

Michael Garrett

Professor Moss

Studies in Shakespeare - ENGL 4650

April 27, 2025

Shakespeare's Use of Metatheatre

The Bard himself was never one to shy away from being playful when it comes to form. In every artistic medium, there are those who reimagine, redefine, and take us new places when it comes to how we view said medium. Jackson Pollock's paintings, Andreas Gursky's photography, Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, Jean-Luc Godard's films all pushed their respective areas of expertise. Shakespeare was no exception. One way that Shakespeare played with the form of theatrical productions and performance, was his use of metatheatre. He wasn't the first to play with the form and to introduce the idea of metatheatrical elements into his plays, but with it being Shakespeare, he helped popularize it and has gained much attention as we all know. Metatheatre, the particular kind that I'm talking about and within the context of Shakespeare's work, is essentially the act of putting a play, within the play. There is much more to it than that, such as scholar Nathaniel C. Leonard's identification of the various *locus* and *platea*, or the University of Warwick's Stephen Purcell and his ideas on how the audience views metatheatrical works, either consistently oscillating back and forth between the two productions, or holding them within our awareness simultaneously, being represented by his "M1" and "M2" formulaic approach. There are many different productions we could look at when analyzing Shakespeare and metatheatre, but I'll be looking at perhaps the biggest and most famous

examples which are *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV Part I*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Perhaps Shakespeare's most notable and memorable use of metatheatre is found in one of his most famous plays, and that is *Hamlet*. *Hamlet's* influence on the world and almost every form of creative expression is undeniable, and even within more specific topics such as this, the powerful influence of *Hamlet* is inescapable. In Act 3, Scene 2 of *Hamlet* we see an excitable, yet plotting Hamlet push for a production titled *The Murder of Gonzago*, or more regularly known as *The Mousetrap*. While the production details events that almost exactly mirror what happened in real life to Hamlet's father, young Hamlet and his friend Horatio observe his uncle Claudius' reaction to the play so he can determine if his uncle's conscience is clear or not. This scene is particularly interesting when you look at it as a kind of commentary on what truth is, what truth looks like, and how it can be perceived. In my mind, it's almost as if Shakespeare is telling us that the stage can be the ultimate source of truth, that we turn to the theatre for truth and understanding, it's a place we go to make sense of this crazy world that we live in. My hypothesis is that Shakespeare understood that storytelling and this art form was a way for us to look at ourselves as well as others in order to make sense of what we might be dealing with. This is a more popular notion in the 21st century, but back in the 15 and 1600s, there weren't quite as many cheesy Pinterest posts with quotes about things like that on them.

What's also interesting about *The Mousetrap* and its function within the play is when you consider young Hamlet's actions and behavior when it comes to the meta-play. It's entirely erratic, provocative, and over-the-top, and distracts the audience within *Hamlet*, as well as us, the real audience. A great example of this being brought to life, is the Kenneth Branagh film adaptation of *Hamlet*, specifically because of its editing. It's so incredibly quick and wild,

constantly going back and forth between Hamlet and Ophelia, the players, Claudius and Gertrude, the audience, and Horatio. It forces us to look at how our minds deal with this specific example of metatheatre and how we're able to juggle the different meanings and stories that are happening. I will admit, as I watch that part of the movie, I find myself having to buckle down on the focus and really pay attention to make sure I don't miss anything. The layers begin to stack up and then even what Keneth Branagh brings to the film to make it his own comes through as well and is so interesting to watch.

Stephen Purcell expands on this idea further saying, "In their book *The Way We Think*, the cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner take Koestler's concept of bisociation as one of the starting points for their own theory of "conceptual blending." The human brain, they argue, is capable of "running multiple conceptions simultaneously, some of them conflicting with each other, and it seems that the brain is very well designed to run such multiple and potentially conflicting conceptions" (232)" (23). I find it rather fascinating to think about the work that our brain is doing to comprehend and follow all the various stories and implications, both when the meta-play closely resembles the actual play, and when it doesn't. Are we able to blend the layers together to see it all in a new color, or are we truly going back and forth, over and over again, making sure we have it all covered? I guess certain people's minds work differently, and that lends a hand to how we might perceive things differently from each other, but it's interesting to see how Shakespeare adds layers, and how he takes them away.

Another excellent example of a play within a play is in one of his slightly less talked about plays, and that is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I might be partial to this one as I performed it once for school as Bottom, the leader of the mechanicals, but I still think it's objectively a great play. One thing I find interesting to think about specifically within the context

of *Dream* is also something written by Stephen Purcell. He talks about how the meta-play is almost like a pun. It was Shakespeare's own little bit of comedy, maybe just for himself. It was him almost messing around, forcing the audience to look a little closer, and think a little deeper about the true meaning of what's happening while you juggle multiple meanings in your mind. We can find this added importance and nuance though multiple layers all over the place whether it's movies, or music. Whenever you have more of a background, more of a story, more context, something becomes more impactful. Shakespeare was able to constantly introduce new elements and seemingly make it difficult to follow, but in all actuality make it more entertaining. That's another aspect of Shakespeare's playfulness. He seems to constantly test the audience and is not afraid of almost trying to confuse him. You don't want to leave an audience in the dark for too long, but it's fine for there to be momentary confusion. It's as if he perfectly understood how to make something incredibly engaging and fun upon viewing the first time, but equally as entertaining and intriguing upon the second viewing. We see this in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Merchant of Venice*, and especially *Twelfth Night*. Granted two of those have to do with gender-trickery and it's not too hard to follow depending on how you're engaging with the play, but you definitely have to follow it.

