
‘Metatheater’: An Essay on Overload

THOMAS G. ROSENMEYER

METATHEATER, A.K.A. ‘METADRAMA’ or ‘metaplay,’ was an overload from the start.¹ The term ‘metatheater’ was coined four decades ago by Lionel Abel in a challenging, bushwhacking manifesto.² Though the book is no longer widely read, I propose to discuss its argument at some length because I feel that its details prefigure some of the puzzles that have been associated with the various uses of the term, especially of late among classicists.

Abel’s thesis was simple: beginning with the Renaissance, tragedy had run its course—Shakespeare wrote only one true tragedy, *Macbeth*, as did Racine, *Athalie*—and a new dramatic form, not consonant with the general conception of tragedy, was taking over.³ In trying to define what constituted this new genre, embracing all manner of playwriting from Shakespeare to the Theater of the Absurd, save only the ‘realist’ plays of the later nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Abel shows a remarkably liberal hand.⁴ The distinguishing features he associates with metatheater are at one point briefly stated: “Without tragedy, of which we may be incapable, there is no philosophic alternative to the two concepts by which I have defined the metaplay: the world is a stage, life is a dream.”⁵ But this pithy summation, inspired by what he finds in *Hamlet* and in *Life is a Dream*,⁶ turns out to be a false front. As Abel continues, many additional specifications find their way in, and their connection often remains obscure. In trying to catalogue the host of particulars, one feels one is doing an injustice to the inventiveness of Abel’s miscellany and the tangle of his combinations. But for the purposes of this paper they are best laid out as separate entries:

·In metatheater, the characters show themselves to be aware of being on a stage; they are self-conscious, both about themselves as characters and about their status as actors playing characters, unlike the heroes of tragedy who carry out their missions without looking into themselves.

·The characters' dramatic life is already theatricalized, but they do not know the kind of plot in which they are engaged.

·The plot is a product of the author's own imagination and not rooted in a fixed tradition.

·The characters tend to improvise, thus usurping the role of the playwright.

·And the correlate: the playwright is not fully in control of his own material; the characters and the events are always on the point of eluding his directive.⁷

·In metatheater, the action is marked by a dream or has the quality of a dream.⁸

·Closure is undermined, and authority subverted.

·The language is self-centered, with words manipulated as pointers to other words more than as signifiers.⁹

·The audience is drawn into the theatrical space and into the development of the action, so much so that the events are not so much impressed upon our receptive minds as they are the results of our constructive responsiveness, somewhat along the lines of reader-response theory.¹⁰

The 'play-within-the-play,' which often ranks as the central piece in talk about metatheater, Abel somewhat deprecatorily and mysteriously calls a scheme rather than a form.¹¹ These are the principal features which according to Abel set metatheater apart from tragedy.¹² I shall have more to say about some of these entries as they reappear in the writings of those who continue to talk about metatheater. That some of them are at odds with one another should be obvious. And as one looks at particular illustrations designed to body forth the special character of the new genre, its contours become more and more baffling. The globalism of the theory lends itself to the heady underwriting of ex-

travagant irreconcilables; at the same time it rides roughshod over the specificities of the achievement of particular playwrights and directors.¹³ It is almost as if by 'metatheater' Abel meant to define any play that does not observe the rules of classical mimesis;¹⁴ but no such coherent deconstructionist thesis, which might end up disavowing the authority of theater itself, is advanced by him. No, he proceeds by enumerative modification rather than by radical abrogation. In the light of everything Abel attaches to the burden of his term, its contribution to the understanding of dramatic theory is unpersuasive, and its utility for the practice of critical refinements ends up hollow.

The purpose of my catalogue is to spotlight the problem of latitude facing those who wish to avail themselves of the usage, in addition to questioning some of the presuppositions on which their work is based.¹⁵ As a matter of fact Abel's followers (I will, without prejudice, call them Abelians though many of them probably do not acknowledge Abel's instigation) confine themselves to a selection of the ample range of options he offers them. Depending on the critic, the emphasis may be, and often primarily is, in spite of Abel's hesitation, on the play-within-the-play; or on the dramatized awareness of characters that they are characters in a play, i.e., the further 'theatricalization' of what is already theatrical; or on the play as a discourse on playmaking; or on the capacity of characters to act like playwrights; or on the tenuousness of the distinction between character and actor; or on the breakdown of the separation between the stage and the audience; or on the critical or ironic convergence upon an earlier text; or on the self-consciousness or self-reflexivity of the playwright within the confines of the text. But others of Abel's benchmarks continue to be associated with 'metatheater,' and yet others are added.¹⁶

One difficulty of the concept is Abel's sense that the limits of tragedy, against which his new genre is to be bounded, are understood. In spite of continuing attempts to distill the nature of tragedy,¹⁷ consensus has not been achieved. Nor can

the ancient corpus of tragedy be taken as a unitary point of departure. Abel's remarks about classical tragedy are frequently awkward: "Greek taste, which was most assured in this matter, excluded villains from the tragic universe. Shakespeare's taste was not as good . . ." (11). "If Antigone were self-conscious enough to suspect her own notions in burying her brother Polynices, would the story be a tragic one?" (77). If 'suspect' here is taken in the sense of 'being aware' which the context requires—Abel equates self-consciousness with awareness of the nature of one's own actions—his question demonstrates the limitations of his understanding of what happens in classical tragedy. Abelians soon abandoned the repudiation of tragedy, but their work continues to betray the exclusionary thrust of his venture.

Another problem with Abel's terminology is the use of *meta-* to describe his novel dispensation, a compound formation which has always been on the aleatory side. In Greek, the preposition *meta-* is remarkable in its capacity of designating the most varied relationships. But most of the modern compounds formed with the prefix 'meta,' especially in the arts and letters, are modelled on the name of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which maps the realm beyond physics, as the word 'metaphor,' Greek *metaphora* is literally a 'carrying beyond' the common understanding of a word or phrase.¹⁸ "Corresponding to every level of discourse there is a meta-level which concerns itself critically with the first level. The relationships between levels and metalevels characterize many of the epistemological structures of modern science, and in fact form one of the fundamental characteristics of semiotics in general. Within the realm of language, . . . it is possible to define a metalevel which takes this place or level as its object of interest."¹⁹ Standard modern uses of *meta* in matters of language and literature, as in Genette's *métalangue*,²⁰ postulate one superior entity, in this case a language, existing behind or above or beyond another, a second level, i.e., our language or languages, to which it stands in a dominant critical relation. Equally, metapoetics is thought of

as a critical activity inquiring into and judging the successes of a number of systems of poetics. But metatheater is clearly not a science that wields authority over the theater against which it is played out, and metadrama is not allocated a position on the other side of drama.²¹ Nor does it involve the antitheatrical prejudice of which some have accused deconstruction.²² Perhaps another Greek prefix, such as *para*—‘paratheater’—would have been more appropriate. But there is no need of a prefix. The traits Abel recognizes in his new genre clearly function *within* theatrical practice; it is not as if tragedy were theater in the first instance, against which metatheater were to set itself up as an enterprise raised above the theatrical experience, and exercising a superior diagnostic function, or from which paratheater would secede to form an independent domain.

It is curious to observe that ‘metafiction,’ a term that might be supposed to have been introduced before metatheater, did not come in until 1970, when William H. Gass first used it. Curious, because today it is widely and plausibly thought that metatheater is a specific form of metafiction. “There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to talk about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don’t mean merely those drearily predictable pieces of writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the works of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed.”²³ In the field of narrative fiction, a number of good critics have subscribed to the use of the term ‘metafiction’; others prefer the expression ‘self-conscious novel.’ Perhaps the best general work on the topic is one by Patricia Waugh, whose first chapter is entitled “What is metafiction, and why are they saying such awful things about it?”²⁴ Her book is infinitely more sophisticated and conscientious than Abel’s, but some of her conclusions, and those of others who talk about metafiction, bear a likeness to his, adding further compo-

nents such as parody,²⁵ contradiction, paradox, typographic experiment, collage, the intertwining of the world of fiction and the world of experience, infinite regress, 'intertextual overkill,' and much else.²⁶ At the same time Waugh acknowledges that "although the *term* 'metafiction' might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself." In metafiction, "the reader is always presented with embedded strata which contradict the strata immediately above or below. The fictional *content* of the story is continually reflected by its *formal* existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of textuality,"²⁷ and I would put a special stress on Waugh's "continually."

