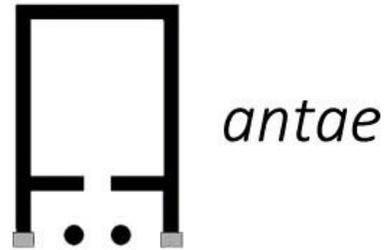


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antae, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Jun., 2020), 72-83



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antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism, and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy, and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

The Technique of the Play-within-the-Play and the Empowerment of Female Audiences in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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In the preface to his book *Drama, Stage and the Audience*, J.L. Styan describes theatre as ‘the most embracing of the arts’.¹ According to him, the meaning and significance of a play cannot be confined to its text. The play, in this Styanian sense, is the sum of textual as well as performative elements the interaction of which generates meaning. In recent years, increasing focus on the theatrical and performative elements of drama has characterised critical discourses and discursive practices about the genre, and the rise of interdisciplinary theories and practices of performance studies in many academic contexts has further promoted this growing interest.

As ‘experiential knowledge [...] is a cornerstone in performance studies’, critics started to focus on the interaction of the different human elements of a play on the page and/or on—and off—the stage.² In a play, we are presented with “real” human beings performing the roles of “fictitious” characters—interacting with other “fictitious” characters—to an audience within a more or less confined space—both real and fictitious—whose material elements are imbued with meaning through the speech acts of the performers (be they actors or characters or even readers and audiences). The performative turn in literary criticism, therefore, shifted the focus (back) to the intersubjective interaction between the human entities (real and fictitious) involved in the performance events.³ These events are based on the material, mental or/and imaginary co-presence and interaction between ‘the person personated, the personating actor and the perceiving spectator’.⁴

Recent critical discourse(s) about drama shows that the human elements are often the dominant ones, especially in performance. As critics or audiences, we tend to give precedence to the human components of drama. This can be explained by the fact that ‘[o]ur ability to empathize with the experiences of others through mirroring is the cognitive hook that impels [our] interest in the

¹ J.L. Styan, *Drama Stage and the Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. vii.

² Tracy C. Davis, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. by Tracy C. Davis, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 1-10 (p.5).

³ The performance theorist Philip Auslander writes: ‘the meaning of the word performance extends to many areas of human endeavor’. In the same vein, Richard Schechner tells us that performance studies seek to study, among other things, ‘how people turn into other people, gods, animals, demons, trees, beings, whatever’. These two quotations reveal the centrality of the human elements to the study of performance. Philip Auslander, ‘Introduction’, in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-25, p. 1, and Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xi.

⁴ Leonore Lieblein, ‘Embedded Intersubjectivity and the Creation of the Early Modern Characters’, in *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance and Theoretical Person*, ed. by Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slight (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 117-138 (p. 117).

activities of the actor/character and engage us in the unfolding narrative of a play'.⁵ Accordingly, dramatic arts are based on the interaction between the different human elements of the theatrical event (characters, readers, actors and audiences). In this sense, a play can be described as a space of human interaction characterised by a penetrating dialogism that crosses the physical as well as imaginary boundaries between the different human entities (namely characters, actors and audiences) on and off the stage. Accordingly, the relationship between the dramatic text (where the characters are supposedly created), its performances (where actors take on the roles of the dramatic characters), and the audiences' responses to these performances is dialogic in nature.

The works of William Shakespeare, in particular, are often considered among the most pertinent examples—if not the most pertinent examples—of this dialogic relationship. Shakespeare's language defies the real or/and imaginary walls of the stage. In many scenes of his plays, the characters refer to objects that seem to exist outside our field of view, such as the cloud that changes shapes and the alehouse of Yagan in *Hamlet* or the storm that destroys the Ottoman fleet in *Othello*. Shakespeare's characters sometimes even address the audience, directly involving them in their plots and schemes. The (passive) complicity of Shakespeare's audiences seems to have given rise to several semi-mythical narratives about the stage performances of certain Shakespearian plays. The possible connection between Claudius's 'Do it, England' (*Hamlet*, IV.3. 67) and the Essex rebellion, as well as the story (or stories) about the man who jumps onto the stage to save Desdemona, are commonplace examples of this. These examples reveal the fragility of the physical boundaries of the stage. It seems that the works of Shakespeare do not recognise the conventional boundaries of drama and the stage. In his plays, "imaginary" and "real" performed/performing entities keep moving in and out of the stage in an almost unrestrained manner.⁶

Shakespeare even dramatises this collapse of the fourth wall by simulating the reactions of the audience on the stage using the play-within-the-play technique in two of his plays, namely *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In these two plays, a play-within-the play is performed to entertain the characters of the framing play (as well as its audience). The resulting mise-en-abyme restructures the performative space. As the characters of the framing play become the audience of the play-within-the play, the elements of the performance and its context become elusive. The roles

⁵ Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in Theater* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 18.

