Forms and Functions of the Play within a Play

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To trace the development of some particular dramatic convention or element of style throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean period is a critical method that can often produce illuminating results and contribute much to our understanding of dramatic art in the Renaissance. There have been very useful and stimulating studies of the development of dramatic speech, of the ghost scenes, of dramatic exposition, and of the play metaphor; I have myself attempted to describe the history of a minor dramatic device, the dumb show.1 One conclusion reached by most of these studies seems to be that each one of these dramatic conventions underwent remarkable changes, which in turn reflect general changes in dramatic technique and literary taste, and that they can therefore be understood only within their context. The latter point seems to me particularly important, although it has not always received due consideration, or has been evaded

by a limited selection of material, e.g., by excluding certain types of plays.

It is by now a commonplace that the device of the play within a play enjoyed particular favor with English dramatists throughout the Renaissance period. It is employed, in some form or other, in a great many plays and by widely differing playwrights, but it is also much more complex and less easily defined than many other dramatic conventions, such as the dumb show or the prologue, and this is perhaps the reason why there has been much incidental comment on plays within plays but hardly any attempt to treat the subject comprehensively. I am not even sure whether it would be possible at all, because such a bewildering variety of forms would have to be included, making fruitful comparison very difficult indeed. Rather than outline once more the history of the play within a play, I shall therefore try to indicate briefly the wide range of this convention and its affinity to other dramatic devices employed by English playwrights. Such an unsystematic and necessarily incomplete survey may perhaps lead to further investigation along similar lines.

It is hardly surprising to see that the convention of the play within a play is to be found mainly in periods when not only dramatic literature but also theatrical practice was flourishing, when dramatists experimented with established forms, and—perhaps most important of all—when the purpose and function of drama and its illusionary character were subjects for searching discussion. All this is particularly true of the Elizabethan period. Drama then was entertainment for the masses as well as for the “judi-

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cious”; it supplied uninhibited fun as well as moral instruction and questioning. Above all, the stage was but an emblem of the world at large; it was understood to “hold a mirror up to nature,” not only by the subject matter of the performance but also by being a continual reminder of the discrepancy between appearance and reality.3

All this seems to me to bear directly on the many-sided use of plays within plays in English Renaissance drama. Just as numerous plays contained scenes of crude merriment and of dry moralizing side by side, we find inserted plays that take the form of tragedies within comedy, or vice versa. Indeed, perhaps the first thing that must be said about the play within a play is that it was not confined to any particular dramatic type. We find it in comedies, histories, and tragedies. Similarly, the plays inserted can be anything from a short dumb show to a complete little tragedy. They can be pure entertainment, literary parody, or moral exemplum. Without attempting a systematic classification, which would probably not be very helpful, I wish to point out some distinctly different types of plays within plays that were developed by Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists to suit their particular dramatic purposes.

The simplest and most obvious device is of course the introduction of a company of actors within a play, who then perform some kind of play themselves before an audience made up of characters from the “main” play. Sir Thomas More (c. 1595) is a good example of this type. Here the actors are separated completely from the other characters of the drama, and the play performed by them, a scene from Lusty Juventus, seems to bear no obvious relation to the main action. The device is employed chiefly to provide some comic relief after some more serious scenes of state and to give an illustration of More’s buoyant sense of fun and his love of the theater.4 It is he who links the two planes of action by suddenly joining in the play to replace some actor who has failed to appear. It becomes clear, even from this somewhat heavy-handed use of the play within a play, that for the author the main interest of this device lay in the interaction


between the two levels of dramatic performance. The attention of the audience in the theater is directed not so much at the inserted play for its own sake but at the reaction of the spectators on the stage. The more skillful dramatists often took care not to make the inserted play too absorbing, so as not to distract the audience. This applies to many of the plays discussed here, particularly to *The Murder of Gonzago*, which technically also belongs to this first and most simple type of play within a play: A group of itinerant players arrives and performs a tragedy which is completely different from the “main” play in tone and character.