How does metafiction view the engagement of the author in his work? In the words of an eminent critic, we must distinguish between writers like Conrad and Ford Madox Ford who "make us aware of the intricate artifice of their narrations . . . in the service of a moral and psychological realism" and John Fowles, who "causes himself to sit down in the same railway compartment with his protagonist,"²⁸ thus inserting the author into his artifact. Alternatively, note that another acknowledged metafictionalist, cited by Waugh, intrudes his authorship so hegemonically that he can say: "I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure."²⁹ This restriction of the recipient's engagement may be counted as one indication of the snarls in which the complexity of the notion of metafiction may find itself caught, for other observers of metafiction lay a heavy stress on the reader's complicity. And Waugh is, it seems, taking chances by invoking an extrinsic objective in declaring that metafiction "converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism."³⁰ But in fact metafiction has a better claim to its separate status than metatheater, in that it

is more natural for novelists and readers to rear back and take stock of what they are doing or experiencing as part of the fictional enterprise.³¹ You can explore the organizing premises in a book meant for reading and meditation; drama in performance does not lend itself to that supplementary exercise. Or, conversely, theater has from the beginning, with a few exceptions, such as Menander and the latest realism, been a formal and semantic construct positioned at a certain remove from the patterns of experienced reality, and hence less in need of the realignments introduced by the tools of metatheater.

One of the salient points in the ideas of metatheater and metafiction is the notion that the author exercises a control over his text by means of formal experiment and critical innovation. This, I believe, was in part stimulated by the Russian Formalists, especially Viktor Shklovskij and Boris Tomashevskij, who advocated the deformation or alienation of the literary product by “laying bare its devices.”³² There is some uncertainty about the precise significance of ‘device,’ or ‘artifice,’ Russian *priem*; critics assume that in this connection it is a flexible term, though to begin with the reference was to verse structure. But “‘laying bare the device’ throws into focus the tension between ‘form’ and ‘materials.’”³³ We should note that the summons calls *not* for laying bare its nature, or questioning the artifact, or self-consciousness or self-reflexivity. It calls for a textually limited procedure of attending to and shaking up the conventional forms with the purpose of revealing their conventionality and making them look odd. According to Viktor Erlich it was understood that the devices of literature were not overthrown or even questioned but merely played with for the sake of “making it strange.” Shklovskij prided himself on having brought Sterne to Russia, and appreciated “his mockery of conventional narrative schemes.”³⁴ As Shklovskij said of Sterne (and he said the same thing of Cervantes): “By violating the form, he forces us to attend to it; and, for him, the awareness of the form through its violation constitutes the content of the novel.”³⁵ This is very close

to what Robert Alter calls "a critical exploration through the technical manipulation of the very form that purports to represent reality . . . intended in various ways to draw our attention to fictional form as a consciously articulated entity rather than a transparent container of 'real' events."³⁶ The phrase 'critical exploration' in this statement should not, I believe, be mistaken for the idea that exposing and playing with, hence violating the conventional building blocks of the formal composition equals providing a diagnostic evaluation of the newly fashioned work as a whole.

The Russian Formalists supplied the initiative for a more complex handling of the textual processes and their understanding; what the supporters of metatheater and metafiction did with this, however, goes far beyond that original summons. Alter's 'exploration' stays within the bounds of what the Formalists intended. But once self-consciousness and self-reference are imported into the analysis of the work as a whole and the achievement of the author, the dam is broken. Quite apart from the fact that 'self-conscious' is an awkward locution—the primary dictionary synonym is 'embarrassed'—the emphasis on the author's self-advertisement in the work and on the awareness of the work of its fictional parts goes beyond the objective declaration of 'baring the device.' The transition is easily made: 'metatheater' includes everything whereby playwrights lay bare their awareness of their own formal and conceptual devising and whereby dramatic composition or performance refers back to itself.³⁷ The latter addition is not an inference from the initial statement, but demonstrates how far the current will run once the dam is broken. I am not suggesting that the supporters of metatheater and metafiction have in any sense betrayed the legacy of the Formalists. It is simply that the opening impulse has produced an entirely new generation of insights and ways of looking at the material.³⁸

After an initial flurry of interest in Abel's new terminology, much of Shakespearean criticism turned its back on meta-drama, and other ways of seeing differences, such as the old

categories of 'illusory' and 'non-illusory,'³⁹ or art and ritual,⁴⁰ captured its reign, before semiotics and deconstruction and Lacanian approaches and the new historicism and the new philology, and the continuing recognition of incommensurabilities⁴¹ did away altogether with applying homespun binary schemes to the world of drama. 'Metatheater' is not taken up in the essays of so sovereign a collection as Parker and Hartman.⁴² Nor did it make much of a mark in the critical work in other languages.⁴³ For a while, where Abel's influence continued to be felt, the terms used were more often the adjectives 'metatheatrical' and 'metadramatic,' as if there was a feeling that the institution of a new genre could be avoided by the assumption that there were certain features teasingly evoking the semblance of a generic identity to be found in a variety of plays and dramatic traditions. One Abelian speaks of the "distinctive metadramatic tensions" of which "the theatrical interaction of playwright, play, and audience" is only one variety.⁴⁴ One wonders why this particular tension should not be ascribable to any and all plays. Furthermore, those who employ the adjectival form are tempted to use it to isolate this or that episode or line in a play—a practice often found in the interpretation of Aristophanes or Plautus—disregarding the imperative that 'metatheater' should strictly be used only to keynote the effect of the totality of a production. Or, perhaps significantly, uncovering the authority in charge, the term 'metadramatic' becomes a feature of the criticism devoted to metadrama.⁴⁵ Others, more cautiously, speak of 'theatrical metaphor' or 'play metaphor,' or again of a 'play turning in on or toward itself,' thereby avoiding the generic issue.⁴⁶ But in a few quarters Abel's totalizing perspective and terminology persist and flourish, with some resurgence of the unhappy nouns,⁴⁷ and this in spite of the growing reluctance on the part of some to fabricate or even retain inclusive genres or subgenres in the face of a frustratingly rich variety of literary and theatrical phenomena.⁴⁸

Now, within the past two decades or so, surprisingly, Abel's legacy has become unusually prominent in the field of classi-

cal studies, particularly on this side of the Atlantic, but also in Great Britain. There has been a flood of special studies of metatheater, and many other books on ancient literature help themselves to the term. One of the earliest to exploit Abel's outlook was Marino Barchiesi,⁴⁹ in an article which extended Abel's temporal starting line into antiquity and covered the whole history of Western drama, thus overthrowing one of Abel's principal contentions. Others have followed; interesting and enjoyable contributions have been mildly bruised by their reliance on Abel's redundant and jumbled construction, though many Abelians steer away from his more extravagant ruminations. One may wonder about the unexpected resurgence of an outworn concept. One potent reason for it was the revival of interest in ancient comedy,⁵⁰ for some Abelians have seen metatheater in the native ability of Old Comedy to recognize itself as fiction, or of the fusing of the comic with the tragic. Critics of Aristophanes and Plautus perhaps feel that the hallowed term 'intrigue,' which in older scholarship had been the standard term to apply to creative plot complications in drama,⁵¹ may not be adequate to plumb the riches of the comic maneuvers; and in fact the term 'intrigue' has disappeared from most current criticism. Deception and entrapment and disguises and changes of costume, both in comedy and also in tragedy, have been spotted as significant clues in recognizing a meta-theatrical embodiment.⁵² Oliver Taplin reserves the use of 'metatheatre' for comedy only, and equates it with 'theatricality,' the awareness of actors and characters that they are performing a play, and the communication of that awareness to the sensibility of the audience, without the diagnostic implication discussed above.⁵³ Like Taplin, other students of ancient drama who have recourse to Abel's language do not accept all of his suggestions.⁵⁴ But many are less stinting, and in what follows I will try to comment on some of the uses of 'metatheater' by students of classical drama, a conveniently full inventory of which may be garnered from the work of Mark Ringer.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most widely accepted notion associated with metatheater is that the play recognizes its own status as fiction and performs a hermeneutics of itself, that it examines or judges or raises questions about or *is* about itself or the tradition in which it stands, or raises questions about theater as a whole. This is a move familiar in fiction from Gide and Huxley, and widely practiced in the criticism of Hellenistic and Latin lyric. Gass, the coiner of the term 'metafiction,' is properly contemptuous of the word 'about,' which had been expelled from literary-critical talk by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics, and it is easy to agree with him that its imprecision leaves little room to the understanding. But it is a shorthand for the larger idea that in turning in upon itself a play will end up exercising a judgment upon itself in relation to the tradition of which it is a part. This is precisely the step beyond 'laying bare the artifice,' and it is taken by many Abelian classicists.⁵⁶ It is true that there are some modern plays which invite such a judgment. Peter Handke's *Insulting the Audience*, which perversely ratifies Aristotle's unities of place, time, and plot by having the characters address only the audience rather than each other, may be regarded as a questioning of the dramatic tradition.⁵⁷ So are the single person stagings and some conversational pieces currently offered on the stage. But antiquity fails to offer such experiments. Some have tried to see in Aristophanes' use of parody a juggling of codes that entails a critical reflection upon not only tragedy but also on its own procedure.⁵⁸ Parody is a special case of deriving one's inspiration from working with an older author or tradition, which for some is the principal meaning of metatheater.⁵⁹ But it is hard to see how the dependence on predecessors, whether scoffing or exploitative or in a spirit of deference or, for that matter, transformative, can be useful to a play in appraising itself.⁶⁰ The bulk of ancient tragedy is fabricated, often defiantly, from the materials of epic; Euripides implicitly finds fault with Aeschylus; and the debt of Roman Comedy to Greek New Comedy is indisputable though variously defined. All literature, it has been said, is intertex-

