated language, reference to divine hierarchy, sense of communal belonging (within the plays and among the audience, at the denouement), and the felt power of larger forces such as fate or Providence.[15]

Political discourse in sixteenth-century England made frequent reference to the concept of the commonwealth as a natural body, with the parts ordered hierarchically.[16] The divine sanction for monarchy and aristocracy is a very common refrain in Shakespearean drama. Claudius's claim, "There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will" (*Hamlet* 4.5.127-129), is no doubt informed by multiple ironies, but the power of such conceptions effectively served a variety of dramatic purposes for Shakespeare. The "root conditions of Elizabethan theater" were the deeply ceremonial culture—religious, popular, civic, and state—of Shakespeare's youth (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare's Life" 52). Greenblatt observes, "the theater drew significant energy from the liturgy and rituals of the late medieval church" ("Shakespeare's Life" 55). The representation of divine hierarchy, whether it is affirmed, undermined, or mourned for its loss, functions to authorize Shakespeare's plays as worthy of attention then and now. An individual's thoughts and actions acquire dignity, dramatic power, and a depth of meaning by their relationship to the cosmos, whether Greek, Christian, or some combination thereof. Shakespeare lived during a crucial transitional period. The feudal order was still very important, but its foundations were being questioned and undermined by powerful socio-political developments. His drama emerged as "a mimetic civilisation of image and myth, symbol and ritual, gave way to a more patently moralistic culture of the printed and authoritatively pronounced word" (Collinson 226), not an easy or always peaceful transition. The Reformation introduced radical changes that made possible the English Civil War, following which Hobbes and Locke formulated new theories of political order that do not rely on any divine sanction. Plays such as *Richard II* and *King Lear* take the demise of the feudal order as their subject matter, nostalgically mourning its loss while recognizing the weakness and corruption of its leading figures and their ceremonial status.[17]

Leading Protestant reformers generally affirmed the authority of godly rulers (which could be opposed to papal authority); their challenge was primarily directed to religious reforms.[18] But Christian egalitarianism and Protestant iconoclasm were simply too powerful to be limited to specific ecclesiastical reforms. The iconoclastic perspective was inevitably extended to virtually all existing political and religious authorities, leading to "the reforming of Reformation itself," to borrow a phrase from John Milton (*Areopagitica* 957).[19]

Robert Weimann's work on Shakespeare is relevant to our line of inquiry here. He is fundamentally concerned with the connections between folk mimetic traditions, Christian rituals, Christian drama, and Shakespearean drama. The continuities and discontinuities are equally important for him, although he emphasizes Shakespeare's debt to the popular tradition in the theater.[20] The question is, what authorizes these various dramatic traditions for their contemporary audience? He finds "a fundamental contradiction" between Christian ritual and Christian drama, "a shift from *similitudo* to *imitatio*, from the ritual incarnation of the Christian mass to the mimetic representation of biblical myth in terms of late medieval reality and sensibility": the former bodies forth a miraculous episode while the latter is representational and more engaged with the world of the audience (*Shakespeare* 57-8). Ritual relied on traditional ecclesiastical authorities, but medieval drama was largely an expression of the local people of all ranks and it included representations of their everyday lives.

Medieval drama was authorized by its religious content *and* by its connection to the lives of the ordinary people by whom it was performed. Virtually the whole community of a town and surrounding countryside was involved in the staging of a Mystery cycle. The potential for conflict between traditional authorities and the townspeople was actually included in medieval drama; it found expression in the physical staging, the distinction between the platea—the margin of the performance area, near the audience—and the locus, a platform or wagon representing specific locations in the dramatic action (Weimann, *Shakespeare* 73-85). The figures of the locus remain in the world of play, while figures on the platea often address the audience directly, more or less in their own person, and they speak to the concerns of the spectators (although this is not a stable opposition, and locus figures sometimes address the audience directly too). The shepherds from the Wakefield Master's *The Second Shepherds' Play* are on one level characters from the New Testament, but at the same time they speak to and connect with the audience directly about contemporary concerns: bad weather, the travails of marriage and children, and the injustices inflicted by “gentlery men” and their insolent servants (line 18). The shepherds, despite their role, speak to the audience as in effect one of their number.[21]

Weimann recognizes insightfully that the importance of platea figures meant that medieval drama was divided against itself in terms of its authorization. On the one hand, the content was largely traditional, moral, and religious; it affirmed the Established church, state authorities, and the ideology supporting them. But at the same time, it was authorized by its connection to the people of the audience, those who were governed and had an alternative perspective.

Weimann argues persuasively that the platea-locus opposition informs the staging and content of Shakespearean drama in important ways (*Shakespeare* 208-260). In the banquet scene of *Timon of Athens*, for example, Apemantus sits on the platea and, in his asides to the audience, comments critically on the figures of the locus, Timons and his hypocritical followers (1.2). Hamlet stands at the margin of the stage during Claudius’s coronation/marriage speech, pointedly dressed in black, and, in the subsequent dialogue, cryptically attacks his stepfather and mother (*Hamlet* 1.2.1-128). Paulina, in *The Winter’s Tale*, openly challenges King Leontes and his grossly mistaken judgment of his wife, Hermione. After Hermione’s apparent death, Paulina succeeds in dominating the Sicilian court while retaining an oppositional perspective. Although Leontes heatedly rejects her viewpoint, initially, she becomes a strong rival to the King, orchestrating the “resurrection” of Hermione in the final “statue scene” of the play. Such platea figures are legion in Shakespearean drama, and they are of central importance to the plot, themes, and aesthetic of the plays.

Weimann notes that Renaissance drama is still attached to traditional forms of authority. He writes,

> Let me say without the usual qualification that in the Shakespearean theatre dramatic representations of juridical, political, and ecclesiastical authority could be made to carry great weight and meaning—”meaning” in the sense that, with considerable efficacy, the audience was made to accept impressive moments of illusion and significations effecting the already-given closure between what was represented and what was representing. (“Bifold Authority” 410)

But the foregrounding of marginal figures and perspectives means that Shakespeare’s drama is inhabited by what Weimann calls “bifold authority” (a term he borrows from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*), the division between platea and locus first of all. Weimann comments,

> However, if the locus-centered authority of what was represented could be amply

> confirmed, that same authority could also be deeply and profoundly challenged, and such challenge was, more often than not, geared to whatever platea-dimension Shakespeare's stage tended to retain or, sometimes, revitalize. ("Bifold Authority" 410)

According to Troilus, the "the bonds of heaven are slipped, dissolved, and loosed" by what he perceives as Cressida's betrayal (*Troilus and Cressida* 5.2.160), forcing him to lament,

> . . . Oh, madness of discourse
> That cause sets up with and against itself!
> Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
> Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
> Without revolt! This is and is not Cressid. (5.2.146-150)[22]

Cressida is presented as morally weak, but no more so than Troilus and the other warriors. Cressida's perspective is given an authority equal to (and for some critics, greater than) Troilus's. Thersites, a platea figure, provides a devastating critique of the rhetoric of chivalric honor, thus calling into question Troilus's character and the whole project of the war, for both Trojans and Greeks.

Bifold authority, for Weimann, can be expressed in a variety of ways: ritual mimesis vs. dramatic representation, actor vs. role, "the represented locus of authority, and the process of authorization on the platform stage" ("Bifold Authority" 402). These different expressions of bifold authority are all rooted in the larger crisis of authority in Elizabethan England—a real conflict between various factions seeking power—but also expressing some long-term socio-political movements, the most important of which was the Protestant Reformation. Weimann does an excellent job describing, analyzing, and documenting this multifarious crisis of authority, which involved a shift from the public, ceremonial authority of monarchy and church to the discursive authority appropriated and internalized by individuals by means of various religious practices, including reading, interpreting, and in effect mastering the Bible, which Protestants believed was the ultimate religious authority and path to salvation.[23] Weimann shows how Shakespearean drama challenges the authority of public figures and traditional ideologies. The result of this crisis of authority, I argue, is that the central figures need the supplement of metadrama—an onstage audience that serves to explore and negotiate the issue of legitimacy in various ways, while functioning ultimately to authorize Shakespearean drama and its figures.

As Erich Auerbach has pointed out, the Christian Bible was revolutionary in granting working-class people the dignity of serious literary representation (41-49). Jesus's disciples were conspicuously lacking in any special social status, and the "dregs" of society featured prominently among his followers. The resurrected Christ appeared first to his most loyal women followers. During the sixteenth century, The New Testament was translated into vernacular English and made widely available in mass-produced, affordable editions. Among its revolutionary themes was Christ’s ferocious attack on hypocrisy among the Jewish religious leadership, a critique rooted in the prophetic tradition and, ultimately, the Mosaic rejection of idolatry.[24] In sermons, tracts, and literature, Protestants all over Europe applied Christ’s censure of priestly corruption to the Catholic authorities. At the same time, the Old Testament concept of idolatry was directed to Catholic artworks and ritual. Bishop Stephen Gardiner, in 1547, explicitly links religious images to political authority, claiming, “the destruction of images, containeth an enterprise to subvert religion, and the state of the world with it, and especially the nobility” (qtd. in Foxe 27). While reformers might have desired to limit their critique to Catholicism (and its ecclesiastical remnants), Protestant skepticism was inevitably extended to virtually all public, institutional authorities, with considerable justification in many cases.[25] Political and religious radicals authorized their agendas by appeal to the Geneva Bible.[26] State authorities and the established church were prominent targets, and the London theaters were hardly exempt. Antitheatrical polemics in England made frequent reference to the Bible.