A thorough discussion of the play scene in *Hamlet* is beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough here to emphasize how skillfully the play is integrated into the context of Hamlet's tragedy. Again it is chiefly the impression made on the spectators that is the center of dramatic interest, and here also lies, I believe—apart from some incidental satire—the reason for the introduction of a dumb show which gives a brief outline of the play that is to follow and thus largely satisfies the audience's curiosity as to its plot. After the dumb show the attention of the spectators can be focused on Hamlet and the court, who watch the performance. Another important aspect of this scene is that here drama is employed not so much as entertainment but as a moral weapon. Every serious Elizabethan dramatist hoped that his tragedies would “make mad the guilty and appal the free.” In *Hamlet* this moral function of drama is put to the test in full view of the audience and is at the same time used as a means of creating a maximum of dramatic suspense. It is hardly necessary to point out how masterfully the attention and sympathy of the audience (in the theater) is manipulated here. Like Hamlet we are watching the king very closely, but we are at the same time following Hamlet's own movements and speeches with great excitement until, in the end, we know that his device has only partly succeeded because he has betrayed himself more than the king and has done nothing toward achieving his revenge.

5. Cf. my chapter on *Hamlet* in *The Elizabethan Dumb Show*, pp. 110–120, where the most important studies of the play scene are listed. See also F. Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton, 1949), pp. 120–127, for a more general discussion.

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In *Hamlet* as well as in *Sir Thomas More* the play is performed by a group of professional actors. This of course gives the author a particularly good opportunity to comment on contemporary stage practices and to define his own views about the proper function of drama—as could also be illustrated by quotations from many other plays, although there are very few in which these problems are discussed so seriously as in *Hamlet*. In several others the play that is introduced serves mainly as an entertainment.

As an example of a quite different kind one could mention Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1610). Here we are not explicitly told who actually performs the masque in the first act; it is at any rate quite separate from the rest of the play. We watch all the bustle of preparation, the spectators crowding to get to see the performance; an atmosphere of intense expectation is created. There is also, at the very beginning of the play, some rather scornful criticism of the whole practice of such masques; they are said to be “tied to rules of flattery.” The masque that is then presented is quite long (nearly two hundred lines) and is played through without any interruption from the spectators. Its main dramatic function seems to be to provide a vivid contrast between the first act, with its festive court setting, and the second, far more intimate and intense act in which the hideous truth behind the gay façade is revealed. The masque evokes an impressive if conventional picture of the happiness in store for the newlyweds; in the light of the following events this turns out to be ludicrously inappropriate. The play within the play here is an instrument of Fletcher's overdeliberate, almost brutal irony, his often somewhat strained hunting for sensational surprises. As such it is very much in keeping with the dramatic technique employed throughout *The Maid's Tragedy*.

If we turn from this play to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611), however, we find that the wedding masque conjured up by Prospero, so different from Fletcher's, again fits in particularly well with the general tone of the play and its theme. It is an elaborate demonstration of Prospero's magic art and a most appropriate tribute to the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda, who watch the performance and only once interrupt it to voice their admiration and astonishment. As well as

emphasizing that nothing but perfect harmony will be the result of the lovers' union, the masque contributes to the airy and fleeting character of the play, in which there are several such apparitions and in which the illusionary character of dramatic performance is several times insisted on.  

In the plays discussed so far—and several others could be cited—the inserted play was performed either by actors who had nothing to do with the other characters of the play or by spirits conjured up for the purpose. The two levels of acting were kept entirely separate, and no confusion of identities, of the part acted and the character behind it, was possible. Another type of play within a play is that performed by characters from the "main" play itself. This device appears to have been far more frequent than the first because it was particularly flexible and could be adapted to almost any type of play. It also enabled the dramatist to make the interrelation between the two planes of dramatic action far more subtle and intriguing.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) is a comparatively simple case. We watch the preparations for the play to be performed, and the rehearsals as well as the performance itself are full of amusing comments on acting and dramatic art in general. Moreover, the play of Pyramus and Thisbe not only parodies certain dramatic conventions, but, as has often been noticed, bears an obvious relation to the "main" play by giving, in grotesque distortion, another example of romantic love. There even seems to be some good-humored satire on dramatic conventions employed quite seriously in the "main" play. On the other hand, there is not very much interaction between the two sets of characters. Except for "Bottom's Dream," they are practically kept separate throughout the play, and the inserted tragedy is distinctly different from the rest of the play.

