

Notes on metatheatre

... metatheater [means] drama about drama. It is a process by which the playwright enlists the enthusiastic cooperation of a willing reader/audience in the simultaneous creation and dismantling of the fiction of the play. Its application to the dramatic text serves the playwright in expressing the pervasive idea of the illusive nature of reality, ...

Metradramatic techniques serve not only as important thematic devices but also structuring elements in Golden Age theater, often with specific relevance for staging.

The general definition of 'metatheater' [is] put forth by Lionel Abel: 'theatre pieces about life as already theatricalized' (60).

Richard Hornby, in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, ... divides metadrama into several categories, each having different effects. His categories of metadrama are the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, and literary and real life reference within the play.

The function of the first, the play within the play, is to create two sharply indistinguishable layers of fiction so that the audience has the experience of 'seeing double', clearly noting multiple levels of action. Hornby further subdivides the play within the play into the inset drama and the framed play; in the former there is an inner play interjected into and secondary to the main action, such as the play that Hamlet uses to expose the culpability of Claudius. In the 'framed' type the inner play is the primary focus within a subordinate frame (33). We could consider most of the play of the Golden Age as partially framed through the customary recognition accorded the audience at the end of each play, ...

Hornby's second category, the ceremony within the play, involves a formal spectacle that is set off from the surrounding action. An example would be a wedding or the crowning of a king. The ceremony provides a communal pleasure in the achievement of an understanding of what is otherwise confusing or ephemeral and is a statement of recognition or acceptance by society... These ceremonies are cultural guideposts to the important issues for that culture. A well-known

example of Golden Age drama is the usual happy ending with many, if not all, of the players paired off. This is reflexive, at least in part, of a need to reaffirm societal unity.

Roleplaying within the role, like the play within the play, also distances the audience from the fiction of the drama, calling attention to the fictionality of the original role by foregrounding a second role. This type of metadrama, which creates more than one identity for the player, calls into question in the minds of the audience the whole area of identity. That this was a relevant issue in Golden Age drama is obvious from the frequent presence of... plays which carry the matter even further with multiple and changing sexual identities.

... aspects of metatheater derived from roleplaying... examples include the double roles played by characters, the use of an actor who speaks the prologue explaining the action to come and then steps into the dramatic work itself, the inclusion into the text of the play of the author's own circumstances or those of members of the audience, and, in religious plays, the representations of sacred stories which carry the action to the contemporary world of the audience (Surtz 35-67).

... metadrama... introduces thoroughly and effectively that omnipresent idea of the interplay of reality and illusion. ... This concept [i.e. of metadrama] may also serve as a bridge to English literature, since the interplay of reality and illusion is prevalent in Elizabethan drama. ... [Moreover, metadrama highlights the fact that] literature is not an isolated event, but rather a representation of the human community in its expression of the common perceptions and preoccupations of all history.

References

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