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Metadrama and antitheatricality in Shakespeare's King Lear and Troilus and Cressida

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Metadrama and Antitheatricality
in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare uses metadrama as a rhetorical vehicle for responding to antitheatricalism; realistic drama and staged theatricality therefore coexist in his plays. The cultural context of the early modern era, especially its antitheatrical rhetoric and the predominance of theatricality throughout the structures of its society, illumines the interaction of metadrama and antitheatricality Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Troilus and Cressida* and *King Lear*. By failing to consider adequately the unique nature of the emergence of early modern theater and the equally distinct reaction to its popularity, previous scholarship considering antitheatricality has exhibited essentialism and a universalizing tendency similar to that of the antitheatricalists. The paucity of specifically protheatrical response in prose to the immense antitheatrical work of polemicists such as William Prynne and to antitheatrical tracts and publications signals the presence of protheatrical response within the literature of the stage: its plays.

Metadramatic critics have noted that metadrama provides a subtle means of establishing a connection between actors and their audience and that it serves as a means of interrogating various deployments of theatrical power and the motives implied by its use. *Troilus and Cressida* celebrates, interrogates, and reproves the theater, engaging the proponents and detractors of the theater through depictions of Ulysses and Pandarus as

effective and ineffective interior directors, respectively. Ulysses's militaristic drive toward victory at all costs demonstrates his affinity to the figure of the stage Machiavel, while his seemingly inexplicable hostility toward Achilles similarly marks his connection to the figure of the Vice. Pandarus's relation to theatricality highlights the negative associations of theater and prostitution apparent in the works of the antitheatricalists. His self-delusory propensity to motivate others to actions to which they are already predisposed mocks and calls into question the assertion that theater exerts motivational power over its audience. Literary critics considering *King Lear* observe that identity loss underpins the tragic process apparent in the plays' protagonists. Depictions of staged theatrical ability and inability and positive depictions of antitheatrical Puritanism pervade *King Lear*. The deployment of theatricality in the play both emphasizes its creative and soteriological function and embodies the harmful potential of dramaturgical art.

Introduction

In *Troilus and Cressida* and *King Lear*, two intensely masterful and sobering plays, Shakespeare portrays not only drama at its purest and most straightforward, but also—and simultaneously—multiple levels of metadrama. Both plays debunk—though in vastly different ways—failed mythologies; both plays can also be considered dramas of the real, although *Lear* surpasses *Troilus* in this aspect with the latter play having a more poignantly satirical flavor. In addition, the performance histories of both plays testify that only at the advent of the modern era—with *modernism*, to be more precise—did they come to be widely performed in ways adhering to the original scripts by Shakespeare. Paradoxically, however, these “realistic” plays both exhibit and to some extent revolve around the depictions of depictions, the dramas of dramas, and—especially in *Troilus*—the satires of satires. In these two works heightened realism and self-consciously histrionic metadrama dynamically complement each other. An awareness of the early modern era’s cultural context, specifically its well-documented antitheatrical debate, elucidates this paradox as it operates in these two particular plays, as Shakespeare simultaneously affirms and subverts the cultural construction of theater, a construction manufactured by both the proponents and antagonists of an art form whose flowering coincided with what we now know as modernity. In this thesis, I will build and expand upon the works of scholars such as Sara Munson Deats, Jean E. Howard, Jyotsyna Singh,

and Erin Rutter, who first discovered and documented the connection between metadrama and the antitheatrical prejudice in the drama of this period. I will employ a new historical methodology closely modeled on their works and demonstrate the correlation between metadrama and antitheatricality in the early modern era, a connection that I believe enhances an historical and aesthetic understanding of a unique cultural phenomenon.

Historical Milieu

The Antitheatrical Debate

Controversy surrounded the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater as it became more and more popular, just as controversy has surrounded popular theater of other eras. The rise of theater in early modern England, however, displayed some important characteristics not shared by the ascendancy of theater in these other eras, and consequently the opposition to the theater in the early modern era proved to be particularly vehement. In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Jonas Barish observes: “One recurrent feature of the history of the theater is the fact that outbursts of antitheatrical sentiment tend to coincide with the flourishing of the theater itself” (66). In this brief introductory chapter, I will explore the historical context informing certain methodologies and techniques in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* and *King Lear* and also consider literatures from the early modern era that are avowedly antitheatrical or protheatrical. I will not attribute the motivations of the antitheatrical writers to a universal “antitheatrical prejudice” somehow inherent in human nature—a fundamental assumption of Barish’s work—because this view fails to account adequately for the unique historical forces present in early modern England during the emergence of its theater. Political, religious, and artistic aspirations spurred writers on both sides of the controversy

surrounding the popularity of the early modern theater in England, and although I risk oversimplification by casting the debate as a simple “antitheatrical vs. protheatrical” binary, I will employ this method for expediency, looking first at the case of the antitheatrical writers, following with a consideration of specifically protheatrical writings, and then concluding by analyzing the overlapping assumptions, disjunctions, and anomalies extant in the works that I consider.

The Antitheatrical Case

In his famous rebuttal of the antitheatrical case, “A Defence of Poesy,” Sir Philip Sidney perhaps most eloquently and succinctly states the antitheatrical position:

[t]he most important imputations laid to the poor poets . . . are these. First, that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than this. Secondly, that it is the mother of lies. Thirdly, that it is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a siren’s sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent’s tale of sinful fancies . . . ; how both in other nations and in ours, before poets did soften us, we were full of courage, given to martial exercises, the pillars of manlike liberty, and not lulled asleep in shady idleness with poets’ pastimes. And lastly, and chiefly, they cry out with open mouth as if they overshot Robin Hood, that Plato banished them out of his commonwealth.

(369)

It is worth mentioning in connection with this passage that during the early modern era and well before, not much distinction was made between poetry and playwrighting; they were considered to be the same endeavor (Deats 1). What Sidney sums up in a single paragraph comprises over one thousand pages of rambling, margin-riddled prose in William Prynne's *Histriomastix*, a work that has received very little scholarly attention since the nineteenth century. According to Arthur Freeman, *Histriomastix* is "probably the longest antitheatrical polemic in any language" (5).

Whether or not antitheatrical writings had any measurable effect on the early modern English theater is an interesting question unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. Speaking hypothetically, however, I am confident that if there were one antitheatrical work that effected a radical change, it would be *Histriomastix*. That the work had far-reaching implications—including personal ones for the author—is indisputable, given the historical circumstances of its publication and the reaction of Charles I. After the publication of *Histriomastix* in 1633, Prynne's ears were cropped on two separate occasions by order of the Star Chamber, which also branded "SL" onto both of his cheeks, signifying to the crown that he was a "Seditious Libeler," and signifying to Prynne that he had received "Stigmata Laudis," or the marks of Laud (i.e., Bishop William Laud). After the interregnum, Charles II restored Prynne to a degree of dignity by awarding him a position as Keeper of the Tower Records (Barish 88). Both in his punishment and in his subsequent restoration, Prynne proved to be politically useful to the civil authorities of England.

Although Barish somewhat mockingly generalizes the writings of Prynne and his fellow antitheatricalists as "rehears[ing] all the objections against the stage first

formulated by the [Church] Fathers, along with a plentiful sprinkling of picturesque anecdote and invective against the loose manners of a London playhouse,” he also astutely points out that “[i]t need not be assumed . . . that when they recite grievances dating back to early Christian times they are merely witlessly parroting their ancestors” (88). I fully concur with Barish’s assessment, but would add that although Prynne may not be merely “parroting” the social concerns of early Christians, he does fail to make a distinction between Roman and English theater. For Prynne all theater is pagan, and the rich history of the English theater—a theater having its origins in Christian liturgy as well as in the morality and mystery plays—makes no difference to him whatsoever. Prynne evinces his knowledge of the English theater’s ecclesiastical roots in the following passage from *Histriomastix*:

Now even Stage-playes have a certaine shape of Images; and oft times move the pious affections of Christians, more than prayer it selfe. And after this manner truly Stage playes and shewes are wont to be exhibited on certaine times of the yeare, the certaine pictures of certaine Evangelicall histories being annexed to them. Of which sort is this, . . . that on the day of the resurrection of our Lord in the morning after morning prayers, Angels in white garments, sitting upon the sepulcher, aske the women comming thither and weeping, saying; “Whom seeke ye women in this tumult, weeping? he is not here whom ye seeke: but goe ye quickly, and tell his Disciples; Come and see the place where the Lord lay.” And that on the same day the image of our Lord, bearing an ensigne

of Victorie, is carried about in publike procession, and placed upon the altar to be gazed upon by the people. (763-764)

Prynne knows that the institution that he criticizes, the English theater, has its origins in the institution that he champions, the Church. Yet his inability to discern degrees of moral value in different types of dramatic representation emerges in his commentary on Church drama: “O the desperate madnesse, the unparalleled profanes of these audacious Popish Priests & Papists, who dare turne the whole history of our Saviours life, death, Nativitie, Passion, Resurrection, Ascention, and the very gift of the holy Ghost descending in cloven tongues, into a meere prophane ridiculous Stage-play” (765).

According to Prynne’s own legal testimony, he began *Histriomastix* at the age of twenty-four (Freeman 6), and the lack of reference to specific plays or playwrights in his work makes it apparent that he must have had meager exposure to the theater before taking his Quixotic stance against it. As Barish notes (85), Prynne frequently catalogues multiple social evils, indiscriminately attributing the cause of each to the theater. Prynne assumes the stance of an arch-conservative reactionary, conflating most of the evils that he addresses with the theater as if it were impossible that some of them might have existed independently of this institution, and as if it were impossible that these evils originated outside of the theater. Prynne’s universalizing tendency pervades his work; he writes as if all theater everywhere were exactly as corrupt as some theaters and plays at some times and in some places.

Despite these flaws, however, Prynne represents a salient example of the extent of the opposition to the theater flourishing at this period. At least, Prynne’s “inveterate negativism” (Barish 88) could not have been impugned as being inconsistent or timid.

Theater for him metaphorically represented the disintegration he saw around him in every sphere of life: the political, the religious, and the social. This disintegration included the transgression of boundaries as commoners under patronage became nearly as wealthy as their masters, the transgression of gender as male actors—men and boys—convincingly portrayed women and girls, and the transgression of class as stage players openly violated sumptuary laws and donned the garments of nobility. Regardless of what motivated his zealous and passionate war against the theater, Prynne's actions and life clarified the issues surrounding the controversy and evinced the interconnectedness of multiple convictions undergirding his obvious hostility to the theater.

While endorsing Prynne's essential argument and employing many of the same writing stratagems, Stephen Gosson manifested many qualities in his writing diametrically opposite to those of Prynne. Part of this difference arose from a difference in occupation. Prynne—a staunch Puritan, a lawyer, and a parliamentarian—seemed unacquainted with and unappreciative of imaginative enterprises of any sort; his writing reflects a mind wholly occupied with prosaic things. Gosson, on the other hand, fashioned himself to be a reformed playwright, and his writing reflects the imaginative repertoire of someone who has written—somewhat successfully, apparently—for the stage. The reader of Prynne may hesitate to grant any credibility to his opposition to the theater because it seems apparent that he never really enjoyed the theater and perhaps rarely saw a play. Conversely, Gosson strikes the reader as someone still fascinated with the theater and, in fact, trying to perpetuate a writing career by switching from poetic theatrical writing to prosaic antitheatrical writing. Just as Sir Philip Sidney eloquently states the position of his adversaries in his "Defence," Gosson, in framing his

counterargument, lucidly delineates the argument in favor of drama: “Nowe are the abuses of the worlde reuealed, euery man in a play may see his owne faultes, and learne by this glasse, to amende his manners” (24). Nothing in *Histriomastix* exhibits anything like the deference and rationality that Gosson employs here by clearly stating the position against which he argues.

