

***‘A Hierarchy of Competing Reals’: Metatheatre,
Fictional Worlds and Representation in Thomas
Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy***

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Abstract

The paper is concerned with the metatheatrical aspect of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. It argues that the confusion generated by the play is due to its unique ontological structure with its characteristically proliferating fictional worlds. The paper addresses these issues using modern theories of fictionality, like possible worlds and make-believe theories, as metatheatre incarnates the multiplicity of worlds and as its effect is generated by the success of the make-believe games. Through this analysis the play is shown to decentralize the concept of the ‘actual’, redefines the concept of mimesis itself, and emphasizes the peculiarity and indispensability of dramatic representation in general.

هرمية الواقع المتعدد: ما وراء المسرح، العوالم الخيالية والتصوير المسرحي في مسرحية (التراجيديا الاسبانية) لتوماس كيد

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المخلص

تتناول الدراسة الجنبية ما وراء المسرحية في مسرحية (التراجيديا الاسبانية) لتوماس كيد. تذهب الدراسة الى ان الفوضى المعرفية والتصويرية الناتجة عن المسرحية ترجع بالاساس الى بنيتها الوجودية الخاصة والتي تتميز بالتوليد المستمر للعوالم الخيالية فيها. تقوم الدراسة بمقاربة هذه المواضيع باستخدام النظريات الحديثة حول التخيل الفني، مثل نظرية العوالم الممكنة وفعل التظاهر، لان ظاهرة ما وراء المسرح تنسم بتعدد العوالم التخيلية وتعتمد في نجاحها على الاتفاق الضمني على التظاهر بالتصديق والانخراط باللعبة المسرحية. من خلال التحليل تبين الدراسة بان هذه المسرحية تعمد الى تحييد مفهوم العالم الحقيقي وتعيد تعريف مفهوم المحاكاة وتؤكد على خصوصية وحتمية التصوير المسرحي.

In the theatricalist play [metatheatre] the dramaturgy of plot and character is subject to a prior condition, the dramaturgy of incommensurate ontological realms. These dramatic worlds relate to each other as a hierarchy of competing reals.

(Fuchs 2006, 42)

Elinor Fuchs here emphatically places the essence of metatheatrical drama in its ontological structure, to which all other dramatic elements should be subordinated. The words 'incommensurate' and 'hierarchy' are particularly revealing, since they emphasize the relativity and multiplicity of ontological spheres in such plays. Although questions of the relativity of existence might be regarded as characteristic of postmodern thinking, these issues featured prominently in early modern metatheatre. Early modern drama showed an infinitely subtle, if barely explored, sense of reality which emphasized the relativity of ontological concepts. In this regard, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1588-1592) is emblematic of this metatheatrical tendency. The play is accredited as the first to use the play-within-a-play technique, alongside a long list of 'first's, like being the first revenge tragedy, the first play that mixes comic and tragic elements, etc. (Erne 2006, 96)⁽¹⁾. Moreover, its centrality to the canon of Renaissance drama is evidenced by its exceptional popularity in the period as well as by the lasting influence it exerted on later drama. Through its multiple dramatic levels, the play generates a multiplicity of fictional worlds which are subtly oscillating in this incessant competition of ontological 'reals'.

The metatheatrical aspect of *The Spanish Tragedy* has garnered sustained critical attention. James Shapiro (1973), for example,

points out that the play is unique in staging violence which other plays keep offstage. He relates that to the tradition in Elizabethan England of hanging and scaffold executions. Similarly, Molly Smith (1992) shrewdly points to the correlation in the period between stage and scaffold, for Tyburn gallows and Triple Tree (places for staging capital punishment meted out on convicted criminals) are erected in the same decade which witnessed the establishment of the first public theatre in England. Lukas Erne (1996), on the other hand, addresses many theatrical ironies in the play, and points out that the play shows Kyd's dramatic achievement and his expertise as a man of the stage. William N. West (2008) considers the play's investment in staging confusion as part of the performative force of the play. In the same vein, Gregory M. Colon Semenza (2010) treats the play's metatheatricality as a tool whereby the play dramatizes the epistemological indeterminacy of post-Reformation England. It is cognitive in working on the audience's perception of the intended confusion that it creates. Its metatheatricality consists in consciously foregrounding these issues, which exerted lasting influence on later Renaissance drama.

This study approaches the metatheatrical aspects of the play in terms of the notion of fictional worlds. It argues that the play deals with the issue of theatricality by questioning the nature and the status of the 'real' itself. The metatheatrical structure of the play consists in creating multiple, 'incommensurate' dramatic levels. Informed as it is by 'possible worlds' theory, the study puts forward a reading of the play which views these dramatic levels as hierarchically layered fictional worlds. The play's engagement with theatricality is manifested through its use of fictional worlds. The play presents multiple fictional worlds, each being considered actual from the

perspective of its inhabitants. Consequently, the 'real' is presented as a matter of perspective, and as a relative, not absolute concept. Besides, the play's confusion is created by breaking boundaries between these worlds. As a result, characters can be viewed to dwell in and belong to different worlds. This multiplicity of worlds also fosters the confusion for the on-stage and real world audiences. Therefore, the actual world is no longer regarded as the sole object of representation, as each fictional world in the play is presented as an imitation of another fictional world. Thus, the epistemological indeterminacy and cognitive confusion that previous scholarship has identified in *The Spanish Tragedy* is the result of a deeper ontological interrogation of the nature and status of the real.

In order to explore the ontological hierarchy of the play, we will have recourse to some modern theories of fictionality, namely possible worlds and make-believe theories. Possible worlds theory advances the view that the 'actual' world is a relative concept: each possible world can be considered actual from the perspective of its inhabitants⁽²⁾. Thus, a fictional world should be seen as a self-contained reality with its own system of actual and possible states of affairs. Consequently, possible worlds theory is specifically relevant to metatheatre because the latter is remarkable for creating an ontologically layered reality with multiple fictional worlds. This view is fertile in studying *The Spanish Tragedy*, since each of the various performances in the play claims to form a self-contained reality, a reality whose inhabitants consider as actual. Moreover, the 'possibility' component of possible worlds theory is fruitful in shedding light on the deterministic poetics of *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as the (un)predictable nature of the dramatic performances within it. Make-believe theory is well represented in the work of

Kendall Walton (1990) and it treats fiction as analogous to children games of make-believe. The success of the game depends on the mutual cooperation and understanding of the two sides of that game. In metatheatre, this process is repeated with the introduction of every new dramatic level. Make-believe theory is particularly informative in case of the violation of that agreement, as in the case of *Soliman and Perseda* in Kyd's play.

