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and celebrate***
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Diccon the Bedlam:

Stage Manager Character in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*

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Gammer Gurton's Needle is recognized as one of the earliest domestic comedies in English drama. The playwright, Mr S, is widely considered to have been either John Still or William Stevenson. In a similar way to *Roister Doister*, whilst the structure of the play is modelled on Latin comedy, both the content of the drama and its characterization are, on the whole, intrinsically English.

Obviously, much has been written about the play text and performance of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, and particularly about the comic role of Diccon, which is often singled out as being exemplary. First of all, his full title, Diccon the Bedlam, suggests that he was once an inmate of the mental asylum, Bethlem Hospital, and therefore, for contemporary spectators, a promising source of dramatic and theatrical mayhem and fun. Furthermore, one can distinguish in this character certain traits evoking, on the one hand, the well-known conventional vice character, such as can be found in many earlier plays, and, on the other hand, the clowning and jesting of subsequent Tudor buffoon characters. But perhaps his most important significance in this play is situated in a very practical way on the functional level, where, although an outsider, he is able to slyly distribute what could possibly be described as 'theatrical roles' to the unknowing villagers in a storyline of his own creation. All that then remains is to move the action along in such a way as to obtain entertaining theatrical effects

To summarise the diegesis of this play: Gammer Gurton, an old woman, loses her only sewing needle while mending the trousers of her servant, Hodge, who consequently now has to wear pants full of holes. Most of the play involves speculation as to what has happened to the needle and the comical—and at times almost violent—effects caused by its loss or possible theft.

The theatrical action therefore begins when Diccon, the Bedlam, arrives in the village and transforms the incident into his dramatic plot. The two houses are then put into use as the

stage scenery, and the villagers, unknowingly, take on their dramatic roles. Later, at the end of the “performance”, when Diccon has had his fun and the characters have unwittingly acted their parts, the play ends on a triumphant, yet comical, note when the needle is found in the very place where it had first gone missing: in the seat of Hodge’s trousers.

Diccon’s rich dramatic role in the diegesis of the play is, of course, essential. However, I should like to place particular emphasis on the part he plays in the actual functioning of the stage performance. He keeps a close eye on “his” players, and it has been pointed out that, as well as his function as stage manager character in the play, Diccon could possibly be described as a sort of intra- and extra-dramatic pivot. He is portrayed as an itinerant beggar, always on the look-out for some sort of advantage to seize upon but, perhaps most of all, to create fun. This can be observed from the outset, when he steals a rasher of bacon.

The spatio-temporal system of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* is built on the fundamental contrast between the perception of the habitual way of life of the community and how it is subsequently affected by Diccon’s manipulations. He effectively turns the village into the semblance of a theatrical playing area. He begins by slyly telling a few untruths to the two main occupants of the neighbourhood: Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat. These characters are prototypes of village gossips, who are bound to react, or even overreact, as dramatically as Diccon hopes. He therefore sets up his scenario by building up levels of anger, leading each of the ladies to believe that she has been robbed by the other: Dame Chat of her cock and Gammer Gurton of her needle. This, of course, is to be the basis of the whole scenario of the play, as well as the crux of Diccon’s dramatic diegesis and the villagers’ theatrical performances. It is indeed with great aplomb and surprising theatrical talent, as well as a certain amount of slyness, which serves to heighten the comic element, that Diccon stage-manages the ensuing events.

The development of Diccon’s scenario includes setting Doctor Rat up as a spectator hiding in the garden to see Dame Chat using the needle. He then tells Dame Chat that Hodge is going to sneak into her garden to steal her chicken. So Diccon sets her up as a spectator behind a hole in the fence, and inevitably Doctor Rat, mistaken for Hodge, receives a sound beating.

Gradually, all of the characters are called before the Bailiff and the truth comes out: Diccon had invented the whole scenario in order to make everyone angry at each other and thus to create an entertaining spectacle. Diccon is given a mild punishment, and he jovially slaps Hodge on the rump. This gesture dislodges the needle, which had been in his pants the whole time. This is a fitting denouement for this comedy, and it is therefore thanks to Diccon’s “staging” that the time and space are now filled with joy. The charac-

ters group around Diccon and, applauded by the audience, everyone is congratulated as having put on a good show.