So we find, on the one hand, the New Testament extension of personal dignity to all individuals, notably exemplified by a new emphasis on a conversion experience in sermons, books, and personal narratives—including the ballad of “Bottom’s Dream,” about which Bottom says, riffing on First Corinthians, “The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was” (4.1.209-212). On the other hand, Protestantism fueled a widespread distrust of public authorities, political and religious. Together, these two powerful dynamics led to the breakdown of the feudal order. While the English monarchy was consolidating power, and nationalism was becoming a prominent element of English culture; the authority of public figures, and the foundation of the social structure in the principle of divine hierarchy, were being called into question, in ways that went far beyond the dynamics of the late medieval period.[27] These larger social-political changes were bound to have profound effects on English popular culture. An increase in social mobility and an active professional class—merchants, lawyers, actors, and authors—helped make possible the success of dedicated theaters in London. The prevalence of apologetic prologues and epilogues was one symptom of the developments I’ve described here. Edmund Spenser recognized that literary protagonists are vulnerable to resentment; in his “Letter to Raleigh” (which serves, in effect, as an “apology” for his epic masterpiece) he wrote that he “chose the historye of king Arthure” (among other reasons) for being “furthest from the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time” (205).

The speeches from the platea are metatheatrical insofar as the actor recognizes the audience as such and speaks to them as one of their community. Platea figures express the importance of the ordinary people in Christianity and in popular culture, including their resistance to traditional authorities. The authors and players of the Mystery cycles found it natural to include anachronistic references to the everyday life of the audience. But it’s fair to say that Shakespeare and his contemporaries take metadrama to a new level. We still have platea figures and framing devices, but we also find other expressions of metatheater including the many references to acting and theater including the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, playwright figures, the themes of spectatorship and eavesdropping, and of course the play-within-a-play.

S. L. Bethell accounts for the unrealistic elements of metadrama by recourse to his concept of “multi-consciousness” (29). He writes, “The mixture of conventionalism and naturalism demands a dual mode of attention. Awareness of the play as play implies the dual awareness of play-world and real world” (27). Renaissance audiences had no problem holding two disparate levels of meaning in their minds at the same time, and they had no knowledge of modern standards of dramatic realism. In my view, Bethell provides a valuable antidote to those who would apply anachronistic standards of naturalism to Shakespearean drama. The limits of Bethell are that he doesn’t take into account the larger social and political developments that inform Renaissance metadrama, including the contradictory social imperatives and the problem of authority.

In many of Shakespeare’s plays, the relationship of central figures (theatrical and political) to their on- and off-stage audience becomes virtually the main subject matter of the play. Centrality on a public stage is a problem that Renaissance drama addresses explicitly in multifaceted ways.

Weimann’s work on the early modern crisis of authority and its expression in Shakespearean drama is of crucial importance for any discussion of metadrama in this time period. I agree with Weimann that Renaissance drama is fundamentally split against itself, but I would articulate this contradiction in somewhat different terms. On the one hand, Shakespeare drew on Elizabethan ceremonial culture (popular, political, and religious) to make the central figures and their fate dramatically compelling. On the other hand, Renaissance drama needed to authorize the audience, that is, to ameliorate their potential rivalry with and resistance to centralized figures traditionally sanctioned by their divine or historical status. Theatricality becomes a dominant theme to address these contradictory imperatives.

Stephen Greenblatt describes in some detail the ceremonial culture of Shakespeare’s youth and concludes,

> The young Shakespeare, whether as believer or skeptic or something in between, might have carried away from such [various contemporary] ceremonies several impressions: an intimation of immense cosmic forces that may impinge upon human life; a heightened understanding of the power of language to form and exalt the spirit; an awareness of intense, even murderous competition and rivalry among competing rituals; and perhaps a sense of the longing to believe that may be awakened and shaped in large crowds. I have placed Shakespeare himself in each of these scenes—which together sketch the root conditions of the Elizabethan theater.

> (“Shakespeare’s Life” 52)

On one hand, we find the “intimation of immense cosmic forces,” the sense of belonging to a larger whole, and inspired, elevated language—working together to create the compelling experience of Shakespearean drama. On the other hand, “intense, even murderous competition and rivalry among competing rituals.” Greenblatt lumps all these together as “the root conditions of the Elizabethan theater” without noticing the sharp contradiction between them. The “rivalry among competing rituals” was essentially iconoclastic (even while each faction maintained its own rituals) and thus directly opposed to the traditional ceremonial culture of Shakespeare’s youth. Shakespeare’s drama was inhabited by deeply contradictory imperatives. His response, essentially, was to make precisely this contradiction a major subject matter of his plays. Shakespeare was able to appropriate both sides of the conflict as sources of dramatic power.

2. The London Theaters

The authority of the London theaters was problematic not only because of larger historical developments but also as a result of theater’s unique identity among English institutions. The lack of religious sanction was just one element of their controversial status. On the larger crisis of authority, James Bednarz writes,

> During the 1590s Elizabethans began to sense with a new urgency the disintegration of an inherited sociocultural, economic, and political order. In a climate of intellectual turbulence, the grounding of legitimacy became a prime subject of debate. (230)

This debate found expression in the controversies surrounding and within the London theaters, including the rivalry between the various playing companies. There was intense competition for paying spectators, and different amphitheaters specialized in distinct theatrical genres. Acting companies and theaters came into and went out of business on a regular basis. The repertoire of the boys’ companies at the indoor theaters appealed to a different class of spectators than that presented by the adult companies in the public theaters. This was not only a competition between rival traditions but an intensely personal “Poet’s War” between Jonson, Marston, Dekker, and Shakespeare, expressed in plays in which they caustically satirized each other.[28] In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents an adult company forced to tour the provinces because “an aerie of children” have so berattled the “common stages” that “many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose quills and dare scarce come thither” (2.2.339-344). Shakespeare exaggerates the success of the children’s company, but his mention of the controversy testifies to its potency.

Ben Jonson’s rivalry with Shakespeare was in part a conflict of poet-scholars with a classical education (like Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe) and player-playwrights like Shakespeare, who lacked any University education. Everyone is familiar with Greene’s attack on Shakespeare for borrowing his poetic authority from the so-called University wits. Greene (or someone writing in his name) calls Shakespeare and his fellows, “those Puppets (I mean) that speak from our mouths, those Antics garnished in our colours” (34). Greene continues,

> there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapped in a Players hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Iohannes fac totum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country. (34)

Shakespeare has “beautified [himself] with our feathers,” that is, he has plagiarized the poet-scholars, or at least he is riding on their coattails, and in his pride presuming an expertise that he actually lacks. Greene’s attack is symptomatic of not just his sense of injured merit but also the larger atmosphere of intense rivalry among playwrights and acting companies.[29]

The audience was also involved in the competition for attention. In Thomas Dekker’s “The Gull’s Horn Book,” he sarcastically advises young gallants on how to behave in London in order to dramatize themselves as fools and gulls. In the theaters, they are recommended to sit on stage with a purchased stool and call attention to themselves with obnoxious behavior:

> It shall crown you with rich commendation to laugh aloud in the midst of the most serious and saddest scene of the terriblest tragedy, and to let that clapper (your tongue) be tossed so high that all the house may ring of it. (210)

The gull will take it as an honor to be abused by the rest of spectators:

> on the very rushes where the comedy is to dance . . . must our feathered ostrich, like a piece of ordinance, be planted valiantly (because impudently), beating down the mews and hisses of the opposed rascality. . . . By sitting on stage, you have a signed patent to engross the whole commodity of censure. (208)

Dekker continues,

> Neither are you to be hunted from thence, though the scarecrows in the yard hoot at you, hiss at you, spit at you, yea, throw dirt even in your teeth. ‘Tis most gentlemanlike patience to endure all this, and to laugh at the silly animals . . . (209)

The gallant can likewise expect abuse from the players and playwright: “Their poet cries perhaps a pox go with you” (211). The more scorn the young gentleman attracts, the more he has succeeded in monopolizing the attention of everyone present. A character in Jonson’s *Every Man Out of his Humour* gives similar advice on how to behave like a gentleman at plays: “when you come to Plays, be humorous, look with a good starched face, and ruffle your brow like a new book; laugh at nothing but your own jests, or else as the noblemen laugh" (1.2.61-64). In Dekker and Jonson's portrayal, the theater is essentially a place for individuals to display themselves, competing for the everyone's (mutually contemptuous) attention, and the stage play is merely the occasion for the rivalry among spectators, players, and poet. No doubt Dekker exaggerates for satirical effect, but what he describes had an underlying basis in reality. Unlike a modern theatrical performance, where the audience is usually quiet and passive, London spectators competed for attention with each other and with the players. Audiences were known to be quite vocal in their disapproval of what they perceived as inferior plays. All this is the essential context for the staging of spectatorship in Shakespeare's plays.

Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) ridicules the ignorance of citizen spectators and the typical repertoire of the theaters, both public and private. The grocer's active presence on stage is no sign of refined taste. The grocer and his wife insist on their servant playing a leading role in a play of their own devising. They view themselves as having more dramatic skill (or at least better taste) than the author or players. The conflict about what genre of play to perform exemplifies the competing repertoires of private and public theaters, as well as the direct involvement of the audience in such rivalries.

Ben Jonson was typically contemptuous of his audience for failing to appreciate his genius, and he was not shy about expressing his scorn. The prologue to Jonson's *The Poetaster* describes itself as "Armed," because

> . . . 'tis a dangerous age:
> Wherein, who writes, had need present his *Scenes*
> Forty-fold proof against the conjuring means
> Of base detractors, and illiterate apes,
> That fill up rooms in fair and formal shapes. (Induction 66-71)

Jonson appeals to the more educated spectators, who are invited to share the author's contempt for those with less refined tastes:

> Here now, put case that our author should, once more,
> Swear that his play were good; he doth implore,
> You would not argue him of arrogance:
> How ere that common spawn of ignorance,
> Our fry of writers, may beslime his fame,
> And give his action that adulterate name. (Induction 76-81)

Jonson claims that envious competitors, "Our fry of writers," are responsible for attacking his reputation, while the present audience will presumably appreciate him, sharing in his superiority to the "common spawn of ignorance." Somewhat like Shakespeare's Coriolanus, Jonson resisted his dependence on his audience, yet the evident anxiety about his reception testifies to his need for approval. The more he proclaims his independence the more he shows himself reliant on them.

Many scholars have noted that the public theaters were in certain respects leveling, in that anyone with a penny could attend, and, while seating was divided by price, there was still mingling of all classes together in the theater. The audience is, in one sense, equal in their status as spectators in relation to the play. The Chorus to *Henry V* courteously addresses the audience as "gentles all" (Prologue 8), as does Puck in the epilogue to A *Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.424), and the Prologue to *Henry VIII* (Prologue 17). While the well-to-do could afford better seating, everyone could and did interact in the theater. Merchants mingled with aristocrats in the higher-priced seats. The Merchants Taylors school, in 1574, took the drastic step of forbidding the public showing of plays by their boys in their Common Hall because they allowed the lower classes to claim equality to their social superiors:

> Everye lewd persone thinketh himself (for his penny) worthye of the chiefe and most commodious place without respecte of any other either for age or estimacion of the comon weale, which bringeth the youth to such an impudente famyliaritie with their betters that often tymes greite contempt of maisters, parents, and magistrates followeth therefore. (qtd. in Chambers, 2:75)

Stephen Gosson, in his *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), found it threatening that players personated gentlemen in performance, which he thought might lead to the breakdown of the social distinctions that maintained social order. Actors violated the biblical principle, "We are commanded by God to abide in the same calling wherein we were called" (110). The players, in his view, were in competition with gentlemen for the rightful recognition of the community:

> If private men be suffered to forsake their calling because they desire to walk gentlemanlike in satin and velvet, with a buckler at their heels, proportion is so broken, unity dissolved, harmony confounded, that the whole body must be dismembered, and the prince or the head can not choose but sicken. (110)

The audience of a play, on one level, is a crowd, which were often despised by elites and widely feared by authorities for their disruptive potential. Antitheatrical literature was deeply concerned with the uncontrollable nature of audience response, and, indeed, conflicts and riotous behavior were not uncommon at the London theaters. Shakespeare, especially in the Roman plays *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, shows the specifically mimetic dangers of a popular audience. Antony's oration at Caesar's funeral turns the crowd's adulation of Brutus into irrational rage (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.75-231). The fact that the crowd targets the wrong Cinna for lynching (even after being informed of their error) illustrates the irrepressible nature of the crowd's anger, and the detail that Cinna is a poet is not accidental. We don’t know whether Shakespeare shared the classical distrust of democracy, but he was able to make effective dramatic use of the proverbially mimetic nature of the “multi-headed multitude” (*Coriolanus* 2.3.16). One reason for the suppression of late medieval guild plays and folk festivals was that they could lead to riots and revolts.[30] In London, “The city fathers saw plays as threatening civic order by promoting unruly gatherings and by taking people from work and worship” (Janet Hill 110). Their fears may have been somewhat paranoid, but their existence is significant. We don’t have much sympathy today for such attempts to suppress dramatic performances, but it’s true that crowds can be unruly, and disruptive behavior is contagious.

Some Quarto editions of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1609) include an epistle to the reader by an anonymous author who claims that the play was “never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar” or “sullied with the smoky breath of the multitude.” Robert Ormsby sees this passage as demonstrating the vulnerability of a play to the audience’s physical response (25-26), but I would suggest it also implies a rivalry among the audience members, whether as readers or spectators. Readers are assured of their superiority to the “vulgar” and the “multitude.”

Hamlet is comparable to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in its obsession with the rivalry/resistance of spectators and players. Both Hamlet and Polonius view themselves as aficionados of acting and theater. Hamlet is captivated (but also horrified) by Aeneas’s tale to Dido as performed by the First Player, and he praises the players as “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (2.2.524). But his love of theater also finds expression in his contempt for typical playgoers and players. He finds the play featuring Aeneas to be “an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning” (2.2.439-40); but it “pleased not the million; ’twas caviar to the general” (2.2.436-437). Hamlet’s identity as “The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword, / . . . / The glass of fashion and the mold of form, / Th’ observed of all observers” (3.1.154-157) depends upon his assumed superiority to those who lack his refined taste. By the same token, the fact that Aeneas’s speech (as well as *The Murder of Gonzago*) is pointedly old-fashioned and cumbersome in style allows Shakespeare’s audience to see themselves as superior to Hamlet, Polonius, and the First Player. In his discourse to the players, Hamlet insists on specifying how they should pronounce the speech he has added to the play, and he criticizes the typical practices of actors and clowns who play to the worst elements of the audience, “the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise” (3.2.11-12). Hamlet’s speech has been dissected for any clues to Shakespeare’s own dramatic philosophy, but for our purposes it testifies above all to the implicit competition among spectators and players. Shakespeare is not just holding the mirror up to the fact of rivalry in the theater, he is responding to it in a sophisticated way, thereby authorizing his own theatrical practice.

During the First Player’s speech, Polonius positions himself as a rival for attention by complaining about the length of the speech, whereupon Hamlet enters into rivalry with Polonius by contemptuously dismissing his complaint as ignorant and unsophisticated. During the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, he supplies a scathing commentary on their old-fashioned dramaturgy, successfully competing with the players for the attention of the courtly audience. Claudius's reception of the play is of course a major focus of this scene; he asks, "Is there no offense in it?" (3.2.230-1). Hamlet briefly describes the action of the play, and pointedly suggests that only those guilty of or complicit with such a murder would find it offensive: "Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung" (3.2.240-241). The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* puts everyone present into ethical conflict with each other. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the king himself is at stake here. The role of the players, we should note, is secondary to the importance of the audience. The representation of theatrical reception in *Hamlet* supports my point that the London theaters (public and private) were full of mimetic tensions among the audience and the players; and it also exemplifies my larger thesis, that Shakespeare's representation of spectatorship serves to address such tensions, at the same time exploring the larger import of such competitive rivalry as a driving force of modernity.

The London theaters were infused by mimesis on every level; this is one important reason why they were so feared in Renaissance England. The theater stimulates our mimetic tendencies in order to discharge and defuse them. But it does so by means of mimesis, so containment is inherently ambivalent, since by evoking these human tendencies (newly empowered by socio-political developments in England) there is always the danger of their escape into real world expression.[31] Theater has always been a controversial institution, and Jonas Barish has shown that the antitheatrical prejudice is as old and enduring as theater itself.[32]

Antitheatricalists recognized that plays competed with church services for the time of the people. John Northbrooke complains, "Many can tarry at a vain play two or three hours, when they will abide scarce one hour at a sermon" (8). The Mystery, morality, and miracle plays of Shakespeare's youth offered religious and moral lessons that complemented church teachings but were nevertheless seen as competing for the public's attention. Greenblatt notes, "in attacking the stage, ministers often seemed to regard the professional players as dangerous rivals" ("The Playing Field" 34). The opponents of the stage never tired of pointing out that playgoing detracted from the new possibilities for advancement in Shakespeare's England: personal, social, religious, and economic. Russell Fraser sums up the antitheatrical position on this point, "In the sixteenth century the proper use of time is the prosecuting of virtuous business, which one will gloss as his bias directs him" (55).