While Prynne does paraphrase Aristotle (121), he does not display a sophisticated understanding of Aristotelian philosophy. Conversely, Gosson speaks in the language of the theater. For instance, in alluding to the end of Caligula’s life, Gosson remarks, “For as [Caligula’s] life was abhominable, so was his end miserable: Comming from dancing and playing, he was slaine by *Chærea*, a iust rewarde, and a fit Catastrophe” (29). By using terms such as “Castastrophe” and “iust rewarde” Gosson demonstrates his understanding of how Aristotelian literary theory—*hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*—informs dramaturgical craft.

Another difference between Gosson and Prynne lies in what they are willing to concede. Both hold the theaters accountable for the types of people and the types of transactions reputed to take place in the theaters without making a distinction between those who write and perform plays and those who frequent them. While Prynne remains stalwart throughout *Histriomastix* against all playwrights, actors, and “Play-haunters,” Gosson makes a concession that we would never hear from Prynne: “And as some of the Players are farre from abuse: so some of their Playes are without rebuke” (42).

A final difference worth considering in the two authors relates to their respective audiences. An early modern non-religious reader, regardless of whether or not he or she was familiar with the theater, would probably have been alienated or repelled by Prynne’s

imposing 380-word title page that immediately labels plays as “Pompes of the Divell,” “sinfull,” and “heathenish.” Prynne includes many laws and regulations in his work specifically pertaining to the behavior of pastors and clergy, clearly indicating that professional audience to be the primary focus of his writing. Gosson’s work, for the most part, makes only very tentative and oblique references to the Church, God, or the scriptures. He freely invokes the myths of Greek deities, just as a playwright might in the dialogue of a play. Although passages in Gosson contain militaristic and reactionary overtones, his work probably appealed to a broader early modern readership.

The approach of Phillip Stubbes in his *Anatomie of Abuses* shares much with that of Prynne, including exhortations to artists to abandon their careers, attacks on the lawfulness of plays, and complaints about the popularity of fictions as opposed to scripture and devotional literature. Unlike both Prynne and Gosson, however, Stubbes utilizes a dialogue form imitating that of a stage play to argue his points. This technique resembles that of Plato’s *Republic*, which employs a poetic and dramatic style to argue against the inclusion of poets in Plato’s ideal republic. Most early modern antitheatrical writers included an appeal to the authority of Plato in their attacks on theater, but Stubbes’s use not only of the content of Plato’s argument but also of its form subjects Stubbes to the same criticism leveled against Plato himself, namely that he betrays an inclination toward poetry by using the dialogue form and poetic language in his argument. A distinctive and effective feature of Stubbes’s *Anatomie*—one that appeals in a strange way to the post-modern sensibility—is the use of sarcasm. Consider, for example, the following passage:

And wheras, you say, there are good Examples to be learned in [plays]:
Trulie, so there are: if you will learne falshood, if you will learn cosenage:
if you will learn to deceiue: if you will learn to play the Hipocrit: to cogge,
lye and falsifie: if you will learn to iest, laugh and fleer, to grin, to nodd,
and mow: if you will learn to playe the vice, to swear, teare, and
blaspheme, both Heauen and Earth: If you will learn to become a bawde,
vncleane, and to deuerginat Mayds, to deflour honest Wyues: if you will
learne to murther, slaie, kill, picke, steal, robbe and roue: If you will learn
to rebel against Princes, to comit tresons, to consume treasurs, to practise
ydlenes, to sing and talke of bawdie loue and venery: if you will lerne to
deride, scoffe, mock & flowt, to flatter & smooth: If you will learn to play
the whore-maister, the glutton, Drunkard, or incestuous person: if you will
learn to become proude, hawtie & arrogant: and finally, if you will learne
to comtemne GOD and al his lawes, to care neither for heauen nor hel, and
to commit al kinde of sinne and mischeef you need to goe to no other
schoole, for all these good Examples, may you see painted before your
eyes in enterludes and playes. . . . (105-106)

Within the imagined dialogue, Philo (the persona created by the author to convey the position represented in the work), in replying to the prompting statement—“there are good Examples to be learned in them”—does not openly rebut the statement, but instead agrees wholeheartedly: “Trulie, so there are. . . .” The catalog of abuses that follows is predicated on the value attributed to the word “good,” so that at the end of the passage Philo can parrot the term “good” back to the prompting persona, Spud: “you need to goe

to no other schoole, for all these *good* Examples, may you see painted before your eyes in enterludes and playes” (emphasis mine).

Looking specifically at the writings of Prynne, Gosson, and Stubbes clarifies the following characteristics common to the group: none of these writers specifically targets any particular writer or play; all the writers rail against other vices that they associate with plays, but which are not by any stretch of the imagination necessary adjuncts of the theater; each writer cynically dismisses the possibility that anything good or virtuous could be learned at a play; and all of the writers refuse to acknowledge any difference between the theater of England and the theater of antiquity. All of these writers, in various ways, demonstrate a hostile stance toward the theater.

Considering the progression that the theater made from the middle ages through the end of the sixteenth century helps to contextualize the intensity of their resistance. In medieval England, Church and street dramas having Christian origins and content still met with harsh vituperation and outright prejudice. Although “no sustained body of antitheatrical writing survives” (Barish 66) from this era, individual instances of antitheatrical sentiment do appear in the historical record. Gerhoh of Reichersberg, for instance, berates “those who use church as a theatre” (qtd. in Barish 67) and an anonymous fourteenth-century sermon against miracle plays, “generally agreed to be of Lollard inspiration,” similarly documents what “one may assume to have been a vigorous minority opinion” (Barish 67). Barish does emphasize that the theater in medieval England was *less* criticized and oppressed—at least initially—and also more celebrated than that of ancient Rome precisely because of its Christian origin and content. “The key to [the] forbearance [of the ecclesiastical authorities],” according to Barish, “lies of

course in the fact that the theater this time had sprung not from an alien, hostile religion but from Christianity” (67). Barish highlights additional historical ironies of theatrical production:

Early in the [sixteenth] century, when the stage served chiefly as an adjunct to pedagogy, helping teach correct pronunciation and good deportment to schoolboys, or when it served as a toy of the court and the great nobility, it was possible for fierce Protestants like John Bale and John Foxe themselves to write plays and destine them for performance. . . . It might help form sober citizens and godly parishoners. But with the building of the playhouses toward the end of the century, the creation of a permanent class of professional actors under the aegis of the crown, and the gradual tightening of government control over all theatrical activity—in short, with the theater more visibly legitimized and institutionalized than at any time since Greek days—the attack moves into high gear. (Barish 82-83)

Yet even this historical context fails to explain the hostility of the antitheatrical writers in any satisfactory way. Barish sees this alleged antitheatrical prejudice as a particular historical manifestation of an antitheatrical prejudice existing universally as a part of human nature (4). By approaching these works under this assumption, he overshoots the mark.

While I agree that early modern antitheatrical writers share much with antitheatrical writers of other eras, Barish too quickly ascribes the pronounced vehemence of these writers—particularly Prynne—to a repetitive process in human

history caused by an inherent prejudice. Barish himself concedes that Prynne's *Histriomastix* constitutes a high-water mark in the history of antitheatrical writing (83). I suggest that insecurities arising from radical paradigm shifts in the religious, philosophical, political, and artistic realms contributed both to the rise of the theater in early modern England as well as to the particularly vehement opposition accompanying that rise, making both phenomena worthy of consideration as distinctive historical events not easily reconcilable to the antitheatrical sentiment of other eras.

The Protheatrical Case

Despite the general lack of a specifically protheatrical discourse outside of the dramatic medium itself, two writers—Thomas Heywood and Sir Philip Sidney—published prose treatises in defense of poetry and the theater. Because of his status as an aristocrat and non-professional writer, Sidney's treatise was not published until after his death. Sidney's "Defence," quoted earlier, masterfully handles almost every accusation proffered by the antitheatrical writers. His circumspect awareness of the arguments against poetry serves to buttress his credibility as a defender of the imaginative enterprise. Sidney's writing such an elaborate, highly rhetorical, well-researched, and logically complex prose work for the expressed purpose of vindicating poetry testifies to the strong antitheatrical sentiment roughly concurrent with Shakespeare's plays.

Despite its many strengths, as Barish has documented, Heywood's work—"An Apology for Actors"—"thrust[s] weapons into the hands of his adversaries" (120) by not only validating the fears of the antitheatricalists, but also by exacerbating those fears

through a reckless defense of the theater that lacks understanding of the arguments against it. Some of the arguments in the poetic prologue mirror and reverse antitheatric polemic by asserting that plays as a pastime exceed other potential pastimes in virtue. This argument rests on the view that theater serves primarily as a pastime, and by categorizing it as such, Heywood thereby assents to accusations that the theater keeps people from Church or productive work. Heywood rehearses much of the same material that Sidney incorporates in his essay: that the stage symbolically censures vice and rewards virtue, that it moves spectators to virtuous action, and that it provides a useful educational tool for educators. Heywood refers to other theatrical virtues—the noble audience of plays, the excellence of actors, the moral lessons that the theater teaches, and the improvement of the English language that drama fosters, for example—and praises the architectural accomplishments manifest in the theaters of the ancients as monuments to a noble enterprise. While granting the baseness of some players, Heywood makes a case that actors generally form an upright fraternity, censoring through exclusion those who transgress the standards of the community.

The prose literature written against the theater—both in the form of pamphlets and in more formal works like Prynne’s *Histriomastix*—certainly outweighs similar works in support of theater, such as Sidney’s “A Defence of Poesy” and Heywood’s “An Apology for Actors.” The paucity of protheatrical writings from this era, however, can be at least partially attributed to the theater’s success; because it manifested a clearly effective rhetoric in its own productions, the theater had no pressing need to defend itself or engage antitheatricalists in prose arguments. The plays themselves are a form of protheatrical literature. Also, the theater owed a great deal of its success to royal

patronage and protection, without which it would have enjoyed neither popularity nor success. Looking to the plays themselves for the response of dramatists/poets to antitheatrical propaganda illuminates how both protheatrical and antitheatrical discourses functioned. Shakespeare took the theater's opponents seriously, as did his fellow playwright Ben Jonson.

To remark that theater is intrinsically protheatrical may seem obvious, yet it is imperative to state clearly that the primary site of a "protheatrical discourse" resides precisely *in* the theater, and not only in the theater as an abstract concept, not only in its authors, its texts, its performative utterances, and those theatrical aspects most conducive to academic consideration, but also in the physicality of the playhouse building with its custom-designed architecture, the trapdoors, the "heavens," the "tiring house" with its costumes, the recesses and tiered galleries, the elaborate props, mechanisms, and special effects.¹ Stephen Greenblatt, in an imaginative reconstruction of the era, remarks that "[a]ny young actor or aspiring playwright up from the provinces must have felt on entering a London playhouse that he had died and gone to theatrical heaven" (184). The theater, then, functioned as a strategic site of resistance both in an intellectual sense and in a physical sense. The physical placement of the site, as Greenblatt also notes, was politically strategic: "[James] Burbage and [John] Brayne were wise to build [the theater] on land they had leased in the liberty of Holywell in the suburb of Shoreditch, outside the Bishopsgate entrance to the city. Here . . . the enterprise was subject to the queen's Privy Council rather than the city" (183). The theater's location in the "liberty" of Holywell associated the theater—figuratively, economically, and politically—with other "amusements" that ecclesiastical and municipal authorities opposed:

[The theater] conjoined and played with almost everything that the “entertainment zone” had to offer: dancing, music, games of skill, blood sports, punishment, sex. Indeed, the boundaries between theatrical imitation and reality, between one form of amusement and another, were often blurred. [Prostitutes] worked the playhouse crowd and, at least in the fantasies of the theater’s enemies, conducted their trade in small rooms on-site. (181)

Given the proximity of the theater to these other sites of “amusement,” it makes sense that in the attacks of the antitheatrical writers the theater became closely associated with societal evils other than the supposed evil of theater itself. Barish identifies the “catalogue of horrors” as a “staple technique of the radical antitheatricalists” (85), yet considering the degree to which the theater shared a physical space as well as a similarity of entertainment appeal with other enterprises in the “liberties,” this conflation of terms and targets may be at least partially understandable if not excusable.

