

Metatheatre in Aeschylus' Oresteia

By Robert Lewis Smith*

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

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Since 1936, scholars have examined theatricalizing elements in Greek dramas, those that might be called 'metatheatrical,' though that specific term wasn't applied to drama until the 1960s (Stow, 1936; Schmid, W., 1946 cited in Muecke, 1977; more recently: Bain, 1977 and Taplin, 1986). Aristophanes' use of such elements is so extensive that he is now recognized as a fully metatheatrical playwright (Chapman, 1983; Edmonds, 1980; Foley, 1988;

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Slater, 1982; Muecke, 1977).¹ Scholarly analysis of metatheatrical elements in Greek tragedies is far less extensive (Easterling, 1985).² Several scholars wrote of metatheatrical elements in specific plays of Euripides,³ and Richard Hornby, in one of his chapters, 'Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*,'⁴ discussed the metatheatrical elements he found there. Recently, Mark Ringer addressed the metatheatrical elements in the plays of Sophocles and C. W. Marshall obliquely alluded to metatheatrical elements in 'A Gander at the Goose Play' (Ringer, 1998; Marshall, 2001). No other scholarly commentaries that address the use of metatheatre in Greek tragedies have been found.

Among Euripides' plays, Froma Zeitlin analyzed *Orestes*, and Charles Segal analyzed *Bacchae*. Both are from the end of Euripides' career, where we might easily suppose that he had been influenced by the metatheatrical elements in Aristophanes. At the very least, all of the Old Comedies presumably contained a *parabasis*, the chorus', and hence the author's, direct address to the audience, clearly a metatheatrical technique.

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

Lionel Abel coined the word *metatheatre* in his 1963 book, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, when he stated that he had discovered a new type of theatre (Abel, 1963). In his discussion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that he considered the first example of metatheatre, he saw Hamlet as being the archetypal metatheatrical protagonist. Abel defines such a character as 'one who has the capacity to dramatize others, and thus put them in whatever situation he is intent on being in' (ibid., p.61). Other writers have contributed to the expanding literature on metatheatre. Robert J. Nelson, in his *Play Within Play*, examined the play-within-the-play technique and found its use in plays from Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrez*, in 1497, to the contemporary period (Nelson, 1958, p.8). Richard Hornby, in his *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, found instances of many metatheatrical elements in plays of all cultures and time periods. However, while he found some metatheatrical elements in the classical plays, he did not consider them *fully* metatheatrical.

¹Oliver Taplin (1986, p.164) states the case most strongly when he writes that 'Old Comedy is ubiquitously self-referential: Aristophanes is probably the most metatheatrical playwright before Pirandello'.

²Bain finds no cases of theatrical self-reference in Greek tragedy (Bain, 1977, p.208 ff.). This point is refuted by Rutherford (1982, p.160, n. 69, where he cites an example in Euripides' *Troades*).

³Zeitlin (1980) treats the illusion-reality game, self-consciousness, and Orestes' casting in a role he cannot escape. See also Segal, particularly his chapter, '*Metatragedy: Art, Illusion, Imitation*,' in which he notes, amid many other points, that Dionysus, though he is an actor like the others in the play, 'is the director, dressing and instructing his "actors" for the role they will have to play' (Segal, 1982, p.225).

⁴Hornby's discussion focuses on the issue of 'perception . . . about perception' (1986, pp.121-132). Unfortunately, his arguments are based, as I understand them, upon a mistaken belief that Oedipus might not have killed Laius.

The most systematic presentation of metadrama characteristics is in Richard Hornby's book. For Hornby, such plays' inward mirroring process exhibits several identifiable characteristics of their self-reflexive process, which is symptomatic of metadrama. Hornby notes that there are several 'possible varieties of conscious or overt metadrama' and particularly reiterates that the techniques must be 'consciously employed' (Hornby, 1986, p.32). He lists five characteristics (ibid.):

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

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

Ceremony within the Play

According to Hornby (1986, pp.52-53), the ceremony within the play is a prescribed action performed in a set manner and includes such events as banquets, processions, pageants, rituals, executions, coronations, and similar actions. Ceremonies are distinguished from theatre by the fact that the participants do not play full-fledged characters and that the ceremony never has a plot. Hornby notes that virtually all plays have some form of ceremony, and he observes that 'it becomes difficult to find a play *without* a ceremony in it of some kind' (ibid., p.49). Among those ceremonies are prayers, which are ubiquitous in the Greek tragedies. Jon D. Mikalson's central findings on unanswered prayers, though not central to this study, provided ample documentation of the formalized and ritualized use of prayers in Greek tragedies (Mikalson, 1989).