The analysis below investigates the ontological structure of the fictional worlds in *The Spanish Tragedy* and its relation to the unique representational practices in the play. It mainly centres around four dimensions: (1) the interrogation of the real/fictional distinction in different dramatic worlds in the play, (2) the interrogation of the actual world as the sole source for imitation, (3) the indispensibility of dramatic representation, and (4) the peculiarity of that representation.

I

The first metatheatrical aspect in the play is the re-thinking of the nature of the real itself. The play re-defines and calls into question the real/fictional dichotomy: every world (or dramatic level) can be viewed simultaneously as both real and fictional from different perspectives. Moreover, *The Spanish Tragedy* plays off these worlds against each other in 'a hierarchy of competing reals'. As we shall show below, this is a source for confusion for the spectators, since what they take as real will turn out to be fictional, and what they thought to be fictional, will appear to be real. The philosophical and literary questions of actuality, fictionality and border-crossing have been chiefly the object of investigation of

possible worlds theorists. Thus, to fully understand these issues, we need to probe theory's take on the concepts 'actual' and 'fictional'⁽³⁾.

Possible worlds theory views the concepts of actuality and possibility as relative ones. David Lewis, for example, endorses the 'indexical' theory of actuality. An indexical is a term whose reference is not fixed, but varies with the context of utterance, like the words 'I', 'here' and 'now'. According to that theory, the term 'actual' has no fixed reference. Inhabitants of each possible world call their world 'actual' and consider other worlds as possible. Thus, although a world might be considered possible relative to our actual world, that possible world is considered 'actual' by its own inhabitants (Lewis 1970, 184-5; 1973, 85-6). Lewis's indexical theory of 'actuality' has inspired Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of 'recentering'. According to Ryan, whenever we are recentered in a given world, that world will be considered as an 'actual' world. When we read or watch a work of fiction, we get recentered in the fictional world created by that work. So, for the duration of our immersion in it, that fictional world becomes our main system of reality and we tend to think of it as our *actual* world. Thus, that world is considered 'actual' by its inhabitants, although it is still considered as a possible world from the perspective of our actual world. By the same token, when a new fictional world is created within the first one, that second world will be considered as actual by its inhabitants although it is seen as merely possible from the vantage point of the first (embedding) fictional world (Ryan 1991, 22).

The concepts of the multiplicity of worlds and the relativity of 'actuality' are particularly relevant to metatheatre, especially the play-within-a-play. Metatheatre chiefly raises ontological issues,

since it mainly features layered ontological realms in the fictional world. The play-within-a-play presents multiple dramatic levels or fictional worlds embedded within one another. According to Elinor Fuchs, “in the theatricalist play [metatheatre] the dramaturgy of plot and character is subject to a prior condition, the dramaturgy of incommensurate ontological realms. These dramatic worlds relate to each other as a hierarchy of competing reals” (2006, 42). Thus, although the whole play is a possible world relative to our actual world, its characters consider it as their actual world. When a play-within-a-play is performed, it is considered fictional from the vantage perspective of the actual world’s audience and the original play’s characters; however, the inhabitants of that play-within-a-play consider it as fully actual. Moreover, the outer frames acquire a sense of actuality at the expense of the inner levels. In plays like *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, “highlighting the obvious theatricality of the play-within-a-play serves to heighten the apparent ‘reality’ of the surrounding action” (White 1998, 96)⁽⁴⁾. From the point of view of actual world spectators, the fictionality of the play-within-a-play heightens the sense of reality of the original play.

The Spanish Tragedy lends itself readily to this analysis, since it is matchlessly rich in creating these multiple ontological levels or fictional worlds. The play is composed of three embedded dramatic worlds. The first world is inhabited by Andrea and Revenge; the second world contains all the other characters of the play’s fictional world. The third world is a play-within-a-play, *Soliman and Perseda*, which is performed by some characters that inhabit the second world. So, we end up watching Andrea and Revenge, who are watching the stage characters (such as the King, Viceroy, Horatio, etc.) who in turn are watching a playlet performed by some of the original cast

(Hieronimo, Balthazar, Bel-imperia and Lorenzo.). We will call the first world the ‘frame’; the second world, which comprises most of *The Spanish Tragedy*, is the ‘inset’; and will call the third world, *Soliman and Perseda*, the ‘playlet’. Although they are quantitatively dissimilar, the inset and the playlet are both plays-within-a-play⁽⁵⁾.

Each of the three worlds claims a relative reality of its own in a cacophony of ‘competing reals’. In possible worlds terms, the frame is a fictional world from the perspective of our actual world. it is an actual world for Andrea and Revenge. The inset is a fictional world from the perspective of Andrea and Revenge; yet, it is perfectly real to its own inhabitants. From the perspective of the inset’s characters, the playlet is merely a fictional world, but to its inhabitants it should be seen as actual. The fictionality of the playlet fosters the reality of the inset, and the inset’s fictionality fosters the reality of the frame. Thus, the reality of each of these worlds is relative: it can be simultaneously seen both as actual and fictional. This relativity of the concept of the ‘actual’ itself has generated the epistemological indeterminacy and cognitive confusion of *The Spanish Tragedy*. On the one hand, each fictional world is presented from a double perspective as both fictional and actual. As we are tempted to think of each world as actual and realistic, we are simultaneously being reminded of its theatricality and fictionality. On the other hand, the boundaries between these worlds are made spongy and, as a result, characters might be said to belong to more than one fictional world at a time. These confusions, as we shall see later, have profound metatheatrical and philosophical significance to the spectators.