I believe that the lack of specifically “protheatrical” literature from this era strongly indicates that the theater itself functioned as its own best defender, that we have in the plays themselves a strong protheatrical literature, a literature that by including within itself dialogue between “pro-” and “anti-” theatrical positions succeeds, whereas the one-sided and reactionary literature of the antitheatrical polemicists—because of its unbalanced and overtly biased positions—totally fails.

Troilus and Cressida

Critical History

No survey of metadramatic literary criticism could respectably begin without a consideration of Anne Righter's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*². Righter informatively demonstrates that Elizabethan and Jacobean theatergoers inherited from their medieval counterparts a level of discomfort with plays that were overly self-contained, since audiences of both eras expected to have a part to play in the plays that they viewed. She also notes that extra-dramatic address (direct audience address from a character within the play) was normally associated with the Vice figure (55). Righter further points out that metadrama evolved in English drama as a "means of establishing [a connection] between actors and audience that is far more subtle than extra-dramatic address" (75). Righter's conception of the power of early modern English theater and how its proponents and critics viewed that power provides a valuable context for understanding Shakespeare's employment of metadrama in *Troilus*. Righter incisively observes: "Both the champions and the enemies of the theatre thought that it could change lives" (82).

Philip Edwards, a critic considered foundational by later critics such as Richard Fly, argues that characters in the play on both the Greek and Trojan sides attempt to

elevate hopeless, dull, and mundane situations through the use of elevated language (97-98), yet this very attempt belies and accentuates the enervating ubiquity of what Edwards labels “the dark lake . . . of unorganized experience” (3). Edwards’s criticism calls attention to the enormous gap between word and action that pervades the play: “There is a distance shown between men’s beliefs, plans, vows, and what actually happens, which the play maintains is not bridgeable” (106). Edwards also illumines the general lack of consistent moral integrity in any of the play’s characters; according to Edwards, ironically, Thersites and Diomedes are the only two characters whose words truthfully describe actions in the world of the play.

Frustratingly, Eugene Nassar in his work *The Rape of Cinderella* omits *Troilus and Cressida* in his survey of metadramatic plays by Shakespeare. This omission seems truly odd considering David Bevington’s remark in describing *Troilus* and *Hamlet* that “no other plays in the Shakespeare canon are so insistently conscious of theater and role-playing” (*Troilus* 75). Nassar’s criticism of Shakespeare’s plays, however, quite insightfully illumines how Shakespearean actors inhabit the liminal space between being “in character” and functioning almost extra-dramatically as choric figures who offer “the comment, the meditation, [and] the rhetorical or witty counterpointing” upon the core action of the play (104). Nassar’s concept of “(choric) rhetoric” (109) provides an important vehicle for interpreting *Troilus*’s frequently criticized disjunctions.

James L. Calderwood’s seminal work, *Shakespearean Metadrama*, in many ways inspires and anchors the body of metadramatic criticism that I have consulted in approaching *Troilus and Cressida*. According to Calderwood, Shakespeare is “obsessed by the duplexity of art” (15) and his plays “are not only about the various moral, social,

political, and other thematic issues with which critics have so long and quite properly been busy, but also about Shakespeare's plays" (5). In Calderwood's reading, Shakespeare's own theater becomes "the master metaphor of life-as-drama" and Calderwood expands his analysis by suggesting that "metaphors are reciprocally illuminative; between the metaphor of the play and the play itself there is a meaningful interplay" (5-6). Calderwood's criticism tends to function at a macroscopic level, equating comprehensive themes pervading the plays that he discusses to metadramatic metaphors or statements.

Lawrence Danson identifies *Troilus* as a play focusing on "problems of expression" (68) and interprets it in light of contrary streams of word and action. He also notes that *Troilus* is a play in which "ironic dissolution is allowed to have its way over heroic reintegration" (75) and identifies the play as a "deadly serious . . . parody" of "tragic attitudes and structure" (77, 79). Danson further observes that the scene of Cressida's infidelity, also called the "tent scene," (5.3) functions as a metadrama "with Cressida and Diomedes as actors, Troilus and Ulysses as audience, and Thersites as ironic chorus" (91). Danson sees *Troilus* as "[a] daring experiment . . . [that] uses the arts of language to question the efficacy of language in a secular world, [and that] uses the gestures of the stage to show man's inability to act meaningfully in a world deprived of transcendent meaning" (96).

Richard Fly offers what is perhaps the first extensive metadramatic treatment of *Troilus*. He argues that "certain of [Shakespeare's] plays arise out of a growing conviction—expressed in varying degrees of intensity—that poetic drama, although wide reaching, is not always answerable either to the complexities of human existence or to the

art that tries to mirror it” (x). Fly approaches *Troilus* from a theoretical perspective that views *Troilus*’s metadrama as primarily serving to illustrate the unwieldiness for the playwright of the dramatic medium itself. In Fly’s view, Shakespeare is obsessed with the project of “suit[ing] the action to the word, the word to the action” (*Ham.* 3.2.17-18). In writing specifically about *Troilus*, Fly labels the play as “deeply troubling” and further claims that it “seems to be the work of a dramatist no longer in serene control of his craft and, indeed, perilously close to capitulating before a medium that appears to have grown hostile and intransigent to his creative efforts” (32). While duly recognizing the extent to which the characters in the play defiantly act out their intentions against the stark antithesis of foreboding prophecies (35), Fly oversimplifies Ulysses’s motives by assigning to him “the reactivation of Achilles” as the ultimate goal of his rhetoric and interior direction. Conversely, I will argue that Ulysses malignantly desires to “pluck . . . down Achilles’s plumes” (3.3.385) and that this malignity aligns Ulysses closely with the figure of the medieval morality play Vice.

Of the group of metadramatic critics whom I would consider to be foundational, Thomas Van Laan develops the most useful system of classification. He identifies four types of role-playing: 1) “a role in the literal sense, a part in a play, pageant or other entertainment”—the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* functions as Van Laan’s example of this type; 2) “a nonce-role, a role temporarily assumed, but . . . constitut[ing] one dimension of its performer’s interrelation with the rest of his world”—Viola in *Twelfth Night* serves as his primary example of this type, yet characters who “unconsciously assume . . . self-misrepresentation” also manifest this type of role; 3) “dramatic role”: a category which includes “the beautiful and eligible young woman of

comedy,” the “*Miles Gloriosus*,” and the “morality play *Vice*”—characters in this third type of role often “do . . . not realize [they are] playing it” (9); and 4) “that which the character possesses by virtue of his position in a mimetic social structure” (11)—these include king, courtier, and wife (19). I will refrain from employing Van Laan’s precise terminology, but will attempt to incorporate into my work the clarifying awareness afforded by such a system.

Van Laan’s key metadramatic insight into *Troilus*’s employment of role playing arises from the tension between character as realistic persona and character as historically determined entity. For example, the “inflated self-conceptions” of figures such as Ulysses, Agamemnon, Hector, and Troilus “correspond to the reputations [that] they have acquired and which have become an integral part of the history passed on to the spectators watching Shakespeare’s play. . . . Shakespeare implies [that these reputations] . . . are a supreme example [sic] of the over-prizing with which *Troilus and Cressida* is so much concerned” (166).

Like other critics before him, Sidney Homan comments on the Shakespearean theme of the consonance or disjunction of word/language and deed/action. He identifies *As You Like It*, for example, as “swing[ing] between the extremes of cynical literalism and fatal artifice, between Touchstone-Jacques and Orlando-Phebe,” thus generating “its own need for Rosalind” (132), who serves as a mediator between these extremes. Homan introduces another useful metadramatic concept in his criticism: the “return to . . . reality” (134). Just as the theater audience enters the theater as an implicit confession of a need to escape “reality,” and just as this audience leaves the performance in order to return to reality, so the internal/“staged” audience of a metadrama also has its return to

the “reality” of the pre-metadrama play world. Yet just as actual theatergoers leave the play as “changed” persons—as people who will no longer see the world in quite the same way—so also the internal audience of the metadrama leaves and returns to reality with a different perspective: “As audience we cannot be the same after the play since a part of our experience in life now includes the play” (Honan 134). Ulysses’s description of Patroclus’s pageant (1.3) has an identical effect on Ulysses’s audience, who return to the play’s reality with quite a different impression of their position in the war than they had before they vicariously experienced through Ulysses’s words.

J. Dennis Huston argues that Shakespeare, in his early plays, “dramatically announces his sense of the way play, in its almost infinite variety, can affect and transform the world” (2). Huston identifies play as “an intermediate reality between phantasy and actuality” in which “[t]o hallucinate ego mastery” (Erik Erikson qtd. in Huston 6-7). Huston discovers “confusing . . . and uninterpretable . . . behavior” at the center of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* and yet finds that the confusion “suggests the complexity of motive and action we associate with real human beings, and makes the world of this play the most realistic so far encountered in the comedies” (124-125). To Huston, the quality of diminished interpretability in *Much Ado* signals “that for the first time in his comedies Shakespeare sees his medium as extending beyond his immediate control, assuming a life that the playwright cannot altogether circumscribe, containing meanings that he cannot limit absolutely” (127). Huston judges metadrama to be a defensive force operating internally in the play world and also asserts that role-play is a negative, self-deceptive, and insulating force (130) for many of the characters of *Much Ado*. According to Huston, the shallowness and predictability of the figures in

Shakespeare's earlier plays empower the playwright with control and puppeteer-like freedom. Conversely, the characters of the later plays, having evolved toward realism, prove to be unwieldy to the playwright, yet compellingly lifelike to the audience. Huston asserts that "[t]he world of *Much Ado* proves too complex, too unmanageable to be effectively controlled by an artist figure within the play; his powers work with full effectiveness only in a very specifically defined and isolated realm" (142). Although he does not address *Troilus*'s metadramas in enough detail to warrant specific citations in this thesis, Huston's work served the valuable purpose of establishing a context for an understanding of the function of metadrama as a general concept.

While other metadramatic critics take issue with the idea that metadrama in Shakespeare primarily figures as a way of exposing artistic process and, in doing so, points up the degree to which early modern English society relied on theatricality in many facets of its existence, Richard Snyder adopts a different tack. Theatricality runs much deeper for Snyder, who holds that "what we normally call 'reality' is just as much an imaginative construct, and more particularly a 'theatrical' construct, as any play" (200). Seeing metadramas in *Troilus* as metaphorical representations of "the breakdown of healthy relationships in society," Snyder connects images of disease and decay in the play with Shakespeare's concern in *Troilus* about "the tyranny and corruptive influence of audiences" (201) on artists and performers. By circumspectly and conscientiously identifying terms having theatrical resonances within the play, Snyder discovers subtle instances of metadrama in *Troilus* overlooked or discounted by other critics.

Jean Howard incisively appraises the locus of the anti-/protheatrical debate: "Beneath all the arguments about [the] morality [of theatricality] . . . lurked the urgent

question of who would control the implicit power of this institution” (5). Howard’s thesis that “the drama enacted ideological contestation as much as it mirrored or reproduced anything that one could call the dominant ideology of a single class, class function, or sex” resonates thematically with the tone and structure of *Troilus*. To Howard, the presence within a play of “ideologically incompatible elements” does not necessarily signal “aesthetic failure,” but can instead “be read as traces of ideological struggle, of differences within the sense-making machinery of culture” (7). Howard also delineates an important critical shift in the interpretation of metadrama by observing that the “formalist and allegorizing bent” of early metadramatic criticism tends to “obscure the extent to which the theater shared a discourse of theatricality with the larger culture” (10). I will present an interpretation of *Troilus* that parallels in some important ways Howard’s thesis concerning *Much Ado About Nothing*. Howard posits “that [*Much Ado*] resembles the antitheatrical tracts in its silent legitimation of the theatrical practices of the powerful and the demonization of those same practices in the hands of subordinated social groups, in this instance, women and bastards” (16). Essentially Howard postulates an unacknowledged nexus between Puritanism and a certain degree of social instability instigated through theatrical practice. The stage, Howard comments, “stripped [monarchical] symbols of their sacred aura, making it more possible for spectators to have a critical, rather than a merely reverential, attitude toward them” (31). Howard identifies “the ‘counterfeitability’ of social identity” (32) as a key ingredient in the growing social malaise of which the theater may have been partially a cause, but also, and more importantly, partially a reflection. Howard documents the extent to which fiction (theatricality) pervaded all aspects of the lives of early modern theater

professionals. “The shareholders of the companies,” writes Howard, “were as much entrepreneurs as servants to an aristocratic master, though the fiction of service was what gave them cultural legitimacy” (45). Early metadramatic critics found the staged inability of theatrical endeavor to achieve its ends to be a representation of Shakespeare’s frustration with the intractability of his medium. However, Howard establishes an important standard in her savvy evaluations of the complexity and ambiguity of metadramatic representations in *Much Ado*, positing that staged theatrical inability “acknowledg[es] the validity of much antitheatrical polemic” (58).