Ideally, the relationship of the audience to a play is a perfectly reciprocal free market transaction. The audience has freely chosen to give their money for an entertaining spectacle, and the players willingly perform in exchange. Both parties are free to enter or leave this arrangement at any time. But the players are not completely unrestricted in their performance. They are obliged to provide what spectators will pay for, placing them in dependence upon a sometimes fickle audience. Prospero finds himself forced to beg for the “good hands” and “Gentle breath” of the audience, without which he is imprisoned by the “spell” of the audience (Epilogue 8, 10, 11). The audience has become a magician who places a spell on the playwright and player, reversing the conventional metaphor. Furthermore, the need for patronage made the players into servants; the London playing companies were liveried servants of a lord or member of the royal family. Without patronage, players would be viewed by the law as vagabonds and in danger of punishment. And they were subject, of course, to government censorship. At the London theaters, on one level, the audience is in control; they have paid the actors to perform for them; they can leave at any time, and without their paid attendance the acting company would be forced to disband. The existence of a large body of antitheatrical literature (and other evidence we have already considered) shows that audiences sometimes resisted the authority of theatrical performances. At the same time, antitheatricalists feared that audiences would passively imitate what was represented on stage. And so, it is also true that the actors are in control of what is presented, and the audience must submit themselves to the artists’ vision in order to enjoy or just understand the performance. The necessity of submission could spark resistance.

The relationship of the audience and the play is dialogical in the theater during performance but also in origin and during the whole formative process of creation, as Shakespeare shows in the rehearsals for *Pyramus and Thisbe*. A play is necessarily formed in response to a particular audience’s concerns and desires, even if the playwright is leading in new directions. An author is well aware of potential resistance since he is a member of the same community and he writes for himself first of all. An ambitious author is typically his own toughest critic. Shakespeare found it necessary to thematize such resistance in order to contain it first of all but also simply to understand it, and he succeeded in making the dialogic nature of staged authority a source of dramatic pleasure and anthropological knowledge. Without the support of religion or traditional social hierarchy, artists must engage with their audience by incorporating them into the subject matter of the play. This strategy functions to authorize a play’s performance and defuse the potential for rivalry and resistance, while serving as an anthropological discovery procedure exploring the complex, protean relationship of centralized figures to their audience.

Both Plato and Aristotle recognized that the theater is a very mimetic place on every level and that it can serve an important role for social order. They both understood, in different ways, that mimesis is central to our identity as humans. The action on stage, of course, is fundamentally mimetic, as both imitation and representation. Plato and Aristotle also insisted that the audience is mimetic in its relationship to the performance. Aristotle’s account of tragedy is meant to refute Plato’s, but his concept of catharsis as a purification or purging of disruptive emotions represents an inchoate recognition of the danger of mimetic contagion.[33] Pity, we should note, involves the imitation of another’s attention to their sorrow or suffering. The fears of the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are akin to ancient Greek concerns about mimesis. The spectators' reaction to a ferocious lion or a violent death might be too mimetically powerful, and they might react by having the craftsmen hanged, every mother's son of them, a cathartic purging of the dangers of mimesis.

Despite Weimann's obsession with mimesis and imitation, he neglects the mimetic nature of the relationship of the audience to a theatrical performance, even though both Plato and Aristotle highlighted, in different ways, its importance. Because Weimann fails to understand the precise nature of the problem that metadrama emerges to address, his understanding of metadrama is similarly lacking. The relationship of the audience to public, ceremonial figures, as modeled in the relationship of platea to locus, is always mimetically ambivalent, oscillating between identification and alienation. The foregrounding of "the sense of theatricality" in Elizabethan theater is not merely a response to "the limits of the platform stage vis-á-vis the needs (and vulnerabilities) of historiographic representations" (Weimann, "Representation and Performance" 505). Weimann ignores the role of mimetic rivalry within Shakespeare's plays, in the theaters, and in the larger culture. The problematic authority of centralized figures in relation to the spectatorship of peripheral characters stands at the very heart of Renaissance drama beginning with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. This problem reflects larger political and economic developments, but for Shakespeare it is first of all a problem of the theater—and the two levels overlap in significant ways.

3. The Anthropology of Mimesis

Aristotle's claim that humans are the most mimetic of animals has been confirmed and developed by recent anthropological research, a consideration of which will help us to understand the nature of the mechanicals' fears and their basis in social reality. Social psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis draws on research showing that humans imitate each other unconsciously and, in our social life, more or less continuously. He writes,

> imitation is of such importance because it can be conceived of as default social behavior. Imitation is not something we only occasionally engage in. Instead, we usually imitate—automatically—and not doing it is the exception. (208)

Infants, only a few hours after birth, will mimic the facial expressions of adults, and a child's facility for imitation develops in strength and sophistication. "Our ability to imitate is not something we learn. Although it is certainly true that our ability to imitate evolves over time, the basics are already there when we are born" (Dijksterhuis 208). The gift for mimesis is rooted in the very structure of the brain: "humans have a shared neural system for perceiving and performing an action . . . These mirror neurons discharge both when an action is observed and when it is executed"; humans are literally "wired to imitate"

(Dijksterhuis 209). Humans have a strong propensity for sharing the attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of nearby others, such as smiling, laughing, or walking slower. Moods are highly contagious. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater note, summarizing Dijksterhuis, “Just thinking about or perceiving a certain kind of action automatically increases, in ways participants are not aware of, the likelihood of engaging in that general type of behavior oneself” (36). Dijksterhuis argues that our mimetic tendencies are a strong “social glue” that holds together human communities. Such imitation can be found on two main levels. There is the direct imitation of moods and behavior, which facilitates group cohesion in obvious ways. Dijksterhuis argues that there is also a “high road” of imitation, by which we mimetically anticipate the behavior of others, by means of “trait inferences” based on observed behavior, appearances, and social stereotypes (214). For Dijksterhuis, the basic motivation is to be liked by others. Therefore we adjust our behavior in anticipation of the beliefs and intentions of others, in order to make our social interactions more pleasant and productive.

Dijksterhuis argues that imitation facilitates social cohesion, but he recognizes that imitation can lead to conflict; for example, when individuals imitate the “hostile or aggressive behavior” of others, or when social stereotypes are crude and inaccurate (218, 220). In terms of the high road of imitation, it’s possible that our reading of another’s disposition may be incorrect, based on fantasies about others’ intentions. On the high road, imitation involves the imagination, which may lead us in unhelpful directions. The craftsmen in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are travelling the high road when they modify their performance in accordance with their fantastical stereotype of how aristocrats will behave in certain situations. In his recognition of the harmful forms of imitation, Dijksterhuis supports René Girard’s idea that mimesis can be expressed as destructive rivalry (Girard, *Violence* 143-168). At least one reason imitation is fundamental to human behavior is that it expresses the biological imperative of competition for limited resources. As *cultural* animals, we compete for recognition as the basis of identity and a source of authority.

Michael Tomasello’s recognition that the ability for “shared attention” distinguishes the human species is highly relevant here. Infants (and all animals) are born with the ability to pay attention to people and objects in their environment—a dyadic relationship between self and the object of attention. But beginning at around nine months, infants instinctually begin to “share attention” with others, to imitate the attention of others to objects or people (Tomasello, *Cultural Origins* 62). A child will look to see what I am pointing at, a behavior not found among our primate cousins. This is a triadic relationship: self, other, and object of attention.

Attention, Tomasello notes, is intentional—this is what distinguishes it from simple perception—so that we share the intentions of others, thus enabling collaboration. In this sense, we identify with others in our everyday social interactions. Andrew Meltzoff argues that our predisposition to identify with others is rooted in our mimetic tendencies (56).

Tomasello emphasizes cognitive and biological factors (favored by natural selection) in our ability for shared attention, but he still goes so far as to characterize children "from one to three years old" as "virtual 'imitation machines' as they seek to appropriate the cultural skills and behaviors of the mature members of their social groups" (*Cultural Origins* 159).

Shared intentionality is triadic and therefore scenic, like theater and like language itself. We use gestures and words to direct the attention of others. Shared attention is very basis of language. Our practice of sharing attention with others distinguishes human society. Tomasello writes, "the fundamental social-cognitive ability that underlies human culture is the individual human being's ability to and tendency to identify with other human beings" (*Cultural Origins* 90). We can distinguish human intentionality from the agency exercised by all animals in order to survive. And since such intentionality is inherently mimetic and shared, it follows that our attention to the world, as a general rule, is mediated by shared intentions. Tomasello maintains that words and all forms of symbolic communication are intrinsically inhabited by the intentions and perspectives of others (*Cultural Origins* 8-9). Tomasello cites with approval the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who argues,

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 294)

Bakhtin notes the struggle involved in our engagement with language, especially authoritative discourse, in contrast to Tomasello, who is more interested in collaboration. But Tomasello's research supports Bakhtin's idea that the discourse of any particular community (large or small) embodies an ideological perspective on the world.