The inset is the main fictional world in *The Spanish Tragedy*. It can be seen from a double perspective as both fictional and actual.

From one perspective, the world of the inset is fully actual. The sense of actuality of the inset is fostered by the reality of its events as well as the existence of avowedly fictional events in it. The inset is presented as an ontologically autonomous world at the centre of which stands an absolutely established textual actual world; the events of the inset's world are presented as absolute facts. Moreover, characters are recentered at that world and they treat it as their actual world. As a result of this recentering, the characters and spectators consider the inset's world as their native domain. Everything happening throughout the inset is presented as real. The murders and executions committed are frighteningly real. The losses they suffer are irrecoverable. Characters feel genuine pain for their loss (Viceroy, Hieronimo and Isabella), and feel profound love and burn in desire to consummate it (Horatio, Balthazar, and Bel-Imperia). We get immersed into that world and will empathize with them accordingly. Even Andrea, who inhabits the world of the frame⁽⁶⁾, also treats the inset as his native domain, and to him the world of the inset is "painfully real" (Richter 1964, 79). For example, When Revenge brings him back to watch the inset's action, he bursts out: "Brought'st me hither to increase my pain?" (2.6.1). So, these characters treat the inset's world exactly the same way we treat our actual world.

The actuality of the inset's world is also affirmed by the fictional events it contains. One category of these events includes what Ryan (1991) calls 'alternative possible worlds': states of affairs which characters construct mentally but which have no actual realization. Characters harbour hopes, cherish beliefs and set plans for future action. Some of these states are realized in the course of the action while others remain mere possibilities. However, these

possibilities help enhance our feeling of the actuality of that world. If what did not happen remains a possibility, then that which happened should only be seen as forcibly actual. The other fictional event within the inset is the playlet, *Soliman and Perseda*. The presence of the playlet as a fictional piece of work scripted, directed and acted out by some characters of the inset also gives the impression that the inset itself cannot be fictional. In Fuchs's words, the inset is the playlet's surrounding, 'more constant real'. A world in which fictions are constructed should be actual, just like our own world in which people write, perform and respond to innumerable fictions.

Yet, as the inset's reality is emphasized, its fictionality and theatricality are equally foregrounded. This double perspective makes the inset utterly confusing to spectators. As spectators get immersed in the world of the inset, they are simultaneously expelled from the inset, being constantly reminded of its apparent theatricality. The fictionality of the world of the inset is emphasized through three strategies: the relation established between the inset and the frame, the inset's theatricality and play-like status, as well as the deterministic poetics of the frame.

The first indicator of the theatricality of the inset is its relationship to the frame. As far as the relation between the world of the inset and the frame is concerned, the inset is embedded in but separate from the world of the frame. There is a one-way accessibility between the two worlds: the characters of the frame know about what happens in the inset's world, but not vice versa. More significantly, the fact that the play opens and closes with the speeches of Andrea and Revenge gives a compelling impression that the main action in *The Spanish Tragedy* is no more than a play-

within-play, watched by Andrea and Revenge (See Coursen 1968, 772; Chu 2008, 159). This embeddedness of the inset serves to endow it with fictionality and endow the frame with actuality. Thus, the actuality of a given world is a matter of perspective: as the characters of the inset consider their world to be actual, those of the frame look at it as a fictional world. Metatheatre draws the attention of the spectators to these facts, pushing them to speculate, as one character in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search for an Author* speculates, that they might be characters in a play which is being watched by an audience of a higher sphere.

The second indicator of the fictionality of the world of the inset is its play-like status, concretized as it is with its highly theatre-laden language. Consequently, the inset self-consciously draws attention to its own theatricality. As Patricia Waugh persuasively observes, metafiction foregrounds the fictionality of the literary work as it denies its capacity to project a self-contained possible world (1984, 100). Similarly, Hilary Dannenberg points out that, in contrast to realist fiction, metafiction shatters the sense of a self-contained fictional world by expelling the reader/spectator away from that world (2008, 42). By using that theatricalist language, the play is reminding its spectators of its own ontological status, namely as a work of fiction.

The theatricality of the play is self-consciously exposed in *The Spanish Tragedy* using several tools, such as the heavy use of theatrical terminology. Murderers, for example, are called authors of tragedies (1.1.87-8; 2.5.39) or actors in tragedies (3.7.41). Characters also call their plans 'plots' or 'complots' (3.2.100; 3.4.40). Moreover, characters in the play speak about themselves as acting out and

playing roles. Pedringano, for example, finds himself playing the man (3.3.29) and playing the priest (3.3.38). Characters also take recourse to dissembling: Hieronimo advises Isabella to “cease thy complaints, / Or at the least dissemble them awhile” until they discover the identity of Horatio’s murderers (2.5.61); and Hieronimo later reiterates his intention of “Dissembling quiet in unquietness” (3.13.30). Bel-Imperia discloses to Hieronimo that she is concealing her hatred just to have the opportunity to wreak vengeance: “Although I bear it out for fashion’s sake” (4.1.24). The conscious playing, dissembling and self-fashioning by characters point to the general theatricality in the play. Characters are always playing some other personas as their situation prescribes. This sweeping theatricality in *The Spanish Tragedy* might also reflect the general theatricality of the early modern English society⁽⁷⁾. To its own spectators, the play is a reminder of the theatricality of their own daily life in its social, political and religious aspects.

Further, we are constantly reminded that the inset is no more than a play being watched by Andrea and Revenge: “Here sit we down to see the mystery / And serve for Chorus in this tragedy” (1.1.90-1)⁽⁸⁾. Even the inset’s characters are acutely aware of a removed fourth wall, of a world of surveillance where everything is being watched. Like actors on stage (which these characters really are!), all the characters’ actions are being attentively watched. For example, in their second rendezvous, Horatio and Bel-Imperia have been betrayed by Pedringano and are being monitored by Lorenzo and Balthazar. The exchange, mingled with that of their on-stage ‘audience’, is tellingly indicative of that tragic ‘drama’:

Horatio. The less I speak, the more I meditate.

