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ART2014-1149

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Abstract

Lionel Abel coined the word 'metatheatre' in his 1963 book, Metathatre: A New View of Dramatic Form, claiming he had discovered a new type of theatre, and cited Shakespeare's Hamlet as the first metatheatrical play. Over the intervening decades, various scholars have pushed the incidence of the earliest metatheatrical play back beyond Hamlet. Richard Hornby, in his 1986 book, Drama, Metadrama, and Perception, found instances of metatheatrical elements in many plays before Shakespeare and likewise found it in the theatre of other cultures. Despite that, he did not accept classical drama as being 'fully' metatheatrical. However, Hornby provided the fullest taxonomy of metatheatrical characteristics: ceremony within the play, literary and real-life reference, role playing within the role, play within the play, and self-reference. Since then, Old Comedy has been accepted as fully metatheatrical, primarily because of the inclusion of the parabasis. For many, Greek tragedies have not been accepted as fully metatheatrical. An earlier paper by the author advanced the claim that Euripides' Medea was a metatheatrical play. Now a point-by-point comparison with Hornby's metatheatre taxonomy and Aeschylus' Oresteia posits that the Oresteia is also a fully metatheatrical play. The conclusion is that each day's plays by the tragic playwrights at Athens's City Dionysia, particularly with the inclusion of the satyr play, makes those plays fully metatheatrical. Hence, we should accept that metatheatricalism is a characteristic of all drama, not just of plays from a particular period.

Keywords: Metatheatre, Aeschylus, *Oresteia*

Since 1936, scholars have examined theatricalizing elements in Greek dramas, those that might be called 'metatheatrical,' though that specific term wasn't applied to drama until the 1960s.[1] Aristophanes' use of such elements is so extensive that he is now recognized as a fully metatheatrical playwright.[2] Scholarly analysis of metatheatrical elements in Greek tragedies is far less extensive.[3] Several scholars wrote of metatheatrical elements in specific plays of Euripides,[4] and Richard Hornby, in one of his chapters, 'Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*,'[5] discussed the metatheatrical elements he found there. Recently, Mark Ringer addressed the metatheatrical elements in the plays of Sophocles and C. W. Marshall obliquely alluded to metatheatrical elements in 'A Gander at the Goose Play.'[6] No other scholarly commentaries that address the use of metatheatre in Greek tragedies have been found.

Among Euripides' plays, Froma Zeitlin analyzed *Orestes*, and Charles Segal analyzed *Bacchae*. Both are from the end of Euripides' career, where we might easily suppose that he had been influenced by the metatheatrical elements in Aristophanes. At the very least, all of the Old Comedies

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[1] See H. L. Stow's (1936). 'The Violation of the Dramatic Illusion in the Comedies of Aristophanes.' Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago and W. Schmid's (1946) *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, I: *Die klassische Periode* 47(2), as quoted in Frances Muecke's (1977). 'Playing with the Play: Theatrical Self-Consciousness in Aristophanes.' *Antichthon* 11: 52(2). More recently, see David Bain's (1977). *Actors & Audiences: A Study of Asides and Related Conventions in Greek Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, and Oliver Taplin's (1986). 'Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy: A *Synkrisis' Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106: 163-74.

[2] See G. A. H. Chapman's (1983). 'Some Notes on Dramatic Illusion in Aristophanes.' *American Journal of Philology* 104(1): 1-23); Lowell Edmonds's (1980). 'Aristophanes' *Acharnians.' Yale Classical Studies* 26: 1-41); Helene P. Foley's (1988). 'Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes' *Acharnians.' Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108: 33-47); Niall W. Slater's (1989). 'Aristophanes' Apprenticeship Again.' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30(1): 67-82; and Frances Muecke's work cited above. Oliver Taplin, also cited above, states the case most strongly when he writes that 'Old Comedy is ubiquitously self-referential: Aristophanes is probably the most metatheatrical playwright before Pirandello,' 164.

[3] See P. E. Easterling's (1985). 'Anachronism in Greek Tragedy.' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105: 1-10. Bain, cited above, finds no cases of theatrical self-reference in Greek tragedy (208 ff.). This point is refuted by R. B. Rutherford (1982). 'Tragic Form and Feeling in the *Iliad.' Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102: 145-60, where he cites an example in Euripides' *Troades* (160, n. 69).

[4] See Froma I. Zeitlin's (1980). 'The Closet of Masks: Role-Playing and Myth-Making in the *Orestes* of Euripides' (*Ramus* 9(1): 51-77), in which she treats the illusion-reality game, self-consciousness, and Orestes' casting in a role he cannot escape. See also Charles Segal's (1982). *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, particularly his chapter, 'Metatragedy: Art, Illusion, Imitation,' in which he notes, amid many other points, that Dionysus, though he is an actor like the others in the play, 'is the director, dressing and instructing his "actors" for the role they will have to play' (225).

