Jingkang Zhang
Prof. Turner
English 117B
December 11, 2019

Justifying “Improbable Fictions”:
Metatheatricality in Shakespeare

Metatheatre, the theatrical incarnation of the concept of self-reference which has infallibly intrigued generations of philosophers, claims a heavy presence in Shakespeare’s plays. By including theatrical elements in the characters’ speeches, a play introduces metatheatricality in the broader sense, whether specifically granting the characters with metadramatic awarenesses or not. Metatheatre is indeed one of the most powerful devices, in that its “meta” quality both inherits the charm of self-reference and opens up a whole new dimension of expressiveness denied to devices confined within “the fourth wall”, yet an unsettling one, for its employment forcibly extends the mirth, agony, reflections, or revelations of characters inside the play to every audience who might otherwise choose to remain a looker-on.

Matetheatre is used, for example, when Fabian comments on the improbability of Malvolio’s complete falling for the prank: “If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction” (*Twelfth Night*, 3.4 115-16). Although Fabian probably only intends to express the unbelievability of the situation in the play, we, as the real audience in front of whom the scene is indeed “played upon a stage”, are invited to make our own evaluations. In other words, we are tempted ask ourselves, “having seen it presented to me, should I ‘condemn’ the play as an ‘improbable fiction’?” While the answer to this

specific question may be subject to judgement of the individual audience, the example demonstrates the metatheatre's extraordinary capability of engaging the audience. More importantly, we are pressed to examine whether or not the employment of metatheatre itself adds to the play's convincingness, enjoyability, and ability to induce empathy. While some may suggest that metatheatricality may have the "initial effect [of] alienat[ing] us from the illusion of the play" (Teskey 27), reminding us of the artificiality of the play, and subsequently interrupting our immersion in the play, I would argue that, in opposite, metatheatrical elements in Shakespeare oftentimes serve to justify the story, draw recognitions from the audience, and invoke audience's empathy from one level deeper, when they feel that the situations in the play have a real-life implication for them.

To see how metatheatrical elements may carry positive effects, we must investigate both possibilities — whether the characters uttering metatheatrical lines have the self-awareness that they are in a play. Even though Shakespeare wrote before the erection of the "fourth wall", he appears to be very cautious against letting his characters explicitly break it. Instead, the more common metatheatrical usages assume that characters comment on the situations with theatrical references in sheer coincidence. However, there's one exception in which characters may explicitly break the "fourth wall" and directly address the audience — that is usually towards the end of the play, sometimes in the epilogue. One good example is the closing lines in *All's Well That Ends Well*:

> The King's a beggar now the play is done.
> All is well ended if this suit be won,
> That you express content, which we will pay
> With strife to please you, day exceeding day.
> Ours be your patience, then, and yours our parts;
> Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts. (5.3 328-33)

Near the closing of the play, as the line between performance and reality blurs with the introduction of metatheatre, it is notable that the character speaks more as an actor than the role that he acts. By explicitly referring to the play (as in "the play is done" (328)) and clearly stating the roles of the actors and audience (as in "we will pay / With strife to please you" (330-31) and "your patience" (332)), he no longer plays the King but admits his role as an actor. As *All's Well That Ends Well* is intended to be a typical comedy, its uttermost purpose, as the King confesses, is to "please" the audience. Thus, introducing metatheatricality in the more radical way - granting characters metadramatic self-awareness - appears to be acceptable, given that the use of metatheatre itself conforms to the theme and purpose of the play. To see this, we notice apparent efforts in rendering metatheatrical lines themselves as a source of entertainment to the readers. The paradoxical declaration of the King as a beggar, the inversion of roles between audience and actors, and the rhyming couplets are all sources of amusement that further add to comical effects of the play as a comedy.

In the same light, in romances or tragi-comedies, it is unsurprising to find that the employment of explicit metatheatricality adjusts accordingly its degree of audience alienation from the play's illusions in order to preserve the theme of the play. In the epilogue of *The Tempest*, we are encountered by Prospero with the same metadramatic awareness when he starts to address us in the hope of obtaining "the help of our good hands" (10). However, unlike what the King in *All's Well That Ends Well* does, Prospero does not detach himself from the role that he plays:

> Now 'tis true
> I must be here confined by you,
> Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
> Since I have my dukedom got
> And pardoned the deceiver, dwell

In this bare island by your spell,
(3-8)

This speech is closely related to the plot of the play. By summarizing what has happened ("[he] have [his] dukedom got / And pardoned the deceiver") and mentioning what is yet to happen (his departure to Naples), Prospero diligently adheres to the storyline. Thus, instead of jumping out of the play and joining the audience in real-world as the King of France does in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Prospero, in effect, drags the audience into the play by assigning the audience a role. As Prospero requires actions from the audience to "release [him]" (9), "fill [his] sail" (11), and "set [him] free" (20), the audience becomes a character in the play whose action has important consequences to the development of the plot and the consummation of this romance. This technique, opposite to other instances of metatheatre that we will see later which invites us to see our world as a stage, brings us onto the actual stage and makes us see it as our world. Indeed, having witnessed the magical powers of Prospero which thread the entire play, we are inclined to believe that the breaking of the "fourth wall" is also part of his magical wonders. Because of this precise quality of *The Tempest*, the metatheatricality in its epilogue, far from distracting us from the story, actually sinks us deeper into the romantic world that Shakespeare would like us to immerse in.

