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“Making Meaning by Finding It: A Study of *The Tempest*”

What good is it to discover or point out the existence of meta-drama in a play, that it portrays or invokes the experience of watching or being an actor in a drama? For humans, all conscious experience includes the capacity for meta-ness – the self-conscious awareness that one is an “I” having the experience in question, that the observing “I” once noticed thus becomes an object of observation, and so on in endlessly recursive reflections. It is both the deepest and the most trivial aspect of consciousness.

But when is it “deep,” leading to a greater insight into one’s self and world? When is it simply a genre to make note of, or a pleasant conceit to record in one’s commonplace book? Is a play entitled to be classed as meta-drama simply for invoking the metaphor and then going on with its largely independent story line?

I see Shakespeare’s plays as rich in examples of a superior kind of meta-drama portrayed or invoked for the reason that in varying degrees the thought they suggest is, fractal-like, congruent with the meaning of the work as a whole – an admittedly debatable assertion given the variety of conflicting views about nearly everything Shakespearean, including even the idea of authorial meaning.

I claim and will try to show here how and why *The Tempest* is the culmination of those many examples, and much wider in the scope of its ambition and achievement; it is Shakespeare’s most explicit and comprehensive marriage of meta-dramatic form, content, and effect. My point of departure will be a little-noticed but all-important anomaly in the masque organized by Prospero to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. Closely considered, it raises *The Tempest* to the level of a prophetic but thoroughly meta-dramatic representation of that eternal puzzle which our own contemporaries confront in every field from physics to linguistics, and continue to grapple with in such terms as the mind-body problem, the Big Question (i.e., consciousness), metaxis, the existential crisis, and much else.

Emily Coyle, Rutgers University

“Things of Flesh: On The Actor’s Body in *The Duchess of Malfi*”

This paper is part of a chapter that imagines how John Webster used the actor’s body to effect both his fiction and his audience’s perceptions of it. In a play where characters are often indexed by their relation to things—to portraits, to apricots, to cosmetics, and most spectacularly, to wax figures—I argue that *The Duchess of Malfi* advances a theory of acting as “tragic anatomy,” of which Bosola is its chief engineer. Focusing specifically on how he (re)produces Antonio and his children as figurines, I argue that Webster does not kill his actors off but seeks to show how they have been dead all along. As Bosola says in the play’s second act, Webster’s actors are rotten and hidden in rich tissue.

Jeff Doty, University of North Texas

“Metatheater of the Real?”

At or near climactic moments, characters in Shakespeare’s later plays often try to come to some ultimate reckoning of their experiences or even the meaning of life itself. When they do so, they often explicitly reference plays or players. To be sure, there are important differences in metatheatrical speech acts by Macbeth (5.5.23–27), Coriolanus (5.3.40–42), Cleopatra (5.2.214–216), Posthumus (5.6.229–30), and Prospero (4.1.146–163). But together, these passages point to Shakespeare’s tendency to refer to theatrical mimesis as a means to articulate what the human condition is (or can be) like. One account we might give of this tendency is: Shakespeare’s imitations paradoxically try to capture the essence of reality by pointing to *other* imitations – other things that are not “real.” So instead of using poetry to convey profound truths (as Sidney might have it), Shakespeare pulls audiences into a dizzying *mise en abyme*. (Perhaps all there is to know is that all the world really is a stage?) To further develop this account, we might argue – especially from our post-Brechtian vantage point – that Shakespeare’s metatheatrics in these climactic moments are designed to produce certain theatrical effects. References to players or plays briefly layer the theatrical moment in ways that afford playgoers a double-perspective: on one level is emotional involvement during highly-pitched moments; on a coterminous level is the critical – and emotional? – distance that comes when we are forced to acknowledge moment’s artifice. In this essay, however, I will attempt to develop a contrary account of how these metatheatrical statements function. I suggest that for Shakespeare evoking the artifice of plays and playing is actually a form of verisimilitude. For these characters – and the audiences they address – plays may be fictions but they are also durable things in the world. And in likening the events in their lives to fictional persons, Shakespeare’s characters behave like actual people, for whom the imagined helps constitute and create – rather than escape from – what is real.