Bel-Imperia. But whereupon dost thou chiefly meditate

Horatio. On dangers past, and pleasures to ensue.

Balthazar. *On pleasures past, and dangers to ensue.*

Bel-Imperia. What danger and what pleasures dost thou mean?

Horatio. Dangers of war and pleasures of our love.

Lorenzo. *Dangers of death, but pleasures none at all.* (2.2.25-31, emphasis added)

The intermittent intervention of Balthazar and Lorenzo are alarmingly reminiscent of Revenge's interventions with the story and the dialogue of the inset. In a more striking parallel, as Revenge vowed to turn the joy of the inset's characters' into misery, Lorenzo and Balthazar are issuing the same 'threat' to the lovers. Consequently, as the inset proves to be a play scripted and predetermined by Revenge, the two lovers' meetings appear as no more than a tragedy performed and orchestrated by Lorenzo and Balthazar. Again, an ever new play is being performed within this play within a play. Thus, as the fourth wall of theatre is only an illusion, the secrecy these characters think to enjoy is likewise illusory. This would bring home the parallel their entire life has with a theatrical performance. This also adds up to the unsettling confusion of the actual world spectators who will identify with the inset's characters. What if these spectators are also being closely watched like the characters they are watching now?! The play might be making a point about the espionage strategies of the police state which are awfully familiar to its original spectators at the last decade of Elizabeth I's reign.

The third indicator of the fictionality of the inset is the deterministic atmosphere of the frame. Revenge treats the inset as a play already scripted, whose events are teleologically directed to a set end. The events, most notably fate of characters, are irreversibly predetermined by Revenge. In his first address to Andrea, Revenge tells the beleaguered worrier to sit down and see his murderer “Don Balthazar, prince of Portingale, / Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia” (1.1.88-9). His promise, we come to discover, augurs ill for Balthazar. To Andrea’s complaints of delay, Revenge retorts with his habitual confidence: “Be still, Andrea, ere we go from hence, / I’ll turn their friendship into fell despite” (1.5.5-6). In the theatrically-loaded language we mentioned above, Revenge assumes the author status. In other words, Revenge can be seen as an image of Thomas Kyd himself. We can just imagine Kyd attending the play’s first performance at The Rose and, pressed by his colleagues about absence of justice in his play, he assures them that all villains will be murdered by the end of the play.

However, this predetermined end of the inset is disorientingly paradoxical. As a scripted play, it should leave no room for any contingencies. However, as it is composed of events that unfold in time, the inset is a string of purely contingent events, where every event could have been otherwise. Horatio and Bel-Imperia could have escaped the trap; Hieronimo could have missed Bel-Imperia’s or Pedringano’s letters; Bel-Imperia could have fallen in love with Balthazar, and so forth. Any mutation of these events could have failed Revenge’s script. That is to say, the inset can be seen as full of possibilities (from the viewpoint of its characters) and as virtually devoid of any possibility (from the viewpoint of the frame’s characters). This would raise Revenge to a divine, God-like status,

since events ultimately adhere to his script. This is insistently metatheatrical: real world spectators might identify with the inset's characters and accordingly speculate if the free will they think to cherish is a mere illusion where everything is actually predetermined by God. The play might be commenting on the conflict between the determinism of Calvinist theology and the non-determinism of Pelagianist belief in early modern England (See Erne 2006, 103).

Thus far, we have observed that the play problematizes the ontological and representational status of the inset, thereby generating utter cognitive confusion for its spectators. But the play goes even further in complicating these concepts with the insertion of the playlet of *Soliman and Perseda*. For while the boundaries that set the frame from the inset are solid enough, there are no clear boundaries between the inset and the playlet. In the play-within-a-play, boundary-crossing is essential to the movement from one fictional world to the next. For characters to move into the new fictional world of the play-within-a-play, they need to cross the boundaries between the original fictional world to the world of the play-within-a-play. Possible worlds theory sufficiently illuminates the mechanisms of boundary-crossing. Marie-Laure Ryan discerns two types of boundaries to be crossed: ontological and illocutionary. Since the movement between dramatic levels results in creating new fictional worlds, the two kinds of boundary-crossing correspond to Ryan's two prerequisites for fiction-making: recentering and the embedded speech act, respectively. According to her, "Ontological boundaries delimit domains within the semantic universe, and their crossing is a recentering into a new system of reality. Illocutionary boundaries delimit speech acts within a text or a conversation, and their crossing introduces a new speaker or a new narrator" (1991,

175). Only when the two kinds of boundaries are actually crossed could we have the true case of fiction within fiction.

Consequently, the ontological status of the playlet itself is complicated since the ontological and illocutionary boundaries are not equally crossed by all players. Lorenzo and Balthazar are ontologically and illocutionarily recentered within the fictional world of the playlet; but Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia seem to be only ontologically recentered in the playlet. Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia do not engage in a simple act of pretence, which Ryan, following Searle (1975), considers as a criterion of fictionality. It is an act of deception, not pretence⁽⁹⁾. Hieronimo and Bel-imperia pretend that they pretend that they act as the Bashaw and Preside, respectively. As a result, even the ontological crossing does not obtain. While they are thought to be recentered in the world of the embedded story, Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia are still acting according to their native system of reality - that of inset. Because they believe in the fictionality of the playlet, the inset's characters think that the murders are feigned. But, as that fiction was not sustainable, the murders 'really' took place within the world of the inset itself, and, therefore, they are disappointingly actual. Hence the on-stage audience's stunning shock when this 'fact' is uncovered by Hieronimo. Even Hieronimo's declaration of the end of the playlet is just a formal one: "Here break we off our sundry languages / And thus conclude I in our vulgar tongue" (4.4.74-5). The fiction has already ended, or it had not begun in the first place: "Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts, / That this is fabulously counterfeit" (76-7). The ambivalence of the stance of Hieronimo and Bel-imperia rendered the boundaries between these layered systems of reality porous. What was thought to be fictional has turned out to be real! However, the

play is becoming here piquantly ironical: from the point of view of the actual world audiences, these deaths, now lamented as ‘real’, are just fictional ones, given the fact that the whole *The Spanish Tragedy* is just a fictional artefact, itself based on act of pretence.

