

Functions of the Play within a Play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet* and *Women Beware Women*

Twinkle Kumar

Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc),
Department of English and Foreign Languages,
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya,
Koni, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh.

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Abstract:

The credit for creating immortal plays can be given to the Elizabethan and the Jacobean age, as this was the time which provided much attention to the plays. The playwrights of this age filled their plays with a number of innovative themes and techniques and also refined the old techniques. One of the most common techniques is the use of the play within a play. As the name suggests, the play within a play is a play in which another play is incorporated, and it is meant to be performed before the characters of the play. The play within a play has significant and specific functions to perform. Although the sole purpose of the play within a play is to highlight an emotion or to develop the theme of the play, it is not limited to this only. Playwrights with their creative genius have used this to perform other functions. This paper is concerned with exploring and understanding of the function performed by the play within a play in *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Women Beware Women*.

Keywords: Audience, Entertainment, Hamlet, Masque, Plays, Thomas Middleton, William Shakespeare.

The origin of drama is rooted in religion. The shift of drama from the inside of the church to an external, public space was significant. This is how drama moved from religious and moral purposes to secular themes. People in every age crave entertainment, and while poetry is a thing of personal enjoyment, drama, on the other hand, is concerned with large public entertainment. The golden age of drama in English literature saw a significant increase in the popularity and sophistication of the genre. Queen Elizabeth was fond of pageants and farce, and use to organized drama in her royal court. The popularity of drama was also because it employed a number of devices on the stage such as live action, murders, supernatural elements, and dumb shows, which thrilled and excited the audience. One

common dramatic technique was the “play within a play”. This literary device is known to have been first used by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1587. A play within a play is a play that is being performed in the confines of another play. The characters of a play watch a play being performed for them. The general audience is not the intended audience of the play within a play; instead, the characters in the play are the audience. Many playwrights used this technique in their plays which performed different functions in the play. This technique helps the dramatist to interpret and intensify the themes of their plays. Here we will be discussing few instances of this technique and their function or purpose in the play it was incorporated.

The golden age of drama or the Elizabethan age was the era where drama was giving royal patronage, and so the plays were inspired by royal people. The royal patronage filled the pockets of various playwrights due to which many people started writing plays. Drama touched every sphere of life — from the royal court to the common people — and everyone was given a place in the plays. During the Elizabethan age most plays revolve around the life of kings and queens and showcase their life, struggle and tragedy. Although it mainly deals with the royal people and royal court, nevertheless it still didn't fail in entertaining the common people. The common people still enjoyed them. Playwrights were inspired by classical Greek and Roman plays. One of those who wrote drama inspired by the ancient classical playwrights; was Shakespeare, who not only breathed new life into English drama but also refined many theatrical devices. Shakespeare has used the technique of the play within a play in many of his works such as *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Tempest*. In each of these works the play within a play has a specific function to perform.

To Provide Comic Enjoyment

The play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare contains a play within a play which reveals Shakespeare's remarkable use of this dramatic technique. Shakespeare is known to borrow from ancient classical texts but his merit lies in giving his own personal touch to the play which makes his play remarkable and his characters immortal. And again, although he was not the inventor of the technique of incorporating a play within a play, his use of this technique in his works was truly creative, and the audience could only admire his creative genius. In the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the use of play within a play serves to summarise many important themes in the play. In *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, Theseus asked for a play to be performed to light up his mood before he goes to sleep “Is there no play to ease the anguish of a torturing hour?” (“A Midsummer”). Theseus chose the story of Pyramus and Thisbe to be performed before him. And although Philostrate suggests that the play might not be fit to be performed by the amateur actors, Theseus wishes to watch only this play. One may think that Theseus chose this play because the story of Pyramus and Thisbe somehow resembles with what happened to the characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In both the stories the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (Book IV) and Lysander and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, faces parental disapproval and opposition to their love and marriage. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe deals with the theme of love, hardship and confusion. In the story Pyramus mistakenly believes that Thisbe has been killed by the lion when he saw her mantle covered with blood near the lion, which Thisbe had dropped in her flight. This misunderstanding arouses guilt and sadness in Pyramus and he committed suicide by falling on his own sword. When Thisbe came back and saw her lover is dead she also killed herself by falling on the same sword. This was the tragic end of their story and this story was meant to arouse pity and grief and to bring tears in the eyes of the audience. But Shakespeare used this story in his play in a totally contrasting way. The laborers who performed the story of Pyramus and Thisbe before Theseus and the other nobles act out a clumsy version of the story. They bumble, mispronounce and overreact which make the noblemen and women laugh. The story which was tragic turns into a comedy which makes the environment and mood of the audience joyful.