The work of Tomasello and Meltzoff suggests that shared attention distinguishes human consciousness. Even when we are alone or thinking privately to ourselves, our consciousness is (virtually or imaginatively) inhabited by the intentions of others. Insofar as we are cultural animals, our attention to the world is not just occasionally but essentially mediated by the specific individuals with whom we are in contact, and also, at the same time, our shared language and culture. Attention, we should note, is built upon and includes perception, so that our very experience of the world, on one level, is populated by the intentions of others.[34] Our intentional perception of our surroundings is to some extent constructed by our shared fears and desires, thus making possible a world like that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, populated by magical creatures and transformations. For most of human history, the belief in spirits and magic was a dominant mode of understanding the world.

Human intentionality, as defined by Tomasello, is both public and private at the same time. On the one hand, intentions are expressed in our words and actions, shared, and thus inherently social. We imitate the intentional perceptions of others. At the same time, in a virtual or actual dialogue with others, we can formulate our own personal intentions, which can be shared with others or not. Intentions are thus essentially psychological and internal on one level, even when they are shared. In practice, we must infer the intentions of others (Dijksterhuis 218). In some situations, when a child sees me pointing at a present object, the direction of my attention is perfectly clear. But even in this situation, the child must infer, or I must explain, *why* I am calling her attention to this object. Tomasello seems to assume that our intentions are transparent to each other. He makes this assumption since he is mainly interested in our ability to cooperate, because that is what gives the human species an evolutionary advantage. Successful collaboration depends upon humans defining a goal and working together for its achievement. This would not be possible if our intentions were not more or less transparently communicated. But the human species does a lot more than just collaborate. We also still compete with each other.[35] In fact, there are many situations when we do not fully share our intentions with each other, either deliberately or because of a failure to communicate. Our personal intentions/goals may conflict with the goals of others, as we've seen in our discussion of the rivalry surrounding and within the London theaters. We can see that identification inevitably involves what we call the imagination, one of the central themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When Hippolyta complains during the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard," Theseus responds, "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." Hippolyta replies, "It must be your imagination then, and not theirs" (5.1.209-212), suggesting that the craftsmen lack imagination, a criticism echoed by some scholars. But in fact, during rehearsal, the mechanicals imaginatively represent the aristocrats to themselves; they envision what will be their reaction to their performance, and they supplement it accordingly. They mimetically imagine themselves in the position of their audience, a uniquely human capacity. Girard proposes that Puck, in deceiving the lovers and transforming Bottom, metaphorically represents the action of the mimetic imagination (*Theater* 237-239). We can say that imagination is essentially mimetic, because it begins with the imitation of another's attention, and we must use our imagination (tempered, hopefully, by reason but still inhabited by shared fears and desires) to divine their intention. Our faculty for imagination is rather different from the ability of animals to anticipate the behavior of others, which can be explained most parsimoniously in terms of conditioning.

Tomasello shows how collaboration involves being able to discern and anticipate the causal relations between people. He notes that our ability in this regard becomes extended to events in the world that are independent of humans. Tomasello writes, "many of the people of the world, when they are in doubt as to the physical cause of an event, often invoke various types of animistic or deistic forces to explain it; perhaps this is the default approach" (*Cultural Origins* 24). He goes on to say,

> Thus, among the Jalaris peoples of rural India, illnesses and natural disasters are

> prototypically explained through an interaction of spirits and human misdeeds (Nuckolls, 1991), and the Azande from central Africa attribute many kinds of unfortunate events to witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). (*Cultural Origins* 184)

Marshall Sahlins observes that “the original political society” of our prehistoric ancestors and aboriginal peoples was characterized by animism, attributing agency to virtually everything in their environment:

> In the animist cosmos, animals and plants, beings and things may all appear as intentional subjects and persons, capable of will, intention, and agency. The primacy of physical causation is replaced by intentional causation and social agency. (Kaj Århem, qtd. in Sahlins 101).

Modern humans no longer live in an animist cosmos, but our world is still populated by the intentions of others; we use our imagination to discern the intentions of others, and we often mistake others’ intentions. While the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were not taken seriously by Shakespeare’s audience, belief in magic and witchcraft was still common in Elizabethan England.[36] Antitheatrical literature explained the popularity of plays as due to the influence of Satan. And today, politicians and commentators are susceptible to paranoid interpretations of their opponents’ intentions, not to mention the many conspiracy theories found in public discourse.

In terms of my thesis about the emergence of metadrama: the rivalry among the artisan players and their audience was quite real, because it was animated and amplified by the imaginative, mimetic forces that play such a powerful role in the world of the play, in the playhouses themselves, and in the larger culture. The mechanicals’ fears are perfectly conformable to a world in which magical transformations are common, and in which fears and desires can transfigure the world. At the same time, these fears and desires are mimetic and therefore expressive of rivalry, which is why they needed to be (meta)dramatized and vicariously satisfied.

We reflexively attribute intentionality to people, animals, even inanimate objects, but also to representations themselves. The artisans’ fantasy about how their audience will react to a dramatic enactment is in one sense typical of audiences. We relate to dramatic representations of conscious agents as if they were real people, while reserving knowledge of the fiction. Critics commonly discuss the psychology of fictional characters. For hundreds of years, people have been responding to Hamlet as if he were real person, revering him, resenting him, and even psychoanalyzing him.

Theseus dismisses the imaginations of “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet” (5.1.7), but in fact imagination is constitutive of our social lives. Our experience of the world is inhabited by the intentions of others, which we must imaginatively infer. Theseus seems unaware that he lives in a world populated by spirits and magic. The world of the play is literally and mimetically animated by the dangerous power of the imagination. If Bottom can be given an ass's head and made the lover of the Queen of the Fairies at the same time, then the personation of a lion on stage can well be transformed into a real lion. There's an underlying psychological truth to the mechanicals' fears, which makes their ameliorative amendments absolutely necessary. What makes the authority of the stage problematic (and compelling) is ultimately its mimetic power.[37]

Soon after the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Miguel Cervantes composed *Don Quixote* (1605), a realist novel about the power of the imagination. Don Quixote animates the heroic romances he reads in his imagination, and as a result his whole life is transformed into a romantic adventure, with terrible giants, evil enchanters, and ladies in distress. A recent example is David Lynch's film *Inland Empire* (2006) about the making of a movie, in which the identity of the actors (who are actors playing actors) gets ominously mixed up with the characters they are playing in the movie-within-a-movie. The mimetic power of fiction is often thematized in popular and serious art. Uncanny literature (including magical realism) and films satisfy our yearnings for magic in a secularized world while serving as an anthropological discovery procedure.

The *theatrum mundi* idea in literature is usually interpreted to mean that we each play a role on the larger stage of our social life, and that we are capable of playing different roles, whether by choice or because of external forces.[38] Jaques says, "All the world's a stage . . . And one man in his time plays many parts" (*As You Like It* 2.7.138, 141). But if our life is essentially theatrical, then reality itself is fluid and variable, capable of transformations animated by our collective imagination. Actors not only play different roles, they inhabit different fictional worlds in different plays. The play/world changes along with the actor's role. When Titania wakes up from the spell cast by Oberon, she finds out that her nightmare was true, and she enters into what is, in a sense, another dream. Macbeth realizes that his whole life has been merely a "poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more," a "walking shadow" created by his "vaulting ambition" and haunted by compelling hallucinations (5.5.24-26; 1.7.27). Prospero observes, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" (4.1.156-158).

4. **Shakespearean Metadrama**

The functionality of Shakespearean metadrama is more complex than critics have recognized. Let's go back to *Pyramus and Thisbe* to address this issue. The framing devices added to *Pyramus and Thisbe* by the artisans demonstrate that the cognitive function of self-reference can conflict with the aesthetics of the play as a whole. We are reminded that these are merely actors playing roles, not actual people suffering a tragic fate—not that we would think so anyways in the case of Quince and company, even without the metadramatic speeches, but one could say the same about any theatrical performance. Samuel Johnson is correct in writing, "The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (*Preface to Shakespeare* xxvii). But Johnson would agree that the power of any particular performance depends upon our entering imaginatively into the world of the play and sharing in the characters' fears and desires. Metadramatic speeches can work against our affective immersion.

The artisans, of course, are not trying to be funny. Just the opposite. Too much imaginative involvement by the audience, they believe, would endanger the entertainment value of the performance (making it frightening and disturbing) as well as the players' lives. The craftsmen need to ward off this possibility so that their performance will be worthy of the audience's attention. Yet without any imaginative immersion, their play descends from tragedy to farce. Without any intention to do so, they become authorized by their comic inability to produce tragedy, which is underlined by the prologue and other interjections.