A much more complicated, though perhaps not very subtle, use of the same device occurs in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587). It is one of the earliest examples, if not the earliest, of the play within a play. Here the play


to be performed is devised and prepared by the play's protagonist, Hieronimo, who acts as Master of the Revels and plans to carry out his revenge under the guise of a courtly entertainment.10 The main interest of the scene lies, I think, in the deliberate blurring of the dividing line between reality and dramatic illusion. When Hieronimo announces, "I'll play the murderer" (IV.i.133), we already suspect a double meaning in the phrase. The king and the court, however, suspect nothing. When the play is performed, Hieronimo and Bellimperia are still applauded for their realistic acting, when in fact they have already overstepped the limits of the play and executed their revenge in earnest. Then Hieronimo, as a kind of chorus, informs the audience. This sudden transition from illusion to actuality (on the stage) provides a rather sensational stage effect, but it also points to a deeper problem: the nature of dramatic illusion and its bearing on reality.

This problem we find explored in a great many Elizabethan plays. After Kyd, as is well known, the introduction of a play or a masque became a regular feature in revenge tragedies. We find it in Marston's Antonio's Revenge (c. 1600), in Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (c. 1606), and, in a rather grotesque way, in Middleton's Women Beware Women (c. 1621). In Tourneur's play the masque is a particularly appropriate means of carrying out the revenge because the whole tragedy is concerned with the question of disguise and masking. Disguise metaphors are particularly frequent; 11 masques are "treasons licence" (V.i.196), and in them people are "Putting on better faces then their owne" (I.iv.35). Thus the introduction of a masque at the end is in keeping with Tourneur's dramatic style, but the masque is rather too short to be called a play within a play.

In Women Beware Women, however, the device is exploited to the full.12 It is perhaps too ingenious and sensational to be artistically convinc-

ing, but it is remarkable for its pointed use of stage properties and dramatic irony and for its ambiguous treatment of dramatic illusion. As in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the spectators are still wondering about the plot of the play when the first "real" murder has already been executed:

**Livia (as Juno)**

*Now, for a sign of wealth and golden days,*

*Bright-ey'd prosperity—which all couples love,*

*Ay, and makes love—take that; our brother Jove*

*Never denies us of his burning treasure*

*To express bounty.*

[Isabella falls down and dies.]

**Duke**

She falls down upon't;  
What's the conceit of that?  

**Fabricio**

As o'erjoy'd belike:  
Too much prosperity o'erjoys us all,  
And she has her lapful, it seems, my lord.

**Duke**

This swerves a little from the argument though:  
Look you, my lords.  

[Showing paper.]

**Guardiano**

All's fast: now comes my part to tole him hither;  
Then, with a stamp given, he's despatch'd as cunningly  

[Aside.]

(V. i. 155–165)

A similar use of masques at the climax of the play is also to be found in some comedies rather akin in structure to the tragedies of revenge. Marston's *The Malcontent* (c. 1604) is a good example of this type. Here, too, the unmasking of the villains is achieved by means of a performance at the end of the play, although it does not end in wholesale slaughter as do the revenge tragedies. Middleton's *Your Five Gallants* (c. 1605) employs a similar technique. By assuming disguises, the five gallants reveal themselves as what they really are and precipitate their own downfall. The performance here brings out the sharp contrast between appearance and reality, between a person's assumed role and his real character. In all these
plays the inserted performances are often no more than a brief masque or dance; but all seem in some measure to be derived from *The Spanish Tragedy*, and all play more or less skillfully on the spectator's awareness of what is actually going on. They all use disguise and acting for purposes of deception and mischief.\(^{13}\)