Andrew Griffin, University of California, Santa Barbara

“Ben Jonson and Bathetic Overliving”

This paper considers biographical accounts of Ben Jonson’s life by appeal to Emily Wilson’s vision of “tragic overliving.” Where tragedies tend to feature lives interrupted too soon, tragedies of overliving, Wilson argues, tend to imagine a death that is differently “untimely,” cruelly arriving after the moment when -- according to some measure -- it should have arrived. “Prolonged old age is one way in which life may seem to go on too long,” she points out, but even young people may feel that they ought already to have died. . . . The sense that the central character ‘should’ have died generates an uneasy feeling in the audience or reader that the text itself ‘should’ have ended. These texts therefore challenge Aristotelian notions of tragic structure, in that they go on after the

expected moment of ending. . . . [Such] tragedies of overliving encourage feelings of despair and longing for death that are never completely eliminated. (1, 11)

While such a model of biographical overextension relies on formal dramatic categories -- on Aristotle's sense, for instance, that plots have beginnings, middles, and ends -- the categories apply in useful ways when attempting to consider biographical accounts of Jonson's career. As we see in both modern and early modern biographical accounts of Jonson's life, writers tend to treat him as a figure who overlived bathetically rather than tragically, dying twenty years after his career came to fruition with the 1616 publication of his folio rather than maturing gradually over the course of a professional *cursus*. I want ultimately to argue that this biographical complexity is an issue to which Jonson pays particular attention in his late plays. In paratexts to these later works he recognizes both the narrative problems posed by preemptively memorialized life and also attempts to make sense of the career that has befuddled biographers who were searching for a plot. After outlining the various ways that Jonson's career has troubled biographers, I argue that Jonson preemptively challenges many familiar biographical readings of his life, and that he does so within his larger project of authorial self-presentation. In doing so, he produces for himself a well plotted life, imagining his career according to the imperatives of dramatic plotting that he outlines most explicitly in *Discoveries* and in his final play -- his vocation's crowning achievement? -- *The Magnetic Lady*.

William R. Jones, Murray State University

“‘Stuff for Paradoxes’: Shakespearean Meta-Satire”

This essay re-opens and broadens the fraught question of Shakespeare's relationship to the modes of satire prevalent near the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Scholars such as Oscar J. Campbell (*Comicall Satyre and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida*, 1938, and *Shakespeare's Satire*, 1943) and James Bednarz (*Shakespeare and the Poets' War*, 2001) represent two important perspectives on the issue, with the former arguing for Shakespeare as an enthusiastic employer of satire, and the latter arguing for Shakespeare as utilizing satire mainly to assault Ben Jonson during the so-called “Poets' War.” More recently, Anthony Dawson and Gretchen Minton have adopted a more nuanced approach, citing Shakespeare's “discomfort...with the ambiguous moral stance of satire.”¹ So, is it reasonable to describe Shakespeare as a satirist or not?

With the 1599 Bishops' Ban on satire, the Poets' War, and the Inns of Court as socio-cultural contexts, this essay argues that Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* employs the satiric modes of the time to self-consciously comment on the potential ideological consequences of those modes (a decidedly meta-satiric structure). Because satire's imperative to attack inevitably forces an ideological position on the author, Shakespeare's unique meta-satiric structure suggests the author was neither a proponent nor a detractor of the prevailing satiric modes, but was instead interested in dramatizing a somewhat conservative (i.e. politically safe) overview of the potential tragic consequences to Old and

¹ Dawson, Anthony B. and Minton, Gretchen E., Editors. *Timon of Athens*. Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Cengage, 2008.

to New Troy (London) of the current iconoclastic impulse. From the “Meta” perspective, *Troilus and Cressida* becomes a dramatic laboratory in which the contemporary nihilistic satiric ideology is allowed to undermine the imperial ideology that supposedly links (according to Early Modern English historians) Troy, Rome, and London. The play’s dark and inconclusive tone ultimately compels the audience to reflect on the utility of satire’s tendency to reduce cultural touchstones to risible “paradoxes,” as Ulysses terms them, at the expense of time-honored orthodoxies.