The production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* suggests that metadrama is not first of all an aesthetic technique. Its initial motivation is cognitive, directed to our understanding. But it turns into a dominating aesthetic effect whose appeal is irony, an aesthetic of sophistication and difficulty. It requires some thought to appreciate the additional level of meaning introduced by metadrama. To this extent, Renaissance metadrama is quite different from medieval platea speeches, which are not generally intended to be ironic and distancing in this sense.

Metadrama, by definition, works on two levels simultaneously, bridging the world of the play and the world of the audience. The contradiction between the imperative of including the audience and the necessity of creating dramatic illusion has a larger historical import. Theatrical illusion is associated with magic and the sacred, which in turn were attendant on religious and political ceremony, as *The Tempest* reminds us. Prospero is a magician, a Duke, and a playwright figure—as such, he exemplifies (and problematizes) the supernatural sanction for political and theatrical authority—while the iconoclasm of metadrama is typically skeptical of any such divine sanction. *The Tempest* represents Prospero's voluntary yet in effect forced abdication of his supernatural powers in face of the resistance of Ariel, Miranda, and Ferdinand—and the outright hostility of Caliban, Sebastian, and Antonio—a resistance and hostility symptomatic of larger socio-political changes, as well as theatrical-historical developments.[39]

In the production of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, we find metadrama emerging as a supplement to the performance, but, like many such supplements, it quickly becomes the main theme. *Pyramus and Thisbe* makes the important point that Renaissance tragedy, insofar as it is metadramatic, is split against itself; and this split is rooted in the contradictory imperatives of authorizing the audience (anticipating and ameliorating their potential resistance) and authorizing the performance as compelling illusion. The staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, however, parodies metadrama, exaggerating certain qualities and ignoring others. It highlights the original motivation for metadrama in audience resistance, but it overlooks other functions.

Metadrama can serve to blur the distinction between the stage and the world. In *Pyramus and Thisbe*, it’s funny when we are reminded that the actors are playing a role—first, because we already knew this, and, second, because it contradicts the imperative for dramatic illusion. Their representation as actors playing a role, however, is itself an illusion from a larger perspective. Actually, they are actors pretending to be actors playing a role, an insight that is available to us by reflection but not highlighted within the world of the play. In fact, the actors’ comic portrayal of amateur players is entirely convincing, at least as Shakespeare has scripted their portrayal. So even though *Pyramus and Thisbe* parodies metadrama, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* effectively embodies it on other levels. Like *Hamlet* and other plays, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, even while it absolutely depends upon that distinction. The actors are both fictional and real at the same time, and the same could be said of the lover’s adventures in the forest.

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, another obsessively metadramatic play, most of the main characters are playing a “dramatic” role, either deliberately, as with Rosalind, Jaques, and Touchstone; or unconsciously, as with Orlando, Silvius, and Phoebe. In the case of Rosalind, sincerity and playing a role are perfectly compatible. We can view the young lovers of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in similar terms. The young lovers in the forest, unlike the artisans, do not understand that they are actors in a play. The lovers are not, initially, who they think they are; they are not independent agents of their sacred and singular desires but subject to powerful mimetic, social forces, allegorically represented by Oberon and Puck. The lovers find themselves playing stereotypical roles in the romantic triangles in which they are involved, the conventional nature of which is highlighted when the roles are so easily switched.[40] Each of the lovers never questions their own transformation, but they are amazed at the mutability of the others. To be self-deceived, as the lovers in comedy so often are, is to be immersed in an illusion and, in a sense, a spectator to oneself. Both Olivia and Orsino, in *Twelfth Night*, are in love with the roles they are playing, until Viola, knowingly playing a role, helps them to overcome their self-deception.

When the midsummer night lovers wake up in the morning, they are greeted by the members of the court, to whom they tell their tale, which Theseus finds to be “more strange than true.” Hippolyta, however, comments,

> But all the story of the night told over,
> And all their minds transfigured so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy’s images
> And grows to something of great constancy;
> But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-27)

We never actually hear what the lovers tell the others about their adventures. We might ask, how is it even possible that Hippolyta finds "something of great constancy" in their combined stories? If each lover simply recounts what happens from his or her own first-person perspective of the night, then it's hard to see how their tales would cohere, since each of them was immersed in conflicting illusions, unaware of Puck's interventions. But what is most important is that the lovers, after fighting all night, have achieved a peaceful reconciliation. Hippolyta's comment suggests that when they wake up in the morning, they have become an audience to their own illusions, and, through mutual reflection, in discussion with each other and the court, they have learned something about love and are better prepared for their marriages—even though they still recount "strange and admirable" wonders that cannot be accounted for in rational terms. Demetrius says, "These things [last night's events] seem small and indistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds." Hermia replies, "Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double" (4.1.186-189). In many of Shakespeare's comedies, unlike *Pyramus and Thisbe*, metadrama is fully integrated into the plot and serves a constructive purpose for the characters. Social order is threatened in the comedies, but these threats are easily, if unrealistically, resolved. The audience doesn't have the same expectations for theatrical illusion as with the tragedies and histories. "Bifold authority" is not the same problem in comedy and Romance as it is in tragedy (or satire, in the case of *Troilus and Cressida*).

The metadramatic speeches of *Pyramus and Thisbe* assure the audience that the characters are only actors playing a part. Hamlet, in a speech equally metadramatic, protests that he is not an actor playing a part. When Hamlet gives his speech about "seeming," "for they are actions that a man might play" (*Hamlet* 1.2.76-86), the audience may or may not reflect on the fact that Hamlet actually is an actor putting on "the trappings and the suits of woe" (which, to multiply the irony, do not "denote [him] truly"). If the audience does think about the discrepancy between the actor and the character he is playing, then this would seem to work against the tragic pathos of Hamlet's character; and for some spectators, it well might. But the fact remains that Hamlet, despite calling attention to his status as an actor playing a role, is still theatrically compelling as the prince of Denmark (in contrast to the artisans performing *Pyramus and Thisbe*, who are compelling for the opposite reason). So the question for us is, how does *Hamlet* succeed as tragedy using the same strategy by which the artisans fail?

The metadramatic elements of *Hamlet*, of course, are motivated in a different way than in the artisans' play. *Hamlet*'s metadrama is fundamental to the tragic plot, unlike the framing devices of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Hamlet's resentment of Claudius is legitimated by events, and it's also an expression of pure rivalry (and thus central to his character), similar to Hamlet's rivalry with Polonius and the players. In his speech on "seeming," Hamlet is protesting his sincerity, which is ironic not only because he is an actor playing a role but also because Gertrude and Claudius have not questioned his sincerity. On one level, he is elliptically accusing his mother and uncle of hypocrisy in their past display of mourning for

King Hamlet. Hamlet says, in effect, “I’m genuinely mourning here, unlike some people I could name, who have married so hastily.” Hamlet is justifiably skeptical of the public scene or show of mourning for his father, and, by extension, all such public ceremonies including the coronation speech given by Claudius. By the same token, Catholic ceremonies, in the Protestant view, were mechanical “plays” with rote speeches that contradict the true and loving worship of God found in spontaneous prayer. Hamlet has “that within which passes show,” an interiority so profound as to defy representation; while ceremonial actions and speeches are in effect idolatry, a false sacred, legitimated merely by their display on a public scene and empty tradition. The irony, of course, is that Hamlet’s critique applies also to the play in which he is acting, which itself is a form of ceremony, a scripted spectacle, albeit not religious. His speech apotropaically wards off the accusation of false seeming, which actually defines the theater.

Hamlet is, in effect, modeling and authorizing the audience’s response to centralized figures, including himself. The central figure becomes mimetically worthy of attention first of all because it has an alert audience. At the same time, the potential for resistance is given expression and legitimated. Iconoclastically attacking Claudius serves to critique the hypocrisy and corruption of courtly ceremony. Furthermore, such an attack authorizes the attacker, with whom we can identify, and the play as a whole, which presents a sustained critique of ceremony—”maimed rites,” as Hamlet calls them (5.1.219)—which have been hollowed out by Machiavellian politics. But the play serves finally to reaffirm the ceremonial order by means of the “fated” death of the protagonist—which occurs, significantly, during a ceremonial duel. We may pity and fear Hamlet’s tragic fate, but his death is (part and parcel of) a necessary purging of an evil that disturbs the cosmos. Hamlet is “sacrificed,” in effect, to the necessity of social order, which, historically, was believed to depend upon divinely-sanctioned ceremony in one form or another.