It is clear that this motif lends itself particularly well to comic treatment, and it is indeed in comedies that we find the most intriguing use of plays within plays. Middleton seems to have been particularly fond of the device and introduced it with skillful variations into several of his comedies, most ingeniously perhaps in *A Mad World, My Masters* (*c*. 1606), where the play is not only a trick to extort some valuables from the chief spectator (as also happens more crudely in *Hengist, King of Kent*), but where even an "outsider," a constable who threatens to unmask the actors, is unexpectedly dragged into the play and tied fast before the eyes of the spectators, who completely fail to see where the play ends and the practical joke begins. They are vastly amused ("I am deceived, if this prove not a merry comedy and a witty," V.ii.129–130) and even help to confuse the identities: "This is some new player now; they put all their fools to the constable's part still" (V.ii.86–87).\(^{14}\) Similarly, in *Hengist* (*c*. 1618), Simon insists on being cheated because he wants to take part in the play, while the actor-cheats really mean business and disappear with the properties. Both plays delight in statements which emphasize this ambiguity and leave the listener uncertain as to their true meaning. Thus the Second Cheater warns Simon, who wants to play the clown's part in the comedy: "Good sir tempt me not, my part is soe written that I should cheat your worship: and you were my father."\(^{15}\) Simon thinks all this refers only to the play and agrees to be cheated.

\(^{13}\) There is an interesting scene in the history play *Woodstock* in which King Richard II and some of his men perform a masque before Woodstock immediately before his arrest. Cf. A. P. Rossiter's edition (London, 1946), iv.2. The masque seems to have been introduced mainly for the sake of dramatic contrast.


\(^{15}\) Cf. R. C. Bald's edition (New York, 1938), V.i.309 ff; I have lowered superior letters and expanded abbreviations. A similar use of a performance for the purpose of gulling can be found in Robert Tailor's *The Hog Hath Lost His Pearl*. Here, however, the "cheaters" appear in the guise of spirits, not actors.
Similarly, in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Spanish Gipsy* (1623) the demarcation line between the play proper and the play within the play is blurred. Here, however, it is the main “actor” (a young gentleman disguised as actor) who has to learn that there is more to the play than he realizes at first. His own father, who sees through the disguise, makes up the plot of a play in which a prodigal son is severely reprimanded by his father. Thus the son (playing the son’s part) is prepared by the play for the reception he will meet afterward from his “real” father. A reader of these comedies may sometimes wonder whether the characters are still acting their parts or speaking in person.

This complex use of the play within a play, often resulting in startling shifts of identities and deliberate confusion of the spectators (both on the stage and in the theater), seems to be a distinctly Jacobean feature. In most earlier plays there is a fairly clear-cut division between the two levels of acting, which nevertheless can be just as dramatically effective as the more surprising and novel techniques of later dramatists. For all their ingenuity, Middleton’s comedies are no more dramatically coherent and expressive than many earlier plays. There is rarely a deep probing into the problem of reality and illusion in them, but rather a frivolous and lighthearted experimenting with dramatic conventions. They mark, however, a noticeable advance in artistic consciousness and originality of dramatic technique.

This also applies, I would suggest, to the most elaborate example of plays within plays, Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (1626). It is a particularly good specimen of the complex and often contrived structure of many Jacobean plays, but it is a play that for its very adroitness leaves one cold. It could almost be called a scientific exploration of various ways in which plays can be introduced into other plays. The first play is staged (rather like *The Murder of Gonzago*) to exercise a salutary moral effect on some hardened sinner in the audience, but the device fails and the character addressed derives quite a different moral from the play. The second performance illustrates how a play can be mistaken for reality. Domitia

16. I am not quite certain whether Brown means more than this when he says, “So skilful a use of the play within a play is, I believe, unparalleled in Elizabethan tragedy” (“Play within a Play,” p. 45). Mere elaboration of certain conventions does not always make a good play. I quote from the Gifford edition (London, 1813), II.
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betrays her love for Paris by her violent reaction to the performance in which he is about to commit suicide:

PARIS (as Iphis)

... at your gate,

As a trophy of your pride and my affliction,

I'll presently hang myself.

DOMITIA

Not for the world—

[Starts from her seat.]

Restrain him, as you love your lives!

CÉSAR

Why are you

Transported thus, Domitia? 'tis a play;

Or, grant it serious, it at no part merits

This passion in you.

PARIS

I ne'er purposed, madam,

To do the deed in earnest; though I bow

To your care and tenderness of me.

DOMITIA

Let me, sir,

Entreat your pardon; what I saw presented,

Carried me beyond myself.