To delve a little further into the mechanism at work in this play, the signs and references indicate a spatio-temporality inhabited by peasants. This effect is achieved by, for example, referring to imaginary off-stage characters such as Tom Tankard, Sim Glover and Hob Filcher and evoking their various activities and preoccupations. This creates an imaginary background of animation and local colour, which gives life to the village and helps to weld together the on-stage and off-stage spaces. Among the scenic techniques which enable the audience to imagine the immediate off-stage space are exits and entrances, background voices and noises, and also teichoscopy. Choric commentaries also create imagined visual tableaux: for example, Dame Chat can be imagined sewing with Gammer Gurton's needle.

Such techniques can also set up comparisons suggesting that, although the two houses are so similar, life is less austere and far more pleasant at Dame Chat's. For example, her servant, Doll, can play cards, whereas Gammer Gurton's servants must work hard and are undernourished and badly dressed. The spectator can therefore get the impression of conviviality and gaiety at Dame Chat's, as opposed to frugality and misery at Gammer Gurton's. This is made clear from the first line of the play's Prologue, which plunges the spectator into the world of the English peasantry. Gammer Gurton is no gentle and nimble needlewoman: "As Gammer Gurton, with many a wide stitch / Sat piecing and patching of Hodge her man's breech" (Pro. 1-2). The last line of the play is, on the other hand, influenced by Roman comedy: "For Gammer Gurton's needle's sake, let us have a *plaudite!*" (V.ii.333). This duality is a vital aspect of the play and helps to create its dynamism.

As suggested earlier, one of the most interesting and indeed vital aspects of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* concerns what is often described as Diccon's pivotal role. His character is present in both the interior and exterior of the drama, and, in this way, it can be compared to preceding vice-characters, such as Ambidexter in *Cambises*, Mery Report in *The Play of the Wether* and Haphazard in *Apius and Virginia*.

In the same way as these characters, Diccon engenders both dramatic conflict and structural harmony. His role is particularly rich in metatheatrical elements, to the extent that, in his hands, not just one separate staging area but the whole village is transformed into a veritable theatrical playing space, with the villagers as actors. However, Diccon does not make use of the whole range of the techniques associated with the Vice. For example, he is not a dramatic narrator, and his skills do not involve any "*morceaux de bravoure*" whereby the Vice goes from laughter to tears. In fact, Diccon should probably not be considered a rogue or a villain, nor even a seasoned prankster, but rather a creator of theatrical action and fun. He is more of a stage director than a dramatic performer. His

greatest pleasure seems to be to simply stand back and admire the theatrical effects that his efforts have sparked off. Nonetheless, a darker side to his character is observed when he convinces Doctor Rat to spy on Dame Chat with a view to determining whether she has stolen the needle. Diccon guides Doctor Rat into a hole, where, in the darkness, he will receive a sound beating carried out by Dame Chat.

The places and also the activities carried out by the peasants who live there are suggested in order to create the semblance of activity in the village and to weld together the off-stage and on-stage spaces. This technique can also suggest that, although their houses are so similar, life is more animated and pleasant at Dame Chat's. Consequently, the spectator is given the impression of conviviality and gaiety at Dame Chat's as opposed to frugality and monotony at Gammer Gurton's. Other scenic techniques help the audience to imagine the immediate off-stage space: these are mainly exits and entrances to and from imagined areas, as well as off-stage voices and noises.

Some of these techniques accentuate the close similarity between the two houses, whilst others bring out the differences. For example, in the spectacular scene III.iii, in just a few lines, Hodge, then Doll leave the stage to search in their respective mistresses' houses for a weapon with which to fight. Hodge re-enters the stage space with a simple staff and Doll with a roasting spit. Furthermore, the entrances and exits to and from Gammer Gurton's are more pragmatic than at Dame Chat's.

Once more, Terence's influence is found when an on-stage character can speak to an off-stage one and vice-versa. In this way the dramatist uses the technique of teichoscopy in order to bring the off-stage space into the dramatic action. One example involves Cock leaving the stage to find a candle. Gammer is giving him orders from the stage space and, thanks to the technique of voice-off, Cock replies from the off-stage space, thus bringing that fictional area to life (I.iv.46).