Emily Kohlhasse, University of Rochester

**“‘Out of mere wantonness’:
Play(ing), Desire, and Interpretation in Jonson’s *Volpone*”**

Classifying Jonson’s *Volpone* as a metatheatrical play is a critical commonplace. Scholars often identify Volpone and Mosca as virtuosic actors or playwrights, and W.B. Worthen rightly notes that “the most striking criticism of the play regards the desire to perform, rather than greed or lust, as the play’s driving motive.” Yet commentators typically focus on how these metatheatrical elements—combined with the tricksters’ fates—may be read as a critique of acting or a clue to Jonson’s (anti)theatrical attitude.

In this essay, I am less concerned with the play’s exploration of the combined allure/danger of acting and more interested in what it means to be a character who is player-like in *Volpone*: how does the act of playing operate in this play-world? I plan to explore the nexus among playing, desire, and interpretation. Playing is a means of achieving one’s desires (and is Volpone’s chief desire), but knowledge of someone else’s desires also allows a player to manipulate them. A skilled player is a skilled interpreter, both in the sense of *explicator* (e.g. Mosca glosses the “sick” Volpone’s attitude for the gulls and remarks on the gulls’ stupidity for Volpone and the theater audience) and *discerner* (e.g. Volpone and Mosca tell us that they do not rob indiscriminately but only cheat those who deserve it, and both men have a knack of telling victims exactly what they need to hear). Volpone and Mosca have no trouble controlling the avaricious gulls, whose objectives they understand all too well, but have less success directly influencing Bonario and Celia, whose motivations seem vague, obscure, or nonexistent.

I use the term *player* instead of *actor* because Volpone’s chief impulse is playful as well as histrionic. He displays not only the “appetite for acting” Michael Goldman discusses but also the instinct to play described by Johan Huizinga: the fox constantly seeks out diversion. Yet Volpone’s playing does not remain distinct from ordinary life as Huizinga claims it must. Volpone’s real trouble is not that he plays per se but rather stems from his conflation of play and reality, which derails his interpretive abilities.

Nathaniel C. Leonard, Westminster College

**“‘Our sport shall be to take what they mistake’:
Metatheatricality and the Interaction
of Representational Layers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”**

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A Midsummer Night's Dream, like many of Shakespeare's plays, embraces metatheatrical tropes as foundational to its representational logic. The play's Rude Mechanicals and their inset performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe,' while certainly humorous, also create a complex series of virtual layers within the play's fifth act and the interactions between these layers demonstrate the efficacy and dramaturgical potential of not just the play-within-the-play structure, but also metatheatrical moments more generally. Even as the play's staged audiences invite the viewer to "take what they [The Mechanicals] mistake" and to find comedy in the folly of these amateur actors, that framing mechanism is inverted as the audience tries to navigate the complex representational landscape of the scene. If the viewer identifies with the staged audience watching the inset play, then the act's manipulation of performed viewership undermines a simplistic understanding of the relationship between the actual audience and the world of the play that potentially collapses *Midsummer's* genre. On the other hand, if the audience accepts the Rude Mechanicals as the lens through which to read the scene, they are effectively cast as the ensorcelled Titania, forced to accept an almost absurd and topsy turvy interpretation of the relationship between the performed and the real. The play's use of metatheatre invites the viewer to interrogate the nature of the audience/performance relationship offering a representational logic that doesn't neatly resolve and which in turn models the potential impact that the stage can have on the real world.