Having dedicated an entire volume to exploring the ways in which Shakespeare appropriates and yet paradoxically destabilizes the literary history of the Trojan War as a national English mythology, Heather James offers insights that help explain the play’s disjunctions, or—more accurately—helps to make sense of why the play and its disjunctions do not make sense:

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare refuses to privilege or adjudicate among versions of the Troy legend, but instead twists, disorders, and occasionally inverts versions of the Troy legend. Drawing attention to narrative techniques—rhetoric, genre, and disposition—that stamp interpretive values on the legendary events and heroes at Troy, he exposes lack of authenticity in a legend which exists only to bequeath authoritative origins. (89-90)

James’s brilliant analysis, although failing to locate exterior antitheatrical sentiment as motivating metadrama within the play, offers instead the plausible hypothesis that Shakespeare’s refusal to integrate source materials or mold his materials into a

recognizable genre yields the most acceptable strategy for explicating the play's intense self-reflexivity (97-106). James also poses as a context for this refusal the intense surveillance by cultural authorities around the time of the play's production. "Ancient histories," according to James, "had become almost as suspect as modern ones" (117) to those who attempted to detect treasonous plots and sentiments in plays produced for the stage. James also notes that "[c]ensors and secret service agents suspected the subversive power of staging events from the classical past" (118).

Michael O'Connell sees early modern anxiety about the theatrical as being closely akin to early modern English anxiety about the overpowering immediacy of visual representation (116-117). Whereas other critics have called attention to the rift within *Troilus and Cressida* between what occurs at the level of language and what occurs at the level of action, O'Connell observes the disparity between what *could* happen visually within the play (i.e., what the text leaves "strikingly open" (135) in terms of visual possibilities) and what the text of the play, as well as the corresponding "text" of the Troy legend supporting the play, requires. O'Connell identifies the thorough "debunking" of the heroes deriving from the Homeric tradition as "figuratively" iconoclastic. According to O'Connell, this figurative (i.e., theatrical/visual) iconoclasm "abrades verbal tradition" (135), and he incisively identifies Thersites as the play's primary iconoclast, noticing the way that Thersites's lexicon mirrors that of the iconoclastic antitheatricalists: "[Thersites] calls Achilles 'thou picture of what thou seemest, and idol of idiot worshippers' (5.1.6-7)" (135). O'Connell finds metaphorical allusions to idols, idolatry, and iconoclasm in Hector's argument for returning Helen to the Greeks (2.2.53-60) and in "the playlet Ulysses and Nestor stage for the sake of spurring Ajax's pride" (136) at

2.3.188-89. To O'Connell, *Troilus* is a "problematizing of vision," a "literal *revision* of the Troy story," and an "iconoclasm by visual image" (138). In speaking of Shakespearean metadrama, O'Connell asserts that "this self-reflexive sense . . . is itself a response to the larger interrogation of the image that comes of the Reformation, an interrogation that, as it spilled over into the antitheatricalism of Puritanism, necessitated an intense self-consciousness about what theater is" (143).

Antitheatricality and Metadrama in *Troilus and Cressida*

Just as the particularly virulent antitheatricality of the early modern era springs from causes not extant in any other historical era, so *Troilus and Cressida* serves as a unique marker of both the antitheatrical sentiment present at the time of its production and the theatrical response to that antitheatrical sentiment. Unlike most early modern plays, *Troilus and Cressida* may never have been performed on the stage, possibly making it the only "closet drama" written by Shakespeare; the publisher's preface to the Quarto (1609), asserts that *Troilus* was "never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar" (1-3). Bevington documents, however, that the Quarto "was published . . . in two states with two different title-pages and front matter, one advertising the play as having been acted by the King's Majesty's servants (Shakespeare's acting company) at their public theater, the Globe" (Bevington, *Troilus* 3).

Thus the term "closet drama" is actually a misnomer as it applies to *Troilus* because regardless of whether or not the play was actually performed, the text of the play,

with its stage prompts and directions, its casting list, and its scenery and prop requirements, justifies the argument that Shakespeare composed the play to be staged. The assertion that the play was never “clapper-clawed” (2) (i.e., “applauded”) by the “palms of the vulgar” (2-3) implies that what the general population finds praiseworthy must surely be contemptible. The antitheatrical sentiment prevalent in the prologue, however, also pervades the play itself, and the publishing history of the play attests to the antitheatrical environment attendant upon its production.

The disillusionment in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* mirrors the disillusioned world of an ageing Queen Elizabeth in the wake of the failed rebellion by the chivalric Essex. Many critics have noted the absence of any supernatural agency in *Troilus*, and in some ways the play serves as a brutal commentary on what a world stripped of divinity and meaning would be like. “No play,” according to David Bevington, “is more capable than *Troilus and Cressida* of making Shakespeare seem thoroughly modern” (*Wide* 125).

Theatricality in *Troilus* generally fails to achieve the ends to which it apparently aspires. Yet it is misleading to conclude that this failure demonstrates a consonance between the action of the play and the early modern antitheatrical rhetoric. While it may be true that in a play such as *Much Ado* Shakespeare asserts a knowable world of essences (Howard 60), the absence of just such an assertion in *Troilus* yields a sense of futility that pervades the ideological world the play. Whereas *Much Ado* figures the “origin . . . of disruption” (Howard 61) by casting the villain as a bastard, *Troilus*’s outspoken bastard choral figure, Thersites, paradoxically emerges as the character with the most unmediated apprehension of truth. Thersites’s liminality empowers him with

transcendent vision and yet simultaneously consigns him to theatrical inefficacy. His role thus parallels that of Cassandra; both characters' transcendent visions when articulated in the imperfect medium of speech fail to work any change in the behaviors of their hearers.

If Shakespeare actively associates the power of theatrical representation in plays like *Much Ado* "with aristocratic male privilege" (Howard 61), he undercuts this privileging of theatricality in *Troilus* by portraying theatricality itself as an inherently flawed form of power, by subverting the hierarchy of its manipulators, by demonstrating an energetic and powerful theatricality in characters such as Patroclus and Thersites, who might otherwise easily be categorized as marginal, and by mocking through disjunctive form and structure the effectiveness of theatricality. In *Troilus*, Shakespeare questions "the role of theatrical fictions as instruments of power and as a means of compelling belief in a particular view of the truth" (Howard 64).

Ambiguity of interpretation also plays a key role in *Troilus*. In figures such as Hector, Shakespeare subverts both hierarchy and heroism. For instance, Hector's sudden and virtually unexplainable reversal of his position in the Trojan War council scene (2.2) simultaneously highlights Hector's humanity and debunks his heroic stature as received through the mythology. Shakespeare employs a similar dramatic mechanism to deflate the heroic status of Achilles, who also reverses position, as my explication of the play's ending will demonstrate. Scenes in which signifiers confuse motives and even the actual content of verbal communication—such as Aeneas's scolding "ceremonious" address to Agamemnon (1.3.234) and Pandarus's unintentionally humorous interplay with the servant in 3.1—contribute to this destabilization. In other words, Shakespeare highlights in *Troilus* the destabilizing effect of language, a constantly changing medium incapable

of supporting the supposedly static order of society sanctioned by the Elizabethan world view.

Metadrama in *Troilus and Cressida* tends to move in two different directions simultaneously: toward the formation and the dissolution of identity. Troilus's position as a spectator in the tent scene (5.2), when he overhears Cressida and Diomedes, causes a dual identity crisis: mentally he divides his ideal Cressida from the one he has just witnessed ("This is and is not Cressid" [5.2.153]), and he also experiences this division as being internal to himself ("Within my soul there doth conduce a fight / Of this strange nature" [154-155]). Metadrama for Troilus, then, functions as dissolution. Yet for Patroclus, Thersites, and Achilles, metadrama carries a function of play similar to that which Huston locates in Shakespeare's early comedies. Thersites's pageant of Ajax (3.3.282) occurs in the wake of Ulysses's retributive machinations against Achilles, and yet this scene finds an unrepentant Achilles inciting further theatrical productions (274-279), ridiculing those in the Greek army who have fallen out of favor with him. The employment of theatrical tactics by Achilles, Patroclus, and Thersites as a practical stratagem in the independent formation of identity in opposition to the hegemonic interpellation of authority mirrors the way that early modern theater, existing in the liminal space of the liberties, performs similar constructions of identity.

The scene in which Troilus and Cressida pledge their love to each other (3.2) includes multiple instances of metadramatic staging and role-playing. Snyder chronicles these instances particularly well, but fails to note an important instance that indicates antitheatrical metadrama. Cressida ambiguously claims and then disclaims her

passionate love for Troilus, attempting perhaps to reconstruct the witty but reticent persona she had employed earlier with Pandarus (1.2):

CRESSIDA. Boldness comes to me now, and brings me heart.

Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day

For many weary months.

TROILUS. Why was my Cressid then so hard to win?

CRESSIDA. Hard to seem won; but I was won, my lord,

With the first glance that ever – pardon me;

If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.

I love you now, but till now not so much

But I might master it. In faith, I lie;

My thoughts were unbridled children, grown

Too headstrong for their mother. See we fools!

.....

. . . Sweet, bid me hold my tongue,

For in this rapture I shall surely speak

The thing I shall repent. (3.2.109-119, 125-127)

Cressida begins this interplay with Troilus with a sincere and forthright avowal of love, yet Troilus's question—"Why was my Cressid then so hard to win?"—reminds her of her former "act" of not being in love with Troilus. In her attempt to unmask former pretensions, however, she feels a need to reconstruct those pretensions. In line 116 she flatly contradicts her avowal of love: if, in a previous state, before the "now" of 116, she "might master" her love, then the "not so much" state of that love does not reflect the

“night and day” love of 110. Her statement in line 117, “In faith, I lie,” enacts one of the chief concerns of the antitheatricalists: that actors—far from being skilled artisans—are (from the antitheatrical perspective) simply “liar[s]” (Prynne 424). Cressida’s attempt to “come out of character” backfires in this sense, and by line 125 Cressida projects onto Troilus her need for a prompter or stage manager to cue her back into character: “Sweet, bid me hold my tongue. . . .” Her concern that Troilus will “play the tyrant” (115) manifests antitheatrical anxiety about roles and role-playing and yet paradoxically necessitates her own reversion to a previous theatrical self.

The antitheatricity of the metadrama in *Troilus* is borne out in the discoveries of both Howard and O’Connell. Howard notes that Protestant antitheatrical writers such as Thomas Tuke tended to locate both Catholicism and theater along an axis of duplicity. In this view, both of these institutions maintained a “double purpose”: on the one hand, to promote and promulgate an outward appearance of high morality and, on the other, to violate that feigned morality through actual practice. According to Howard, “[t]his is the type of double purpose repeatedly attributed to the theater, where, it was alleged, under the guise of entertaining or even educating the audience, actors, like priests, debauched and corrupted that audience, making women prey to young gallants and making men effeminate” (38). *Troilus and Cressida* recognizes and responds to such specifically articulated Puritan fears, including the alleged interpenetration of theater and prostitution.