[5] Hornby, Richard (1986). *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 121-32. His discussion focuses on the issue of 'perception . . . *about* perception' (121). Unfortunately, his arguments are based, as I understand them, upon a mistaken belief that Oedipus might not have killed Laius.

[6] See M. Ringer (1998) *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press and C. W. Marshall (2001). 'A Gander at the Goose Play,' *Theatre Journal* 53(1): 53-71.

presumably contained a *parabasis*, the chorus', and hence the author's, direct address to the audience, clearly a metatheatrical technique.

Were the earlier Greek tragedies also metatheatrical? Comedies were first presented at the Dionysia from about 486 BCE. Thus, the Old Comedies and their metatheatrical contents could have influenced the playwrights of the extant tragedies. The question is whether metatheatrical elements exist in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, making it metatheatrical?

Lionel Abel coined the word *metatheatre* in his 1963 book, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*,[1] when he stated that he had discovered a new type of theatre. In his discussion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that he considered the first example of metatheatre, he saw Hamlet as being the archetypal metatheatrical protagonist. Abel defines such a character as 'one who has the capacity to dramatize others, and thus put them in whatever situation he is intent on being in.'[2] Other writers have contributed to the expanding literature on metatheatre. Robert J. Nelson, in his *Play Within Play*, examined the play-within-the-play technique and found its use in plays from Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres*, in 1497, to the contemporary period.[3] Richard Hornby, in his *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, found instances of many metatheatrical elements in plays of all cultures and time periods. However, while he found some metatheatrical elements in the classical plays, he did not consider them *fully* metatheatrical.

The most systematic presentation of metadrama characteristics is in Richard Hornby's book. For Hornby, such plays' inward mirroring process exhibits several identifiable characteristics of their self-reflexive process, which is symptomatic of metadrama. Hornby notes that there are several 'possible varieties of conscious or overt metadrama'[4] and particularly reiterates that the techniques must be 'consciously employed.' He lists five characteristics:

1. The ceremony within the play.
2. Literary and real-life reference.
3. Role playing within the role.
4. The play within the play.
5. Self reference.[5]

Our methodology will employ Hornby's taxonomy in examining Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. If it contains all the indicators for metatheatre, it should be considered fully metatheatrical. Not every instance of each element in the play will be catalogued—it will be sufficient to consider several of the most significant instances.

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[1]Abel, Lionel (1963). *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form.* New York: Hill & Wang.
[2]Ibid., 61.
[3]Nelson, Robert J. (1958). *Play Within Play: The Dramatist's Conception of his Art: Shakespeare to Anouilh.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 8.
[4]Hornby, 32.
[5]Ibid.

Ceremony within the Play

According to Hornby, the ceremony within the play is a prescribed action performed in a set manner and includes such events as banquets, processions, pageants, rituals, executions, coronations, and similar actions. Ceremonies are distinguished from theatre by the fact that the participants do not play full-fledged characters and that the ceremony never has a plot.[1] Hornby notes that virtually all plays have some form of ceremony, and he observes that 'it becomes difficult to find a play *without* a ceremony in it of some kind.'[2] Among those ceremonies are prayers, which are ubiquitous in the Greek tragedies. Jon D. Mikalson's central findings on unanswered prayers,[3] though not central to this study, provided ample documentation of the formalized and ritualized use of prayers in Greek tragedies.

Many ceremonies are described or performed in *Agamemnon*.[4] The chorus recounts the ritual sacrifice of Iphigenia ten years before the start of the Trojan War (13, 1-35). At the beginning of Scene I, Clytemnestra enters to perform a sacrifice (13, 50). Scene II starts with the herald entering and offering a prayer to the gods for Agamemnon's safe return from Troy. Later, during the Exodus, Aegisthus describes the banquet at which Atreus served up to Thyestes his own children (32, 25-50). The beginning of *The Libation-Bearers* starts with Orestes performing a ritual at his father's tomb. This is followed by Electra performing another ritual in her prayers for Orestes' return to avenge the death of their father. A major part of *The Furies* deals with the ritual of a trial. At the end of that play, Athena leads a processional into the Cave of the Furies. A. M. Bowie in 'Religion and Politics in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*' pursues the topic of ceremonies and myths.[5] Bowie found many references to particular ceremonies ceremonies in the plays of the trilogy. A single illustrative instance is the comparison between the Panathenaea and Clytemnestra's beacon-fires at the beginning of *Agamemnon*. Bowie quotes Fraenkel's comparison of the progression of the beacon-fires to the *lampadeldromia*, a race that was a part of the Panathenaea festival. Fraenkel notes that '[t]his paradox must have struck Athenian hearers as something almost grotesque.'[6] Such allusions must have been jarring for the audience, probably even self-referential.