tual or transtextual. The issues of indebtedness, transformation, and critique are important and have been widely studied, but the benefit of such a study from investing it with the mantle of metadrama is hard to visualize.

The hermeneutics practiced in metatheater is often couched in the language of two virtually synonymous terms, 'self-consciousness' and 'reflexivity' (or 'self-reflection').⁶¹ The language varies; sometimes it is the author who engages in self-consciousness, and sometimes it is the play itself or a character in the play. The same multiple distribution is found in the case of reflecting and self-reflecting. The play, it is thought, works as a mirror reflecting the playwright's self, or it reflects (upon) itself and its position within the generic realm of drama.⁶² The artist's self-consciousness produces an art that is self-conscious in that it submits its product to an internal evaluation and to a ricocheting between form and intention. A character is caught up in the mosaic of these currents and is burdened with the tasks incumbent on the hermeneutics. In addition, "to be successfully decoded . . . experimental fiction of any variety requires an audience which is itself self-conscious about its linguistic practices."⁶³ 'Self-reference' is another term used in this connection,⁶⁴ as is 'thematizing,' a locution taking it for granted that a dramatic performance, like narrative fiction, has a 'theme' the audience is invited to capsulize and monitor. But there is a difference. The character of written narrative fiction speaks to the individual reader who, if engaged, is readily induced to reflect on what he reads; the character of drama speaks to a collective listenership which, though engaged, is allowed little time to reflect. Both reader and listener are expected to recognize simulacra or transmogrifications of themselves in the characters presented to them. But in the case of drama, to attach the labels 'self-reflexion' or 'self-reference' to the developing, ever sliding re-cognition on the part of the audience, which is itself a problematic collective, is to convert a transient entente into a controlled act of reason. Self-reference, self-reflexion, reflexivity, self-consciousness: what matters is not so much the near-

interchangeability of the expressions and their combinatory effect of fanning out,⁶⁵ but the underlying idea that a piece of metatheater is by definition or concomitantly a variety of commentary, and that both the play and the characters and the playwright, and ultimately the audience, share in that critical pursuit. For the play, that property becomes concrete in a variety of maneuvers and devices which will be the subject of the following section.

Probably the most widely discussed and most complex component of metadrama is the play-within-the-play (hereafter: play-within).⁶⁶ The common assumption is that the play-within can form a mirror to the play as a whole, a form of *mise en abyme*,⁶⁷ and in turn affect our understanding of the play. The mirror in Velasquez' *Las Meninas* is frequently cited as an analogue, with inferences drawn from that small mysterious object looming large in the interpretation of the painting. The play-acting or rather series of play-actings in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* is diagnosed as a self-referential gloss on playwriting and on the theatricalization of the women's festival. The *technê*, or artistic *apatê*, generating devices to produce the play-within mirrors and thereby highlights and calls for a scrutiny of the *technê* operating in the play as a whole, making it the skilled fiction it is. But beyond this it is felt that, as a mirror or reflector, the play-within can tell us something about the concerns or the meaning of the play around it, and that metatheater is a consequence of this outward transference. Conversely, the relation between the play-within and its container may be understood as an analogue to the relation between the play as a whole and the world within which its fiction is provocatively poised. In that case the link is likely to be one of antagonism, the tension between illusion and fact, a relation that is prominent in detective drama where the sleuth, or the reader, is misled by scenes tendering false clues. It has been easy for an Abelian to say that "As metatheater, the *Bakchai* calls into question that process of 'hedging off' a sacred space for play separate from reality. It allows the one to

break through into the other."⁶⁸ This statement would stand as a general description of the contentious linkage between the theater and the cosmos within which it works, without the qualification 'as metatheater.' The tense interaction between the staged ritual and external observance is a theatrical constant. The play-within redoubles that tension.

Now the play-within manifests itself in various sizes and proportions; on the Renaissance stage masques, dumb shows and choruses are included, and even the Inductions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and of *Bartholomew Fayre* are identified as plays-within, alongside the more accepted samples like Hamlet's "Mousetrap."⁶⁹ By a similar flexibility certain interludes in ancient drama are put in the same category. The appearance of the scout pretending to be a merchant in *Philoctetes* is understood as a play-within, prompting one Abelian to cite it among the materials for his conclusion that *Philoctetes* is a self-conscious discourse on tragedy and the tragic experience.⁷⁰ By a further refinement we are asked to distinguish between factual subplots, which "recast the play's events in terms *true* with regard to the plot," and fictive subplots which "alter the play's main plot and then render it in 'non-factual' terms."⁷¹ So the play-within is a plastic entity, recognized in Agamemnon's letter-writing of *Iphigenia in Aulis*,⁷² as well as in the burial performance of *Helen* and Pentheus' ordeal of *The Bacchae* which *are* of course playlets staged by dramatic directors, and there seems to be no limit to the ability of critics to isolate certain scenes within drama as plays-within. *The Bacchae* comes closest of all ancient drama to the exuberance of pieces like *Marat/Sade* or *Six Characters*, in which the plays-within engulf the play proper. But not every play-within has something to say about the play around it or the business of theater in its setting. Agamemnon's abortive epistolary effort does not induce questions about the genre of tragedy, and Old Comedy presents many spectacles which may be regarded as pure entertainment, analogous to the masque featuring Quince acting a wall. A sufficiently ingenious hermeneut might find in *Pyramus and Thisby* a *mise-en-abyme*

of the totality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but few would be persuaded. The play-within is a subject full of interest, but to make it part of the study of metatheater by redirecting its scope is to make it part of an integrated identity to which it does not always aspire.