Genevieve Love, Colorado College

“That Crookbackt Prodegie’: Richard III, Likeness, and Textual Forms”

Putting disability studies in conversation with bibliography, my paper will investigate how Richard III's distinctive body haunts discussions of the play's textual history: its existence in six early quartos, and their relationship to the Folio. The relationship between plays in their theatrical and in their textual forms, beginning in the period itself, has been understood in part through an appeal to disability: supposedly imperfect textual versions of plays are characterized as "lame." My interest is in how, when disabled bodies are at the center of bibliographically complex texts, those anomalous bodies are covertly reproduced in the language we use to describe the textual problems or complexity of such plays. The corporeal language of bibliography takes shape not only through the supposed the "maiming" of individual texts, but in the stemmatic, genealogical relationships among different versions of the same text. This language, when brought to bear on texts featuring a disabled body, becomes a kind of meta-language, reanimating the body in the text as it describes the text's "body." At the same time, a body like Richard III's, which seems to anticipate his own play's bibliographical multiplicity and compromised genealogical likeness, projects a kind of self-referentiality *avant la lettre*: his distinctive body proleptically sets the terms for textual debates over the play that bears his name. I will be particularly concerned with how questions of degrees of variation among the seven early versions of the text recapitulate questions in the text—and in current disability studies approaches to Richard—about the extent of his bodily difference.

Erin Minear, William & Mary

“As good as a chorus’: Acting and Narrating in *Hamlet*”

Hamlet hears a narrative account of his father’s death from a source he hesitates to trust. So he turns to live action, translating the story into a play. His ostensible reason purpose is to create the opportunity to watch his uncle while he watches to play, to see if he betrays any sign of guilt. The “proof” that he receives from this exercise is problematic for more than one reason. But what other possible functions does the play-within-the play serve? My paper will argue that in having Hamlet stage the Ghost’s story, Shakespeare reflects upon these two different modes of representation: narrative and drama. Hamlet informs the players that their job is to hold a mirror up to nature, but Hamlet in fact asks them to hold a mirror up to something phantasmic and unnatural in two senses (it comes from an unnatural source, whether spirit or devil, and imitates an “unnatural” action—the murder of a family member). What does it mean to give flesh to this ghostly narrative? Is Hamlet’s conviction of his uncle’s guilt partly based on the fact that he has now *seen* the Ghost’s story brought to life in front of him? But Hamlet himself, at what seems the crucial moment, turns the drama back into a narrative, breaking into the play to inform the audience about what they are seeing or soon to see: “He poisons him in the garden for his estate... You will see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.” It is after this pronouncement that “the King rises.” Hamlet does not quite trust the drama to convey the information he wants it to convey. This series of shifts—from narrative to drama and back again—captures in miniature Shakespeare’s approach to the art of play-writing.

Mark B. Owen, Washtenaw Community College

“Mak[ing] Possible Things Not So Held’: Meta-Space in *The Winter’s Tale*”

Shakespeare scholars often claim that the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* generates wonder for the audience primarily by visual means. Yet, how does the spectacle of Hermione’s metamorphosis, which calls attention to the conditions of performance and emphasizes its theatricality, allow for a genuine feeling of wonder for its audience? In this essay, I will examine the ways in which the play prepares its audience to perceive—in what I regard as the meta-space of Paulina’s chapel—not only what is on display visually, but the holistic theatrical product of the interactions between, and intermingling of, stage and world. Jumping off from Foucault’s conception of heterotopia, my paper will explore how the exchanges and juxtapositions between spatial modes (diegetic and mimetic, off- and onstage, unreal and real, dreams and actions, narrative “old tale” and dramatic spectacle) lay the groundwork for an intersubjective perceptual experience in the play’s final moments.

Meta-spaces abound in Shakespeare’s plays. However, unlike *King Lear*’s Dover Cliff scene, for example, in which the disguised Edgar’s asides brace playgoers for the artifice of Gloucester’s fall, thus generating dramatic irony, or plays-within-plays, which maintain a hierarchy of illusion, the meta-space of Paulina’s chapel is sui generis in that it seems, however illusory, to endow player and playgoer, on- and off-stage audiences, with a shared agency in determining an as-yet-determined reality. In this high-wire act of theatrical manipulation, playgoers are encouraged to confront the possible: Hermione could reject or

accept Leontes; Leontes could “shun her again” and “kill her double” or not; the audience could “hoot” at the scene as it would an old tale or it could be moved to tears. I will suggest that *The Winter’s Tale* warns of the interpretive pitfalls of fixed perspective and blinkered perception, while the final spectacle stokes an awareness in its audience of the harmony of truth and illusion, and of possibility and impossibility, in the theatrical event.

