

Metadrama in Elizabethan and Contemporary British Plays

ISHIDA Yuki

Abstract

The central aim of the present study is to explore metadrama in British plays written in two periods of time, when this device has been widely used: the Elizabethan era (1558-1642) and the Twentieth Century. The term “metadrama” is used here to refer to the art of creating a sense of theatricality within a play. This art can be divided into the following four types: (i) a play within a play, (ii) dramatic ceremony within a play, (iii) role-playing within the role, and (iv) self-reference as a play. In addition to the Prologue and Epilogue, this study consists of two parts. While Part I deals with four works by Elizabethan writers, Part II draws attention to three pieces by two contemporary British authors, both of whom have created adaptations of Shakespearean metadrama.

In the first two chapters of Part I, we treat two of William Shakespeare’s plays. Chapter 1 discusses dramatic rituals in *Titus Andronicus* (1594). Behind its atrocities, this play has imageries of specific ceremonies, all of which are related to the ancient Roman deity of Time: Saturnus. After the emperor’s tyrannous reign, by which a Saturnalian chaos is brought to his realm, the banquet with Titus’s allegorical performance imitating Saturnus brings down the curtain on the festive disorder over his country.

Chapter 2 treats *Measure for Measure* (1604), whose main theme is surveillance. Searching for a way to control the unrestrained sexuality of the Viennese, the disguised Duke secretly observes his deputy and his people, and pulls strings to control them. When he reveals such manipulation in the dénouement, the corrupted society becomes aware of the existence of an unseen omniscience concerning the State, provoking in the people a sense of an invisible governing force.

The latter half of Part I analyses two plays by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Chapter 3 concentrates on the court-masque theatricality in the machinations carried

out by the protagonist in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) by Thomas Middleton, or Cyril Tourneur. After looking closely at the conventions of the Jacobean court masque, we observe how the customs of this extravagant spectacle are parodied in the protagonist's treasons.

In Chapter 4, we examine *The Changeling* (1622) by Middleton and William Rowley. Recalling the fact that the Bedlam Hospital in London in the seventeenth century functioned as a "playhouse of folly" exhibiting its patients, as is described in this play's subplot, we look into its main plot that also has an image of the same theatrical performance.

In Part II, we turn our eyes to three plays by postmodern British authors. Chapter 5 interprets Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) with a reference to Roger Caillois's concept, "vertigo," as one of the four basic elements of games presented in his *Man, Play and Games* (1958). This approach reveals that role-playing within this drama, which questions the stability of perception of the spectators, has a crucial function to create a temporary sense of vertigo in their minds, and to lead them to share a sense of uncertainty with the unfortunate heroes.

Chapter 6 studies Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), which consists of a frame play and its embedded thriller. When we remember Stoppard's keen interest in René Magritte's self-referential paintings, it is reasonable to say that this writer shares with the Belgian surrealist a sharp meta-perspective on his own pieces while questioning the nature of perception. Touching on two of Magritte's oil paintings as influential sources of *Hound*, we throw new light on a metaphorical aspect of this play's highly metadramatic setting that stands for human perception anatomized.

Chapter 7 focuses on Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998), loosely based on one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, *Twelfth Night* (1600). We reveal features of the heroine's cross-dressing with comparison to Viola's disguise in *Twelfth Night*, and clarify how the heroine's metadramatic behavior in *Cleansed* allegorically represents theatre performance in general.

The Epilogue concludes discussions of these seven chapters, and points out differences between metadramas in the Elizabethan theatre and those in contemporary British plays. This conclusion is followed by a reference to a few remarkable examples of recent metadramatic creations achieved by dramatists after Kane.