The confusion created by the playlet is due to its dubious fictional status of its world: up to its end, we are not sure whether or not the playlet constitutes a self-contained, homogenous, and fully autonomous fictional world. In it fiction and reality are hardly distinguishable. This rare phenomenon can also be accounted for in terms of Kendall Walton’s theory of fictionality as games of make-believe. The game depends on a mutual agreement between two sides. The two sides of the game agree to use one thing as a prop whose presence prescribes some imaginings: when one side uses the prop, the other will pretend to imagine what the prop fictionally stands for. The success of the game depends on the mutual cooperation and coordination of the two sides. The theatrical performance works like a game of make-believe between players and spectators. Spectators will consider the players’ actions as props that invite certain fictional imaginings. Seen in this light, the playlet can be considered as a game of make-believe that simply went wrong. What happens is that not all players in the game are actually engaged in it. The mutual agreement and cooperation are not achieved in the playlet since Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia do not play that game which they say they will, or that they are playing a game of their own.

Thus, we can see each fictional world only from a perspective. No world is presented as absolutely actual or absolutely fictional. This constant switching of perspective, as well as the recursive nature of the fictional worlds in the play, brought about the mass confusion

characteristic of *The Spanish Tragedy*. After all, what characters thought to be actual (the inset) turns out to be merely fictional, and what they understood as fiction (playlet) turned out to be actual. The impact on the spectators should have been immense: what if what they are watching as a theatrical performance (*The Spanish Tragedy*) turned out to be real? Similarly, what if the world that they inhabit and consider 'actual' turns out to be a mere theatrical performance?! The play is, thus, calling the privileged concept of the actual world into question.

II

The second metatheatrical dimension of the play is its interrogation of the actual world as the sole source of dramatic mimesis. The play reflects on the self-contained nature of theatrical representation by making fictional worlds imitate each other rather than being a mere representation of the actual world⁽¹⁰⁾. The inset is seen as an imitation of the fictional world of the frame and the playlet as an imitation of the fictional world of the inset. They are used as mirrors to each other. If 'the purpose of playing', according to Hamlet, "was and is, to hold as 'twere a mirror up to nature" (3.2. 21-2), in Kyd's play it is holding a mirror to another fictional world. However, this is not uncommon in metatheatre. As a general rule, Manfred Pfister states that the play-within-a-play "is generally closely linked up with the action on the primary level." In *The Spanish Tragedy* the play-within-a-play metaphorically reflects the larger play in the sense that, although the personages' identities may be different, they exhibit the same properties, and are engaged in relatively similar actions. The play-within-a-play is designed to re-enact a slice of the history of the larger play's actual world.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, moreover, the linkage between the inset and the playlet is pushed to a considerable extreme. The playlet reflects the inset in three ways. First and more obviously, it repeats the same abstract story of the larger play— that of a lover killed by an envious rival vying for the affection of the same lady. Secondly, both are fraught with situations where the communication among characters is severely disrupted. In the inset this is the case with Hieronimo's failed attempts to convey his plea and Bel-Imperia's failure to convey her letter to Hieronimo. In the playlet this is concretized with the 'sundry languages' with which the characters (fail to) communicate. As Andy Mousley points out, "The unintelligibility of the play within mirrors the actual or potential unintelligibility of the play without" (2000, 70)⁽¹¹⁾. Thirdly, both are characterized by moments of sheer confusion and indeterminacy, ranging from the different narratives about the death of Andrea⁽¹²⁾, to the utter confusion of the playlet and the inability to figure out what really is taking place: "If confusion is an effect of the play up until Act 4, it becomes the subject when Hieronimo stages 'Soliman and Perseda'" (Seminza 2010, 158). Given all these parallels, we can agree that *Soliman and Perseda* is a miniature of the inset (Coursen 1968, 777-8).

The inset, in turn, reflects the frame in that they both depict a quest for a revenge of an unfair murder, by Andrea in the former and Hieronimo and Isabella in the latter. In a striking parallel to Andrea's ghost, Isabella is also speaking about Horatio's ghost seeking revenge:

See where his ghost solicits with his wounds

Revenge on her that should revenge his death.

Hieronimo, make haste to see thy son,
For sorrow and despair hath cited me,
To hear Horatio plead with Rhadamanth. (IV, ii, 24-8)

Andrea's and Isabella's pleas are thus depressingly similar. This similarity is further highlighted by mentioning Rhadamanth, one of the gods of the underworld for whom Andrea pleaded for justice⁽¹³⁾. Moreover, the same plot is repeated with Andrea and Horatio: both loved the same lady and both have been killed by her brother, be it directly (as with Horatio) or indirectly (as with Andrea)⁽¹⁴⁾. Thus, a fictional world need not be an exclusive imitation of the actual world, but can rather be an imitation of another fictional world. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, we have the inset mirroring the frame and the playlet the inset. Further, as some characters—most notably, Bel-Imperia—are taking part in more than one level, the confusion between the actual and fictional becomes increasingly disorienting. But if fictional worlds are overwhelmingly outspread, the fictional representation of reality turns out to be indispensable for us to approach that reality.

III

The third dimension of the metatheatricality of *The Spanish Tragedy* concerns the indispensability of dramatic representation. The play calls into question the exclusive status of the real by reflecting that theatricality plays an indispensable role in understanding, reconstructing and retrieving the real itself. As representation is a fictional re-enactment of the events of the actual world, the play gives credence to the necessity and centrality of fictional worlds in

our quest to understand the actual world. Characters might repudiate theatricality and attempt to present (rather than represent) their stories onstage, but at last will find themselves entrapped in that overwhelming web of representation. Their stigma against theatre might also stem from its incapability to represent genuine emotions, but will discover that a one-world interpretation of reality (one that excludes fictional worlds) is crippling restrictive and cannot do justice to the complexity of human experience. The actual past is irretrievable and cannot be re-presented, but only represented using fictional worlds.