Shakespeare finds in Pandarus a particularly apt instrument with which to interrogate and parody both theatricality and the antitheatricalist anxieties. As priest, as pimp, but, most of all, as inept interior director, Pandarus incites and allays apprehensions. In act 3, scene 2, Pandarus assumes a priestly role that embodies fears

about priestly corruption and assumes the power to join the two lovers and facilitate their union. The theatrical use of a veil, as indicated by the stage direction at 3.2.37, which Pandarus draws away from Cressida's face ("Come, draw this curtain, and let's see your picture" [3.2.45]), could not have failed to have the effect of signaling to the early modern theatrical audience Pandarus's usurpation of the roles of both father and priest. Pandarus directly addresses the audience immediately after this scene using a lexicon of corruption and enticement: "And Cupid grant all tongue-tied maidens here / Bed, chamber, pander to provide this gear!" (3.2.205-206). As noted by Righter (55), Pandarus's employment of direct address would associate him with the Vice figure, and his overt pandering to the audience in this scene would signal to some a playful parody of the antitheatrical rhetoric and to others an overt and perhaps terrifying validation of its truth.

Michael O'Connor comments on a similar moment in *Winter's Tale*, in which Shakespeare theatrically embodies a Puritan fear, in this case the fear of theater as a manifestation of literal idolatry:

Perdita falls to her knees in self-avowed reverence, indeed worship, of what she takes to be the statue of her long-dead mother. . . . [A]s the statue 'returns' to life, . . . [Shakespeare] involves even the audience in a moment that would seem to confirm the worst fears of the Puritan antitheatricalists. (13)

Although this scene from a different and later play does not necessarily relate in content to anything portrayed in *Troilus*, its interrogation of a specifically antitheatrical

conflation of Catholicism and theater does have currency and relevance in elucidating similar processes at work in *Troilus*.

In contradistinction to Ulysses, who, I will argue, functions as a playwright of controlled action, Pandarus emblemizes the playwright of language, an interior director who “tells [Troilus and Cressida], in part, what to think and say. As self-appointed prompter he ushers in the participants and gives them their cues” (Fly 49). Pandarus’s agency within the play connects him to Shakespeare’s agency as playwright: “In [Pandarus’s] actions as go-between he recreates the lovers’ identities for one another. Like Shakespeare he both mediates and creates” (49). Pandarus represents the role of a stage artist who transforms ordinary reality—the simple return of warriors from battle (1.2.172-240), for example—into art, exploiting this opportunity to stage a glorification of Troilus. Pandarus does not orchestrate the event, for the warriors would return from the battle with or without him, but he adapts the event’s potential to evoke a response from his audience, Cressida. The return of the warriors, then, functions as a discovered metadrama. Obviously, the efficacy of this endeavor becomes problematic when Cressida reveals her love for Troilus to be a “thousandfold” more “than . . . the glass of Pandar’s praise” (275-276) would have her see. That Pandarus is not a particularly effective stage artist demonstrates his antitheatrical metadramatic function. As a prosaic character he satirically deflates the nobility of those characters with whom he interacts.

Pandarus attempts through the medium of language to persuade various characters to adopt his vision of reality—such as his attempts to persuade Troilus of Cressida’s beauty (1.1), to persuade Cressida of Troilus’s worthiness (1.2.242-246), to persuade Paris to cover for Troilus’s absence from Priam’s dinner (3.1.74), to facilitate and preside

over the union of Troilus and Cressida (3.2.192-199), to deceive Aeneas about Troilus's presence at Calchas's house (4.2.50), and to comfort Troilus with a letter from Cressida (5.3.99). Yet he succeeds only minimally, if he "succeeds" at all, in effecting any action to which these characters were not already predisposed. In the character of Pandarus, therefore, Shakespeare stages Puritan theatrical stereotypes in order to contextualize them and to interrogate them. Moreover, Pandarus's ineffectuality as an interior director calls into question one of the central tenets of both the defenders of the theater and its detractors, the belief in the power of theater to move an audience to action, either efficacious or deleterious.

Inasmuch as Pandarus as inept interior director deflates theatricality by calling its purported power into question, Ulysses manifests a sinister and effective manipulative force akin to the "motiveless malignity" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge qtd. in Huston 146) terrifyingly portrayed in prototypical Vice figures such as Iago in *Othello*. Ulysses and Pandarus, therefore, can be interpreted as competing internal playwrights, much as Don Pedro and Don John in *Much Ado* (Howard 59). Ulysses reverses Pandarus's incompetence and demonstrates staged theatricality as a devastating means of manipulation and control.

One scene seems to attract a metadramatic and antitheatrical reading more often than any other in the play: Ulysses's set speech immediately following his oration on order and degree, in which he describes to the other Greek generals the way that Patroclus "pageants" them:

The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns
The sinew and the forehead of our host,

Having his ear full of his airy fame,
Grows dainty of his worth and in his tent
Lies mocking our designs. With him Patroclus,
Upon a lazy bed, the livelong day
Breaks scurril jests,
And with ridiculous and awkward action –
Which, slanderer, he imitation calls –
He pageants us. Sometime, great Agamemnon,
Thy topless deputation he puts on,
And, like a strutting player, whose conceit
Lies in his hamstring, and doth think it rich
To hear the wooden dialogue and sound
'Twixt his stretched footing and the scaffoldage,
Such to-be-pitied and o'erwrested seeming
He acts thy greatness in; and when he speaks,
'Tis like a chime a-mending, with terms unsquared
Which from the tongue of roaring Typhon dropped
Would seem hyperboles. (1.3.142 -161)

Ulysses employs this speech in order to rally the other Greek generals and shake them out of their complacency. His earlier paean to order and degree begins to move them toward a state of alarm by conjuring in lurid detail all of the enormities attendant upon the disintegration of an ordered world. However, it is not until Ulysses translates the import of his oration into theatrical action—actually parodying the parody of Patroclus—that the

other generals are motivated to any real change of attitude. Thus Ulysses's description of Patroclus's pageant becomes itself a dramatic presentation designed to move his audience to action. Ulysses's "pageant" mediates Patroclus's dramatization of the Greek leaders and thus consigns it to what Howard calls "the unreality of the unseen" (63). In some ways, in this scene, Ulysses functions as a literary critic as well as an interior director, complaining not only about the content of Achilles's and Patroclus's metadrama, but also about its verisimilitude (1.3.167-8); he accuses them not only of insubordination but also of bad acting. Ulysses's pageant also functions as an unmasking of the "evil" theatricality of Patroclus and Achilles, yet, at a deeper level, Ulysses here actually achieves a re-appropriation of theatrical power. By becoming the actor and the director of his own drama, Ulysses displaces Patroclus and usurps his power of play, reversing the vectors of levity and seriousness, and staging the ensuing psychological war against Achilles. Ulysses here paradoxically employs theatricality to stage a kind of antitheatricality, and his later production of the elevation of Ajax (2.3.234-249), a pageant staged with Achilles in mind, demonstrates his willingness to continue responding to the production of Patroclus by staging his own productions.

In addition to achieving an antitheatrical agenda within the play, the pageant also appropriates and transmutes the rhetoric of the antitheatrical tracts. Howard, reflecting on the anxiety about sumptuary transgression manifested in the antitheatrical writings, asserts that "[t]he streets of London provided [a] scene [in which a] 'mingle mangle' of apparel appalled the eye, but the theater was the place where such transgressions were literally institutionalized" (34). Ulysses's pageant targets just these anxieties about the institutionalized transgressions of the theater. First Ulysses censures Patroclus's pitiful

and exaggerated acting (“Such to-be-pitied and o’erwrested seeming”) and then his presumption in assuming a role above his station (“he acts thy greatness in”), and the later accusation functions as a thinly coded allusion to sumptuary law transgression by actors who dress above their station in order to portray nobility. In Jonathan Miller’s 1981 production of the play for BBC Television, Benjamin Whitrow (Ulysses) glances at Geoffrey Chater (Nestor) and seemingly awaits his nod before beginning the speech on order and degree. After Agamemnon asks, “The nature of the sickness found, Ulysses, / What is the remedy?” (140-141), Ulysses looks to Nestor as if to say “Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Nestor nods, and Ulysses begins his speech:

The great Achilles whom opinion crowns
The sinew and the forehead of our host,
Grows dainty of his worth and in his tent
Lies mocking our designs. . . . (1.3.142-146)

Miller’s stage direction to these actors stresses an important interpretation of Shakespeare’s text. Both Vernon Dobtcheff (Agamemnon) and Nestor are a part of the audience of Ulysses’s double mimicry, yet Nestor’s readiness to participate in the discourse, evidenced by his rapid support of Ulysses’s reasoning in this scene (1.3.185-196), suggests the possibility that Ulysses has prepared him for their *mutual* presentation to Agamemnon and the other generals, and Ulysses’s seizing the moment to converse further with Nestor after the other generals have left (310-392) similarly demonstrates that Nestor has been interpellated by Ulysses’s speech in a way not effected in the other generals. Because the speech of Ulysses and its amplification by Nestor occur before the appearance of Aeneas, the challenge to combat that Aeneas offers as Hector’s proxy

functions for Ulysses as the return of the warriors from the field (1.2) functioned for Pandarus, offering Ulysses a metadramatic opportunity to “to “pluck . . . down Achilles’s plumes” (3.3.385). Like Pandarus, Ulysses spontaneously finds material from the world around him with which to fashion pageants that motivate his audience toward a particular action. Ulysses’s speech provides a point of identification for Shakespeare as a playwright because it emblemizes what Shakespeare does with the legend of the Trojan War: “Breaks scurril jests” and “pageants” (1.3.148, 151), thus depriving the heroes of their mythological significance (Yachnin 318; Danson 80).

As a playwright of action, Ulysses does succeed, in an exemplary manner, in motivating action in the targets of his productions. In his first theatrical “pageant” he persuades the generals to the action that he proposes. Arguably, in his second dramatic production, the “elevation” of Ajax, whereby the generals ignore the famed warrior Achilles as they parade by his tent and subsequently discuss Ajax’s greatness within Achilles’s hearing, Ulysses achieves his primary goal of motivating Achilles to fight the Trojans, although not in the way that he had originally planned. Initially, Achilles is shamed by the generals’ blatant disdain and prepares for battle as Ulysses had intended. However, when a letter from Hecuba, mother of his beloved Polyxena, arrives (5.1.38), reminding him of his vow not to fight against Troy, love trumps honor and he declines to take Ulysses’s bait. The play implies, however, that Achilles’s male lover Patroclus’s decision to fight as Achilles’s proxy—an action that Patroclus undertakes in an attempt to thwart Ulysses’s depreciation of Achilles’s honor—results in the reversal of Achilles’s non-combatant position once again, as Patroclus’s death in battle consumes Achilles with grief and rage and motivates him treacherously to ambush and murder Hector (5.7),

leading inevitably to the fall of Troy. Thus Ulysses's theatrical scheming succeeds in motivating action, not in Achilles but in Patroclus. In this reading, the death of Patroclus in act 5, scene 5, forms the final piece of metadramatic theatricality that Ulysses employs to motivate Achilles to fight; the stage prompt in this scene (5.5.16) depicts a motivational spectacle inciting Achilles's rage: "*Enter NESTOR [with soldiers bearing Patroclus' body].*" In such a reading, Ulysses's character embodies the traits of a stage Machiavel who will scruple at nothing to achieve his end. The stoic sense of absolute dedication to victory that Ulysses manifests not only relates him to Machiavelli's Prince, with his total commitment to the good of the state at all costs. Shakespeare employs "strategic opacity" (Greenblatt 327), however, by depicting Ulysses as a character whose hostility toward Achilles surpasses the disinterested rationality one might expect of a purely military strategist. This aspect of Ulysses relates him to the kind of "motiveless malignity" (Coleridge qtd. in Huston 146) typically associated with a Vice figure. The play's ambiguity and uninterpretability, its intentional disjunctions, and its denial of all possibilities of transcendence leave the possibility of Ulysses's agency in Patroclus's death as only one of many possible interpretations and establish the play as lacking a clear villain. Nevertheless, Ulysses's efficacy as an interior dramatist, in contrast to Pandarus's ineptitude, supports the view endorsed by both the protheatrical writers and the antitheatrical polemicists that the theater had the power to move its audience to action, although whether that action elevated or degraded the audience was much debated. In *Troilus*, as well, one's view of whether Ulysses's puissance catalyzes positive or negative results depends upon one's interpretation of the play.