As a postscript to this, one might cite the recent tendency to attach the idea of metatheater to the role of Dionysus, in his capacity as the god of the festival under whose auspices the ancient Athenian plays were performed, and for his skill at disguises.⁷³ *The Bacchae*, with Dionysus in control and supervising its play-within, clearly stands at the center of this association. But Abelianians have gone overboard to convert any mention of Dionysus into a hint at metatheater. Not only *The Bacchae*, but both *The Phoenissae* and *Heracles* have, on the grounds of invocations of Dionysus, been declared to be metatragic.⁷⁴ It is a strange testimony to the delusoriness of the term, and to the arbitrariness of its employment, that not only the appearance of a single character in a play, however divine,⁷⁵ but even choral references to him should be a reason for putting the new generic seal on the performance. Tragedy is of course designed to raise questions among its listeners about the relation between humans, particularly citizens, and the forces directing their lives, and Dionysus is highly qualified to stimulate such questioning. But it is difficult to understand how even the cruelty and contrariety of Dionysus directing the punishment of Pentheus can be said to prompt an audience's inquiry into the nature of the tragic form or of this version of the form, any more so than the problematic paternity of Apollo in *Ion* or, say, the introductory comments of Pan in Menander's *Dyskolos*.⁷⁶ The immediacy and the power of the performance before a large audience would not have allowed the luxury of such an examination, on top of the natural response of wondering about life and death or the relation of the worship of Dionysus to the politics of the city; on the contrary, they would have been arrested by it. It is one of the curious paradoxes of the Abelian position that it comes down heavily on performance, but recommends a de-

gree of investigative scrutiny which is more appropriate to the scanning of a text.⁷⁷

Related to the issue of the play-within are two congruent subjects: the embodiment of a character in the actor, and the occasional emergence of the actor from behind the character.⁷⁸ Brecht's (and before him, Diderot's) notorious demand that the actor stay actor and not engage in the emotional range of a character is not to be read into ancient drama. Characters are constructed and built up, and often expected to develop and change in the course of a drama. The plot of the play constitutes the frame within which considerable liberties of character change, as well as leaps in the story line, are generated. This is part of the theatrical and literary tradition; when Iphigenia changes her mind and chooses heroism toward the end of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, a move criticized by Aristotle, the idea of the conversion is as old as Achilles' transformation in *Iliad* 24. On the other hand, the play-back between actor and character, as more or less of the temperament of the actor gets engrafted in the shaped character, and as the demands of the character impose themselves on the talents of the actor, presents interesting psychological facets which need not detain us here.⁷⁹ But it is worth citing a shrewd critic's comments, introducing the perspective of the audience which is closely linked to this: "We are never aware merely of the character, as if it were an animated Platonic archetype viewed by the 'eye' of the mind. We are always aware of Hamlet-played-by-this-actor, and often focally aware of this. Nor is the actor aware only of the character (in the sense of his awareness being only the character's awareness), but he is aware of both this and what the character cannot know, and of the audience as aware of him-as-playing-Hamlet-in-this-manner, and so on."⁸⁰ This must have been true also of ancient drama, in spite of the masks depersonalizing the facial expressions of the actors.⁸¹

Now on certain occasions, and especially in comedy, both Old and New, the actor emerges completely from behind the character, either addressing a stage-hand as in Aristophanes'

Peace, or as a Plautine slave proposing to cut short a character's speech to prevent the play from dragging on.⁸² This 'downkeying,' as Erving Goffman names it in his frame analysis,⁸³ usually restricted to a line or two or short segments, is not a break of illusion, as it has sometimes been called, since if theater is illusion the downkeying is part of it. Nor does it herald an increase in theatricality; it may on occasion interfere with it.⁸⁴ It merely reminds the audience that the drama they are witnessing is a structure put together from a variety of disparate elements, including props, costumes, music, the architectural environment which are part of the total experience, and the service of personnel to enact the fable. Niall Slater⁸⁵ criticizes Keir Elam⁸⁶ for suggesting that devices which break the frame of the action—or, better, break the internal communication system—continue to confirm the facticity of the representation. Clearly Elam is right; curiously he accepts the terms 'metadramatic' and 'metatheatrical' because they were fashionable then, but uses them contrary to Abel's intent.⁸⁷ The interruptive, or connective, function of the chorus in Greek drama is itself one such break, more extended than others, that enlivens rather than disturbs the dramatic fiction. Even more so is a chorus in which the function of the actors leaks close to the surface of the choral role, as in comic parabases, and in *Oedipus Tyrannus* 895, when the choristers, lamenting the infractions of justice they see around them, sing, "If these deeds are respected, why should I do my dancing?"⁸⁸ or in *Ajax* 701, where the choristers, deceived into thinking that their leader has returned to them, sing, "Now it is my task to do the dancing." Such moments are not, in essence, any different from the occasions when comic figures seemingly shed their status as characters and briefly reveal the actors on which it is grafted. And in fact we should be speaking of a congruence rather than a break; note M. S. Silk's comments on *Acharnians* 497–556, a speech by the principal character: "The great oration begins in a famously astonishing mixture of *personae*—the character of Dicaeopolis (now a beggar),

the actor playing him (in a comedy), the poet Aristophanes himself (the 'me' who is at odds with Cleon)—and a mixed idiom that . . . involves tragic quotations from *Telephus*.”⁸⁹ Old Comedy thus avails itself of a license, both distributive and conjunctive, which there is no reason to doubt is available to all of theater. Goffman's frame analysis, with its talk of laminations within frames, is well suited to make sense of the variously interlocking parts and the different levels of speech to be expected in a dramatic performance.⁹⁰

So if the players in a Roman comedy occasionally deliver themselves of a direct address to the audience, or if, in their devising of schemes to help or obstruct other players, they regard themselves as poets, rivalling the playwright who makes them think that way, such moves have no metatheatrical value. Role-playing is more prominent in Plautus than in some other ancient playwrights, as Niall Slater has ably demonstrated. But role-playing, that is, enacting a role within a role, is as old as the simulation of faithful wifehood by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and yields no metatheatrical dividends. A character who declares himself a 'poet' (literally, of course, a 'doer'), notably in Plautus' *Pseudolus* 401–5, is merely the instigator of an intrigue under a new name. Further, 'improvising,' as it has been called, is just another term for a surprising dramatic initiative as mapped by the playwright.⁹¹ There *are* plays that allow their actors to improvise,⁹² just as there are musical compositions which demand improvising of their performers (the *cadenza*). But we have no evidence of any such case in classical or Greco-Roman drama. The comic slave may seem to design a scene or two, but “the essential ingredient of the plot has been in Menander's hands . . . all along.”⁹³ If it is claimed that in such a case several plot themes are made to conflict,⁹⁴ the same could be said of a play like *Alcestis*, in which the heroine, Admetus, and Heracles each have their own agenda to pursue. Nor do asides or eaves-drops or soliloquies, “in which the hidden mind of a character is leaked to the audience,” give us metatheater.⁹⁵ I am skeptical of the

reasoning of a critic who claims: "Using . . . John Austin's useful terminology, I would suggest tentatively that if 'illocutionary acts move the play along,' a *perlocutionary* speech act like addressing the public has sufficient impact to make everyone—actors and audience alike—feel that the play has momentarily stopped in its course to indulge in a self-reflexive pause."⁹⁶ On the contrary, these 'epic' moments⁹⁷ do not create critical distance, as they do in Brecht, but playful exuberance and comic discrepancy, which are part of the very idea of the genre of comedy. Their intermittency guarantees their inherence in the comic scheme; we recall that metatheater relies on the continuousness of its generic unorthodoxy. And of course the 'poetic' achievements of Plautus' slaves are never definitive: "Any utterance offered by a character in a play on the stage makes sense only if the maker is ignorant of the outcome of the drama."⁹⁸ Nor does the social marginality of the slave release him from the common expectations of the cohesion of comic frivolity, or seriousness.⁹⁹

The involvement of the audience is another element that has fuelled the interest of Abeliens.¹⁰⁰ It is evident that in the ancient theater, as in the medieval mystery play, the ritual and social interaction between players and audience was pronounced. The interaction was not taken to its eccentric limits as it was in the 'rehearsal plays' of the Georgian and Restoration periods and in some dramas of early Romanticism when spectators, sometimes along with the playwright and the occasional critic, were made to invade the stage.¹⁰¹ But the actors of many plays of the classical period were able to appeal directly to the crowd surrounding them, in a manner evocative of the occasions when the citizens met in the assembly or for jury duty.¹⁰² Erving Goffman distinguishes between a theatergoer and an onlooker: the latter laughs at a piece of performance designed to be laughed at, the former laughs when the actor flubs a line.¹⁰³ Since we have adequate evidence of the reactions of ancient audiences to actors mispronouncing words, the distinction is not irrelevant, but it need not worry us as we ask how actively the audience

is involved in what a play, either tragedy or comedy, has to say, and how the actors measure up to its demands. By analogy with the reader-response theory, as Abel saw, it can be argued that without the empathetic input of the audience, the shape of the performed play lacks a vital ingredient.¹⁰⁴