The same, of course, could be said of Oedipus’s tragic fate, and it’s true that both Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* rely on the idea of cosmic order to enable the catharsis of the denouement. The difference is that Shakespearean drama is informed by the necessity of including the audience within the performance using various metadramatic techniques—staging the scene of dramatic representation and responding to the early modern crisis of authority, a supplement which questions the imperative of fate. Shakespeare’s later tragedies such as *King Lear* call the cosmic order into question in a more serious way. *King Lear* repeatedly invokes the final apocalypse and thus could be said to stage the end of the ceremonial order, making this the very basis of tragedy. Shakespeare’s later tragedies and the Romances represent and respond to (in various ways) the declining respect for divine hierarchy.[41]

The critical reaction to Hamlet and other Shakespearean protagonists exemplifies the audience resistance that we have found driving the emergence of metadrama. Hamlet’s soliloquies and asides make the audience into secret sharers, but some viewers have resisted this role. Hamlet is in rivalry with Claudius, but the audience may enter into rivalry with Hamlet (and sometimes Shakespeare, as, for example, in T. S. Eliot's critique of *Hamlet*). According to G. Wilson Knight, it is not the Danish court that is spiritually sick and morally corrupt but only Hamlet; "Claudius is a good king, and the Ghost but a minor spirit" (45). According to this line of interpretation, the main plot action is Hamlet's aberrant hostility toward Claudius, and the revenge imperative is merely Hamlet's self-justification.[42]

Henry V (in the Henriad tetralogy) wards off the potential for resentment by in effect earning his authority through his time spent with lower-class and/or disreputable characters, his defeat of Hotspur in honorable combat, and his victory over the French in the battle of Agincourt. Henry's conversation with the common soldiers on the night before the battle (followed by his soliloquy) incorporates and addresses their (and the audience's) resistance to his authority in sophisticated ways (*Henry V* 4.1.85-303). In the Henriad tetralogy, the authority of common fellowship, merit, and competence is contrasted with the authority of divine right. Henry V, we should note, is always aware of an audience, and he self-consciously manages his reputation. The fact that Henry is his own public relations agent (among other reasons) makes him an ambivalent (or worse) figure for some critics.

While the mechanicals' attempt to authorize their performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* works against any tragic pathos, in the case of *Hamlet*, the self-referential elements serve to intensify the tragedy by means of irony. How is the irony of metadrama different from traditional tragic irony? Tragic irony involves the unintended results of human actions, the divergence between our intentions and the results, while challenging our concepts of identity and justice. The Player King says,

> Our wills and fates do so contrary run,
> That our devices still are overthrown;
> Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. (*Hamlet* 3.2.209-211)

Tragic irony highlights the discrepancy between the human and the divine, especially in regard to standards of justice and the requirements of cosmic order. The larger forces that drive tragedy call into question the self-determination of human identity. As Ophelia says, "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (*Hamlet* 4.5.43-44), a pregnant observation that applies to all of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. The irony of metadrama is rather different.

Oedipus learns that he is subject to larger forces, that all his efforts to avoid his fate have ironically contributed to it. With metadrama, the larger forces are human and social, not divine and cosmic. It's not fate that forces Hamlet to play a role, to put on an "antic disposition" (1.5.181), but because "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Metadrama raises and responds to the question of authority, while the authority of the gods and fate is largely a given in the tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus (however inexplicable their judgments). Because we have become skeptical about divine forces such as fate, Renaissance drama finds it necessary to stage the scene of representation, which authorizes the central figure more or less ironically. The central figure's authority is demystified by showing its dependence upon an audience (even while it proves itself worthy of attention by its self-consciousness), while the audience is authorized, as per the Judeo-Christian tradition, by the peripheral figure's skeptical iconoclasm. So metadramatic irony is rooted in the discrepancy between the traditional concept of cosmic order and Judeo-Christian iconoclasm, which is on one level a model of oppositional identity. The biblical Hebrews' identity as God's chosen people is inseparable from their prophets' rejection of the priestly polytheism of surrounding nations and their fidelity to the one true God (what Jan Assman calls "the Mosaic distinction"[43]); just as a Protestant's identity, during the Reformation, was essentially linked to their opposition to Catholicism. By the same token, Hamlet's identity is defined by his alienation from the Danish court.

This brings up a related point, the convincing psychological realism of Hamlet's character, notably developed by his monologues and asides. To be self-conscious is precisely to be conscious of oneself in relation to an audience. A soliloquy is really a dialogue with oneself and thus intrinsically metadramatic, insofar as the speaker is an audience to him or herself. Hamlet is often intensely critical of himself and his attempts at self-justification. He has in effect internalized his audience. Hamlet authorizes himself in his soliloquies by being his own audience. Harold Bloom, a leading proponent of Hamlet's psychological depth, notes insightfully, "Hamlet can seem an actual person who somehow has been caught inside a play, so that he has to perform even though he doesn't want to" (401). Bloom, however, doesn't seem to realize that it is precisely the metadrama of Hamlet's representation that makes him so persuasive as a character. The dramatic realism of Shakespeare's protagonists, the illusion of depth and interiority, is essentially metadramatic. Every thought they have (in asides or monologues) is a dialogue with a potentially resistant audience. Even Bottom, a lower-class comic character, is always intensely aware of his audience, so that his character, like Hamlet's, truly "hath no bottom." Hamlet's profound interiority functions as a sacred locus that competes effectively with the ceremonial locus of the public stage, both political and theatrical. Shakespeare's protagonists are always inhabited by their other, leading to the "inescapable *perpetuum mobile* of the dialogicized self-consciousness," to borrow a phrase from Bakhtin (*Problems* 230).

Shakespeare's metadramatic techniques have certainly not been neglected by critics, but their root in the potential resistance of the audience has not been recognized. Shakespeare's response to this resistance is essentially to stage it, as way of legitimating it and the audience, offering a catharsis of the emotions involved. In Shakespeare's comedies, metadrama functions to explore the conventional nature of social roles, affirming them but also educating the audience about the imaginative (often destructive) illusions that inform our lives as social animals. In the tragedies metadrama tends to question the imperatives of ceremonial order and dramatic illusion. Shakespeare's genius was to use metadrama to intensify the pathos of his great tragic protagonists. Hamlet is subject not just to fate but also a fundamentally corrupt court. More broadly, metadrama serves to explore and finally understand the complex interdependence of centralized figures and their audience, compelling our continued fascination with Shakespearean drama.

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Notes

[1] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Seventh Edition*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Pearson, 2014); all Shakespeare citations are to this edition.

[2] In a similar vein, James Bednarz writes, “Shakespeare defended the common stages not by emphasizing the didactive power of poetry to transform its audience or the status of its performers, but by insisting that theatricality was the fundamental condition of human experience” (253).

[3] On how the belief in equality can stimulate offense, see Eric Gans’s important essay, “Originary Democracy and the Critique of Pure Fairness,” in *The Democratic Experience and Political Violence*, eds. David C. Rappaport and Leonard Weinberg (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 308-324.

[4] See, for example, Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted* (102), and William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix* (929-931).

[5] Michael Norton argues that Christian liturgy and drama were understood as categorically different forms of cultural activity in medieval Europe. But he notes the existence of Christian drama from beginning around 1200 A.D., and he recognizes that Christian “representational rites,” which shared many of the formal features of drama, were common in medieval Europe and England. See Michael Norton, *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2017). Norton is interested in the history of Christian liturgy, and he believes that the intentions of the clergy during a liturgical ritual are incompatible with the intentions of the participants during a play. A play, however, can be considered a form of ritual, whether or not it includes religious content and enjoys official ecclesiastical sanction. When we consider the larger cultural functions of liturgy and drama, the expressed intentions are just one aspect. I agree that we can’t ignore the intentions of the celebrants, but neither can we ignore the formal, aesthetic, experiential, and emotional dimensions of ecclesiastical ritual and (sacred or

secular) drama, for all participants. Robert Weimann and New Historicist critics have noted the significant connections (both continuities and discontinuities) between Christian ritual, Christian drama, and Renaissance secular drama. See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare's Life and Art," *The Norton Shakespeare, Third Edition* (New York: Norton, 2016), pp. 44-74. For the claim that the Christian Mass was a form of a drama for medieval audiences and understood as such by certain contemporaneous authors, see O. B. Hardison Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). On the religious and ritual content of Greek tragedy, see Christine Sourvinou-Inwood, "Greek Tragedy and Ritual," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 7-24.

[6] See Terrence Deacon on the necessary connection between ritual and the emergence of human symbolic activity: *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and Brain* (New York: London, 1997), pp. 401-410.

[7] On religion as the basis of communal solidarity, see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press-Macmillan, 1915), pp. 59-63, *passim*; and Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 129-133.

[8] Marshall Sahlins, "The Original Political Society," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7.2 (2017), pp. 91–128.

[9] On Protestant drama in England in the sixteenth century, and the scholarship on this topic, see Robert Weimann, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse*, ed. David Hillman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), pp. 28-30; and Raphael Falco, "Medieval and Reformation Roots," *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 251.