⁶ The early modern period is central to the study of textual and stage performance. Metatheatrical data are conveyed in the texts of the plays. Harry Newman has recently argued that early modern plays 'prompted performative reading practices' even before the phase of performance (Harry Newman, 'Reading Metatheatre', *Shakespeare's Bulletin*, 36(1) (2018), 89-110 (p. 89)). The plays of Renaissance period contain metatheatrical data that enable the readers to visualise performance. Early modern playwrights had at their disposal a large repertoire of theatrical devices, such as soliloquies, prologues, and epilogues, by which they and their characters could address the audience directly. These techniques rarely interfered with the conventional relationship between the drama, the stage, and the audience. Shakespeare, however, has the reputation for playing loose with the conventions. His continuous reference to offstage objects, events, and people breaks the fourth wall and allows him to extend the boundaries of the stage beyond the "Wooden O".

are redistributed and the performing bodies are repositioned within the (expanding) performative space of the play. Since some characters now play the role of theatre audiences, the intimacy between the characters and the audiences becomes stronger, especially as identification—one of the main Aristotelian mechanisms that determine the audience's response to drama—intensifies. The characters themselves become audiences responding to a play, and simulate the reactions of certain members or types of (offstage) audiences.

Styan describes a play as 'an historical event' where 'the focus of attention is the experience of the play at a particular time'.⁷ However, the study of the nature of the audience and its relation to (a specific) performance often leads us to challenge this view. It is impossible to unequivocally describe "real" audiences of Shakespeare's plays as belonging to a specific historical period. Indeed, as Jeremy Lopez tells us, the distinction between the contemporaneous and the contemporary audiences of Shakespeare's plays is 'more frequently made than necessary'.⁸ The historicity of the audience's reactions becomes even more questionable when we speak about the fictitious audience of Shakespeare's plays-within-the-plays. On the one hand, their contemporariness emanates from our position as readers and audiences of the framing plays. The dialogic nature of our relationship to the framing plays makes it possible to treat these fictitious audiences as our contemporaries. On the other hand, their contemporaneity with Shakespeare is even less difficult to prove as the rules of mimesis make it possible to think of them as representing the Renaissance audiences, or at least some of their members.

In Shakespeare, the play-within-the-play theatricalises contemporaneous as well as contemporary debates about the art of drama. On the stage, the characters of the framing play exchange remarks about the form and content of the play and of theatre in general. Female characters, in particular, tend to make some of the most pertinent comments on the performance. As they discuss its different aspects, the female characters of the two framing plays usually criticise the misrepresentation of women in each one of two plays within the plays. Their remarks reveal the misconceptions that govern the representation of women in the play-within-the-play as well as in the framing play. As '[i]deas about sexual identity and gender roles were both highly unstable and hotly contested in early modern England', giving voice to the female characters to speak about the way they are represented on the stage can be considered subversive.⁹ By allowing them to assume the privileged position of the audience and the critic, Shakespeare gives his female characters the opportunity to challenge the 'normative conception of gender' that reigns on and off the stage.¹⁰

⁷ Styan, p. 6.

⁸ Jeremy Lopez, *The Theatrical conventions and the Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 13.

⁹ Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearian Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 6.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

In the framing plays, the female characters are usually represented as constrained by the sociocultural power relations that seek to consign them to subservient and passive roles. As Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* puts it:

We cannot fight for love as men do
We should be wooed and were not made
To woo

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.1. 225-8)

These lines reveal that the performative and discursive possibilities available to women in the worlds of the framing plays are limited. Despite their resistance to the power of the male characters, they are subject to the limitations imposed by their position in the performative framework of the framing plays. They are constantly being watched and never allowed to be alone or to avoid the male gaze, always being judged by their male counterparts.