Abelians have made audience involvement sought by the author a significant aspect of metatheater. But the question is whether there is any degree or quality of involvement that makes of a play something that is not programmed by the theater's large genetic code. Does Edgar's final summation of the tragedy of Lear, "situating both the king and himself in the audience,"¹⁰⁵—"The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / shall never see so much nor live so long"—"encourage in the latter a more active participation"? Yes, perhaps, though its terminal placement in the drama is no more effective than any number of choral conclusions in the ancient repertory. To say that "an identification with a character becomes possible only if we as audience burden ourselves with the performative responsibilities of the cast" is a useless tautology. And Anne Barton is right when she argues that after the tight absorption of the medieval community in the success of the miracle play, the Elizabethan dramatists were able "to write plays that were perfectly self-contained, to invent fragile, romantic countries upon which the audience could not safely intrude, and yet at the same time pressure a sense of *rapport* with the galleries and pit."¹⁰⁶ Barton also ventures to suggest that the psychological function of the play-within is analogous to the addresses to the audience in the first five extant plays of Aristophanes, addresses which are, like those of the mystery cycles, not extra-dramatic because "audience and actors still share the same world."¹⁰⁷ There are many different devices whereby a play, any kind of play, can seduce the spectators into seeing themselves transported into the dramatic fabric. Some plays do this less than others, but that is a matter of their degree of cogency or relevance, or of authorial intent, not a matter of their generic specificity.

It is evident that 'metatheater' has, in the wake of Abel's

overload, been employed to cover too many different moves, and to elicit responses that undervalue the traditional inventiveness and the wonderful immediacy of the emotional power of theater. That there is a difference between the dramatic conceptions of Aristophanes and Terence, or Racine and Anouilh, or Schiller and Brecht, or, for that matter, between Aeschylus and Euripides, is undeniable. But these differences are more profitably examined by attending to singular effects instead of relying on a general nostrum. And it is indeed significant that of the better Abelians who talk about the ancient theater, few adopt Abel's assumption that a whole play can be metatheatrical. They use the term to identify specific dramatic movements, some very brief, others longer, but none of such potency that it pervasively colors the total dramatic experience. These moments are shaped by the playwrights to experiment with the materials of their trade. In many cases, the ventures may be interpreted as strokes of irony, practiced at the expense of audience expectation, though it must be admitted that such expectations vary with the degree to which audiences have become accustomed to particular ironies in the past.¹⁰⁸ But whether ironical or not, all of the moves are the liberties of a capacious theatrical mode, permitting the playwrights to perform the most extravagant variations without committing themselves to the constraints of a critical ukase establishing a separate genre. In the western tradition we can speak of tragedy, of Old and New Comedy, of *drame*, of mime, perhaps even of melodrama; or, by way of protest against generic hardening, simply of a piece (*pièce*, *pezzo*, *Stück*). But beyond these few canonical circumscriptions, each of them not without its own native slippages, the manufacture of a new encompassing genre becomes an obstruction to enlightenment. 'Metatheater' has been such an obstruction, where it is not simply an uninformative frill.

NOTES

My warm thanks to Robert Alter, Maurizio Bettini, Mark Griffith, and Jim Porter for their remedial comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. 'Metadrama' and 'metaplay' designate the playbook; 'metatheater' the performance. Semioticians distinguish between book text and performance text; see below, note 77. In the case of the ancient drama we are not at liberty to mark off the features of any one performance from the book texts that have come down to us. Nor am I in this paper concerned with what today is called 'performance art,' whose largely non-verbal communication sets it apart from dramatic performance.

2. L. Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York 1963). In my essay I will use the American spelling 'metatheater.'

3. He thus takes after Dr. Johnson who in the *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays* (London 1765), xiii, says that the bard's plays are "compositions of a distinct kind, exhibiting the real state of sublunary culture, . . . mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination."

4. For a warning about "essentializing concepts of genre" see G. W. Most, "Generating Genres: The Idea of the Tragic," in M. Depew and D. Obbink, eds., *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons and Society* (Cambridge, MA 2000), 15–35; and the section on genre in S. J. Harrison, ed., *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics* (Oxford 2001), especially A. Barchiesi's panoramic and witty "The Crossing." Also T. Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford 1988). There is no shortage of analyses of the definition of genre. For a recent discussion and summing up, and a valuable bibliography, see B. Paltridge, *Genre, Frames, and Writing in Research Settings* (Amsterdam and London 1997).

5. See Abel (note 2), 83. The high rank of the dream is owed to Calderon and Strindberg, two key figures in Abel's thinking. Not unexpectedly, N. Slater, *Power in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind* (Princeton 1985) begins to struggle when at the end of his book, pages 170–72, he tries to apply Abel's emphasis on the dream play to his material.

6. See Abel (note 2), 72: in Calderon's play, "A tragedy was predicted, but did not occur. And if it did not, this was because of the dramatic invention of King Basilio, who substituted for the play intended by fate one of his own inventions." For the avoidance of the plot intended by fate via a tragedy of a character's own initiative, Abel might also have gone to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

7. See Abel (note 2), 63: "Nor are the events adequately understood by Marlowe."

8. J. Fletcher and J. McFarlane, in M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth 1976), 509: "Within this characteristically modern concept of meta-theatre, the role of the 'life is a dream' motif is of unifying importance." Cf. Abel (note 2), 106: "if one

does not see any inner necessity in the lives of people, will not their lives be dreamlike?"

9. This remark, intended to highlight the verbal display of *Love's Labour's Lost* but extended to the bulk of the new genre, runs up against the fact that in Saussurian terms it is one way of describing all language.

10. Before Abel, many of these symptoms were sometimes regarded as marks of 'mannerism' and, in the case of newer works, 'neo-mannerism.' See G. R. Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur* (Hamburg 1959). Hocke is indebted to E. R. Curtius' statement that mannerism is a constant in European literature; *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York 1953), 273-301. For a protest against the explicatory force of 'mannerism' in the discussion of the transformation of classical dramatic models, see H. Weinreich, "Fiktionsironie bei Anouilh," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* N. F. 2 (1961), 239-53. Abel's formulations also bear a distant relationship to the emphasis on 'open form' in R. M. Adams' valuable *Strains of Discord* (Ithaca, NY 1958).

11. The classic on this topic is still R. J. Nelson, *Play Within A Play* (New Haven, CT 1958). Cf. also, among others, the essays in F. Laroque, ed., *The Show Within: Dramatic and Other Insets. English Renaissance Drama (1550-1642). Collection Astraea* 4.1-2 (Montpelier, VT 1992), especially J.-P. Maquerlot, "Playing Within the Play: Towards a Semiotics of Metadrama and Metatheatre"; and M. Schmeling, *Métathéâtre et Intertexte: Aspects du théâtre dans le théâtre* (Paris 1982).

12. For a contemporary critique of Abel's contribution, see S. Sontag, "The Death of Tragedy," in *Against Interpretation* (New York 1966), 132-39. Sontag accepts the new term and much of the thesis, but faults Abel for disregarding comedy, and hence not realizing how far back metatheater goes; for oversimplifying and misrepresenting "the vision of the world which is necessary for the writing of tragedies"; and for not distinguishing sufficiently the range and tone of the body of plays he groups together as metatheater. "There are discontinuities between the modern nightmare and the Renaissance dream which Abel (like, more recently, Jan Kott) neglects." Also Brecht, *pace* Abel, does not fit in his category. Some of Sontag's reservations anticipate objections in the present paper, but her adoption of large stretches of Abel's proposal and her partisanship of Brecht ultimately weaken her polemic.

13. How, for instance, does Abel's itemization of the features of metatheater help us to appreciate the special qualities of *Marat/Sade*, with its identification of theater and madness, its amazing stage effects, and its characters (*not* actors) taking on *historical*, not fictive, roles? See Adams (note 10), 206.