In early modern drama, this contrast between presenting the actual and representing it using the fictional is captured by the two modes of acting which Robert Weimann calls the ‘presentational’ and ‘representational’ modes, respectively. According to Weimann, “While the former [presentation] derives its primary strength from the immediacy of the physical act of histrionic delivery, the latter [representation] is vitally connected with the imaginary product and effect of rendering absent meanings, ideas, and images of artificial persons’ thoughts and actions” (2000, 11). In the ‘representational’ mode, the theatre tells a fictional story that refers to an abstract, absent reality. Actors play out characters other than themselves. In the presentational mode, the actor plays out himself and does not stand for any external persona⁽¹⁵⁾. In possible worlds terminology, presentation privileges the actual world while representation facilitates the move to a fictional world. Other art forms are primarily representational; theatre, on the other hand, borders on presentation due to the appearance of real people and things in the theatrical performance. Thus, theatre is different from other representational arts in that it uses ostension, which means the presentation of the

same thing onstage rather than using any symbolic or iconic sign to refer to it (Elam 2002, 26).

In his performance of the playlet, Hieronimo, quite surprisingly, uses presentational modes of acting. To the dismay of the other characters, Hieronimo does not engage in playing out another personality, but rather boards on performing his own revenge. This strategy enhances the heterogeneity mentioned above of the playlet's world. While Lorenzo and Balthazar play according to the representational mode, Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia engage in a presentational performance: they are presenting their story unmediated onstage. Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia step out of role and return to their native reality, i.e., the world of the inset. They are no longer recentered in the world of the playlet. (They never get recentered in it in the first place.) The presentational performing does not require the illocutionary act (the embedded transaction) since we have no new positioning of the speakers who, rather, keep their original identity.

Hieronimo's presentational performance is associated with and motivated by a stigma to theatricality. Hieronimo denies his engagement in theatricality by warning his audience of thinking "That this is fabulously counterfeit, / That we do as all tragedians do: / To die today for fashioning our scene" (4.4.77-8). He repudiates the theatrical self which needs to 'counterfeit' and 'fashion' its external appearance. Hieronimo's stigma against fictionality culminates in his decision to present the very body of his murdered son Horatio. The body is not represented by any stage prop, but is presented onstage. This indicates that in no sense did Hieronimo aim at illusion. According to Katharine Eisaman Maus, the body serves as a shared

ground and a “common human lot” used by Hieronimo so that the others understand his agony (1995, 96). The body is being used as an ostension: the thing itself is presented rather than represented by a stage prop.

Hieronimo’s stigma to theatricality betrays a distrust of the genuine capacity of the fictional to represent the actual experience. Consequently, Hieronimo feels the need to present his own tragedy not as a fiction, but as actual fact. He does not feel compelled to refer to an absent fictional reality, but finds his own reality authentic (painful) enough to present itself. He cannot engage in fiction due to his identification with his emotion, which is too real to be representable via fiction. Emotion in fiction is feigned, not real. Kendall Walton speculates that the emotion we deliver when reading and watching works of fiction cannot be the real emotion shown in response to actual events. He calls it, rather, ‘pseudo-emotion’ (1990, 250). Pseudo-emotion is too inadequate to give justice to Hieronimo’s wretched state of mind. Thus, Hieronimo dispenses with fictionality since he feels that fiction cannot reproduce reality. Only reality can reproduce another reality. Hieronimo seems rooted in the actual world and is reluctant to use fictional worlds to make his point.

Hieronimo’s stigma to the use of fiction, expressed as it is in such words as ‘counterfeit’ and ‘fashioning’, can be attributed to a general anti-theatrical prejudice prevalent during the early modern period. The decades that witnessed the establishment of the public theatres in England were also the time when fierce attacks on theatre and theatricality were spearheaded. The antitheatrical tracts, many of which were written by Puritan preachers, targeted many aspects of the theatrical experience as immoral. One charge against theatre is

that, by revealing an identity different from one's real self, theatre promoted hypocrisy. The resultant character identity is not genuine (Barish 1985, 91-6). As there was a keen interest of inwardness in the early modern period (Maus 1995), theatricality must have looked problematic since theatre only reveals the outward, inauthentic self. This act of revealing a different self was deemed Machiavellian in early modern views. In his *The Prince* (1513), Nicolo Machiavelli recommended that the Prince always dissemble and hide his real intentions. In possible worlds terminology, the acts of recentering and embedded speech acts are a deviation from reality; they are immoral and thus should be strictly prohibited. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, this is translated by Hieronimo's hostility towards theatricality, evidenced as it is by his reluctance to engage completely in the playlet as well as his disparaging discourse about 'counterfeiting' and 'fashioning'.

Nevertheless, Hieronimo's attempt to get away with fictionality is paradoxical and self-defeating. Hieronimo himself is (in)famous for staging fictional artefacts like court entertainments, the dumb show and the playlet. Moreover, both Hieronimo and Bel-imperia employed deceptive tactics and dissembling, Hieronimo pretending to have no grudge against Lorenzo (3.4.140), and Bel-Imperia claiming to have fallen in love with Balthazar (3.14.101-2). Thus, any denial of theatricality turns out to be using theatricality itself. This indicates that dramatic representation is indispensable. Furthermore, Hieronimo is even an escapist who resorts to possible worlds when the actual world is cruel enough for him. In the added painter scene, he asks the painter to draw him standing happily with Isabella and Horatio (*fourth addition*, 118-122). Obviously, this is a

possible world, which Hieronimo chooses because the actual world is growing increasingly inhabitable.

Thus, representation and the use of fictional worlds are necessary to approach the real world, and they are so encompassing that any attempt to get beyond them is deemed to failure. *Contra* the antitheatricalist discourse, we can see that the play is declaring itself as unashamedly fictional. We have mentioned the sweeping theatricality of the early modern society and the theatricality of the religious and political institutions (the monarchy included), manifested as it was by the scaffold and public executions. Consequently, the play counters antitheatrical discourse by showing the encompassing nature of the theatrical which pervades almost everything, let alone the antitheatrical discourse itself. But if representation in general is inevitable, dramatic representation is signalled out as a unique and peculiar way of re-casting human experience.