[10] Ancient Greek Old Comedy, on the other hand, "is ubiquitously self-referential: Aristophanes is probably the most metatheatrical playwright before Pirandello" (Taplin 164): see Oliver Taplin, "Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy: A Synkrisis," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106 (1986), pp. 163-174. Self-reference in Old Comedy appears to be mainly a function of its topical satire. H. D. F. Kitto observes, "Old Comedy took as its function the satirical criticism of contemporary Athenian life; its background . . . was the streets and meeting places of Athens. It was essentially local and topical" (227). See Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1956). Shakespearean satire almost always has larger aims, and he generally avoids targeting contemporaries in any obvious way (the "little eyases" passage in *Hamlet* is a

notable exception, but even there he does not mention any specific persons). There's some occasional overlap between satire and metadrama in Shakespeare but no necessary connection. The strict separation of genres in ancient Greek drama also limits any comparison.

[11] Classical scholars Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and Michael R. Halleran have noted occasional instances of self-reference in Attic tragedy. See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Greek Tragedy and Ritual," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 7-24; and Michael R. Halleran, "Theater in Performance," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 198-214. This essay argues that Shakespearean metadrama is qualitatively different, being driven by the forces of Christian egalitarianism and iconoclasm.

[12] On the various expressions of cosmic order in medieval culture and Shakespearean drama, see Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), Chapter Four, "The Little World of Man."

[13] See Lawrence Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700," *Past & Present* 33 (Apr., 1966), pp. 16-55.

[14] For example, the Pilgrimage of Grace, the most serious political revolt of the sixteenth century, was conceived as a defense of traditional social order.

[15] On how a disruption in the order of the universe—"call it divine, moral, natural, or merely fatal" (26)—is central to Shakespeare's tragedies, see John P. Beifuss, "The Supernatural as a Tragic Dimension in Shakespeare's Tragedies," *Interpretations* 8.1 (1976), pp. 24-37.

[16] On political discourse and the social order in Elizabethan England, see Lee Beier, "Social Discourse and the Changing Economy," *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 50-67; and David Cressy, "Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England," *Literature and History* 3 (1976), pp. 29-44.

[17] On the demise of the feudal order in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *King Lear*, see Peter Goldman, "A New Way of Interpreting Literature, Shakespeare and Milton," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 26.2 (Spring 2021), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2602/2602goldman/.

[18] There was of course debate about the proper course of godly rule, and controversy about the relative authority of state and church is endemic to Christianity. But William M. Lamont notes, "[John] Foxe's history [*The Actes and Monuments*, 1563] encouraged a reverent approach to [Queen] Elizabeth: she was the culmination of history; the retort of God to the challenge of Rome" (35). See Lamont, *Godly Rule: Politics and Religion,*

1603-1660 (Macmillan, 1969).

[19] See Peter Goldman, "'The reforming of Reformation itself': Public versus Private Scenes of Representation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*," *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*, ed. Adam Katz (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2007), pp. 171-211.

[20] Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*.

[21] On the role of the audience in medieval drama, see also Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), Chapter One. Righter is not concerned with the platea-locus opposition, but she provides a valuable and interesting account of how medieval drama included the audience into the play.

[22] For Troilus, "Bifold authority" refers to a split within rational experience, the evidence of his senses regarding Cressida. This contradiction, for Troilus, fractures the very structure of reality, the "bonds of heaven."

[23] Robert Weimann, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse*, ed. David Hillman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[24] Jan Assman argues that Mosaic iconoclasm, at its origin, was directed to the supposed divinity of Egyptian political and religious authorities as legitimated by the images and figures of the gods. See Jan Assman, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 87.

[25] On the crisis of authority created by the perception (and reality) of corruption in virtually all public authorities and institutions, see David Morse, *England's Time of Crisis: From Shakespeare to Milton* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989). On the "crisis of confidence" in the monarchy and aristocracy leading to their loss of power during the Civil War and Interregnum, see Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (London: Clarendon-Oxford University Press, 1965).

[26] On the radical (and sometimes conservative) uses to which the Bible was put during Shakespeare's lifetime, see chaps. one and two of Christopher Hill's *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin Press, 1993).

[27] On Queen Elizabeth's attempts to consolidate her power, and the resistance she encountered from advocates of reform, including her archbishop Edmund Grindal, see Weimann, *Authority and Representation*, pp. 91-94.

[28] See Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1952); and James Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poet's War* (New York: Columbia

University Press, 2001).

[29] On Robert Greene, the “University wits,” their role in the literary scene of London, and their rivalry with Shakespeare, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), Chap. Seven, “Shakescene.”

[30] M. C. Bradbrook writes, “in Norfolk, Kett’s Rebellion (1549) had started at a play and produced a commune based on Robin Hood’s justice, that lasted for a couple of months”; in *Shakespeare: The Poet in his World* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 38. See also Janet Hill, *Stages and Playgoers: From Guild Plays to Shakespeare* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), pp. 78-79.

[31] See Nova Myhill “Making Spectacles: Spectatorship and Authority on the Early Modern Stage,” on the various conflicts between audience and players in the seventeenth century, including the competing forms of authority.

[32] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[33] Malcolm Heath, classical scholar and translator of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, notes that Aristotle, in his *Politics*, associates the catharsis produced by music with “healing” and “pleasurable relief” (Heath xxxviii). Greek and Renaissance drama, of course, included music, song, and dance. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents catharsis as a “purgation” of pity and fear, but Heath argues that such a catharsis would be experienced only by those with “disordered emotional susceptibilities,” while other audience members would find the emotions aroused by tragedy teaching them virtue and understanding (xxxvii-xliii). For some contemporary perspectives on Aristotle’s concept of tragic catharsis, see Elizabeth S. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 290-292; Leon Golden, A*ristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992); Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics, Second Edition* (London: Duckworth, 1998); and Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2002).

[34] The nature of “social reality” is a philosophical question with a long history. It’s usually addressed in terms of the cultural rules and conventions that condition our actions and beliefs rather than shared fears, desires, and the imagination. See Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 1-6. Readers wishing to pursue this question from a larger philosophical perspective may consult Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1966); John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press-Simon & Schuster, 1995); and Pertti

Alasuutari, *Social Theory and Human Reality* (London: Sage, 2004).

[35] Although Tomasello sees the basic function of shared intentionality as collaboration, he recognizes that collaboration itself is competitive in certain respects. He notes that natural selection will favor individuals with the ability to collaborate (*Natural History of Human Thinking* 4-5). He also recognizes that groups that are more able to collaborate can better compete with groups lacking in this regard.

[36] See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971); and Jon Kenko-James, *This Isle is Full of Monsters: Shakespeare's Audiences and the Supernatural* (Greenrock, Scotland: Beulaithris Publishing, 2018).

[37] See David Morse on the anxiety aroused by crafted representations during the Renaissance, especially in Jacobean tragedy, *England's Time of Crisis*, Chap. 9, "Counterfeit Representations," pp. 192-255. Andrew Gurr also discusses the fear of deceptive appearances and representations in Shakespeare's England: "Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing," in *Neo-Historicism: Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics,* eds. Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess, and Rowland Wymer (Cambridge, GB: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 91–110. Gurr recognizes that metatheater responds to the problem of social order, although we disagree as to the precise mechanism involved. Gurr goes so far as to claim that rhymed or blank verse, along with soliloquies, asides, and other traditional elements of Renaissance drama, were intended to ward off the potential for dramatic illusion. But the theatrical conventions of the London stages are not inherently anti-realistic; in many cases, particularly blank verse, they could be dramatically compelling. By the same token, metadrama is not always anti-realistic, as I discuss in the final section of this essay.

[38] Tanya Pollard has a brief, insightful discussion of the ambivalence of the *theatrum mundi* topos in her Introduction to *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. xix.

[39] On *The Tempest* and the problem of authority, see Peter Goldman, "Shakespeare's Gentle Apocalypse: *The Tempest*," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 18.2 (Spring 2013), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1802/1802goldman/.

[40] Hermia and Helena never receive Puck's love drops, but they switch from the role of the beloved to the role of the rejected, and vice-versa.

[41] On Shakespearean Romance and the problem of authority, see Peter Goldman, "*The Winter's Tale* and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 17.1 (Fall 2011), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1701/1701goldman/.

[42] W. W. Greg, in similar fashion, argues that the ghost is Hamlet's hallucination.

Claudius's (seeming) lack of reaction to the dumb show for *The Murder of Gonzago* proves, in Greg's view, that Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison in his ear. See Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination," *The Modern Language Review* 12.4 (Oct. 1917), pp. 393-421. In Ernest Jones's Freudian interpretation, *Hamlet* is driven primarily by the ambivalent mimetic relationship between Hamlet, his father, and Claudius. See Jones, "The Oedipus-complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive," *The American Journal of Psychology* 21.1 (January, 1910), pp. 72-113.

[43] See Assman, *Of God and Gods*.