(III. ii. 387)

This is the opposite technique to that employed in The Spanish Tragedy and Women Beware Women, in which reality was mistaken for a play. Here the spectator is unmasked by the performance. Illusion serves to bring out reality. By mistaking the play for actuality, the spectator lays bare her deepest emotions. The third play illustrates another technique, the use of a play as a means of revenge, although here the device is not chosen for its efficiency but because it is considered fitting that the famous actor should die in an appropriate and dignified manner, i.e., on stage and in the course of a performance. The play performed partly parallels the action of the “main” play. Both the emperor and the actor seem to play their own lives over again up to the point where play and reality merge into one and the actor is stabbed to death by the jealous emperor. For pure ingenuity this tragedy has no equal among Jacobean plays, but the consistent exploitation of the play motif seems rather too deliberate to be entirely convincing.
There were, however, several other methods of presenting plays within plays. One device found quite frequently was that of "framing" a play and of thus removing it a step further from the audience in the theater. Whereas in all the cases we have considered so far, the "outer" play was the "main" play and the "inner" play only provided an incidental comment on it, usually confined to one or two scenes, the "framed" plays are as a rule far more substantial and extensive than the "frame," which in many cases is very slender. A case in point is Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1594). Shakespeare introduced some play metaphors into the "Induction" of the comedy and tried to make it more credible, yet he seems to have been so little interested in the frame that he dropped it completely after the first act; whereas *The Taming of a Shrew* has four interruptions by the tinker and is rounded off by his awakening, when he comments on the play and decides to apply its "moral" to his own domestic situation: 17

I know now how to tame a shrew,
I dreamt upon it all this night till now.

(xix. 15–16)

Possibly Shakespeare in fact devised a subtler ending which has been lost, but it might be argued that for him the main purpose of the frame was fulfilled with the Induction: to give the impression that we are not simply watching a play, but a performance, a dream, an illusion. Here, of course, the play is introduced mainly as an entertainment, and the lighthearted plot of the Induction, too, emphasizes the amusing character of the whole performance.

Sometimes, however, and this seems to be a technique developed by the "University Wits," the frame serves to introduce a play that is not so much an entertainment as a dramatic exemplum, a demonstration of some moral. One of the earliest examples of this use of the "framed" play is the anonymous *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1582). Here the frame consists of a formal debate between Venus and Fortune, with

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Jupiter acting as arbiter. As the quarrel cannot be decided by arguments, a series of historical "shows," i.e., tableaux vivants, presenting famous victims of the power of Love and Fortune, is produced by Mercury. Even this, however, proves to be inconclusive, whereupon Jupiter suggests that the two rival goddesses should both try to interfere in the fate of two lovers to be presented before their eyes. They are in turn favored by Venus and crossed by Fortune. Each act ends with a "triumph": At first Fortune seems to carry the day; after another act, Venus has gained the upper hand, until at last they agree that they are both equal and both subject to Wisdom.

It is obvious that the play and its frame are very closely interrelated. The play seems to grow out of the debate between Love and Fortune and illustrates their conflict. On the other hand, the play gains in depth through the frame because it is not only an entertaining love story (as it would be without the frame) but a moral exemplum. The frame constantly reminds us that the story is not presented for its own sake but for its deeper significance. The frame also establishes a certain barrier between the audience in the theater and the play, because we see the two lovers and their fate only through the eyes of the disputing parties, who are always present on the stage and watch the performance.

The frame also has a more dramatic function. It creates the illusion that the fate of the lovers has not yet been decided. Jupiter's request to Venus and Fortune implies that the story is still in progress and that the outcome is only to be decided by the conflicting exertions of Love and Fortune. The brief debates after each act provide a running commentary on the action, and they also heighten the dramatic tension by vague prophecies, as after the third act, when Venus seems to triumph and Fortune replies: 18

Brag not too much, what thinkst thou I haue doon?
Nay soft not yet, my sport is not begun.