IV

In addition to showing its inevitability, Kyd also demonstrates the peculiarity of dramatic representation. The fictional worlds of drama are different from and have a more profound effect on the spectators than the fictional worlds projected by other art forms. According to Keir Elam, the possible worlds of drama are more elaborate than the possible worlds of narrative fiction: "Dramatic worlds . . . are presented to the spectator as 'hypothetically actual' constructs, since they are 'seen' in progress 'here and now' without narratorial mediation" (2002, 98). Instead of dumb show and painting, Hieronimo chooses drama to enact his tragedy because drama is the most suitable art form to depict his agony. Drama is ruthlessly efficient at depicting its full miseries since it is the closest art form to

life. That's why, perhaps, the trope of *theatrum mundi* is not repeated with the other arts. In the added painter scene, Hieronimo asks the painter if he could depict his son's tragedy using his painting art⁽¹⁶⁾. The painter seems incapable of producing the kind of detailed reality Hieronimo has in mind. As Donna B. Hamilton puts it, "drama is the form most capable of expressing the human experience because it is both *poesis* and *pictura*, and has, as well, real sound and action" (quoted in Hammersmith 1985, 12). It is this multimedial quality as well as the materiality of the theatrical experience that render drama more suitable than other art forms to enact human experience.

In addition to its lack of 'sound and action', painting can hardly depict things in time. Unlike drama, painting is a spatial, not temporal art. Hieronimo is asking the painter to 'stretch your art' to "after some noise, bring me forth in my shirt, and my gown under mine arm" (*fourth addition*, 136-7) and later to paint "the wind blowing, the bells tolling, the owl shrieking, the toads creaking, the minutes jarring, and the clock striking twelve" (145-7). Obviously, painting can hardly represent these actions, no matter how far stretched it is; nor could it depict human emotions: "There you may show a passion" (152), Hieronimo is desperately asking the painter. It is only through drama that Hieronimo could convey the intensity of his experience to the spectators. According to James P. Hammersmith, "Through the medium of art, the members of the Court are brought exactly to the experience of Hieronimo's own condition – the dramatic portrait becomes, for them, a lively portrait, themselves the embodiment of it" (1985, 13). As we shall see below, it is these features that made drama, more than any of other arts, subject for anti-theatrical prejudice.

Another feature of theatrical performance which Hieronimo made full use of is its unpredictability. As any action taking place in real time, the theatrical action is contingent, a composite of possibilities and, as a result, cannot be completely predetermined. A tension has always been in place between the fixed nature of the dramatic text and the contingent nature of the theatrical performance. Stephen Greenblatt observes that the dramatic text is always predominant on the seemingly contingent performance (1988, 17). However, as James Shapiro points out, the theatrical representation is inherently unstable, potentially subversive and might as suddenly spirals out of control (1973, 99). This contingency made the oscillation between reality and fiction even the more likely. It is this aspect which made the theatrical performance the most convenient place to enact real murders, be it pre-planned or not. It is also behind the long-standing association, mentioned above, between theatre and the scaffold. To this contingency Thomas Heywood refers by pointing out how Julius Caesar, acting in *Hercules Furens*, was so carried out by passion that he killed his servant who was playing Lychas ([1612] 2004) 234-5). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, this is made apparent in the scene of Pedringano's execution. While Pedringano thought that his execution is a performance predetermined by Lorenzo, that performance unpredictably spiralled out of control and led to his real execution. Just like the on-stage audiences of *Soliman and Perseda*, Pedringano will discover too late that the death to be taking place is insistently real. The examples of Pedringano's execution and Hieronimo's play clearly indicate the subversive potential of the dramatic performance. Thus, *The Spanish Tragedy* is a constant reflection on the nature of the dramatic art, on its possibilities and potential danger of destructiveness.

In conclusion, *The Spanish Tragedy* is engaged in a serious contemplation about the nature and scope of theatricality. It thus contributes to the discourses about theatricality prevalent in early modern England. The play achieves that by re-thinking the nature and status of the real itself and through the proliferation of multiple fictional worlds. The metatheatrical significance of this proliferation is far-reaching, extending to re-shaping the relation between the actual and fictional worlds. The play is redefining the 'actual' itself, showing it as a relative, indexical concept, so much so that each world is seen as both actual and fictional from different perspectives. As such, it is also redefining the idea of dramatic mimesis itself, showing it as a fictional representation of another fictional representation, thus moving the actual world out of the game. Consequently, reality turns out to be too restrictive to account for all human interaction, and the need for the use of representation and fictional worlds spontaneously arises. Characters, chiefly Hieronimo, aspire to get out of the trap of representation, but ultimately fail to do so. Lastly, the play has dwelt on the uniqueness of dramatic representation, for its contingency and its capability to depict human emotion, paradoxically, as truly as possible.

The analysis above should have provided a fresh view about the ontological element in metatheatre, which has not been adequately addressed. It has also shown the relevance of modern theories of fictionality, namely possible worlds and make-believe theories, to the study of early modern drama. Scholars of Renaissance literature have been reluctant to employ such developments in other fields in the analysis of Renaissance texts. One reason is the formalist nature of

these theories which is not easily accommodated within the historicist approaches prevalent in Renaissance studies.