However, the more important ceremonies in the play are those in Scene III when Agamemnon returns from Troy. The pageantry of his entrance and the

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[1]Ibid., 52-53.

[2]Ibid., 49.

[3]Mikalson, Jon D. (1989). 'Unanswered Prayers in Greek Tragedy.' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109: 81-98.

[4]Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Louis MacNeice, in Alexander Allison, Arthur J. Carr, & Arthur M. Eastman (1991). *Masterpieces of the Drama, 6th ed.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 44-47. All subsequent script references to this play will be to this edition and noted parenthetically in the text by page number and line number.

[5]Bowie, A. M. (1993). 'Religion and Politics in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.' *Classical Quarterly* 43(1): 10-31.

[6]Ibid., 29.

formal homecoming provided by Clytemnestra take on such significance that they essentially become the whole scene.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that each play is itself a ceremony involved in the ritualistic festival for Dionysus.

Literary and Real-Life References

According to Hornby, the inclusion of literary and real-life references is metatheatrical. 'There are many ways in which a play can refer to other literature. In each case, the degree of metadramatic estrangement generated is proportional to the degree to which the audience recognizes the literary allusion as such.'[1] In order to be metatheatrical references, they must be neither obscure nor overly commonplace. Hornby identifies four types: citation (or quotation), allegory, parody, and adaptation.[2] Perhaps the most noted example of literary reference in Greek drama, from our contemporary point of view, is Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, which contains numerous citations and parodies from the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. The issue of parody is particularly relevant to the tragic playwrights because of the satyr play each had to compose for the festival. Though we only have one complete satyr play, *Cyclops,* and one large fragment, *The Trackers,* parody was often one of the approaches used in the satyr play.

One of the problems in contemporary criticism is neglecting the intervening millennia between the Greeks and us. While a reference to Homer or Greek mythology may be common place today, and, hence, not metatheatrical for us, we are 2,400 years more distant than were the fifth-century BCE Greeks. For them, a reference to Homer was no more distant than a reference to Shakespeare is for us. When we incorporate stories from Shakespeare into our contemporary drama, we typically create metatheatre in the process and acknowledge it as such—we must grant as much to the Greeks.

Attilio Favorini in 'History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus' *The Persians'* addressed the issue of real-life references in *The Persians* and other plays, including Phrynichus' *The Capture of Miletus*.[3] That production was so 'real' that the author was fined 1,000 drachma and the remounting of the play was banned forever. Favorini also alludes to other examples of metatheatrical elements in *The Persians* and other plays that are beyond the scope of this examination.

Agamemnon refers back to Homer's *Odyssey*, specifically to Book III and IV.[4] In Homer's version, Aegisthus, who met Agamemnon on the beach and accompanied him from there to the palace, killed Agamemnon. Clytemnestra's role in Homer was limited to that of a faithless wife who could not resist the

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[1]Hornby, 88.

[2]Ibid., 90.

[3]Favorini, Attilio (2003). 'History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus' *The Persians.' Theatre Journal* 55(1): 99-111.

[4]Homer, *The Odyssey,* trans. E. V. Rieu (1960). Baltimore: Penguin Books.

seductive advances of Aegisthus. There are two significant points here. One is the literary reference, and the second is its self-referencing aspect. Homer's version, certainly known by the audience at Aeschylus' play, must have produced a jarring comparison with the image of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' play. The audience was essentially 'seeing double'—they were exposed simultaneously to Homer's version and to Aeschylus' version. Here, in opposition to their expectations from Homer, was an Aegisthus who had no role until the last scene and a Clytemnestra who, in man-like characteristics, arranged the assassination of her husband and who herself provided the fatal blows. The situation would be comparable to us seeing a new version of *Hamlet* in which Gertrude, and not Hamlet, becomes the instrument of vengeance and actively pursues the death of Claudius. Clearly, we would consider the new *Hamlet* to be metatheatrical. Likewise for the Greeks, this new *Agamemnon* would be metatheatrical.