(976–977)

There is thus a very effective interplay between the two planes of action, and the device of the play within a play seems very skillfully adapted to the

purpose of this dramatic debate. It is interesting to note that technically the
frame of Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy is very similar, although it serves
quite a different dramatic purpose. It shows, however, how closely related
some seemingly disparate types of Elizabethan drama are.19

Another example of this use of the "framed" play is Greene's James the
Fourth (c. 1590), where again the play is part of an argument between two
characters who stand outside and view the performance. Here, too, the
argument begins with some "shows," and the play proper only emerges
after the first act. It seems, however, to have interested the dramatist more
than the frame, because the characters who introduce the shows and the
play recede into the background and neither interrupt the performance nor
reappear at the end, so that the frame seems more like an induction.20

A later and much more elaborate use of the same device is to be found in
Fletcher's early play Four Plays or Moral Representations in One (c. 1612).
The title is significant because it makes quite clear that the four short plays,
for all their melodramatic qualities and wealth of lively incident, are
dramatic exempla; they could almost be described (like Gorboduc and
some other early Elizabethan plays) as a dramatized "Mirror for Magis-
trates." The frame presents Emanuel, king of Portugal and Castile, who is
about to celebrate his marriage. The four plays performed for him are part
of the wedding festivities. The Prologue explicitly, though modestly,
draws a parallel between the virtues embodied in the royal couple and
those "our weak Scenes can show." 21 After each performance the king
draws the appropriate conclusion and thus proves an ideal spectator. His
speech after the first play is particularly interesting because it obviously
outlines the dramatist's own conception of his art and its moral function:

What hurt's now in a Play, against which some rail
So vehemently? thou and I, my love,
Make excellent use methinks: I learn to be

Tragédies de Sénèque et le théâtre de la Renaissance, ed. J. Jacquot (Paris, 1964),
pp. 175-187.
20. Cf. E. Welsford, The Court Masque (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 279 ff., and
Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions, p. 45. Peele's The Old Wives Tale is also
a very interesting example of the use of "framed" plays by the "University Wits."
21. See the edition by A. Glover and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1905-1912),
X, 287 ff.
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A lawful lover void of jealousie,
And thou a constant wife. Sweet Poetry's
A flower, where men, like Bees and Spiders, may
Bear poison, or else sweets and Wax away.
Be venom-drawing Spiders they that will;
I'll be the Bee, and suck the honey still.

(p. 312)

It is thus quite clear that the four plays are primarily didactic and exemplify abstract ideas, as can also be seen from the four "triumphs" following the plays. In these "triumphs" the leading idea of each play is repeated and illustrated by an allegorical pageant, very like some of the "Royal Entries" staged by the populace for their monarchs during the English Renaissance. It seems obvious that Fletcher was greatly influenced by earlier practices and by a conception of the purpose of dramatic art which he does not appear to have followed in his later plays. The use of plays within plays thus proved to be particularly effective when they illustrated the didactic function of drama, because it enabled the dramatist to describe explicitly the lesson he wished the audience to derive from his play.

This use of the "framed" play is, of course, very closely related to some of the more elaborate "inductions" in many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. A full treatment of these inductions would also have to take into account the various forms of the chorus and the presenter and their origins in classical tragedy as well as in the moralities. It is a fascinating subject which has not, I think, been adequately dealt with yet. I wish only to draw attention to some forms of the chorus and the induction which seem to turn the play about to be performed into a play within a play, or at least to make it quite clear that it is "only" a play by insisting on its artificial character. There seem to be at least two ways of doing this.


One is to present the actors without disguise before the beginning of the actual play, to show the preparations for the performance and thus to stress its illusionary nature. Chettle and Munday's Robin Hood plays, *The Downfall* and *Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* (1598), make very effective use of this device. We watch all the excitement before a dramatic performance, the choice of play, the talk about various technicalities, and the beginning of the play proper, under the supervision of the poet Skelton, who then proceeds to act as chorus and to explain the plot of the play to the audience. The didactic intention is not very obtrusive here. The chief function of the frame is to introduce the actors and to create the atmosphere of a theatrical entertainment. Thus a very close contact is established between the actors and the spectators. The play does not pretend to any "realism," but is frankly presented as a piece of make-believe that can be shortened or drawn out at the audience's pleasure, as becomes clear halfway through the second part when Skelton begins to recite an epilogue but is interrupted by a fellow actor, who requests that Mathilda's story be presented to its end as well.