Moreover, this analysis could open up research into the interaction between metatheatrical practices and antitheatrical polemics prominent in the early modern period. This connection has already been suggested by some scholars (Barish 1985, 130; Pollard 2004, xviii; Fuchs 2006, 42-3; Frese 2013, 8). In the light of the analysis above, we can go even one step further to suggest that the metatheatrical aspects which Kyd excessively used in *The Spanish Tragedy* were, in a sense, an indirect response to these antitheatrical polemics. The play could bring about that effect through two ways. Firstly, the use of metatheatrical techniques was to undermine the claim that theatre is a medium of deception which makes spectators mistake illusion for reality. Metatheatrical techniques show that the very fictional/real distinction is untenable, that reality and illusion are at best relative and, at worst, indistinguishable. Secondly, the play advances the view of the inevitability of dramatic representation. It shows that, Hieronimo-like, the antitheatricalist is hemmed in these all-encompassing systems of representation. No matter how hard Hieronimo tried to avoid theatricality, all his attempts are aborted. But in this case Kyd, as Shakespeare will do with theatrical characters like Hamlet and Cleopatra, is asking us to suspend moral judgement and look at what fiction and theatricality can achieve. As fiction was a life-saving act in *One Thousand and one Nights*, it is here used to exact justice, a justice that was impossible to obtain otherwise. Accordingly, serious endeavours are to be taken to further investigate the relation between the metatheatrical practices of early modern drama and the antitheatricalist discourse of the period.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ However, Anne Richter (1964, 78) mentions two plays that used the play-within-play technique before Thomas Kyd: *Fulgens and Lucreces* and *Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*. On the other hand, Ronald Broude (1973) contends that there are many predecessors for the play in the revenge tragedy tradition, mainly derived from morality plays. However, the ‘firstness’ accredited to Kyd’s play may be justified by the fact that it is the work that made a lasting influence on later drama as well as the complexity and subtlety of his treatment of this technique, which is matched only by Shakespeare.

⁽²⁾ For a review of Possible Worlds approaches to literature, see (Eco 1978; Maître 1983; Ryan 1991; Ronen 1994; and Dolezel 1998).

⁽³⁾ There are few attempts to study metafiction and metatheatre in terms of the possible worlds framework. For such attempts see (Waugh 1984; Dannenberg 2008; and McIntyre 2006). However, they are only slightly exploring that relation and barely touch on the case of early modern drama. References will be made to these attempts throughout this paper.

⁽⁴⁾ There are many reasons why the existence of a ramifying fictional world endows its frame with actuality. One reason might be that we are cognitively capable of absorbing one fictional level at a time. So, if we consider the fictionality of the playlet, we will tend to take its frame, the inset, as actual. Or it might be that when we are recentered in the playlet, it is difficult for us to go backward and consider the fictionality of the inset.

⁽⁵⁾ Speaking in quantitative terms, Manfred Pfister differentiates between a play-within-play that “takes the form of a short episode inserted into a more extensive sequence of primary action, which thus carries the predominant focus of the text” and a play-within-play that is “both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the primary sequences, which are then reduced to acting as a kind of frame” (1988, 227).

⁽⁶⁾ The status of Andrea and Revenge in relation to the whole play is controversial. Fredson Bowers (1940) 68), for example, considers Revenge and the ghost of Andrea as unessential to the play, and that their existence after Horatio's murder is an artistic failure. On the other hand, Barry B. Adams (1969, 225) regards the two figures as central to the play since it is by these two figures that Kyd manipulated the response of his audience to the play. For a discussion of these views, see also Herbert R. Coursen (1968, 769,772,781).

⁽⁷⁾ For a classical argument about the sweeping theatricality of the early modern society, see Stephen Greenblatt (1980). For a discussion and a review of the approaches to theatricality and antitheatricality in early modern England, see Thomas Postlewait (2003).

⁽⁸⁾ Critics have long speculated about where the two figures would have been situated in the actual performance: whether they were perched somewhere onstage all the time or in a gallery. See (Adams 1969, 225; Tweedie 1976, 244; and Hattaway 1982, 115-6).

⁽⁹⁾ Ryan (1991, 63) also denies the acts of deception any fictional status. This intuition is also backed up by nontechnical accounts of this act. Carol McGinnis Kay, for example, writes of Hieronimo and Bel-imperia: "Instead of pretending to stab Lorenzo and Balthazar, they actually stab and kill them" (1977, 35).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Jonathan Dollimore (2004, 70-82) observes that there were two concepts of mimesis prevalent during the Renaissance: idealist mimesis and realist mimesis, adopted by Sir Philip Sidney and Francis Bacon, respectively. The view adopted in *The Spanish Tragedy* is distinct from each, and it is closer to the idea of imitation. Interestingly, Dollimore refers to a split between early modern poetic theory and practice. For a discussion about Renaissance mimetic theory, see Potolsky (2006, 71-86).

⁽¹¹⁾ Whether the four different languages are really used or not, has been a controversial issue among critics. For a fairly comprehensive survey of that controversy see Janette Dillon (1995; 1998, 157-161).

⁽¹²⁾ According to Carol McGinnis Kay, there are five versions of the battle narrative: in the play's induction (1.1) by the Spanish general (1.2), by settlement of Balthazar's captivity in the same scene, Villipo's narration to the Viceroy in

(1.3), and lastly Horatio's version to Bel-imperia in (1.4). The concentration of this large number of versions in the first Act only is expressive of Kyd's strategy. Having given a terse account of all these versions, Kay concludes that "It is not the battle but the linguistic uses made of that battle that initiate the action of *The Spanish Tragedy*" (1977, 28).

⁽¹³⁾ For more such parallels, see Howard Baker (1935, 32-3).

⁽¹⁴⁾ It is suggested that the death of Andrea was also plotted by Lorenzo and Castile in order to get Bel-Imperia engaged to Don Balthazar. For a discussion of this opinion, see William Empson (1994, 17).

⁽¹⁵⁾ These two modes correspond to the two functions of theatre, which Jean Alter (1990) identifies as the 'referential' and the 'performant' function. In the former, theatre tells a fictional story which is supposed to have happened 'there' and 'then', and it represents a fictional outside reality. In the latter, the performers are engaged in acting out themselves and they do not refer to any outside reality, such that the attention of the spectators is totally directed to their bodily presence. Theatre props might also have a performant function, as when theatre attempts to present the thing itself onstage.

⁽¹⁶⁾ In using the additions to *The Spanish Tragedy*, the study is staking no claim in attributing them to Kyd himself. The consensus now is that the additions were written after Kyd's death, in 1602. They are generally attributed to Ben Jonson and, less commonly, to Shakespeare. They are different in style, though they keep the thematic emphasis of the play. For a discussion of these additions, see (Cannon 1962).

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