14. 'Mimesis' and 'mimetic,' themselves of uncertain standing, are the foil against which the supporters of metatheater deploy their reading. See, e.g., J. D. Hubert, *Metatheater: The Example of Shakespeare* (Lincoln, NB 1991), 2: "Theater constantly produces double images of combining overt mimetic representations of the story with covert performance and metadramatic clues pointing to its own operations at the risk of undermining or at

the very least problematizing the fable." F. Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre," in H. P. Foley, ed., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York, London, Paris 1981), 175, shrewdly wonders whether art is a "mimesis of reality or a *mimesis* of reality, whether it conceals its art by its verisimilitude or exposes its fictions in the staging and testing of its own illusions," and implies that it is commonly a combination of the two.

15. For a detailed list of types of drama that get away from a putative norm, see the still magisterial P. Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt 1956), 14.

16. Thus F. Muecke, "I Know You—By Your Rags: Costume and Disguise in Fifth-Century Drama," *Antichthon* 16 (1982), 17–34 thinks that disguise is thematically metatheatrical, though in her "Plautus and the Theatre of Disguise," *Classical Antiquity* 5 (1986), 222, she qualifies this: "it is only in comedy that it [disguise] can be unveiled as an image of acting." But note the generalization on page 229: "Disguise may be singled out as a particularly apt vehicle for metatheatrical comedy in that, through the change of costume entailed, it calls attention to the physical and personal nature of acting and allows the subtext of performance to become text," a formulation which appears to extend to more than comedy. Is the changing of costume by the Furies in *The Eumenides* metatheatrical? More important, Muecke implies that metatheater belongs in the general realm of irony, by referring to D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London and New York 1970). It is true that some of the items listed by Abel are more simply defined as varieties of irony. See note 108.

17. For a recent argument, see George Steiner, "Tragedy, Pure and Simple," in M. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic* (Oxford 1996), 534–546. See also Most (note 4). For a probing skepticism concerning the use of generic concepts in the history of the arts, see D. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore and London 1992).

18. In the modern sciences compounds with meta- are coined more freely. In all fields, where *meta-* signals a process of change, the compound traditionally terminates in a syllable indicating process, such as *-sis*, as in metathesis, or *-ism*, as in metasomatism. —W. D. Ross, ed., *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford 1924), vol. 1, xxxii, note 2, reports the tradition that the name of the work is due to its place after the *Physics* in complete editions of Aristotle's writings, an arrangement probably dictated by the view that it is proper to proceed from knowledge of material experience to knowledge in the ultimate sense. This explanation found in ancient commentators, which may be mere speculation, is easily complemented by the notion that once the students have had access to the *Metaphysics*, they succeed in having a more controlled understanding of the physical works.

19. J. M. Lipski, "On the Metastructure of Literary Discourse," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 5.2 (1976), 53.

20. G. Genette, *Figures II* (Paris 1969). See also L. Hjelmlev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Madison 1943), 119.

21. For an exception, see the remark of J. L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama* (Minneapolis 1971), 4: metatheater "is a dramatic genre that

goes beyond drama (at least drama of a traditional sort), becoming a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved." It should be said that on the whole Calderwood's discussion stays safely within the confines established by Abel, not stipulating a drama beyond drama.

22. G. H. Hartman, *Saving the Text* (Baltimore, MD 1981), 121.

23. W. H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York 1970), 24–25. Gass later includes Nabokov, Coover, and Barthelme among the writers of metafiction. The model he cites does not cash out; in line with his final statement, the comparandum in mathematics would not be a metatheorem, but simply the imposition of one equation upon another equation. In any case, Gass is too subtle a critic to make significant use of the term in his essays on individual writers or works.

24. P. Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Contained Fiction* (London 1984). See also L. Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction* (Bergen 1981).

25. M. A. Rose, *Parody/Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody As a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London 1979). Rose vacillates between folding parody into metafiction and putting the two side by side.

26. P. Waugh 1984 (note 24), ch. 2 and 136–49. Waugh interestingly excepts certain postmodern writers, including Pynchon, from the category of metafiction, on the grounds that they destroy rather than problematize the concept of reality. Quite traditionally, her scheme continues to adhere to the conflict between 'illusion' and 'reality.'

27. Waugh 1984 (above, note 25), 15.

28. R. Alter, *Partial Magic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1975), xiii. Alter's study covers novels from Cervantes and Sterne to Nabokov and beyond.

29. B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London 1973), 28.

30. Waugh 1984 (note 24), 11.

31. Hence E. Downing, *Double Exposures: Repetition and Realism in Nineteenth-Century German Fiction* (Stanford 2000), 11, paraphrasing the position of the Frankfurt School: "a great or true work of art always necessarily introduces . . . not only self-reflection and an acknowledgment of otherness but also an awareness of its failure to achieve an identity between its representation and (outside) reality, and thus in a sense an insight into its achieved self-negation." The same might be said of the lyric; cf. now the more linguistically oriented analysis of J. Danielewicz, "Metatext and its Functions in Greek Lyric Poetry," in Harrison (2001, note 3), 46–61.

32. See A. A. Hansen-Löve, *Der russische Formalismus* (Vienna 1978), 188–201 and *passim*; V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (2nd. ed., The Hague 1965), 194 and *passim*; also L. T. Lemon and M. J. Ross, eds. and trans., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, NB 1965), 93: According to Tomashevskij's *Thematics*, devices are either perceptible or imperceptible. "Devices are perceptible for perhaps two reasons:

their excessive age or their excessive newness. Abandoned, old, archaic devices are felt as intrusive elements, as having lost their vitality . . . On the other hand, new devices strike their own peculiar, unaccustomed note if they are taken from a previously forbidden territory." 94: "Writers of the nineteenth century tried to make their devices imperceptible; but others, like Pushkin, make their devices perceptible."

33. Hansen-Löve 1978 (note 32), 191-95; Erlich 1965 (note 32), 194.

34. Erlich 1965 (note 32), 193.

35. Lemon 1965 (note 32), 30-31.

36. Alter 1975 (note 28), ix. Compare also the similarly measured remarks of a film critic, R. Stam, in his *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI 1985), xi.

37. A. F. Bierl, *Dionysus und die griechische Tragödie: Politische und 'metatheatralische' Aspekte im Text* (Tübingen 1991), 116, my translation.

38. One of the few genuine inheritances from the Formalists, under the aegis of 'defamiliarization,' is the interest of the metafictionists in parody. For parody, see also above, note 25.

39. E.g., J. L. Styan, *Drama, Stage, and Audience* (Cambridge 1975), ch. 6.

40. A. Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London 1962).

41. For various theories of theater developed since Abel's time, see M. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca, NY 1984), 454-515.

42. P. Parker and G. Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and The Question of Theory* (New York and London 1985).

43. So enterprising and informed a theatrical critic as Erika Fischer-Lichte, coming out of the European ambience with its varied history, avoids the term, though I am not sure that her "dissolution of the boundaries of the self on the semantic level" is very helpful either. See, among her many works, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City 1997), 273.

44. Calderwood 1971 (note 21), 19.

45. Hubert 1991 (note 14), 7.

46. Barton 1962 (note 40), 203; S. Homan, *When the Theater Turns to Itself: the Aesthetic Metaphor in Shakespeare* (Lewisburg, PA 1981), 10-11; 17.

47. E.g., O. Rivera-Rodas, *El Metateatro y la Dramática de Vargas Llosa* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1992).

48. Cf. Most (note 4), 3.

49. M. Barchiesi, "Plauto e il 'Metateatro' antico," *Il Verri* 31 (1971), 113-30. See particularly 122-23 where metadrama is identified with some endemic features of Old Comedy: the religious collectivity disallowing any sharp separation of stage, orchestra, and the audience; the public, in part via the agency of the chorus, participating in the action, seeing their own reality overlaid with improbably collective dreams; the poet and the audience being in constant personal contact, with the parabasis marking the link; and the audience awareness of the play as play making it impossible to speak of scenic illusion.

50. Even so untraditionalist but meticulous a critic as John Henderson, for instance, in a recent review, *BMCR* 17.41.37 (2001), speaks of Cratinus' "wonderfully metatheatrical *Pytine*," without giving us a reason for his use of the term, save for the text's 'intertextuality,' which in his own view is a feature of most if not all dramatic literature. If Cratinus appeared in the play in his own person, this appearance is not invasive or disruptive, as in some early nineteenth century plays, but comparable to the defensive or admonitory presence of the authorial voice in the Aristophanic parabasis, which is an indigenous feature of the genre.