The second aspect which Shakespeare wants to highlight using the play which is used in *A Midsummer night’s Dream* is the absurdity of the lovers. If one reads the original version the reader feels bad because of the tragic death of both the lovers. But, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Shakespeare presents the story in a contrasting way which makes the audience question whether what the lovers did was wise or nonsensical. Another important point which Shakespeare highlights through this play within a play is the importance of an actor. Each play or story has an emotion or feeling or theme to display and it is the responsibility of the actor to produce such emotion which is demanded. If the actor fails to evoke the needed emotion, it turns into something absurd and nonsensical, and the play loses its credibility as well.

To Pursue Bloody Crimes

Thomas Middleton was one of the most prolific English dramatists of the Jacobean era. Although he started his literary career with poetry at a young age, by the early 1600s, he had solidified his reputation as a playwright. His two well-known works are *Revenger's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*. Both plays have the theme of revenge and contain similar descriptions of violence and gore, where there are endless plot situations created by characters against each other resulting in a climactic moment full of bloodshed. *Women Beware Women* is set in Italy and tells the story of treachery, deceit, romance, affairs, crime and tragedy exposing the dark side of human nature, which makes the play one of the bloodiest of all Jacobean tragedies. Middleton, knowing the temperament of the Jacobean age, has highlighted the lustful, greedy, avenging human nature perfectly. In the play a masque has been organised to celebrate the wedding of the Duke and Bianca. Just as the masque was about to take place four murders had also been plotted simultaneously by the characters of the play to kill each other. Once the masque begins all gathered to not only watch the masque but pursue something. Bianca, Isabella, Livia and Guardiano all have hidden motives; which explains why each of these characters has plotted to murder Cardinal, Livia, Isabella and Hippolito respectively. Bianca mistrusts the Cardinal her brother-in-law because he didn't approve of the marriage of his brother the Duke with a widow (Bianca). The Cardinal believes that both Duke and Bianca are only getting married to cover their sin. However, Duke and Bianca have denied this by saying that they are repenting. Bianca believes that the Cardinal wants the throne for himself. So she plots to kill the Cardinal by serving him a poisonous drink during the masque. This is not the only murder that has been plotted to take place during the masque. When Livia, Hippolito's sister learns that her lover Leantio has been killed by her brother, she tells everyone about Hippolito's incestuous liaison with Isabella. Livia's anger doesn't stop here. She teams up with Guardiano to take revenge on the man who killed her lover. In addition, Guardiano designs two plots to kill Hippolito. The first is to spring the trap door when Hippolito is standing upon it and second was to shoot him with poisoned arrows by the cupids as if it is a part of the masque. During the masque Isabella burns incense to Juno, played by Livia, who descends from the ceiling on a swing. Livia throws burning gold down on Isabella which kills her. Livia feels sick and realises that she had been breathing poisoned incense. Meanwhile, Hippolito discovers that Isabella is dead and he stood on his feet and was shot by the cupid with the poisoned arrow. All this

time Bianca wonders why the Cardinal has not been affected by the poisonous drink yet. The Duke swoons and falls shortly, Bianca came to know that the Duke has drank from the poisoned drink and her plan has been backfired on her. Realizing her mistake she finishes the remaining of the Duke's poisoned drink and dies. The masque thus ends with the untimely and unexpected death of all the characters. The play ends with Cardinals last words, which bemoan the lusty nature of human character. The play within a play serves a good path for the characters to achieve their bloody motives. Every avenging character thought the masque would create the perfect environment to accomplish the bloodshed because no one will suspect murder at a festival. And even if the audience saw someone falling or dying they will assume it to be a part of the masque.