Both Ulysses and Pandarus face the competition of a third internal dramatist in *Troilus*, one that completely surpasses them in efficacy: history itself and the weighty textuality of a culturally reproduced legend function within the play as the originator, orchestrator, and director of the fates of each of the play's characters. The etiolating effect, for instance, of Ulysses's demoralizing sermon to Achilles (3.3) takes on a special poignancy for the play's early modern spectators because Achilles, not having the perspective that the intervening centuries afford to the play's viewers, does not realize that his reputation will not suffer the devaluation that Ulysses conjures through his rhetoric; the audience knows that history has already secured Achilles's glory. The story of Patroclus's assuming the armor of Achilles to fight and die is not found in Shakespeare's play, but its omission hardly robbed the theatergoers of key information because at the time of *Troilus*'s production the legend of the Trojan War resided in the imaginations of the play's English audience as a foundational political myth. Similarly, the fond wishes of Troilus, who desires to surpass all truthfulness in his love for Cressida, the certainty of Cressida, exemplified by the dire consequences to which she is willing to subject her name, and the smugness of Pandarus, who has "taken such pains to bring [Troilus and Cressida] together" (3.2.194-195), are all mocked by a force completely externalized to the world of the play: the knowledge already culturally imparted to every member of the play's audience as a matter of national mythology. Troilus, Cressida, and Pandarus thus take on semi-tragic dimensions as they, in their hope-filled attempts to embrace what they perceive to be glorious destinies of love and success, are viewed by the theater audience through the lens that history as the most efficacious internal director of all holds up to them. Lacking the knowledge held by the audience, the characters

unknowingly consign themselves to what they already are in the viewer's minds: an overly idealistic and blind lover, an unconsciously susceptible and unfaithful woman, and a base go-between. Shakespeare's sensitive and realistic portrayal of these figures, however, proscribes viewing them as caricatures and endows them with a touching realism that compels identification. By stressing history as the consummate interior director, Shakespeare minimizes the power of the theater to influence human actions and shifts the responsibility of power to grander forces.

O'Connell convincingly argues (135-138) that *Troilus and Cressida*, through its antitheatricality, manifests an intrinsic iconoclasm, yet he also posits that the play as a whole functions as a theatrical response to antitheatrical polemic. By incorporating antitheatrical positions into this play and by subtly testing their insights while both parodying and validating them, Shakespeare predicates *Troilus* on a classical antitheatrical position and simultaneously debunks that position. Given Shakespeare's "negative capability" of thriving in an atmosphere charged with conflict, this seeming paradox makes perfect sense. Much of the same kind of rhetorical interplay assumes new and more profound dimensions in another work, less experimental in nature and drawing on the deep psychological currents of classically based tragedy—*King Lear*.

King Lear

Critical History

Because of the status of *King Lear* as one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, any literature review that seeks to address the vast amount written about it—even one focused on aspects as specific as metadrama and antitheatricity—can only skim the surface of the available material. Because in the previous chapter I have considered in detail many foundational critical works concerned with Shakespearean metadrama, I now turn my attention to the works of four critics whose insights and perspectives have helped me form my own approach to *King Lear*. Three of these—Van Laan, Mack, and Danson—approach *Lear* specifically, while the last one, Singh, provides a crucial background for other aspects of my analysis.

Maynard Mack, in his *King Lear in Our Time*, illumines the extent to which allegorical resonances shape the play's various shades of meaning. He also provides useful commentary on the structure of the play, arguing that its organization “is as much homiletic as it is dramatic,” citing as evidence “characters who are pure states of being, unmixedly good and bad . . . or . . . scenes and episodes that have the quality of visual *exempla*” (70). Mack believes the play to be about action and will, which seemingly spring “directly out of the bedrock of personality” (93), and a later critic, Van Laan, will

expand this insight to build a case for interpreting the play metadramatically. Mack holds that in *Lear* Shakespeare presents “human reality as a web of [commutual] ties” (100), a position possessing a deep affinity with my own exposition of the play’s dialogue between pro- and antitheatricalism. “The play’s imagined settings,” according to Mack, “are always emphatically social” (100). He observes that Shakespeare concerns himself with “the language of social use and habit” (103), and this assertion contextualizes my view that the play registers a social dialogue about theatricality concurrent with the play’s production. Mack’s philosophic and profound approach to *Lear* provided a general but helpful guide to my own treatment of the play.

In his introductory chapter to *The Tragic Alphabet*, Danson focuses on one of Shakespeare’s primary concerns in the tragedies: the inability of language to express the depth of suffering to which humanity is prone (1-10). Explicating in detail the term *device* and demonstrating that it often signals artistic endeavor, Danson asserts that metadrama functions as a means employed by figures within a play to communicate what could not otherwise be expressed in words alone (11). He observes that often the devices enacted within a play fail to express adequately what their designers intend. His chapter devoted entirely to *Lear* begins by observing that Lear’s “love-trial” production puts Cordelia in a situation that requires her to perform the highly difficult task of using ceremonial language to placate the “insatiably desirous” Lear (164-5). Danson then argues that the theatricality of Goneril and Regan exacerbates Cordelia’s dilemma by “unabl[ing] speech,” dislocating signifiers from their signified meanings through deceptive and corrupt duplicity (166). Danson suggests that the effect of the initial dislocation occasioned by Cordelia’s taciturn reply and Lear’s reaction manifests itself

throughout Lear's kingdom in all of his subjects. Kent, for example, loses his bearings concerning the proper mode of discourse, and finds himself in the same state of estrangement as Cordelia, whom he had sought to defend. Only the language of paradox, Danson contends, can supply meaning for France and Kent as they struggle to grasp the full import of Lear's wrathful pronouncements (167). The "logic of paradoxical reversal" evident in France's acceptance of conditions (1.1.254-265) contains for Danson "a kind of gospel in miniature" (168), a connection that I will establish more firmly as I explore the play's response to antitheatricality. Danson concludes that, like Goneril and Regan, Edmund simultaneously appropriates language and divests it of its significance, "preempt[ing] the words of love and duty from Edgar" (169).

Having thus defined a pattern of language and identity loss, Danson continues his explication, diagnosing a kind of madness at work in Edmund's interior direction. Danson interprets the theatrical worldview of Edmund as exhibiting solipsism not unlike that of Lear's madness (182). According to Danson, "[Edmund's] play," associated from the beginning with "old comedy" (1.2.137)—an inferior sort of comedy—"will never reach tragic proportions . . . [and will be] overshadowed by the tragic play which has not contemned the conditions of the inexorably real" (183); in other words, Edmund's play—because it refuses to partake of reality—fails in comparison to Lear's. The madness of Edmund's play manifests itself through what Danson calls "a movement toward . . . solitude" whereas the productions of Kent and Edgar—metadramas that are forced upon them and which they stage as a means of protecting their identities—move toward community (184). I find that Danson's dichotomizing of these interior dramas, while supported to a certain extent by the text, also reflects an antitheatrical position. I will

argue that the play as a whole manifests both pro- and antitheatrical positions simultaneously.

Interestingly, Danson parallels the diminutiveness of Edmund's play to that of Edgar, finding Edgar's triumphant ending "too pat, too neatly formulaic" (192). He asserts that as interior playwrights both Edmund and Edgar reflect a dramatic tradition akin to the morality and mystery plays, thus constituting them as somewhat flat characters. Danson stops short of asserting that the *Lear* plot avoids this pitfall completely, and Danson's struggle to find a resolution for the inexplicability of the play's ending testifies both to Danson's honesty as an interpreter and to the ambiguity and power of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

Of the metadramatic critics I have considered, Van Laan is the most studious in interpreting the various degrees of role-playing operating in Shakespeare's dramas. Van Laan aptly demonstrates that Goneril, Kent, and even the Fool employ metadramatic devices. Van Laan's insight that "Shakespeare sees the loss of identity as . . . the [primary] tragic problem" (179) informs my treatment of *Lear* and its complex web of metadrama. Van Laan identifies public self-glorification as the purpose of Lear's staged playlet (1.1) and observes that Cordelia's refusal to "act" in this "scene" highlights its theatrical nature (198). Because he declines to speculate about Shakespeare's motives for opening *Lear* with such self-reflexive theatricality, Van Laan fails to make a connection that I will attempt to validate in my analysis: that this scene, as well as many similar scenes in the play, responds specifically to early modern antitheatrical rhetoric.

According to Van Laan, Cordelia's refusal to assume the "role" of flatterer derives from her desire to adhere more tenaciously to different roles, since Cordelia

dedicates herself to the roles of dutiful daughter and bride-to-be rather than the role of flatterer that Lear desires to see her play. Van Laan thus understands the polarity in the first scene as deriving from competing roles and not from competing positions of pro- and antitheatrical conflict. Throughout his analysis, Van Laan maintains the basic assumption that none of the characters in the play escapes from role-playing of one kind or another. However, in describing the different types of roles assumed, he does not completely avoid the kind of moral privileging that Barish so diligently catalogues in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*; for example, Van Laan finds Lear guilty of “play-acting,” whereas Cordelia’s response springs from “role-play” (199). Inconsistently applying his own system of role classification, Van Laan labels Edmund as “role-less” (200); however, in order to assert that Cordelia plays a socially defined role of the “bride-to-be” or of “the daughter,” one must also interpret Edmund as playing the socially defined role of the “bastard son.”

Like Achilles in *Troilus*, who arranges to be indisposed when called upon by the generals, Goneril stages a similar inaccessibility (2.2) and, according to Van Laan, manipulates her steward Oswald, establishing her not only as a play-actor but also as an interior director. For Van Laan, then, Goneril performs the Ulysses-like function of bringing a rebellious character into line with a set of pre-conceived expectations (201). In the same way that Nestor appears to be predisposed toward Ulysses’s position by the time that they address Agamemnon, Goneril “coach[es]” (201) Oswald to play a specific deprecating role with Lear. According to Van Laan, Oswald prepares Lear for Goneril’s “coup de grace” (201) as she personally enters her pre-staged scene to administer discipline.

Van Laan contends that guilelessness in characters like Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar signifies theatrical inability, at least initially (202). These figures, who are not originally predisposed to utilize theatrical means, assume theatricality only when forced to do so. For Edgar in particular, a theatrical transmutation into Poor Tom predicates itself on the annihilation of his previous identity as a result of Edmund's machinations (202). Van Laan identifies Lear's initial disruption of the social order through the imposition of a relativistic theatricality as the cause of the abandonment of virtually all of the play's socially sanctioned roles. In this sense, *Lear* initiates and stages the chaos predicted by Ulysses in *Troilus*:

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey
And last eat up himself. . . . (1.3.119 -124)

Van Laan interprets the instability of Lear's self-image in the play's first two acts as that of a player in search of a director: "Lear steadily searches for others who will acknowledge his kingship and fatherhood by treating him in the appropriate manner and [by] feeding him the proper cues" (203). By noting the ways in which Lear progresses gradually towards the realization of his identity's dissolution, and by contrasting that gradual progression with the almost immediate recognition of other characters that Lear has nullified his role as king, Van Laan bolsters his case that *Lear* as a tragedy is built around a process of identity loss (204).

Van Laan argues that Lear's madness incorporates "the presence of all possible roles" (206), yet he also asserts that Lear emerges in act 4, scene 7, as an entirely new entity, a man no longer imperious and needing to be obeyed, and one whose desire to communicate marks his transformation. Van Laan holds that Lear's restoration to sanity concurrently manifests "a restoration of order for the entire kingdom" (208), yet struggles—along with a host of other critics—to fit the play's ending into any rational schema. The chapter as a whole anticipates modern critical ideas about language and identity and posits the concept that the roles constructed in any given society determine the language appropriate to those roles. A truly "role-less" entity, then, can have no adequate means of communication; in other words, for every "role" in our society, there is an appropriate lexicon.