Many ceremonies are described or performed in *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus, 1991, pp.44-47).¹ The chorus recounts the ritual sacrifice of Iphigenia ten years before the start of the Trojan War (Aeschylus, 1991, p.13, lines 1-35). At the beginning of Scene I, Clytemnestra enters to perform a sacrifice (ibid., p.13, line 50). Scene II starts with the herald entering and offering a prayer to the gods for Agamemnon's safe return from Troy. Later, during the Exodus, Aegisthus describes the banquet at which Atreus served up to Thyestes his own children (ibid., p.32, lines 25-50). The beginning of *The Libation-Bearers* starts with Orestes performing a ritual at his father's tomb. This is followed by

¹All subsequent script references to this play will be to this edition and noted parenthetically in the text by page number and line number.

Electra performing another ritual in her prayers for Orestes' return to avenge the death of their father. A major part of *The Furies* deals with the ritual of a trial. At the end of that play, Athena leads a processional into the Cave of the Furies. A. M. Bowie in 'Religion and Politics in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*' pursues the topic of ceremonies and myths (Bowie, 1993). Bowie found many references to particular ceremonies in the plays of the trilogy. A single illustrative instance is the comparison between the Panathenaea and Clytemnestra's beacon-fires at the beginning of *Agamemnon*. Bowie quotes Fraenkel's comparison of the progression of the beacon-fires to the *lampadeldromia*, a race that was a part of the Panathenaea festival. Fraenkel notes that '[t]his paradox must have struck Athenian hearers as something almost grotesque' (ibid., p.29). Such allusions must have been jarring for the audience, probably even self-referential.

However, the more important ceremonies in the play are those in Scene III when Agamemnon returns from Troy. The pageantry of his entrance and the formal homecoming provided by Clytemnestra take on such significance that they essentially become the whole scene.

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

Literary and Real-Life References

According to Hornby, the inclusion of literary and real-life references is metatheatrical. 'There are many ways in which a play can refer to other literature. In each case, the degree of metadramatic estrangement generated is proportional to the degree to which the audience recognizes the literary allusion as such' (Hornby, 1986, p.88). In order to be metatheatrical references, they must be neither obscure nor overly commonplace. Hornby identifies four types: citation (or quotation), allegory, parody, and adaptation (ibid., p.90). Perhaps the most noted example of literary reference in Greek drama, from our contemporary point of view, is Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, which contains numerous citations and parodies from the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. The issue of parody is also particularly relevant to the tragic playwrights because of the satyr play each had to compose for the festival. Though we only have one complete satyr play, *Cyclops*, and one large fragment, *The Trackers*, parody was often one of the approaches used in the satyr play.

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

Attilio Favorini in ‘History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus’ *The Persians*’ addressed the issue of real-life references in *The Persians* and other plays, including Phrynichus’ *The Capture of Miletus* (Favorini, 2003). That production was so ‘real’ that the author was fined 1,000 drachma and the remounting of the play was banned forever. Favorini also alludes to other examples of metatheatrical elements in *The Persians* and other plays that are beyond the scope of this examination.