Teichoscopy is used a number of times in this play and has the effect of inciting the spectators to take more of an interest in the imaginary action going on in the immediate off-stage space than in the "real" action playing out before their eyes on-stage. Spatially defining exits and entrances can include, as we have seen, the carrying on or off of props. In this way, the imagined action can almost be seen in the spectator's mind's eye and thereby reinforces the drama being played out in the on-stage area. This technique is particularly effective when it involves dialogue between on-stage and off-stage characters. This is the case, for example, when Hodge and Gammer call to each other from different parts of the house.

One particular episode, a veritable "vignette", is constructed in this way and is, in fact, one of the liveliest ones in the play. Rich in comic elements, it evokes a cat with bright, piercing eyes running to hide in the dark corners of the house. This puts Hodge into a total panic. As well as hearing him, the spectators can almost visualize him, thanks

to the commentary of Cock, who, as an on-stage spectator, is supposedly watching the action. It is also Cock who attracts the attention of Gammer Gurton, who then sets off a veritable orchestration bringing together the techniques of voice-off, narration and dramatic action. Thus, the focalization of the spectators is once more centralized on the immediate off-stage space, rather than on the actual playing area. In fact, this is another convincing example of teichoscopy.

In this way, some of the most memorable episodes of the play are not actually seen, but take place chiefly in the immediate off-stage space. Furthermore, when on-stage characters are fully focalized on what is going on off stage, they are no longer in the action but become on-stage spectators. However, they do increase the density of the action at that point, and the whole set-up results in an amazing impression of life. This effect is created, for example during the game of cards (II.ii.21-24).

Concerning the intrusion of Diccon into the community, he at first conforms—or at least seems to seem to—to the life of the village. But also, in the manner of a stage director character, he starts taking spatio-temporal initiatives with a certain aplomb. He sets up a parasite spatio-temporality whereby he slips into the time and space of the village and uses it at his guise. In fact, Diccon's text contains a large number of references to time, using such phrases as “Good even”, “more of this matter within the hour” or “By the morrow at this time”. It also contains a number of references to spaces, such as, “See ye not what is here? A hole wherein ye may creep”.

Diccon's attention to time and his use of space(s) help him to impose his authority over the villagers and to slyly carry out his manipulations, which he does in the manner of a stage director. So, whilst participating in the village life and respecting its rhythms—and also, like any other “bedlam”, drinking, laughing and even pilfering—Diccon has the function of establishing a second spatio-temporal schema, one which he directs and controls at all times. Diccon is therefore the link between the two main systems. He is also the motor serving to energise the play.

As a darker side is never far behind laughter and gaiety in this play, Diccon's function has a certain ambiguity. In fact, he runs the risk of being perceived as a manipulator, and even perhaps a devil's advocate. This creates a certain suspense and also some anxiety on the part of certain villagers. For example, according to Hodge: “Diccon? It is a vengeable knave, Gammer, 'tis a boneable whoreson”. Hodge even runs the risk of accusing Diccon of calling up a great black devil (III.ii.10-14).

Concerning, once more, the issues of time and space, the time of Diccon is much more dynamic and full of movement than that of the village, and his space is a place of conflict and of strange and extraordinary events, some of which bring harm and trouble to the villagers.

This is the case of Doctor Rat and Dame Chat and, consequently, of the whole community, following a double trap set up by Diccon (IV.iii-iv) based on the use of space. It concerns a hole giving access to Dame Chat's house "where a crafty knave may creep in for need" (IV.iii.32), and which Diccon plans to subvert to his own use. The rest of the scene reveals a malevolent design or plot. He tries to convince Dame Chat that Hodge plans to hide in the hole to steal her chicken.

Diccon attempts another trap, this time when he shows Doctor Rat a space, which is in fact a hole. He pretends to Doctor Rat that he will find Dame Chat there with the needle. But Doctor Rat is reticent, until Diccon falsely reassures him by saying that he had been in there himself. He then helps Doctor Rat into the hole while gently reassuring him: "Go softly, make no noise; give me your foot, Sir John. / Here will I wait upon you till you come out anon" (IV.iv.37-38). Doctor Rat will in fact be beaten by Dame Chat in the darkness of the immediate off-stage space.