I now turn to a critic whose work does not address *Lear* directly, but whose insightful writing provides ample material for investigating metadramatic nuances and for contextualizing pro- and antitheatrical rhetoric. Jyotsyna Singh eloquently elucidates a model for approaching Shakespeare that informs almost every aspect of my current project. For Singh, the figure of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* manifests a paradigm of every theatrical aspect feared and condemned by the antitheatricalists (308-9). Singh observes, however, that even as the play champions theatricality through its depiction of Cleopatra, it also "reproduce[s] [a] conception of the social order in which women and actors are seen as duplicitously subverting the 'natural' boundaries of social and sexual difference" (311). *Antony and Cleopatra*'s Romans thus "portray" the antitheatrical position. Incorporating and citing previous feminist criticism, Singh draws an interesting parallel between antitheatrical rhetoric and concurrent anti-

feminist rhetoric, pointing out that “women and the theater were subject to attack from the same rhetorical position” (314). Identity loss forms a major concern in Singh’s criticism as it does in Danson’s; however, an important difference lies in the agency that Singh attributes as the cause of identity dissolution. Singh asserts that for the Romans in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony ceases to be Antony once he falls in love with Cleopatra (317); femininity itself, in this view, becomes the cause of identity loss. Singh reads the cultural background and ethos of the play’s Roman rhetoric as forming a similar basis for the rhetoric of the antitheatricalists (319).

In an adept crystallization of theatrical philosophy, Singh posits that “[w]hen life is experienced as a performance . . . all assumptions of selfhood become tenuous” (320). According to Singh, Cleopatra demonstrates the validity of this tenet in the way that she captivates both an internal and external audience. The masculinity of the Romans thus genders the spectator position as generically male, even as the otherness and femininity of the performative Cleopatra gender the spectacle position as female. Singh goes on to suggest that by acknowledging, reproducing, and staging these gender conceptions, Shakespeare “puts a more positive construction” (321) upon the early modern English ideology to which he responds.

I propose that much of what Singh asserts about Cleopatra—that she “uses the Roman myth of honor as a manipulable fiction” and that she “does not accept any fixed identity” (321)—also applies to Edgar and Edmund, the central characters through whom Shakespeare anatomizes positive and negative conceptions of theatricality in *Lear*. Like Cleopatra (as Singh has interpreted her), both Edmund and Edgar demonstrate an ability to improvise and manipulate fictions. Singh discovers that Cleopatra, like Edmund in

Lear, is schooled in the same theories of tragedy upon which Shakespeare's play is based (323). In *Cleopatra*, Singh writes, Shakespeare "identifies femininity as one of power's crucial modes" (325), and she elevates this identification as another of Shakespeare's great contributions to his art.

Antitheatricality and Metadrama in *King Lear*

In the years between the production of *Troilus* and *Lear*, as England transitioned into the reign of James I, Shakespeare began to write his late tragedies. The ascendancy of Protestantism became more firmly established, yet the societal tensions that would eventually erupt into the Puritan Revolution began to surface in various environments. The social concerns reflected in *Lear*, as well as its focus on different ideas about nature, emerge from this historical context. Although in many ways more realistic and cohesive than *Troilus*, *Lear* reveals itself to be similarly metadramatic, a drama of dramas—or of sub-dramas—in which multiple characters assume the role of the interior director.

Lear responds to antitheatrical positions through its inscription of multiple responses. First, Shakespeare empathizes with antitheatricalism by valorizing the plain speech of figures such as Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar; these characters either refuse theatricality outright (the choice of Cordelia) or use it only when no other viable option exists for them (the course of action chosen by Kent and Edgar). They represent a positive conception of nature through their tendency to act only in accordance with their "true" selves. Second, the play's depiction of interior drama builds on the stage Machiavel tradition powerfully represented in *Othello*'s Iago, and—as I have

documented in my own treatment in the previous chapter—*Troilus's* Ulysses. Edmund's machinations validate fears articulated by the antitheatricalists by demonstrating the corrosive effects of an appropriated theatricality; his alarming role-playing acknowledges the potential for evil inherent in the deceptive practices of the stage. Edmund represents a conception of nature that anticipates *Macbeth*, reflecting an amoral and purely self-interested rationality, an anti-deterministic, radical voluntarism. The play's third response to antitheatrical prejudice, however, revolves around the protean theatricality of Edgar as his fantastic journey toward identity appropriates the religious language of salvation that supported much of the rhetoric of the antitheatricalists. As in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare's *Lear* depicts theatricality in the hands of the best and the worst. King Lear himself exemplifies a fourth attitude toward theatricality inscribed in the play: like *Troilus's* Pandarus, Lear's ineffective and self-indulgent propensity to stage interior dramas serves as a self-mocking and self-probing agency, one that seems to assert moral ambiguity and relativism. A fifth and final response to antitheatricality manifests itself in the play's enigmatic ending.

Although all of the characters in the major roles, excepting Cordelia, participate in theatricality, only four of these—Edmund, Edgar, Lear, and Goneril—display the characteristics of interior director. Kent and Regan, whose skill at role-play almost qualifies them as interior directors, act only in individual-role dramas or in parts scripted for them by the play's other personae. Kent's role as Caius demonstrates a positive aspect of theatricality by enabling Kent to continue serving Lear despite Lear's banishment of him, while Regan's overplayed role—the passionately devoted daughter—conversely critiques theatricality as a destructive influence. All of these players

experience a deviation from the course of events that they hope to achieve. In one sense or another, all of them have to reconstruct themselves by adjusting to the unforeseen. As Mack has observed, unforeseen consequences that do not necessarily adhere to “the Boethian conception of a divine harmony” (Bevington, *Necessary* 660) figure prominently in two important and emblematic opening scenes: the first establishes the Gloucester sub-plot; the second depicts the “love-trial.” Mack asserts that the play’s theme of unexpected consequences finds expression in the first scene as Gloucester’s dialogue with Kent displays “casualness” toward the illicit affair that produced Edmund, even while “the principal effect” of that action “is already on stage. . . in the person of the bastard son himself” (96). As trumpets herald the appearance of Lear and his entourage, the ceremonial and therefore the theatrical aspect of the ensuing scene becomes apparent. As Van Laan observes, “the impression [of theatricality] . . . owes a great deal to the highly artificial rhetoric of Lear’s speeches” (197), and all of the proceedings leading up to Cordelia’s response

seem to have been written specifically to Lear’s order, for . . . Goneril and Regan . . . speak in response to formal cues from Lear . . . and his replies, because they ignore the content of what has been said and go directly to the business of pronouncing rewards, define these speeches as having successfully measured up to some preconception of what they ought to have been. (197)

Van Laan’s analysis clarifies the theatricality of the scene, establishing the grounds for interpreting it almost as if it were from a storybook.

Thus, the shattering dislocation occasioned by Cordelia's abrupt response to Lear's query—"Nothing, my lord" (1.1.87)—clearly reflects a strong antitheatrical position. In a scene clearly resembling a staged and scripted event, Cordelia has broken away from the script and seems intent on stopping the show. Although the speeches of Goneril and Regan do have rehearsed quality, they also have an air of improvisation, as though Goneril's attention-grabbing performance prompts Regan's strained and overacted attempt to upstage her sister. This dramatic intensification degrades the standard of performance into the realm of melodrama, making the gap between sincerity and showmanship impossible for Cordelia to bridge. Cordelia responds to the demand for performance by *not* performing and by taking a bold, courageous, and Puritanical stance that she does not abandon, even in face of retribution. The phrase that Cordelia employs in her criticism of the performances of her sisters—"glib and oily art" (1.1.228)—matches the valence that such terms have in the writings of the antitheatricalists. Kent displays a similar boldness in his confrontation of Lear and in his subsequent seeming acceptance of Lear's banishment; his exiting lines, "Thus Kent, O princes, bids you all adieu / He'll shape his old course in a country new" (1.1.189-90), further anticipate the exile of the Puritans in 1608 and 1620 to Amsterdam and Plymouth.

Shakespeare inscribes an entirely different response to antitheatricity in the character of Edmund, a figure who exposes the "menacing possibilities" (Mack 95) inherent in malevolent dramatic manipulation. Edmund's ascension to power begins as we see the interactions between a scheming, theatrically adept Edmund and his unsuspecting, naive brother Edgar. Like both Cordelia and Kent, Edgar exemplifies a seemingly innate goodness, yet his "suspension of disbelief" as he fails to see through

Edmund's "acts" sets his course on fortune's wheel in a downward direction. Like Ulysses, Edmund stages dramas for the effect that they will have on their audience; he is effective in achieving the ends he seeks through theatricality.

Edgar's entrance in act 1, scene 2, illustrates both the metatheatricality of his relationship to Edmund and the adversity he embraces through his "suspension of disbelief." He comes on stage as if on cue as Edmund is speaking of him: "Fut, I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. Edgar— [*Enter Edgar*]" (1.2.134-136). Edmund then continues to address the audience, as if in an aside: "and pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villanous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam" (1.2.137-138). Bevington, in a footnote to this line, calls attention to the meaning of the word "pat" for Jacobean audiences: "on cue" (*Necessary* 668 n. 137). The words "catastrophe," "the old comedy," and the word "cue" itself also invoke theatrical associations. Danson observes how Edmund "sets the stage" for his play within a play:

[A]cting is the forte of the Shakespearean villain, and that acting, improperly used, may be the means for interpolating into reality the fantasy-world of evil. Edmund . . . belongs to the same school of acting as Iago; he "practices" upon Gloucester and Edgar as Iago does upon Othello, by staging plays which substitute for reality. (181-182)

The spell that Edmund seemingly casts over Edgar really has more to do with Edgar's willingness to "suspend disbelief" than with any magical power inhering in Edmund's theatricality. As both Howard and Singh have demonstrated, however, the phenomenon

that we call “the suspension of disbelief” appeared to the antitheatricalists to be a kind of magical spell cast through association with malevolent spiritual influences.

Like the playwright Shakespeare, whose resourceful borrowings from a plethora of discourses enabled him to write plays that were conversant with each of those discourses, Edmund, the interior playwright of *Lear*, adeptly appropriates discourses that do not interest him for their content, but rather for their potential dramatic application. For instance, Edmund employs Gloucester’s discourse of astronomical portents, a subject that the play’s exterior audience knows—from Edmund’s previous soliloquy—to be of no intrinsic interest to him, and by pretending a concern with astronomy, he employs his newly acquired language to “set the stage” for his “cue” for Edgar’s actions. Edmund’s use of the phrase “these late eclipses” instantiates doubt about relationships at a cosmic level, not in his own mind but in the mind of his audience Edgar. Bringing the macrocosmic down to the level of the microcosmic world, Edmund questions Edgar about Edgar’s relationship to Gloucester:

EDGAR. How long have you been a sectary astronomical?

EDMUND. Come, come, when saw you my father last?

EDGAR. The night gone by.

EDMUND. Spake you with him?

EDGAR. Ay, two hours together.

EDMUND. Parted you in good terms? Found you no displeasure in him
by word nor countenance?

EDGAR. None at all.

EDMUND. Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended him, and at

my entreaty forbear his presence until some little time hath qualified
the heat of his displeasure. . . . (1.2.153-165)

Having initiated through the language of astronomical portents Edgar's propensity to doubt his relationship to his own father, Edmund nurses Edgar's suspicion until by degrees Edgar becomes malleable to Edmund's wishes. In the realm of metadrama, then, "suspension of disbelief"—the cost of allowing oneself to regress into a non-differentiating perceptive state—subjects the characters-as-viewers to roles of subservience.

Singh notes that "both dramatic text and public debates . . . bring to light the cultural dilemma of choosing between God-given identities and new, socially constructed ones" (325). Edmund, by virtue of his being a bastard, has little difficulty in overcoming scruples occasioned by such a dilemma; because his apparent God-given role of "bastard" is radically de-privileged, his decision to embrace social construction as a means of identity formation essentially frees him to choose from the entire vast array of identities, including, eventually, that of king. Along this line of reasoning, Danson observes that "Edmund's acting is of a piece with his attitude toward language: as he considers (for instance) *bastard* and *legitimate* just two fine words with no fixed meanings, so in his acting he feels free to manipulate reality or to substitute for it any piece of sheer impossibility" (Danson 182). Bevington's introduction elaborates Danson's insights:

Edmund is the "natural" son of Gloucester, meaning literally that he is illegitimate. Figuratively, he therefore represents a violation of the traditional moral order. In appearance he is smooth and plausible, but in reality he is an archdeceiver like the Vice in a morality play, a superb

actor who boasts to the audience in soliloquy of his protean villainy.