However, as they assume the role of the spectators in the play-within-the-play scenes, the female characters of *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can now judge the actions of the male characters who create and/or perform (the female roles in) the plays.¹¹ Although temporary, the reshuffling of roles and the repositioning of the speaking and performing entities within the discursive and performative space of the plays has far reaching effects. It disturbs the otherwise unbreakable hegemony of the main/male characters and their value systems and frames of reference. In what follows, I intend to analyse the reactions of the female characters to the play-within-the-play both in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and show that these reactions uncover the artificial constructed-ness of the female identity on the Early Modern stage. I intend to argue that the technique of the play-within-the-play invests the female characters of these two plays with the performative and discursive power that enables them to challenge the moral superiority of the main/male characters. By destroying the fourth wall and by turning characters into audiences, the play-within-the-play technique penetrates the performative spaces of the framing plays and disturbs the discursive and performative hierarchies that dominate them.

The technique of the play-within-the-play has always shown the fragility of the fourth wall. The first known play-within-the-play in the Early Modern period was probably *Solimon and Perseda*.¹² In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo uses this theatrical performance to camouflage his revenge plot, where he and Bel Imperia stab the unsuspecting Lorenzo and Balthazar at the end of the performance.¹³ Hieronimo, then, cuts his tongue while Bel Imperia commits suicide on the stage

¹¹ The stories of female to male disguise in other Shakespearean plays may also be seen as serving a similar purpose. In many of their soliloquies, the disguised female characters reflect on the gender dynamics and power relations. Their disguise also allows them to discuss and challenge the common stereotypes about women in exchange with the main male characters of the plays (from the privileged position of a male character).

¹² This was written in 1588 and published in 1592 and 1593. It precedes any other surviving play-within-the-play of the early Modern period.

¹³ Representing a female character as an actress in a play is in itself subversive. The play-within-the-play also grants Bel Imperia the power to elude the watchful eyes of Lorenzo and Balthazar. It is, therefore, also archetypal for the play-within-the-play to challenge the dominant gender rules on and off the stage and empower the female characters

(or the stage within the stage). These two acts, along with the revenge plot, are part of the action of Thomas Kyd's framing play as well as part of the arranged performance. There are different levels of performance at play in the scene. The audience watches actors performing the roles of actors that are performing to other actors who perform the role of the audience. The space allocated to the spectators and that devoted to the performed action thus become confused, and this confusion further intensifies as the veil that separates the framed play and the framing play explodes and the two worlds become one.¹⁴ It is, therefore, archetypal for the play-within-the-play to break into the world of the framing play and vice versa.

Shakespeare's plays within plays follow this paradigm. Speaking about his arranged performance, Prince Hamlet claims that 'the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (*Hamlet*, II.2. 566-7) The play-within-the-play consciously tries to elicit a certain reaction in the audience, which Hamlet uses to reveal the inner thoughts of the other characters. His strategy is built on the assumption

that guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions

(*Hamlet*, II.2. 551-4)¹⁵

This is why the play-within-the-play depicts a murder scene that resembles the murder of the prince's father. It also depicts the unfaithfulness of Lady Gonzago and as such it targets both Claudius and Gertrude. However, the resistance of the Queen turns Hamlet's strategy against him and divests him from his moral superiority over her.

Gertrude is one of the lacunae of the play. Her character and the nature of her relationships with her two husbands and her son are never fully revealed. Adam Wolfsdorf describes her as 'a woman made voiceless by the male dominion of the Danish court'.¹⁶ He maintains that even if she speaks sixty-nine times throughout the play, 'her speech is the property of crown and country'.¹⁷ In her early utterances, she only echoes her husband. She joins him in chiding Hamlet for his excessive mourning that seems to ruin the coronation of his stepfather, and helps the king to convince Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on her son. She is primarily the Queen, a public figure. As

of the framing play, be they acting like Bel Imperia or merely watching and reacting like Gertrude, Ophelia, and Hippolyta.

¹⁴ One may speak about a blood ritual that blows the veil separating the world of the framing play and that of the play-within-the-play in the Spanish Tragedy.

¹⁵ These lines reveal the entrenched belief—one that still dominates psychological discourse (likely since Aristotle)—that 'the "true" and "real" attitude, beliefs and emotions of an individual can be ascertained only through his avowals or through what happens to be involuntary expressive behavior' (Erving Goffman, 'Introduction in the Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life', in *Performance: Critical Concepts*, pp. 97-107, p. 98)

¹⁶ Adam Wolfsdorf, 'The Play within the Play Is the Thing', *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 25(2) (2018), 198-207 (p. 199).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Wolfsdorf remarks, ‘the audience does not get the opportunity to know the private Gertrude’.¹⁸ This is why, like Hamlet, Wolfsdorf seeks to understand Gertrude through the analysis of the player Queen. He maintains that the latter ‘may grant the reader a view into the private life of Gertrude’.¹⁹ The Queen’s reaction to the play within the play, however, shows that she is a female who refuses to be (mis)represented by the male characters of the play; after all, the player Queen is created by Hamlet. On refusing to be identified or compared with her, Gertrude resists the image her son tries to force on her.