The *Oresteia* contains several real-life references to the oracle at Delphi. Particularly in *Choephori* and *Eumenides*, the Delphic Oracle is intricately involved in the story—the setting of the last play starts at Delphi. Certainly those in the audience who had been to Delphi would have been making comparisons of how well the play's depiction of Delphi compared with their own experiencing of Delphi. References to other place names, which might be obscure to us, are scattered throughout the plays and certainly were familiar to the members of the audience in the fifth century BCE. One extensive example is in *Agamemnon* when Clytemnestra recounts for the chorus how the signal fires brought the news of Troy's fall to her (13-14).

Prayers and the use of prayers pervaded the Greek society, and 'Athenians of the 420s generally took seriously the oracles of Delphi, and . . . attacks must have seemed, if not literally impious, at least unwise and alien to a proper religious attitude,'[1] another metatheatrical jarring of the audience.

We see there are multiple references to literary and real-life references. Indeed, it's rather difficult to imagine the contrary when major portions of many Greek plays are based on mythology.

Role within the Role

Role playing within the role is when the character takes on another identity. Hornby identifies three types: voluntary, involuntary, and allegorical, with the observation that voluntary role playing is more metatheatrical than the others.[2]

Agamemnon contains several roles within roles, but each is slightly different from the others. Agamemnon enters as the conquering hero, fresh from the Trojan Wars. But unbeknownst to him, he has been cast by Clytemnestra as the sacrificial offering to atone for his own earlier sacrifice of

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[1] Mikalson, 87.
[2] Hornby, 73-74.

Iphigenia at Aulis. Thus, he plays two roles, but he never becomes aware of them until his death. On the other hand, in Clytemnestra's first appearance before the chorus, she is pretending to be the dutiful wife waiting for her husband's return from war. Cassandra is the only other person in the play who knows that Clytemnestra is playing the role of avenger, until the actual murder of Agamemnon. In *The Libation-Bearers*, Orestes disguises himself as a traveler and plays that role in order to get close enough to Aegisthus to kill him. Thus, we see that there are several roles within the roles in the plays.

Play within the Play

Hornby identifies two types: the 'inset' type, such as *The Mousetrap* from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the 'framed' type, such as the Sly scenes of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. For the 'inset' type to be metatheatrical, it must be acknowledged as performance by characters of the outer play. Thus, integrated set speeches and similar devices are not fully metatheatrical. For the 'framed' type, to be considered fully metatheatrical, it must contain some indication of character and plot. Thus, unintegrated prologues and epilogues do not qualify as being fully metatheatrical.[1] Nelson, in *Play Within Play*, is less restrictive about who or what defines whether a play is a play within a play:

> *Who defines the innerness of the play within a play? Is it not necessarily the offstage spectator, the person in the theatre and not the personage on the stage? For the onstage spectator the action of the play within a play is not occurring within some action which he admits to be as unreal as the play he watches. This double relationship, the concept of innerness, obtains only for the offstage spectators.[2] (Emphasis added.)*

Thus, for Nelson, the characters in the 'outer' play do not have to recognize the inner play as performance. It is enough for the audience to recognize that an inner play exists.

One of the basic tenets, inherent in the role-within-the-role concept, is the notion that the inner role is another identity intended as performance for 'others.' That 'other' may be either the audience or another character within the play, thus making it play-within-the play 'performance'. Additionally, to be a 'performance,' the role-within-the-role must be planned with some concept of scripting. If such a 'performance' is given, it becomes a 'play' and hence an 'inset' play-within-the-play.

In *Agamemnon*, the most significant role-within-the-role is that played by Clytemnestra for Agamemnon's processional homecoming. She acts out her

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[1]Ibid., 31-35.
[2]Nelson, 7.

little charade for him and entreats him to walk on the garments, thus committing hubris and earning the wrath of the gods. Even though Clytemnestra has not intentionally revealed her plans to anyone onstage, Cassandra, nevertheless, sees that the homecoming is a hollow show, a performance. Moreover, the audience is well aware that some kind of performance is taking place because of its knowledge of Homer's work. Thus, Clytemnestra's play within the play continues to its final fatal stab.

Another example is Orestes' masquerade as a traveler in *Libation Bearers* in order to deceive his mother and Aegisthus. Again, the play contains play-within-the-play, making it metatheatrical.