Stephanie Pietros, College of Mount Saint Vincent

“Song and Intertextuality in *Othello*”

In the final act of *Othello*, as she lays dying at the hands of her husband, Emilia echoes an important snippet of the song Desdemona sang an act earlier: “Willow, willow, willow.” As is well-known, the song Desdemona sings is itself an intertextual reference. While critics have debated Shakespeare’s sources for Desdemona’s song, general consensus holds that it serves to heighten the tragedy of the final acts of the play. In using this song, however, Shakespeare does not merely recall one (or two) popular ballad(s), but rather an entire genre of songs with tripartite “willow” refrains, some embedded in other plays, some comedic parodies, some popular ballads, some lute songs. In this paper, I will flesh out the characteristics of this genre of song, one which straddles the boundaries of “high” and “popular” art. In so doing, I hope to unsettle critical assumptions about the song’s function in Shakespeare’s play. Moreover, this work suggests the necessity of considering song, among other intertextual elements in early modern drama, if we are to attempt to ascertain audience experience. Audience members’ previous associations with such songs undoubtedly colored their perception of the scenes in which they appeared. While some of these songs’ intertextual networks and codes of signification are, admittedly, challenging to recover, scholars and practitioners of early modern drama have much to gain by attempting to do so.

Shiladitya Sen, Montclair State University

“Performing Spectatorship in Early Modern Drama”

The early modern stage was always a conflicted space, which monarchs and censors, city fathers and antitheatrical pamphleteers, attempted to critique and control. Playwrights and players had to safely navigate these influences, while simultaneously engaging their spectatorship and eliciting the desired emotional responses and financial rewards. They also had to adapt to the exigencies of performing spaces that made it physically impossible to render the presence and nature of spectatorship less than fully evident. In response to such elements, acting companies regularly—and metatheatrically—performed and commented on spectatorship in their plays. This approach allowed performers to rhetorically position their audiences (in the physical theaters and in the *theatrum mundi* beyond them) so as to emphasize the need for appropriate judgment, while laying the onus on the spectators’ critical acumen. In theory, this approach potentially absolved performers from blame for their performances, whether for failing to provide the desired entertainment or for causing political or moral offense.

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My paper examines how early modern playwrights (such as Kyd, Shakespeare, and Jonson) habitually utilized metatheatrical techniques—fictional spectators on stage, direct references to the theater audience, mentions of past performances, prologues that (mis)represented what was to come—in their plays to remind audiences of their role and responsibility in the theater. I lay especial emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the metatheatrical performance; players and playwright displayed their theatrical virtuosity while depicting the dangers of poor judgment and the importance of accurate critical acumen, but used it to rhetorically diminish their own contribution and to lay emphasis on the power of the individual spectator (and the audience as a group) to interpret the performance, whether to positive or ill effect. The negotiation of power inherent in this paradox underlines the centrality of metatheatrical practice to early modern drama, where it was not simply a pleasant intellectual activity but instead a near-inevitable response to the material and socio-political circumstances under which theatre existed.

Claire Sommers, CUNY Graduate Center

“Of Greeks and Gillyflowers: Hybridity and the Creative Process in Shakespeare’s Romances”

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita hands out flowers and says “the fairest flowers o’ th’ season/Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors/Which some call nature’s bastards...I have heard it said/There is an art which in their piedness shares/With great greating nature” (IV.iv.95-104). Polixenes replies that she should make her garden rich in gillyvors and admonishes her not to call them bastards. Perdita describes the “streaked” and “pied” nature of the gillyvors, emphasizing that they were grafted from several different flowers. Because of their hybrid nature, one did not know what the gillyvors would look like when they bloomed. Perdita and Polixenes then use the gillyvor to discuss the relationship between art and nature.