This dramatic use of the induction later became common in comedies as an effective way of playing with dramatic conventions and of "disillusioning" the audience. In Jonson's comedies, in particular, the actors sometimes pretend to enter into a kind of conspiracy with the spectators against the author or some fellow actors, to draw the audience into their confidence and to comment on the play. This proves that it is misleading to talk of Jacobean drama as becoming more "realistic," as is sometimes done, because these playful inductions suggest that the dramatist's "realism" is often nothing but another artistic device and is not intended to be understood as a true copying of actuality.

Another use of inductions is related to the popular pageants and the earlier interludes: The characters constituting the "frame" of the play are personifications, allegorical figures, or various deities like Venus and Fortune in *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*. Thus the anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women* (c. 1599) begins with a dispute between Tragedy, Comedy, and History. Tragedy carries the argument and begins to introduce the play as a kind of presenter. She also interprets it at regular

25. E.g., *Cynthia's Revels*. 
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intervals, pointing the moral and commenting on the action. Again the
play is thus distinctly characterized as a play, and the allegorical frame
serves to bring out the exemplary meaning of the action, its “message.”

A similar introduction is to be found in the anonymous history play The
Valiant Welshman (c. 1612). It begins almost like a masque:

Fortune descends downe from heauen to the Stage, and then shee cals foorth
four Harpers, that by the sound of their Musicke they might awake the ancient
Bardh, a kind of Welsh Poet, who long agoe was there intoombed.

FORTUNE
Thus from the high Imperiall Seate of loue,
Romes awfull Goddess, Chaunce, descends to view
This Stage and Theater of mortall men,
Whose acts and scenes diuisible by me,
Sometime present a swelling Tragedy
Of discontented men: sometimes againe
My smiles can mould him to a Comicke vayne.

(A 4')

The bard then explains the history about to be presented and acts as chorus.
It is interesting to see how the device of the induction is here combined
with the familiar idea of the world as a stage. In the eyes of Fortune, past
and present are one. The “Stage and Theater of mortall men” for her has
no more reality than the performance on the actual stage. By watching
history of the past as a dramatic entertainment, the spectators may learn to
practice the same detached attitude toward life and to see themselves
within the context of the perennial drama of history. Similar ideas are
often implied in plays within plays, and this seems to me to point to the
close relationship between the device of the play within a play and the
convention of the chorus-induction, not only in a technical sense but in
expressing a similar idea of the dramatist’s art and its illusionary charac-

26. Cf. my The Elizabethan Dumb Show, pp. 90–96, for a discussion of this play.
27. Tudor Facsimile Texts, ed. Farmer (1913). Among these forms of introduc-
tion might also be counted the frequent appeals to the spectators’ imagination
(cf. Shakespeare’s Pericles III.11–14 and many others). They also give the impression
that the play to be performed is a play within a play.
There is, finally, another technique which seems to me to bear some relation to the convention of the play within a play. By means of this technique part of the play itself is observed and commented on by some characters from the play as if it were a kind of performance for them. Again The Spanish Tragedy provides one of the earliest examples. In Act I, scene ii, Balthazar is led across the stage by Lorenzo and Horatio. The king, together with Hieronimo, watches them and asks for some explanations. Thus Balthazar and Horatio are introduced to the audience by means of a presenter (Hieronimo), and for a short time they appear to us like the characters in an inserted play.

In a similar though much more elaborate manner, Pandarus (as a kind of presenter) introduces the Trojan warriors in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida (c. 1602) by describing them to his niece: 28

_Hector passes_

PANDARUS

That’s Hector, that, that, look you, that; there’s a fellow! Go thy way, Hector! There’s a brave man, niece. O brave Hector! Look how he looks. There’s a countenance! Is’t not a brave man?

(I. ii. 191–194)

Here the audience is given not only a lively portrait of Hector, but one that is comically distorted and reveals more about the commentator than about the person who is thus described. In this respect the scene has much in common with some play scenes. The “audience” is characterized by its reaction to the “play,” and the characters in this “play”—Antenor, Hector, Paris, and Troilus—seem to be removed from the actual play, if only for a short moment. They seem to perform a part for the amusement of Pandarus and Cressida, and we see them at first only through the eyes of the busybody. The technique is further developed in the last act where Troilus becomes a spectator and has to watch Cressida’s faithlessness without being able to interfere. Diomedes and Cressida, without knowing it, seem to perform a play for Ulysses and Troilus (who in turn are observed by Thersites, who adds his own venomous comments). It is obvious that our own impression of the action is deeply influenced and qualified by