51. Note the expressly structural analysis of A. Dieterle, *Die Strukturelemente der Intrige in der griechisch-römischen Komödie* (Amsterdam 1980). Also J. Blänsdorf, "Die Komödienintrige als Spiel im Spiel," *Antike und Abendland* 28 (1982), 131–54.

52. See F. Muecke 1982 and 1986 (note 16) and A. G. Batchelder, *The Seal of Orestes: Self-reference and Authority in Sophocles' Electra* (Lanham, MD 1995), 35: "In its close association with speech and action, falsehood and truth, the [empty] urn also functions as a symbol of the deception of the theatrical situation *per se*. In this respect it is . . . a 'metatragic' symbol of tragedy . . ."

53. O. Taplin, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings* (Oxford 1993). Taplin is particularly interested in props, disguise, and dressing scenes in Old Comedy.

54. W. S. Anderson, *Barbarian Play: Plautus' Roman Comedy* (Toronto 1993), 139, warns: "If we must flaunt this voguish term 'metatheatre,' we must confine its usage." Anderson prefers to apply it to Plautus' moving the highly artificial "theatrical texture of Greek comedy . . . to another level of theatre" which however does not leave his audience in any doubt "about reality." That is, he reserves 'metatheatre' to the changes one play rings upon another, or to its argument with it. This is in the tradition of B. Gentili, *Theatrical Performance in the Ancient World: Hellenistic and Roman Theatre* (Amsterdam 1979), 15: "I use the term 'metatheatre' in the sense 'plays constructed from previously existing plays.'" The plays can be and often are the author's own. The process has been referred to as 'The Palimpsestic Code': A. J. Boyle, *Tragic Seneca* (London and New York 1997), ch. 5. But G. Genette (trans. C. Newman and C. Doubinsky), *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln, NB 1997), 5 refers to the process as 'hypertextuality,' reserving 'metatextuality' to commentary, which is labeled the good *critical* relationship par excellence. Among his five types of 'transtextuality,' Genette has nothing that corresponds to a category in which metatheatre would find its place. The same is true of D. Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject* (Columbus, OH 2002).

55. M. Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheatre and Role-Playing in Sophocles* (Chapel Hill, NC 1998), index.

56. E.g., see Batchelder 1995 (note 52), 6: "Sophocles' *Electra* is a play about playwriting."

57. M. Pfister (trans. J. Halliday), *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge 1991), 248–49.

58. Rose 1979 (note 25), 154, cites Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* for parody as a method of analyzing *how* a discourse is constructed and received, to give parody a place in the development of self-reflexivity. But Rose, to her credit, also acknowledges, 105, that the concepts of self-reflexion and self-criticism in drama await further clarification.

59. Cf. Gentili 1979, Anderson 1993, and Boyle 1997 (note 54). Abel 1963 (note 2), 107, claimed that Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* is metatheater because "each character in it comes directly from the stage and the opera." Once again, is this not true of much ancient tragedy?

60. G. W. Dobrov, *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford 2001), 16 and 33–35, applies the musical term 'contrafact,' but does not assign to it a diagnostic function.

61. Stam 1985 (note 35), 127–29 shows that the same synonymy obtains in film criticism. The perspective is thought to be Hegelian, but Hegel's *Selbstbewusstsein*, in its metaphysical reach, does not at all coincide with the self-consciousness of the Abelians, but is read into all of tragedy and its heroes: G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Theorie-Werkausgabe*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt 1970), 534–41. Cf. C. Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Frankfurt 1996), 57–58: "In der Tragödie wird die Erfahrung des Schönen und seiner Tragik selbstreflexiv: zu einer Erfahrung des in dieser Erfahrung und seiner Darstellung Vorausgesetzten."

62. Then there is the phonetic homonymy of reflexion and reflection, vexing any precise distinction between reflecting in the sense of meditating and reflecting as a mirroring process.

63. Waugh 1984 (note 24), 64.

64. According to B. A. Worthington, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Reference: An Interpretation of Wittgenstein's "Tractatus"* (Aldershot 1988), 58: "Wittgenstein's association of self-consciousness with self-reference would be . . . a widening of philosophical horizons." In fact, Wittgenstein's argument calls for a prohibition of self-consciousness and self-awareness. As the terms are employed by literary critics, no such widening has succeeded.

65. Waugh 1984 (note 24), 149 quotes John Barth, an acclaimed writer of metafiction, as exclaiming: "Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness."

66. See P. Riemer, *Das Spiel im Spiel* (Stuttgart 1996); the references listed above, note 11; and M. Hattaway, "The Story of Gloucester in *King Lear*, or, How Not to do it," in Laroque 1992 (note 11), 217–223. Hattaway's learned piece makes no allowance for the term 'metatheatrical.'

67. For the *mise en abyme*, see L. Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire* (Paris 1977), 17. For the difficulties of the term, first used by André Gide in a diary entry of 1893, see M. Ron, "The Restricted Abyss: Nine Problems in the Theory of *Mise en Abyme*," *Poetics Today* 8.2 (1987), 417–38.

68. C. M. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' "Bacchae"* (Princeton 1982), 270.

69. For a generous inventory of the various kinds of theater-within, see Schmeling 1982 (note 11), 10. Schmeling's essay is full of terms like *cri-*

tique, jugement, forme hermeneutique immanente, forme réflexive. For a different view of the function of the play-within, see A. B. Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician* (New Haven, CT 1979), 152: "Shakespeare's internal plays reflect an awareness of the relativity of any statement a play makes about reality. Plays may lie and distort as well as tell the truth." The two plays within *Love's Labours' Lost*, the Russian masque and the Interlude of the Nine Worthies, Kernan calls abortive. H. Blau, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York and London 1992), 39, speaks of "the desperate negotiations of the play within the play."

70. T. Falkner, "Six Characters in Search of Sophocles: Authorial Direction and Indirection in the *Philoctetes*," *Text and Presentation* 16 (1995), 43-47.

71. S. A. Frangoulidis, *Handlung und Nebenhandlung: Theater, Metatheater und Gattungsbewusstsein in der römischen Komödie* (Stuttgart 1997), 4. Frangoulidis supports the competitor theme discussed below: that anyone who constructs a scheme or performance within a play is a rival of the author of the play. —For an interesting amplification of the notion of theater-within, see Szondi 1963 (note 15), 157, on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. I summarize: the hero contemplates his own pastness, and as a remembering I becomes part of the formal subjectivity of the play. His family does not consist of independent characters, but emerges as projections of the central I. The 'epic' character of the work can be read off a comparison of this play of remembrance with the traditional play-within.

72. Slater 1985 (note 5), 107-8, with some reservation.

73. See notably H. P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca, NY 1985), ch. 5.

74. See I. Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus: ritual and theatre in Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford 1999), esp. ch. 4. Bierl 1991 (note 37), 140-42, 162, and 182: "The *Bacchae* is the culmination of the growing tendency in the last decade of the fifth century of tragedy referring to itself via the encoded key of Dionysus . . . The varied metatragic functions, earlier only marginally connected with the central action, in the *Bacchae* are concentrated to result in a 'tragedy about tragedy.'" R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford 1994), 273-285, protests against self-reflexive readings of theatricality and sacrificial elements in *The Bacchae*. In his index he refers to such readings as metatheatrical. Given the interpretation of drama as ritual, the audience, as the witness or indirect agent of the ritual, would of course not be expected to engage in the diagnostic exercise associated with self-reflexion.

75. Segal 1982 (note 68), 216, not only regards Dionysus as the god of the theater, but sees a close analogy between the nature of the god and the nature of tragedy: "Euripides uses the figure of Dionysus as god of the tragic mask to reflect on the paradoxical nature of tragedy itself—paradoxical, because by creating illusion tragedy seeks to convey truth . . . The paradoxes of Dionysus, therefore, his liminal status, his place between—between truth and illusion, sanity and madness, divinity and bestiality, civilization and the wild, order and chaos—are in part also the paradoxes of tragedy." Cf. Segal

in L. Edmunds and R. W. Wallace, eds., *Poet, Public, and Performance in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1997), 85: "The *Bacchae*, among its many other aspects, is also a reflection on tragedy and the tragic chorus," hence a meta-tragedy. For a protest, see W. Kullmann, "Die 'Rolle' des euripideischen Pentheus: Haben die *Bakchen* eine 'metatheatralische' Bedeutung," in G. W. Most et al., eds., *Philanthropia kai Eusebeia: Festschrift für Albrecht Dihle* (Göttingen 1993) 248–63.