Diccon's metatheatrical function

Having already suggested that Diccon takes over the time and space of the community in order to sound out its possibilities as a theatrical playing area, we shall now attempt to examine and demonstrate to what extent his role resembles that of a stage director. A number of tasks need to be envisaged, for example: the selection of players and the organization of their rehearsal sessions; the choice of scenario; the collaboration with possible stage-hands and, obviously, with the players.

Concerning the organization of the spectacle, along with his overall motivation to bring some entertainment to a village where nothing extraordinary usually happens, Diccon seems to have given himself the mission to create a spectacle in two parts, comprising firstly the disagreement between Gammer Gurton and her neighbour, Dame Chat, and secondly their brawl. Also on the "programme" is the beating received by Doctor Rat. As can be noted in a number of indications, Diccon behaves remarkably like a stage director who takes his task perfectly seriously. We could almost imagine him holding a tape measure and a timing device in order to create the precision which is so vital in staging. What he sets out to create will naturally resemble a play-within-the-play.

As for the "actors", they obviously need to be good performers, but they must also be ready to take advice and to let themselves be directed by the "stage manager". Concerning the training of actors and possible rehearsals, like any stage director, Diccon motivates and energises "his" actors. We must remember that, within the fiction, these are individuals who have become actors unknowingly, so are without any inkling about the meaning of what is happening. Their energy has its source in feelings such as exasperation, outrage, anger, bitterness or distrust. Diccon sparks off such feelings by means of a

conflict which he invents and which serves as the necessary fiction or dramatic plot to be played out.

These feelings are propagated by means of little confidences or “blasts blown in a friend’s ear”, or by gossip and rumours. Such feelings determine the way in which the actors hold themselves on-stage concerning their attitude, their expression and the way they use the space. Also to be taken into account is whether they are alone or part of a group, and whether they need to hide—for example, to protect themselves, like Hodge or Cock during the fight, or perhaps to observe or spy, like Doctor Rat. Or, on the other hand, perhaps they need to show themselves in order to provoke, like Gammer Gurton, or to justify themselves, like Dame Chat. Questions arise concerning the corporal attitude they should adopt: should they show fear? or anger?—and so on.

Once the sequence begins, appropriate stage directions can determine and, if necessary, modify the use of space by the actors concerned. For example, in the same way as a professional stage director, Diccon gives the following advice to Dame Chat on how to play her role:

Well, rule yourself a space,
And Gammer Gurton, when she cometh anon into this place,
Then to the quean, let’s see! Tell her your mind and spare not” (II.ii.67-69).

The indications which Diccon gives to Doctor Rat during the second part of the spectacle are even more precise:

Follow me a little, and mark what I will say.
Lay down your gown beside you. Go to,
come on your way!
See ye not what is here? A hole wherein you may creep
Into the house, and suddenly unwares among them leap. (IV.iv.29-32).

The *redondance*, which follows, whilst functioning diegetically to reassure Doctor Rat, also confirms to the spectators the existence of this hole: “I was within myself, man, even now; there is no doubt” (IV.iv.36). At the same time, the embedded stage direction creates the *tableau vivant* of Doctor Rat being guided towards the hole:

Go softly, make no noise; give me your foot, Sir John.
Here will I wait for you until you come out
anon
[DOCTOR RAT *crawls into the hole*] (IV.iv.37-38).

Doctor Rat will therefore be beaten by Dame Chat in the darkness of the immediate off-stage space.

The result of this incident will have repercussions on the whole community, according to Doctor Rat: “God’s sacrament! The villain knave has dressed us round about! / He is the cause of all this brawl, that dirty shitten lout!” (V.ii.180-81).

Conclusion

Spectators of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* might possibly agree with Doctor Rat that Diccon, within the plot of the play, is a “villain knave” and the creator of “all this brawl”. However, it is highly likely that Diccon’s role as a stage director is widely appreciated by audiences from the point of view of both diegetic fiction and dramatic function. He is also a character who is able to create both mayhem and mirth. It is therefore in a time and space filled with joy that the characters/actors finally group around Diccon and, doubtlessly applauded by the audience, everyone is congratulated for having put on a good show.

For spectators who have been lucky enough to enjoy a stage performance of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, it must have been a complete and utter delight.

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