As more tragic elements are included in a comedy to shift the play into a tragicomedy, then a tragedy, the play requires more empathy or tears from the audience than amusement or laughter. Thus, it is less acceptable, even towards the end of the play, to grant the characters with metatheatrical consciousness, which removes the character from a pathetic position and thus the audience from an empathetic one. Indeed, in all of Shakespeare's tragedies, none but one ends with an epilogue. And the single epilogue of all tragedies, the epitaph in *Timon of Athens* clearly doesn't feature any metatheatrical elements either. Even though none of the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies realizes that they are in a play and explicitly breaks the

"fourth wall", metatheatricality, as theatrical self-references uttered by characters, is nonetheless prevalent.

One of the most rememberable occurrences of theatrical self-reference dwells in Macbeth's famous soliloquy after his wife's suicide:

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth*, 5.5 23-28)

In his delirious speech, Macbeth uses a series of metaphors to emphasize the fickleness of life. By comparing life to a walking shadow, human to a poor player, and life stories to a tale told by an idiot, Macbeth expresses his indifference to life, and therefore death. Even when his beloved lady commits suicide, he doesn't seem to care in the very least. It is his newly developed philosophy about life, that it "signif[ies] nothing", that explains Macbeth's nonchalance towards the death of Lady Macbeth, his own, and numerous others due to his bloody murders. Though himself unaware, the theatrical self-reference in his metaphor becomes chillingly evident to all of us as the audience as soon as Macbeth conjures up the image of "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more". As a precise reference to himself, who indeed struts and frets his hour upon the self-same stage when he first becomes Cawdor and then the King, and will soon be heard no more after his doomed death, the reflections by Macbeth invokes pity from us, for we lament not only the tragedy of Macbeth's story but also his inability, though close, to break the fourth wall and really claim, without a stake, that his life story is but "a tale / Told by an idiot … / Signifying nothing". In addition to adding this layer of metatheatrical tragedy for the group of audience who can see how Macbeth's revelation brings him so close to the fourth wall,

beyond which true relief is promised, yet fails him in breaking it, the metatheatrical metaphor also elevates the broader audience's appreciation of the tragedy. In a sense, Shakespeare himself, through his character Macbeth, is teaching us what to make of his tragedies: "It is the fact that my players did 'strut' and 'fret', yet will and must be heard no more after the play, that composes the major tragedy".

Aside from adding to the tragedy, metatheatricality assumes another role of offering comfort. Before Cleopatra commits suicide, she relates to Iras about her fear of seeing her story with Antony put into plays in which "some squeaking Cleopatra boy [her] greatness / I'th' posture of a whore" (Antony and Cleopatra, 5.2 216-20). Certainly, in Shakespeare's age, Cleopatra was played by a young boy actor. Thus, as soon as this line was voiced by the boy actor, perhaps in a "squeaking" manner to conform to the performative traditions of the time, the audience would quickly notice the metatheatrical irony. Yet, with thinkings one level deeper, they would realize the scene unfolded before them wasn't exactly ironical in such a negative way that the tragical fear of Cleopatra should become a laughable reality in the theatre, the play ruined. Instead, the boy actor playing Cleopatra in the Globe Theatre was actually defending her grace and greatness by presenting her fervent love, immovable pride, and undiminished bravery to the audience, especially through performance in this scene. If the fictional Cleopatra existing in the script could break the "fourth wall" (or the wall of paper), she would be thankful to the English Cleopatra on stage that preserves her greatness. Thus, the metatheatrical device in the last scene of *Antony and Cleopatra,* far from spoiling the tragedy, actually adds to the sources of comfort which is necessarily offered to the audience in most of Shakespeare's tragedies, thus making the tragedy more complete and entertaining as a whole.

More important than the above points that metatheatricality may help enhance the expression of tragedy by adding more perspectives to it, the ability of metatheatre to invoke the "true empathy" otherwise unattainable in the audience is central to my claim. Metatheatrical moments in which the characters celebrate the metaphor between the world and a stage, a human and a player, are able to help the audience zoom out of the scene for a while to see the world they live in as a stage and their role as a player. Many metatheatrical moments are of this quality: some are blatant — for example, the famous 27-line extended metaphor that starts with "All the world's a stage" and goes through "seven ages of man" in *As You Like It* (2.7 139-66); some are implicit, perhaps only discernible through their use of theatre terms — "Thy mother plays, and I / Play too, but so disgraced a part" (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.186-87). In either of the cases, we are encouraged to reflect on our own lives in such situations. We are pressed to ask ourselves: "If 'all the world is but a stage', and I am 'merely a player', which of the 'seven ages' I am currently in?"; "Are the closest people in my life 'playing', and do I unwittingly play 'so disgraced a part'?"; "Is my life 'but a walking shadow'? Will I be 'heard no more'? Does my life really 'signify nothing'?" As we take a moment to ask ourselves these questions, we appear to temporarily withdraw from the intensity of the play, so some may assert that the practice is harmful to developing our empathy for the play characters. However, I argue that this introspection is particularly crucial to developing a deeper empathy for the characters, to whom and whose situations we can only whole-heartedly relate after we are forced to project their fictional situations into our real-life world and contemplate what we would do and feel.

Having seen how metatheatrical moments in Shakespeare's plays, explicit and implicit, have helped to engage the audience in different ways, we may revisit Fabian's comment on the improbability of the story that he dwells in. Given that "improbable fictions" may

characterize and thus make “condemnable” most, if not all, of Shakespeare’s plays precisely due to their dramatic nature (a truism if seen through the original meaning of “dramatic”), metatheatricality inside the plays celebrates the “drama” by adding to it and greatly enhances the story by amplifying its intrinsic themes, providing new perspectives, and better invoking empathy. As a result, metatheatricality in Shakespeare provokes further contemplations from the audience after they applaud the actors off the stage and step on their own “stage of all the world”.

Works Cited

Teskey, Gordon. "Theatrical Self-Reference in Shakespeare." CEA Critic 46.3/4 (1984): 27-37.