76. Slater 1985 (above, note 5), 54–55 observes on the prologue of *Asinaria* that it is metatheatrical because "the speaker can speak both from within and from without the world of his play." It is not clear where he sets the boundaries of the play; but along these lines most if not all prologues would be metatheatrical. Or are they paratextual peritexts, as G. Genette (trans. J. E. Lewin), *Paratexts* (Cambridge 1997), 161–63, might suggest?

77. For the issue of performance and its implications, see the articles in *Helios* 27.2 (2000) and 28.1 (2001). Also D. Wiles, "Reading Greek Performance," *Greece and Rome* 34 (1987), 136–51. Wiles reminds us that performance is itself a text, but this should not discourage us from distinguishing between a staging and a playbook. If the Greek dramatists can be thought of as also composing for a reading public, the literature of 'metatheater' takes little account of that option.

78. Cf. M. Goldmann, *The Actor's Freedom* (New York 1975).

79. See the remark by R. A. Martin, reminiscent of Plato's language about play-acting, in "Metatheater, Gender, and Subjectivity in Richard II and Henry IV, Part I," *Comparative Drama* 23 (1989), 264 note 3: "self-conscious acting (i.e., knowing you are an actor on the stage, but having that knowledge continually imperilled by what happens in the plot) becomes a metaphor for the complex configuration of a restructured, discontinuous sense of self."

80. B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington, IN 1982), 275.

81. This is the implication of the argument of A. L. Boegehold, *When a Gesture Was Expected* (Princeton 1999).

82. Slater 1985 (above, note 5), 90, of Cleostrata in *Casina* forgiving Lysidamus, "so we won't make this play any longer than it is." This is not, in effect, so different from a statement where the character stays in character: Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 416–417: "I'll have to make a long speech to the chorus, and if I don't do well, it'll be death for me."

83. E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA 1974), 364. Wilshire 1982 (note 80), 275–6, coming from a phenomenological position, criticizes Goffman for his belief that assuming a role, as we all must, is an act of disguise.

84. See Hattaway 1992 (note 66), 227, concerning the blinding scene in *King Lear*: "We are diverted from the suffering of the character to the technique of the actor." That is why the scene is so difficult to stage. Cf. the controversy over staging the suicide of Ajax in Sophocles' play, and the general tendency in ancient drama to have violence enacted off stage.

85. Slater 1985 (note 5), 11, note 19.

86. K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London and New York 1980), 87–92. A. Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre I* (Paris 1996) fails to confront this issue because of the abstractness of her semiological perspective.

87. For another critic who uses the term ‘metatheater’ though fully appreciating that the “framed disruptions of the narrative continuity” are “integral and integrating elements of the entire plot,” see F. Zeitlin, “Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*,” in Foley 1982 (note 14), 182–83, also 188, 203.

88. See my “Irony and Tragic Choruses,” in *Ancient and Modern: Essays for Gerald Else* (Ann Arbor, MI 1977), 31–44; and A. Henrichs, “Why should I dance?” *Arion* 3.1 (1995), 56–111, now expanded in *Warum soll ich denn tanzen? Dionysisches im Chor der griechischen Tragödie* (Darmstadt 1996). See also F. Tonelli, *Sophocles’ Oedipus and the Tale of the Theatre* (Ravenna 1983), 109: “The chorus continues here to speak in the first person (‘I’), but from the stance of a third-person theatrical observer”; and 111, in his Blanchodian vein: “The hiatus opened and closed by the second stasimon recuperates tragedy into tragic temporality and ironic self-awareness.”

89. M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford 2000), 40. It is symptomatic of the diffusion of ‘metatheater’ that even in this book, both original and devoid of jargon, and whose very nature cries out against fads, the term is not entirely shunned, though it is totally unnecessary to its purposes.

90. Goffman (note 83). But ch. 5, “The Theatrical Frame,” is too rigid in its acceptance of the conventions of the proscenium stage. Cf. also G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco 1972), 177–93. The subject of frames is not unrelated to the range of issues taken up by K. Burke in his *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969). The best extended discussion of the composite nature of drama is Pfister 1988 (note 57).

91. ‘Improvisation’ is a key word in Slater 1985 (note 5) who may owe this concept to the treatment of the *commedia dell’arte* in J. L. Styan 1975 (note 39). For this notion, Slater cites S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago 1980), but improvisation in Greenblatt is of an entirely different order. It is understandable, however, that performance criticism, welcome as it is, will find itself attracted to the extemporizing vitality of the San Francisco Street Theater and look at pre-fashioned theater through that lens.

92. Not the play discussed by R. Carne, “The Actor and Improvisation: The Making of Crystal Clear,” *Themes in Drama* 6 (1984), 221–45, which was put together by the collaborative improvisation of actors and director, but then made book text.

93. A. C. Scafuro, *The Forensic Stage: Settling Disputes in Greco-Roman New Comedy* (Cambridge 1997), 354. The idea of Hubert (note 14), 9, of distinguishing between illusion and ‘elusion,’ the latter designating “such

negative and unraveling aspects of dramatic unfolding as a character's explicit or implicit reluctance to perform the part assigned by the author" belongs in the ghostly domain of "the death of the author."

94. This is the theme of Slater (note 5).

95. Goffman (note 83), 512.

96. Maquerlot (note 11), 48.

97. Pfister (note 57), 82–83.

98. Goffman (note 83), 134. Even a Prospero is no more endowed with an integral vision of the drama's flow than, say, Aristophanes' Trygaios.

99. W. Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge 2000), 44, bases his claim of metatheatricality on the marginal position of the slave, who find himself "in a position to move between the world of the dramatic fiction and that of the audience." This is surprising, since one of the compelling theses of Fitzgerald's fine book is the sustained and convincing showing of the interdependence of slaves and free.

100. Cf. the insightful comments of Barchiesi (note 49).

101. Thus refuting S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (New York 1969), 327–30, who suggests that if the audience gets personally involved in the performance, the performance stops. But of course Cavell was not thinking of audience invasions scheduled by the playwright, as in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Postmodern montage theater, analogous to the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Bracque, is the final completion of this splicing of the environment into the artifact.

102. R. W. Wallace, *Poet, Public, and 'Theatrocracy,'* in Edmunds and Wallace (note 75), 108–10 speculates that audiences in the fourth century BCE responded more readily to theatrical productions than in the fifth, when drama was part entertainment and part education. The educational function of the theater was in the fourth century taken over by other genres, hence entertainment, more easily accessible, became the prime purpose of drama. One wonders whether 'education' is the right word for the moral and aesthetic currents connecting the playing area with the audience.

103. Goffman (note 83), 130–31.

104. Wilshire (note 80), 27: "The actors and the audience are co-creators of each character." Cf. also A. Ubersfeld, "The Pleasure of the Spectator," *Modern Drama* 25 (1982), 127–39; and M. De Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance* (Bloomington, IN 1993), ch. 7: "The Spectator's Task." For the appeal to visual images in achieving the complicity of the spectators, see D. T. Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton 2001), 50–54.

105. Hubert (note 14), 3.

106. Barton (note 40), 84.

107. Barton (note 40), 44–45; see also Styan (note 39), 181. —N. W. Slater's *Spectator Politics: Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes* (Philadelphia 2002) was published when my paper was already in the editorial office of *Arion*. Slater argues that Old Comedy is metatheatrical be-

cause it acknowledges that it knows itself and names its parts, delights in disguises, and engages, often politically, with its viewers. Thus, using Barton's terms, in the performance of Old Comedy "audience and actors share the same world," and enjoy talking about and making fun of each other. That is what Old Comedy does, and Slater's scene-by-scene inventory of the plots of eight Aristophanic plays is detailed and enjoyable, marred only by its redundant use of the term 'metatheatre.'

108. For a survey of ironies in drama, see my contribution in M. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic* (Oxford 1996), 497-519.