“Nature” is Edmund’s goddess, and by this he means something like a naturalistic universe in which the race goes to the swiftest and in which conscience, morality, and religion are empty myths. . . . He spurns . . . the Boethian conception of a divine harmony uniting the cosmos and humankind, with humankind at the center of the universe. . . . To him, “natural” means precisely what Lear and Gloucester call “unnatural.”

(Necessary 660)

Edmund’s readily comprehensible motives for self-advancement are made explicit for the audience in his soliloquy in act 1, scene 2. Of all of the play’s interior directors, only Edmund represents the prototypic Shakespearean stage Machiavel. His motivation and aim is self-centered advancement; he justifies all of his actions by the end which he hopes to achieve, namely acceding to the throne.

Through the character of Edmund, Shakespeare exposes some of the negative potentialities of theatricality, yet he simultaneously demonstrates its power by exhibiting the efficacy of Edmund’s stratagems and how near they come to success (“success” both in its modern meaning and in its earlier meaning of “succession”). As Rutter observes, Edgar and Edmund serve as foils to each other in their positions with respect to metatheatricality, in their motivations for using metatheatrical devices, in the rising and falling of their destinies, and in their personal growth (or, in Edmund’s case, lack of growth) (42, 43). To these valid and insightful observations I would add that Edmund and Edgar are also foils to each other in their initial reasons for adopting metatheatrical devices and in the development of those reasons. Edgar, like Kent who has “razed [his]

likeness” (1.4.4.), makes this choice in self-defense; he deviates from reality only as a last resort, and as a protection against a hostile reality. In contrast, Edmund, who may justify his machinations because of his societal position, has already made his decision to employ theatrical means (by forging the letter) before he speaks his first word on stage in act 1, scene 2. Metatheatricality for Edmund, then, is an offensive weapon, one he chooses to employ without external coercion; in fact, Edmund’s voluntary choice to use theatricality as a weapon necessitates Edgar’s choice to employ it as a defense. Both characters demonstrate the power of theatricality: one character, Edmund, exposes its destructive potentiality, while the other, Edgar, celebrates its liberating and creative power, a power that Danson finds to be akin to a “gospel in miniature” illumined through the play’s language of paradox (168).

This aspect of Edgar’s theatricality, its soteriological function, stages dramaturgical endeavor as having a meaning completely opposed to its representation in antitheatrical literature. Edgar attains this pinnacle of “imaginative generosity” (Greenblatt 225) only after having passed through a number of trials and dramatic transformations. Edmund’s vicious aspersions against Edgar occasion Edgar’s first metadramatic transformation into Poor Tom. Rutter maintains that this theatrical self-modification serves not only as a defense against Gloucester, Edmund, and those allied against Edgar, but also as a means of identity formation:

. . . Edgar’s role-playing invokes an inner reflection and a desire for positive change. . . . Tom o’ Bedlam is an identity alien to Edgar and he uses this role to find reason within the madness of the world around him. By seeking this solace, living in another personality completely different

from his own, and understanding the interrelation between other characters, Edgar becomes an active hero experimenting with different identities in order to achieve the appropriate one for himself. (34)

Edgar not only enacts identity formation and personal growth through theatricality, but he also demonstrates the ways in which his theatricality is of benefit to other characters within the play, an attribute Edgar shares with Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In his role-within-a-role of Tom o' Bedlam in act 3, scene 4, Edgar's antic disposition may be "madness, yet there is method in 't" (*Ham.* 2.2.205-206). Edgar is able to connect with Lear through the vehicle of his madness in a truly unique way as Poor Tom's philosophic bent helps him to achieve a rapport with the increasingly insane king.

As Edgar assumes new resolve (4.1.53) to stay in character, the motive of his metadrama expands beyond the purely self-interested. In his role of beggar, he can become the spiritual guide to his father, a role that he would not be able to perform if he were to reveal himself as Edgar, Gloucester's son. In act 4, scene 6, Edgar displays a startling array of theatrical powers as he creates for his blinded and suicidal father the steepness of the hill, the sound of the ocean, the way that the birds have nested midway down the cliff face, the herb gatherer, the fishermen, and the boat at anchor. Because Edgar's father lacks physical vision, Edgar "becomes his eyes" for him. Yet, paradoxically, the vision of the world that Edgar shares with his father—like a poetic vision of a world that never was—must be purely imaginative so that by Edgar's fiction Gloucester's death may be symbolic and not literal. This Shakespearean scene depicting two men—a father and a son—mirrors and reverses the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:13); the two travel upward, one intending to enact a death, yet, in this instance, Edgar,

the son, saves his father, Gloucester, by employing drama as a type of substitute sacrifice. In the last “challenge” scene with Edmund (5.3), the exultation of Edgar’s victory over Edmund supports the general eschatological atmosphere of the play’s closing events and stages a triumph of positive over negative theatricality as Edgar strips Edmund of his pretensions and exposes all of his impostures.

The last interior director worthy of note is none other than Lear himself. During the play, Lear progresses from covert to overt interior director. In the play’s first scene, Lear incites action to which other characters must respond; in this sense he functions from the beginning as an interior director. Like Pandarus, he stages dramas because he enjoys the effect that they have on him; they feed his ego or help him generate certain kinds of emotions within himself, but they have little effect on their exterior audiences. Throughout the play Lear fails to achieve the effects he seeks through theatricality.

As Lear’s madness increases, the strength of his attempted position as an interior director also increases. During the scenes between the love contest and the beginning stages of his madness, Lear becomes more sharp, pointed, and reifying in his orders to inferiors: “Call the clodpoll back”(1.4.46); “Why came not the slave back to me when I called him?” (1.4.52); “Go you and tell my daughter I would speak with her. [*Exit one.*] / Go you call hither my fool. [*Exit one.*]” (1.4.75-76); “You whoreson, you slave, you cur!” (1.4.80); “Do you bandy looks with me you rascal? [*He strikes Oswald.*]” (1.4.83); “Fetch me a better answer” (2.4.89). Lear’s interior direction manifests an entirely different aspect from that of Edmund and Edgar, not only because his nominal position as king requires his commands to be obeyed, but also because his commands lack true performativity. Lear’s commands and directives are so rude and so frequent, his position

as king so like the “great wheel” which runs down the hill (2.4.70), that his subjects—including his daughters—find it increasingly difficult to obey him, even half-heartedly. Once Lear exiles himself into the open night, he unsuccessfully attempts to command the elements: “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!” (3.2.1). Bevington notes (*Necessary* 659) that Lear speaks his first *kind* words to the Fool only after he begins to realize the limits of his authority, as the elements refuse to obey him, and as he begins to suffer the discomforts of common men: “My wits begin to turn / Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold? / I am cold myself” (3.2.67, 68).

The mock-trial scene in the hovel deserves particular attention because of its metadramatic aspects. During this scene Lear’s performative utterances reflect the flavor of his madness and the comedy of his foolishness, and yet also partake of the increasingly confusing logic of the gradually blurred boundary between what Lear perceives to be real and what is real. Bevington’s glosses add some sense to the lines that Lear speaks at the beginning of act 3, scene 6, but the rapidity of the lines in actual performances allows little time for spectators to process consciously the rather equivocal logic of Lear’s words. Beginning at line 20, however, Lear suddenly becomes focused on the necessity of bringing his two daughters to trial:

It shall be done; I will arraign them straight.

[*To Edgar*] Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer.

[*To the Fool*] Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she-foxes! (3.6.20-22)

In these lines, Lear exhibits his skill in recruiting other actors into his metadrama and also displays an imaginative “suspension of disbelief” and irony through his willingness to

cast a beggar and fool in the roles of “learned justicer” and “sapient sir.” Beginning at line 46, Lear begins to “arraign” Goneril on charges of kicking Lear:

LEAR. Arraign her first; ‘tis Goneril, I here take my oath before this
honorable assembly, kicked the poor King her father.

FOOL. Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

LEAR. She cannot deny it.

FOOL. Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint stool. (3.6.46-51)

Although no stage direction specifically calls for a prop here, Bevington’s note to line 51 makes clear both the pun and the likelihood of an intended stage prop: “**joint stool** low stool made by a joiner, or maker of furniture with joined parts. (Proverbially the phrase ‘I took . . . stool’ meant ‘I beg your pardon for failing to notice you.’ The reference is also presumably to a real stool on stage.)” (*Necessary* 690 n. 51). This entire scene highlights Lear’s stalwart need to be a king while contrasting that need with the paucity of resources available to him.

Lear’s encounter with madness and with nature cures him of his propensity to succumb to the wiles of art; he can finally see through the theatricality of Goneril and Regan (4.6.96-105), as he demonstrates that the trauma he endures—a kind of madness—ultimately brings him to the truth that he would have been unable to find otherwise. The image of Lear holding Cordelia’s dead body forms for Kent, Edgar, and Albany an “image” (5.3.268) of the promised “end” or apocalypse of humanity. The death of Lear also represents an antitheatrical statement because of its radical departure from any accepted philosophy of what tragedy ought to be. After four centuries of literary interpretation, the ending continues to bewilder critics, signifying that Shakespeare’s

passion for representing the real refuses to be constrained by literary theories of what tragedy should be and that the terrifying reality of death, even when merely represented on stage, continues to baffle us and challenge us to look deeply for answers.

By inscribing these multiple attitudes toward theatricality into *Lear*, a play that incorporates topics like spirituality, nature, and social interrelatedness, Shakespeare champions his art and demonstrates that edifying content and prophetic insights can exist on the stage as well as in the pulpit. The humanity of Lear—a man and a king—leaves a lasting impression with audiences who struggle to grasp the meaning of the circumstances around them. *Lear* serves as a continuing testament for our time, as Mack so eloquently illustrates, and will certainly continue to do so for many times beyond our own. My hope in approaching this play as I have, through the agency of historical contextualization, is that the rich dialogue thus discovered can advance our knowledge and appreciation both of history of Shakespeare's soul-stirring art.

Conclusion

The world of early modern England continues to fascinate and baffle us as we struggle to understand how early modern citizens viewed the world, even as their traditional outlook gradually faded into a bleak view of reality much like our own. Yet the ancient classical past, particularly through such mythologies as the Troy legend, had an immediacy to their lives and their attitudes that we cannot reproduce. Through literature, the past manifested a force that impacted the polarities that I have explored in this work: both art and art's detractors. Reading though *Histrionomastix*, the gigantic tome that Prynne wrote to establish his case against the theater, gave me an opportunity to witness firsthand the anxious care that Prynne took to validate his points through the citation of ancient authorities. Similarly, my exposure—both in *Troilus* and in *Lear*—to the vast multiplicity of likely sources for just two of Shakespeare's plays, made me realize that today's "sound byte" world of video clips, internet, and iPod education will never recapture the linguistic and intellectual textual accomplishments of that great age of classic theater. Ironically, however, Shakespeare's theater symbolically forms a point of origin for our own media-driven world in much the same way that early modern English citizens may have viewed ancient Troy as a point of origin for their country's polity. History and literature, as recent critical theory has firmly asserted, provide the master narratives that we live by, even as we refuse to acknowledge the subjective agency

involved in the production of both. The rhetorical battle between the drama and its detractors, a battle still raging in some ways even in our own era, may never again assume the proportions it held during those first years of professional English theater, but I would hope that a willingness on our part to consider both points of view, to see the interrelatedness of both ideologies, and to perceive the moral dimensions of theatricality that operate in our own lives might form a basis on which to erect further scholarship.

¹ My references to the physical playhouse structures are based on a drawing by C. Walter Hodges for the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

² Her work is occasionally cataloged under her subsequent name: Anne Barton.

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