Agamemnon refers back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, specifically to Book III and IV (Homer, 1960). In Homer’s version, Aegisthus, who met Agamemnon on the beach and accompanied him from there to the palace, killed Agamemnon. Clytemnestra’s role in Homer was limited to that of a faithless wife who could not resist the seductive advances of Aegisthus. There are two significant points here. One is the literary reference, and the second is its self-referencing aspect. Homer’s version, certainly known by the audience at Aeschylus’ play, must have produced a jarring comparison with the image of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ play. The audience was essentially ‘seeing double’—they were exposed simultaneously to Homer’s version and to Aeschylus’ version. Here, in opposition to their expectations from Homer, was an Aegisthus who had no role until the last scene and a Clytemnestra who, in man-like characteristics, arranged the assassination of her husband and who herself provided the fatal blows. The situation would be comparable to us seeing a new version of *Hamlet* in which Gertrude, and not Hamlet, becomes the instrument of vengeance and actively pursues the death of Claudius. Clearly, we would consider the new *Hamlet* to be metatheatrical. Likewise for the Greeks, this new *Agamemnon* must also be considered metatheatrical.

The *Oresteia* contains several real-life references to the oracle at Delphi. Particularly in *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*, the Delphic Oracle is intricately involved in the story—the setting of the last play starts at Delphi. Certainly those in the audience who had been to Delphi would have been making comparisons of how well the play’s depiction of Delphi compared with their own experiencing of Delphi. References to other place names, which might be obscure to us, are scattered throughout the plays and certainly were familiar to the members of the audience in the fifth century BCE. One extensive example is in *Agamemnon* when Clytemnestra recounts for the chorus how the signal fires brought the news of Troy’s fall to her (Aeschylus, 1991, pp.13-14).

Prayers and the use of prayers pervaded the Greek society, and ‘Athenians of the 420s generally took seriously the oracles of Delphi, and . . . attacks must have seemed, if not literally impious, at least unwise and alien to a proper religious attitude’ (Mikalson, 1989, p.87) another metatheatrical jarring of the audience.

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

Role within the Role

Role playing within the role is when the character takes on another identity. Hornby identifies three types: voluntary, involuntary, and allegorical, with the observation that voluntary role playing is more metatheatrical than the others (Hornby, 1986, pp.72-74).

Agamemnon contains several roles within roles, but each is slightly different from the others. Agamemnon enters as the conquering hero, fresh from the Trojan Wars. But unbeknownst to him, he has been cast by Clytemnestra as the sacrificial offering to atone for his own sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis ten years before. Thus, he plays two roles, but he never becomes aware of them until his death.

On the other hand, in Clytemnestra's first appearance before the chorus, she pretends to be the dutiful wife waiting for her husband's return from war. She continues her voluntary performance for Agamemnon and Cassandra. Though Clytemnestra does not know it, Cassandra has been given the ability to know the future, with the curse that no one will believe her. Thus, until the actual murder of Agamemnon, Cassandra is the only other person in the play who knows that Clytemnestra is faking the role of a devoted wife and is hiding her true role of avenger. Cassandra clearly sees the performance of Clytemnestra's roles.

In *The Libation-Bearers*, Electra, though a princess of the realm, has been cast against her will by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as little more than a household slave, "Behold me here / Brought down to slave's estate" (Aeschylus, 1996, p.73). In the same play, Orestes has been both voluntarily and involuntarily cast in the action of the play. Orestes is motivated on his own to avenge the murder of his father—a role he is willing to play. However, he also has been involuntarily cast by the god Apollo to be the murdered of his own mother, a role that he is reluctant to play but that ultimately generates the action of the third play in the trilogy. In order to reach his objective, he takes on another role and disguises himself and changes his accent so he will pass as a traveler who has news of Orestes' death. The disguise is necessary so he may get close enough to Aegisthus to kill him. Even Kilissa, the nurse, plays a role to insure the success of the disguise and the action by telling the bodyguards to leave their weapons behind.

In *The Furies*, Athena undertakes perhaps the greatest casting of roles when she appeases the anger of the Furies by giving them new roles to play that are both significant inside the play and significant outside the play as components of Greek mythology.

Thus, we see that the several plays of the *Oresteia* incorporate various roles within the roles and in a variety of contexts.