My paper will assert that this passage extends beyond botany, becoming the means by which Shakespeare reflects upon his own process of writing *The Winter’s Tale* and his other late romances. Shakespeare’s plays have traditionally been sorted into three categories: comedy, tragedy, and history. But his late plays confound traditional generic boundaries, and in recent years, scholars have classified them as romances. Shakespeare drew upon many sources when writing *The Winter’s Tale*. I will analyze the play with respect to the ancient Greek novel, translations and adaptations of which were among the Renaissance’s most widely read works. These texts were distinguished not only by their focus on love and equality of gender, but their synthesis of tragedy, comedy, and philosophy. I will argue that the play’s oscillation between the tragic and comic serves as a means of engaging with the Greek romance and its evolution as seen in the prose fiction of contemporaneous Renaissance writers such as Robert Grene’s *Pandosto*. In blurring the boundary between comedy and tragedy, Shakespeare surpasses unitary dramatic forms and critically engages with adaptations of the Classics in an Early Modern world, as throughout the play, he reflects upon questions of genre and his own aesthetic process. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that Shakespeare recognizes the experimental nature of his work: with its

synthesis of genres, sources, and traditions, *The Winter's Tale* is a literary gillyvor and not even Shakespeare knows what piedness will bloom.

Jan Stirm, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

“Rethinking the Representation of Art and the Artist in *The Winter's Tale*”

The Winter's Tale and *The Tempest* are two of Shakespeare's “late” plays, both “romances” in modern parlance. Like Shakespeare's other romances, both plays focus on the marriage of a royal daughter, heir to a father whose rulership has been, at the least, troubled, but whose authority is reinvested at the end of the play. Both plays involve ocean voyages and shipwreck, missing mothers, and metatheatricality. *The Tempest* has long been valorized as Shakespeare's last play (though it's not the last play he worked on), with the central character, Prospero, dethroned Duke of Milan and magician, often seen as a sort of stand in for Shakespeare himself as theatrical master. In contrast, *The Winter's Tale* has received less attention, and it's theatricality has been read, especially recently, in terms of nature and natural phenomenon rather than as artistry. In this paper, I plan to use ecocriticism and feminist approaches to rethink the ways Prospero's artistry (as magician and theatrical master) are read, and to reread the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* to posit Paulina as a parallel in some ways with Prospero as a master of theatricality and artistry.

Deb Streusand, University of Texas at Austin

“Divergent Audience Responses to Metatheatre in Theatre Pro Rata's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*”

Critics who put forth theories of metatheatre often make claims about how the phenomenon affects audiences in the theatre. These claims tend to have two things in common. First, the critic makes the argument about audience response without actually making a direct investigation (such as an interview or survey) of theatre audiences watching metatheatrical plays. Second, they claim or imply that audience members watching the same play have a unified response, if not to every kind of metatheatre, then to each specific kind they identify in their theory. For example, Lionel Abel, James Calderwood, and Andrew Gurr all maintain that at least some types of metatheatre consistently have an alienating effect on audiences and that playwrights even employ metatheatre for this specific purpose. They do not acknowledge that this response to metatheatre may not be universal or may even vary within the same audience.

In working to put together my own account of metatheatre, I have surveyed audience members for their responses to metatheatrical plays at venues such as the Stratford Festival and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. My paper will examine the results of the audience surveys I conducted at Theatre Pro Rata's Spring 2016 production of *Knight of the Burning Pestle* in St. Paul, MN. I will use these results to argue that different members of the same audience can have divergent responses to the metatheatrical elements of the play they watch. I will specifically address the common claim that metatheatre alienates the audience and demonstrate how my results suggest that metatheatre can evoke this type of response in

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some members of an audience and not in others. Finally, although *Pestle* involves a type of metatheatre that no other early modern play employs -- namely, a layering of theater audience, actors/stage audience, and actors/stage actors that the play maintains throughout -- one can still use responses to it to make some generalizations about how metatheatre affects audiences in other contexts. Therefore, my paper will conclude by providing some suggestions as to what these results might be able to contribute to a larger account of metatheatre.