During the performance, Hamlet orchestrates a discussion of the different aspects of the play-within-the-play. In the middle of the show, Hamlet addresses his mother to ask her about her opinion on whether Lady Gonzago will remain faithful and keep her promises to her husband. Queen Gertrude uses this opportunity to complain that the part of lady Gonzago is exaggerated. She declares that she ‘protests too much’ (*Hamlet*, III.2. 218). Although her remark is dismissed by her son, it reveals that his representation of her in his lengthy soliloquies might not be as truthful and as reliable as he makes them seem to be. The Prince of Denmark describes his mother’s mourning as follows:

or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,
Like Niobe, all tears.

(*Hamlet*, I.2. 147-49)

As she dismisses the sentimentality of Lady Gonzago as unnatural and exaggerated, the accuracy of Hamlet’s description of his mother’s grief becomes questionable; one cannot tell whether it emanates from observation or from desire. The psychological mechanisms of denial and repression that dominate Hamlet’s narratives become obvious when he faces Gertrude’s resistance to his narratives. He cannot achieve absolute narrative superiority over her.

The remarks of Gertrude, therefore, have a far-reaching influence on the framing play. They destabilise the discursive hierarchy of *Hamlet*. In the framing play, the Danish prince monopolises the discursive space with about 1509 lines, which makes him the most talkative character in Shakespeare. Flying is Hamlet’s specialty. He dominates the play and allows no one to talk back to him. When the other characters try to contradict him, he overwhelms them with his discursive energy. In the castle hall scene, for instance, Hamlet completely squelches Polonius, one of the most talkative—even garrulous—characters of Shakespeare, with puns, retorts and backhanded compliments forcing him to silence (before he kills him a few scenes later and silences him forever).

The discursive power of Hamlet that allows him to put everyone on the defensive emanates—in part—from his inaction. He unrelentingly grills the other characters for their inauthenticity and immoral actions from the safe stance of the (detached, philosophical) observer. However, as he,

¹⁸ Wolfsdorf, p. 201.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

eventually, starts to act, the Danish prince is no longer immune to criticism. The play-within-the-play may be called Hamlet's first act. The nature of this aesthetic act puts Hamlet in a discursively precarious position. Now, the other characters can challenge his (mis)representation of their actions. Hamlet's ethical, discursive, and ontological superiority is shaken. He, therefore, needs to maintain it, which is why he tries to distance himself from the play by assuming the role of the critic.²⁰ He is the first person to criticise the prologue: 'Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?' and subsequently tries to control the discussion (III.2. 139). When someone speaks out of turn, he silences them with puns and quibbles. For instance, when his uncle Claudius asks him: 'Have you heard the argument? Is there no offense | in 't?' (III.2. 220-21), he answers: 'No, no, they do but jest. Poison in jest. No offense i' th' world' (III.2. 222-3). The king does not dare to speak again until he abruptly ends the performance and leaves the castle hall.²¹

Hamlet keeps the other characters in check through aggressive retorts and deviations. He resorts to different forms of overt and covert discursive violence to keep the other characters in line, forcing them to remain silent while he runs the show.²² Yet, even as he forcefully plays the role of director on and off the stage, Hamlet fails to maintain absolute discursive superiority. Soon, it becomes obvious that his discursive hegemony is artificial and that it is built on discursive violence. When Ophelia remarks: 'you are as good as a chorus, my lord' (III.2. 230), Hamlet defensively retorts: 'I could interpret between you and your love, if I | could see the puppets dallying' (III.2. 231-32). His reference to her sexuality in the pun of the puppets is meant to lead the conversation away from the play-within-the-play.²³ Resorting to this strategy shows that, like Gertrude, Ophelia threatens Hamlet's domination of the scene. He can no longer hide his frustration and his vulnerability. As his discursive and theatrical domination is disturbed, the validity of the gender stereotypes that pervade his description of the two female characters of the play becomes questionable. The play-within-the-play technique thus reveals the constructed-ness of these stereotypes and, in the case of *Hamlet*, also reveals the discursive violence involved in the creation and maintenance of the dominant (mis)conceptions about gender and gender roles in the play.