Play As A Mousetrap

Shakespeare again uses the technique of a play within a play in his masterpiece *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is based on the life of prince of Denmark. In Act 3 scene 2 Shakespeare incorporates a play within a play. Horatio and Marcellus have told Hamlet about the ghost which they think resembles Hamlet's father; and Hamlet goes to the ramparts at night to witness it. It turns out to be the ghost of his father; whose death's still grieves and preoccupies him. The ghost reveals the truth about how Claudius killed him and instructs Hamlet to take revenge for his death. Although the ghost claims to be his father — "I am thy father's spirit,/ Doomed for a certain term to walk the night"(Edwards 105) — Hamlet didn't believe the ghost completely even though it resembles with his father. Hamlet is not a fool to be deceived by the Ghost. He is not Macbeth, who was easily influenced by the supernatural. He tries to confirm whether whatever the ghost had told him is true or not. Before taking any further step he wishes to test the ghost's trustworthiness. When some players visit the court, Hamlet comes up with the plan of having *The Murder of Gonzago* performed in front of the king, queen and whole royal court, with the addition of a speech written by Hamlet. This act is important for many reasons. Hamlet instructs the players regarding their roles, but he had a motive behind the play, which was going to be performed before the king, queen and nobles. And the motive was to confirm the ghost's words. Hamlet was convinced that Claudius would definitely show some visible sign of discomfort, when he would see the act by which he killed his brother king Hamlet being presented on the stage during the performance. And he had asked Horatio to, "observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech,/ It is a damned ghost that we have seen, and my imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan's stithy"(Edwards 155-156). Hamlet has designed the last act of the play according to

what the ghost had told him, and it closely resembled the crime committed by Claudius. As the play was being enacted Claudius asked Hamlet, “What do you call the play?”, “The Mousetrap”, Hamlet replies. What Claudius did not know was that the play on the stage isn't merely a play for entertainment. It is a trap for Claudius —“The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king”(Edwards 143), as Hamlet himself puts it. It is a trap to catch the murderer and to confirm that Claudius is his father's murderer. The result of the play turns out to be exactly what Hamlet was expecting. When Claudius saw the actor pouring the <poison in his (king's) ear>, Claudius rises and shouts “Give me some light, Away!” and he exits the scene. And this was what Hamlet wanted to see. The trap which Hamlet had set up to catch the criminal successfully caught the murderer. And after this success Hamlet furthers his action of taking revenge of his father's murder.

In the end we see that the dramatic technique of writing play within a play performs specific functions which are demanded in the play. And since each play has different theme, play within a play performs different functions. With the passing of time the technique of the play within a play is not only limited with highlighting an emotion or evoking of a feeling of the writer. The playwrights such as Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, R. B. Sheridan and many others, with their creative dramatic genius have used the play within play in many creative ways. Play within a play can perform various specific functions in a play. Firstly, play within a play can be use to produce a totally contrasting emotion in the audience than what is been expected. It can provide a joyful environment and could give a happy ending to a play. Secondly, play within a play can be use as a trap, either to catch a criminal to confirm whether a character is guilty or not. Thirdly, play within a play can be use to pursue some bloody hidden motives, such as in *Women Beware Women*, where characters plan to kill others during the performance of the play, thinking that they will be busy watching the play on the stage and will be off guard. All these functions of the play within a play are just few examples. There are still many left to be explored by critics, because there is nothing that can limit or set boundaries to the fancy and creative power of the imagination of a writer.

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