Play within the Play

Hornby identifies two types of play within the play: the ‘inset’ type, such as *The Mousetrap* from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the ‘framed’ type, such as the Sly scenes of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. For the ‘inset’ type to be metatheatrical, it must be acknowledged as performance by characters of the outer play. Thus, integrated set speeches and similar devices are not fully metatheatrical. For the ‘framed’ type, to be considered fully metatheatrical, it must contain some indication of character and plot. Thus, unintegrated prologues and epilogues do not qualify as being fully metatheatrical (Hornby, 1986, pp.31-35)

Nelson, in *Play Within Play*, is significantly less restrictive about who or what defines whether a play is a play within a play (Nelson, 1958, p.7):

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

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

One of the basic tenets, inherent in the role-within-the-role concept, is the notion that the inner role is another identity intended as performance for ‘others.’ That ‘other’ may be either the audience or another character within the play, thus making it play-within-the-play ‘performance.’ Additionally, to be a ‘performance,’ the role-within-the-role must be planned with some concept of scripting. If such a ‘performance’ is given, it becomes a ‘play’ and hence an ‘inset’ play-within-the-play. It almost follows that if voluntary role within the role is taking place then of necessity play within the play is also taking place. Voluntary performance is intended for an “audience” of other characters in the same play. The performing character typically intends that the other characters will not perceive that a “play” is taking place. Typically the intent is for the other character/s to be deceived by the “play.”

In *Agamemnon*, the most significant role-within-the-role is that played by Clytemnestra for Agamemnon's processional homecoming. She performs her little charade for him and his retinue. Her “script” is to repeatedly entreat him to walk on the garments, thus committing *hubris* and earning the wrath of the gods. Even though Clytemnestra has not intentionally revealed her script to anyone onstage, Cassandra, nevertheless, sees that the homecoming is all show, a performance, a play-within-a-play. Moreover, the audience is well aware that some kind of performance is taking place because of its knowledge of Homer's work and the fact that this performance is different than the expected performance. Thus, Clytemnestra's play within the play continues to its final fatal stab.

The best example in *The Libation-Bearers* is Orestes' masquerade as a traveler in order to deceive his mother and Aegisthus. Orestes' "play" differs significantly from Clytemnestra's "play." She was the only onstage character in her play, but Orestes' play has multiple characters. His cast of deceivers includes Orestes himself, his sister Electra, and all the members of the chorus. Each has a part to play by keeping Orestes' identity a secret from both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The chorus goes further than merely being a deceiver and implores Kalissa, the nurse, not to obey Clytemnestra's order to have Aegisthus' bodyguards bring their weapons. The chorus, rather than just being a performer in Orestes' play, now casts a new member in the play to assure its success. An elaborate "play" has been set in motion, but it's a play that almost everyone involved knows about except for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Moreover, the audience knows about this "play" as soon as the characters in *The Libation-Bearers*. Again, this play contains play-within-the-play, making it metatheatrical.

Self-reference

Hornby writes: 'self-reference is always strongly metadramatic. With self-reference, the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction' (Hornby, 1986, p.103). In Hornby's discussion, the dramatic production is the intuitive illusion perceived by the theatre audience against the background of the 'logical' world—the 'real' world in which the play takes place. 'In sum, we perceive a play as an intuitive foreground set against numerous logical backgrounds' (ibid., p.114). Part of those logical backgrounds is the context and the conventions within which the play is presented, both in terms of its momentary performance and of the culture in which the play is presented. '[W]hen self-reference occurs in a play, the world of dramatic illusion undergoes a displacement . . . there is a shift in perception that turns the field of thought inside out. What had been background is foregrounded, and vice versa' (Hornby, 1986, p.116). Redirecting the audience's attention, even for an instant, from the foreground of the performance to the background—to the play as a play—is self-referencing and according to Hornby, makes it strongly metadramatic (ibid., pp.103-117).

Mark Damen obliquely addressed this topic in his 'Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy' (Damen, 1983). With one or two exceptions, three male actors performed all speaking roles in each tragic playwright's play. Damen's investigation centered on how the necessary doubling was achieved for the tragedies of Euripides, but he does address other plays as well. Damen identifies several plays for which the role assignments may be established with certainty. Damen notes how 'the actor who played the lesser roles (Cadmus, the servant, and the first messenger) in the *Bacchae* struggled futilely against the greater forces represented by the actors playing the principal characters' (ibid., p.323). Some portion of the audience must have been aware of these patterns for role assignments and accordingly must have had its attention

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

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

Conclusion

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

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