28. I quote from P. Alexander’s text (The Tudor Shakespeare) in four volumes (London and Glasgow, 1958), III.
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this dramatic technique. Both Cressida’s betrayal and the disillusion of Troilus are presented to us at a distance, and we are likely to react to them in a more detached way than we would if they had been presented without any comment and if a simpler dramatic technique had been employed. Our disgust, or pity, for Cressida is softened by the distance between her and us; likewise our compassion for Troilus is qualified by the comments of Thersites, which, although they are by no means “endorsed” by the whole play, yet succeed in making Troilus an object rather than a character with whom we want to identify ourselves.

This technique seems to me to be typical of Jacobean rather than Elizabethan drama. It suggests what has been called an “experimenting with points of view and approaches.” In no other play can this technique be better studied than in Webster’s two masterpieces. J. R. Brown has drawn attention to Webster’s frequent use of commentators on the action. Thus in the first scene of The Duchess of Malfi (c. 1614), Antonio gives a detailed description of Ferdinand and the cardinal while they are both on stage and engaged in some private dialogue. The audience therefore has had a (not unbiased) account of them before they have had time to reveal themselves by their own speeches and actions. In a later scene (III.i.48–59) the reaction of the two brothers to the news of their sister’s marriage is observed and described by two or three frightened onlookers, and we are made to see it through their eyes. Again the situation is very much like a play within a play. Similarly, the banishment of the duchess is only presented as a dumb show and commented on by two pilgrims who have no other function in the play than to provide this detached commentary on the action. Even more striking is the way in which the murders of Isabella and Camillo in The White Devil (c. 1612) are “performed” in dumb show like plays within plays, with Brachiano watching and enjoying the success of his own stratagems.

There is perhaps no direct connection between this technique of commented action and indirect plot presentation, on the one hand, and the
simpler forms of plays within plays, on the other; but the use of these devices often seems to proceed from a similar attitude of the dramatist toward his characters. In The Duchess of Malfi, Brown remarks, "the main characters 'live' as if they played on a stage and tried, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, various disguises" (p. 1).31 The dramatist does not take sides, but often leaves the spectator to choose between various disguises put on by the play's characters.32 Webster stresses this actor-like quality of his characters by frequently making them objects for the observation of others, just as in many plays containing plays some of the actors become objects and some spectators. The action seems to take place on several levels simultaneously, and this makes an active cooperation of the audience necessary.

In most of the earlier Elizabethan plays these techniques, if employed at all, serve rather more simple purposes. They either underline the didactic and moral function of the play, as in some plays of the "University Wits," or else they introduce an element of playful experimentation with dramatic conventions. The Spanish Tragedy seems a combination of both; it skillfully exploits a great variety of dramatic devices which before had never been used in a single play side by side.

Later dramatists, especially Shakespeare, Webster, and Middleton, introduce plays within plays or similar techniques toward more complex ends. By presenting action on more than one level, the dramatist can imply ambiguous and provocative comments on his characters and their deeds; he can give a detached view of certain dramatic situations and thus leave the audience unsure about their moral bearings. In comedy this can lead to a bewildering confusion of identities and a grotesque distortion of reality. In serious drama it often means a deep probing into the very nature of reality and the validity of certain moral positions.

The play within a play, then, proved to be one of the most versatile and adaptable dramatic conventions. Its development from a fairly straightforward device toward a highly complex and not easily definable dramatic

31. J. Kott's interpretation of Hamlet (Shakespeare Our Contemporary, pp. 48-61) contains similar ideas. See also the beginning of The Revenger's Tragedy and Marston's Antonio and Mellida (Act I, the reception of the suitors) for the same technique.
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 technique is an important aspect of the history of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and a fuller investigation—for which this essay can only be a very slight preliminary sketch—would probably reveal many interesting correspondences. Apart from the wider philosophic and aesthetic implications discussed by Fiedler and Nelson, the play within a play seems to me a particularly striking example of the diffuse and experimental character of English Renaissance drama, of its astonishing capacity for assimilating diverse conventions and for creating coherent and unified works of art out of seemingly contradictory elements of style.