Self-reference

Hornby writes: 'self-reference is always strongly metadramatic. With self-reference, the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction.'[1] In Hornby's discussion, the dramatic production is the intuitive illusion perceived by the theatre audience against the background of the 'logical' world—the 'real' world in which the play takes place. 'In sum, we perceive a play as an intuitive foreground set against numerous logical backgrounds.'[2] Part of those logical backgrounds is the context and the conventions within which the play is presented, both in terms of its momentary performance and of the culture in which the play is presented. '[W]hen self-reference occurs in a play, the world of dramatic illusion undergoes a displacement. . . . there is a shift in perception that turns the field of thought inside out. What had been background is foregrounded, and vice versa.'[3] Redirecting the audience's attention, even for an instant, from the foreground of the performance to the background—to the play as a play—is self-referencing and according to Hornby, makes it strongly metadramatic.[4]

Mark Damen obliquely addressed this topic in his 'Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy.'[5] With one or two exceptions, three male actors performed all speaking roles in each tragic playwright's play. Damen's investigation centered on how the necessary doubling was achieved for the tragedies of Euripides, but he does address other plays as well. Damen identifies several plays for which the role assignments may be established with certainty. Damen notes how 'the actor who played the lesser roles (Cadmus, the servant, and the first messenger) in the *Bacchae* struggled futilely against the greater forces represented by the actors playing the principal characters.'[6] Some portion of the audience must

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[1]Hornby, 103.
[2]Ibid., 114.
[3]Ibid., 116.
[4]Ibid., 103-17.
[5]Damen, Mark (1983). 'Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy.' *Theatre Journal* 41(3): 316-40.
[6]Ibid., 323.

have been aware of these patterns for role assignments and accordingly must have had its attention momentarily diverted to the 'real' frame of the theatrical event, thus creating self-reference.

An even stronger case for self-reference is the best actor award process. Damen shows convincingly that because of the award process, the judges and the audience had to identify the actor in each successive role he performed. The audience had to be able to see past the costume, the mask, and the character of each role and identify which actor was playing that role. This momentary breaking of the illusion was an essential audience skill for the leading actor award process. Surely the general audience was able to exercise the same abilities.[1] Thus, at some point, for every new role in the play, the audience must have stopped, shifted its focus from foreground to background, identified the actor playing the role, and then shifted back to the foreground of the play. This self-reference alone should be enough to make all the Greek tragedies metatheatrical.

But, beyond that, the use of the 'mute' actor in *Agamemnon* is probably the most unique theatrically self-referential moment in the play. A mute actor was used when more characters were on stage than could be handled by the three allotted speaking actors. In such cases, the mute actor played the character but spoke no lines, a convention well understood by the Greek audience. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus had the actor playing Cassandra stand silently for about 300 lines, despite a direct request to speak. 'Finally, when the audience was convinced that Cassandra was being played by a mute actor who would not speak, Cassandra suddenly erupted into song.'[2] The audience was suddenly brought up short with a perceived 'violation' of the stage convention, its focus shifted, self-reference occurred, and the play became metatheatrical.

This happened again in *The Libation-Bearers*—only it is even more pronounced. Pylades enters at the top of the play and seems to be another mute actor. Late in the play, only after the death of Aegisthus, does Pylades speak— his single line in the whole play.

No less an authority that Aristophanes addressed this exact issue in *The Frogs*.

> *Euripides: . . . He'd bring some single mourner on,*
> *seated and veiled, 'twould be*
> *Achilles, say, or Niobe—*
>
> *the face you could not see—*
> *An empty show of tragic woe,*
> *who uttered not one thing.*
>
> *That was his quackery, don't you see,*
> *to set the audience guessing*
> *When Niobe would speak, meanwhile,*

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[1] Ibid., 318.
[2] Bain, 339.

the drama was progressing.
Dionysus: The rascal, how he took me in!
'Twas shameful, was it not?[1]

Here is contemporary documentation that Aeschylus' audience was guessing about whether the mute actor would speak or not, a clearly self-referential and metatheatrical technique.

A last self-referent event takes place near the end of *The Libation-Bears*. The dead bodies of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are displayed, presumably on the *ekkyklema*. This display was a duplication of the similar scene at the end of *Agamemnon*. Surely the audience had to be aware of the intended reference back to the similar scene it had already seen earlier in the day. It must have shifted momentarily from the foreground of *The Libation-Bearers* to the background of *Agamemnon*, and then back to *The Libation-Bearers*.

Conclusion

Thus, the *Oresteia* satisfies each of Hornby's five criteria for metatheatre and does it in what I submit are rather self-conscious ways. It now seems reasonable to reconsider whether metatheatre really is a modern development. As demonstrated here, metatheatricalism existed and was employed throughout the classical period in Greek drama. Thus, metatheatrical elements can be found in all periods of western theatre from the Greeks to today. They have been found in many oriental theatre traditions as well. The question is whether metatheatre is specific to any particular culture or if it is simply one of the many characteristics of theatre itself?

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[1]Robinson, Jr., Charles Alexander, ed. (1958). *An Anthology of Greek Drama.* New York: Rinehart & C.

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