²⁰ Hamlet usually tries to distance himself from his actions. In the very first act, he decides to 'put an antic disposition on' (I.5. 172), which will help him deny responsibility for his actions. Towards the end of the play, he readily denies any responsibility for the woes he inflicted on Laertes and his family, by murdering Polonius and indirectly causing the death of Ophelia, saying it was his 'madness' (V.2. 223), rather than himself, that perpetrated them.

²¹ In the scene, the king attempts to use his state power to exert 'prior restraint' or censorship over Hamlet's play, but Hamlet does not allow him to use his power. He overwhelms him discursively. When the king finally leaves the stage, the prince triumphantly proclaims victory over him, exclaiming: 'let the stricken dear go weep' (III.2. 255) Hamlet's political and theatrical power will increase after that and he will be able to defy the king and thwart his plots by using the royal seal of his father. This shows that theatrical and political power are interconnected in *Hamlet*.

²² Although Hamlet's discursive, performative and representational hegemony is not entirely based on his gender role, his discursive violence is usually infused with Oedipal anxieties that are revealed in his misogynistic remarks about Gertrude and Ophelia.

²³ For an analysis of Hamlet's pun on the word puppets, see Gordon Williams, *Shakespeare's Sexual Language: A Glossary* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 250.

According to Judith Butler, gender (like many other categories) is defined dialogically by the prevalent norms and the individual's attitude to them (passive or active/intentional or unintentional). For her, identity is always (being) negotiated. In this vein, she writes of how '[t]he "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in a way that maintains a critical and transformative relation to them'.²⁴ This reveals that Butler sees identity as both relational and situational. It is not stable, but rather constituted by the interaction between the individuals and their (sociocultural) surroundings. Their ability to negotiate their identity depends on the discursive and performative space and power they can use in certain interpersonal interactions.

As stated earlier, drama as a genre is based on the copresence and interaction of different human entities. The dialogic and polyvocal nature of drama allows the different characters to negotiate their identity within the performative and discursive interpersonal relations of the plays. In the works of Shakespeare, this characteristic maneuverability that the dramatic art offers varies according to the position of the characters and amount of discursive and performative power allocated to them in the different scenes of his plays. It seems, then, that Shakespeare uses the play-within-the-play technique to give his female characters and audiences a stronger and less vulnerable voice in his plays. The power of this voice, however, varies from one play to another, but we may safely say that the Bard seems to be critical of the common stereotypes about woman nature. In his plays, Shakespeare undermines the wide-spread generalisations by treating every one of his (female) characters as an individual with distinct characteristics.

This is quite obvious in his portrayal of the female characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While Gertrude and Ophelia have very few chances to resist the discursive and representational hegemony of the male characters of *Hamlet*, the female characters of *A Midsummer's Dream* challenge and even ridicule the common misconceptions about the nature of women, and this both directly and indirectly throughout the play.

Their opposition to the male social and imaginative hegemony culminates in Hippolyta's ridicule of the show presented by Bottom and his troupe. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play-within-the-play stimulates critical responses from its "fictitious" audience due to the strange devices introduced by Bottom and his band. Fearing that the roaring of a lion may frighten the ladies at the show, Bottom suggests altering the play-within-the-play by adding explanatory lines.²⁵ As Bottom explains to his bandmates:

²⁴ Butler, p. 2.

²⁵ Ludicrous as they might be, the preparations of the mechanics reveal that the writing and performance of plays was subject to censorship. The playwright and the actors maybe severely punished for any transgression.

To
bring in—God shield us! —a lion among ladies is a
most dreadful thing. For there is not a more fearful
wildfowl than your lion living. And we ought to look
to't.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* III.1. 14-18)

This is why he suggests adding the following speech:

You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
May now perchance both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
Then know that I, as Snug the joiner, am
A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam.
For if I should as lion come in strife
Into this place, 'twere pity on my life.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.1. 209-17)

The first three lines would seem ridiculously out of place if we consider the conducts of the targeted female characters throughout the play.