Going back to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what's particularly fascinating is how much more you can take it apart than you'd initially assume. First, there is the play within the play; *Pyramus and Thisbe*, performed by the "mechanicals," but there is more to look at after that when it comes to the metatheatrical. After the obvious play done by the mechanicals, one could argue that the human world is another kind of production all done in front of the fairies and their supernatural world. Puck and Oberon watch the lovers quarrel and confusion play out in the forest just as we would watch another play that happens within *Dream*. What's another, equally

interesting layer to the meta-theatricality of *Dream* is the fact that when we're watching the mechanicals' play that is performed for Duke Theseus and his bride Hippolyta, our attention is not on the play, but instead it is on the audience watching the play. This turns it into another unofficial meta-play alongside the supernatural's observation of the human world. This is all detailed in an article written by Sam Osheroff about Penn State's production of *Dream*. He says, "With the second "play-within-a-play", the shift of focus turns, in part, not to the play at hand, but to the audience watching it." He explains how we're actually laughing at the audience as Bottom and Theseus converse about the play and Bottom's misconceptions about stage production are settled. This manipulation of where our attention is brought, shines a light how much of our experience of the story is being manipulated. Much like the themes of *Dream*, it's as if Shakespeare is telling us that there's always someone pulling the strings. It forces us to understand that we're at his hands, we're on his ride. Within *Dream*, the humans are all being manipulated by the fairies and by forces they cannot understand. Even that point there, could be argued as some kind of meta-commentary.

What this does for the tone of *Dream* is also very fascinating. The play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is much more serious in tone and treated very differently than other meta-plays. We get to deal with this situation differently than how we're initially interacting with the overall play. Instead of laughing at lovers' heads being turned into donkeys, and confusing love triangles and dynamics, we laugh at the audience within the play, and how they're struggling with the seriousness of the mechanicals' play. Not only is it serious, but it's lacking in quality and execution. The contemporary words for this kind of situation would "try-hard," or "cringe," but I'll refrain from using those unironically. The commentary this inevitably has on the play is quite interesting. Perhaps Shakespeare is trying to prove that maybe tone is something that isn't fixed

or rigid at all, even within one piece of work. Maybe tone is something that is manipulated throughout the story just like a character, or the plot, and instead of an overarching, all-encompassing theme, what we get to see is theme move and twist just like the other aspects of the story. We see this manipulation of theme and tone in his problem plays *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Although within those one's there's a more distinct line drawn within the play, where one half contrasts another half, and it doesn't blend as much. *Dream* undoubtedly tests us as viewers and forces us to think about what it means to perceive an artistic medium, within that same artistic medium, and how they might differ and how they might be in conversation with each other.

The example that comes from *Henry IV Part I* goes along perfectly with the one from *Dream* in terms of analyzing tone and what it can say about the characters or story within a play. Falstaff and Prince Hal stand up in the tavern and perform for the crowd what the conversation that Prince Hal is going to have with his father might look like. First, when Falstaff acts as the King, he defends himself and brings about the laughter that is typically synonymous with his presence on the stage. Then, they switch roles and Prince Hal acts as the King and criticizes this pretend "Hal" for hanging out with characters like Falstaff, leading the true Falstaff to defend himself, and continuing to make us laugh. This example is so impactful because even though it is quite small and is really just a spontaneous improv and isn't as much of a formal play, it says a lot about the story and the characters, specifically Prince Hal. Shakespeare was able to use this micro-play to first, start to show us more explicitly where Prince Hal's head is at and what he truly thinks of Falstaff and his life, and second, to hide the more serious nature of the play underneath comedy and wit. It's a very "Shakespeare" move as I'm sure you're well aware by now.

Henry IV Part I and this specific scene within the play is so intriguing when thinking about meta-plays and what they mean when we reflect on ourselves again and reanalyze how our brain is juggling these concepts. Like I previously mentioned, within the metatheatrical discussion pertaining to stage plays and particularly Shakespeare, the way our brains are able to interpret, metabolize, juggle, and make sense of all the different meanings and productions that are going on is a large topic of discussion.