Hippolyta is a warrior queen, the leader of the legendary Amazons. She only accepted Theseus after he 'wooded [her] with [his] sword' (I.1. 16) She is, therefore, a powerful and independent woman. 'The representation onstage of female characters exercising power' is no more subversive than when coupled with a ridicule of the male prejudices about them.²⁶ Would Hippolyta be scared by a stage lion? Hippolyta (the character) would not fear a real lion, let alone a fake one, and this is probably why the lion becomes the subject of jest. She calls the speaking wall 'the silliest stuff that ever I heard', but leaves the lion in the hands of the male members of the (fictitious) audience to mock; she does not need to waste her breath on it (V.1. 207).²⁷

The other two female characters show no less courage and independence than Hippolyta, although their silence at the end of the play may be perceived as a reconciliation with the system. After Theseus allowed them to marry their lovers, they have nothing to complain about. Nevertheless, it does not affect their overall characterisation but rather cements their image (as strong and independent women) in the mind of the audience and the reader through not showing them fawning

²⁶ Martin White, *Renaissance Drama in Action: Introduction to Aspects of Theatre Practice and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 79.

²⁷ Theseus's comment—'Well moused, lion' (V.1. 253)—sarcastically refers to the speech where the lion claims that the ladies would be scared by mice. To this, one may add that Hippolyta's silence is more powerful than any comment she might utter.

submissively on their husbands.²⁸ Indeed, throughout the play, Hermia and Helena represent a challenge to the dominant stereotypes about women, and they are portrayed as strong women who resist the gender hierarchies of Theseus's Athens.

Hermia challenges the law of Athens for the sake of love and defies her father's legal and moral authority. She does not only refuse to recognise his legal right, but also rejects the value system he represents. When Theseus, the Duke of Athens, tells her that she should accept Demetrius because he 'is a worthy gentleman' (I.1. 52), she retorts: 'So is Lysander' (I.1. 53). She asserts her right to judge for herself and refuses to look at the world through the eyes of her father or any other man.²⁹ She is her own mistress, and his is obvious in her following words:

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
Unto his lordship, whose unwishèd yoke
My soul consents not to give sovereignty.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I.1. 79-82)

She overwhelms Theseus, who finds his arguments insufficient to convince her. When he asks her to take some time to reconsider her decision, we cannot help but wonder whether the break is for her sake or for his own.

Helena's resolve is by no means inferior to that of her friend. She follows Demetrius undeterred by the fact that she is left alone to wander the forest. Her submissive and fawning attitude towards him should not be interpreted as a sign of weakness or docility. Indeed, although she willingly calls herself his spaniel, she prefers his genuine scorn to his fake love. When Robin applies the love concoction to the eyes of Demetrius and Lysander and the wooing begins, Helena suspects that the change in her beloved's behavior is nothing but a practical joke. She refuses to be used for the amusement of Hermia, and defends herself by scornfully pointing to the blemishes of her rival to tease and mock her. Her sense of dignity and self-esteem never forsakes her. In this sense, she can be described as more assertive than her friend Hermia.

Therefore, even before the play-within-the-play is performed, the female characters of the framing play have belied Bottom's misconceptions about women. Accordingly, the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is used to further ridicule the misconceptions about theatre and its (female) audiences. The preparations of the band of mechanics are based on generalised

²⁸ Shakespeare seemingly silences them on purpose. As with Hippolyta, the silence of the female character does not divest her of her power but only enhances it.

²⁹ The law of Athens not only ensures the moral and legal dominance of the father, but it also requires that Hermia submits to his epistemological authority. Theseus represents him as the legal source of the girl's knowledge and judgement.

stereotypes about the nature and functions of women, but misreading the audience and letting socially and culturally constructed stereotypes run the show spoils ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’.

Unlike the other traditional forms of literature, drama does not usually contain glossaries or explanatory notes that may help the readers understand the work. This has never prevented the Bard from embedding metatheatrical statements in the utterances of his characters; they use every opportunity to discuss the theatrical art on the stage. However, in most cases, the discussion is dominated by discursive and performative hierarchies that do not allow certain characters to defend themselves against misrepresentation. Through the technique of the play-within-the-play, Shakespeare thus allows his female characters to uncover the vulnerability of the normative social and cultural stereotypes that determine the way women are represented on and off the stage. This technique disturbs the social as well as discursive power relations of the framing plays and uncover their fragile foundations. Allowing the female characters to assume the role of the spectator and critic gives them the necessary discursive and performative space to challenge the dominant stereotypes. Shakespeare, therefore, uses the performative possibilities of drama to release his characters from these same dominant hierarchies. The poetics and politics of gender in the two plays analysed here are intertwined, and both depend on the positions of the actors and characters in the performative space. Repositioning them within this space invests female characters with the power that enables them to challenge the norms, and also gives the readers and audiences the opportunity to discover the discursive and performative violence that create and maintain the power relations in the framing play as well as in society more generally.

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