One of the most prevailing of these theories is explored by Zied Ben Amor in his journal titled *Metatheatre as the Invisible in the Non-burlesque Constructs of Shakespeare*, and again by Stephen Purcell in his previously mentioned journal article. They both speak of this theory is that there is an M1 (Here and Now), referring to what we as the audience are viewing live on the stage and what we think and feel about that, and then there's M2 (Then and There), referring to the world that exists on the stage and what's playing out before our eyes. The question is on whether or not the audience holds those two ideas at the same time, constantly oscillating back and forth between the two, checking in on each other to catch up, or if the audience is constantly "blending" and "unblending" them. I find this "blend" metaphor to be particularly interesting because it suggests that we quickly put it all together to see what it's like, and then just as quickly break it all apart to go back to the core elements. If I take a look at my own mind, and how I work, what makes sense to me is the oscillating theory, the idea that we're constantly going back and forth between the two productions, between what's happening on stage and what's happening in real life and even perhaps adding in a third element with the various plays that take place within the given play. The level of effort you sometimes have to put in to really understand it all, and how much it can test you speaks to the power of Shakespeare's work, and again how he was unafraid of testing audiences. I think that's partially why he was so successful,

because he threw things around so much and kept the plays grounded while constantly adding various elements to the story.

The final play I would like to look at when talking about the framing device of putting a play-within-a-play is *The Taming of the Shrew*. What's fascinating about this example, is that throughout the whole play, what we watch is what's being framed rather than a smaller production taking place within the overall production. It's much like the films *Life of Pi*, *The Princess Bride*, or even *The Grand Budapest Hotel* to name some examples from film. What this does to the play is it immediately gives it this magical quality, where we now know that we're truly being told a story as if it's from a special book. In our minds we instantly feel that this isn't really happening (as if the fact that it being a stage play wasn't enough), and that this is all in a land of make believe. It reminds me of how Shakespeare will place a lot of his plays in Italy, at least the ones of romance and passion, the ones that seem to have an almost magical quality to them especially when talking about love.

The way he frames this play with a prank also speaks to the tone and meaning of it all. If *The Taming of the Shrew* simply started off with Lucentio and Bianca falling in love, and didn't include the part where Sly is pranked by the Lord and begins to perform, how would we then see the play? Would we take it more seriously? Would we still see it as a comedy, or would it be something else? Would we have something else, or more to say about the portrayal of women in this play? It's such a quick and simple part of the story, something we might even forget, but it does so much for the tone of the play. The same way the story being read by the grandpa to Fred Savage in *The Princess Bride* continually reminds us of the inconsequential, storybook nature, we can look at *Shrew* as inconsequential and untrue because it's all the silly performance of a drunk man that fell asleep in front of an inn. That example is slightly different because of

repeated interruptions in the story by the grandpa and grandson, but if you are able to keep in mind all through *Shrew* what this story actually is, it has a similar effect. I think that the *Princess Bride* example as well as that approach to this particular play supports the notion that there is the M1 and M2 that we are constantly going back and forth between. I do not see it as a constant blending and unblending, it makes more sense to me that we go back and forth, but that could just be the way my brain works.

Shakespeare's playful nature with metacommentary and metatheatrical devices of any kind is almost a staple of his, and it's hard to think of The Bard and some of his most popular plays without remembering young Hamlet's plot to catch his uncle's guilty conscience, the silly play done by the mechanicals at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the more comedic opening to *The Taming of the Shrew*. This simple technique, putting a play-within-a-play that is, does so much more than make us laugh at the idea of it all, it can change the entire meaning of a production. It can alter the tone of the given play or provide new commentary on it, it can reveal characters' true intentions and motives, or it can add to the playful confusion of the story. It serves as a tool that allows us to reflect on the true performance and storytelling within the play, and the directly to us. It shapes audience's perceptions and engagement, especially when it comes to various adaptations and approaches to the same text. Either way, it's something that's hard to deny when studying Shakespeare and it's worth looking at further if you're to truly understand the inner workings of some of his stories.

Works Cited

Ben Amor, Zied. "Metatheatre as the invisible in the non-burlesque constructs of Shakespeare."

SSRN Electronic Journal, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4453621>.

Ben Amor, Zied. "Metatheatre in William Shakespeare's Hamlet: Recycling or Reviving the

Script?" *SSRN*, 23 Aug. 2024, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4832064.

Blankenau, Katherine. "From plays-within to players without: Theatrical hospitality in *hamlet*

and *sir Thomas More*." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1 Mar. 2022, pp. 176–

203, <https://doi.org/10.1086/719056>.

Dustagheer, Sarah, and Harry Newman. "Metatheatre and early modern drama." *Shakespeare*

Bulletin, vol. 36, no. 1, 2018, pp. 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2018.0001>.

Flaherty, Kate. "Theatre and Metatheatre in Hamlet | Sydney Studies in English." *Sydney Studies*

in English, 2008, openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SSE/article/view/583.

Grover, Arushi. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, 12 Aug. 2021,

sites.psu.edu/amidsummernightsdream/metatheatre/.

Purcell, Stephen. "Are Shakespeare's plays always metatheatrical?" *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol.

36, no. 1, 2018, pp. 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2018.0002>.