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Seeing-is-believing Vision and the Power of Verbal Framing in the Tudor Theatre

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I n the process of seeing, an object reflects a pattern of light onto the eye; the light enters the eye through the pupil, is gathered by the lens, and thrown onto the screen at the back of the eye, the retina. On the retina is a network of nerve fibres which pass the light through a system of cells to several millions of receptors, called cones. The cones are sensitive to light and colour and they respond by carrying information about light and colour to the brain. At this point, the human equipment for visual perception ceases to be the same for each person. The brain must interpret the raw data it receives and give the complex ocular data both structure and meaning. This is done with innate skills, on the one hand, and also with skills developed out of experience. Since each person has had different experiences, and possesses different knowledge and faculties of interpretation, each person processes the data received by the eye with different equipment. Much of this equipment is culturally relative, in the sense that it is determined by the society which has influenced a person's experience. It is composed of a number of variables which include the categories with which the visual stimuli will be classified; the knowledge that will be used to supplement what immediate vision gives a person; and the attitude that will be adopted to what is seen. These

variables contribute to making what I shall call the "given-to-be-seen", to be understood as the product of a verbal framing process which gives shape and form to what is apprehended visually.

It is the human mind that gives sense to what is seen, and no transcendental deity or scientific processing of any kind. However, there are accepted ways of seeing, pre-invented worlds into which we are born and which are either absorbed fully, or uncomfortably. In the latter case, the coercive side of these worlds will be become apparent and questioned, even dislocated or rejected. The experience and perceptive "equipment" that the Tudor playgoer took to the theatre drew upon a variety of cultural, topical and popular references, but also upon diverse texts and performances, all of which enabled him/her to believe or disbelieve, to engage his/her imagination or not in the possible worlds represented by the playwright on the stage. Ostension—the most primitive form of signification which distinguishes "show" from "narrative," wherein description is used—is of utmost importance in the drama, but in the main it is accompanied by verbal framing of some sort, either intended to persuade the audience to accept the author's vision of things or designed to open up the way to new visions of truth.

In this paper I wish to discuss a number of ways in which verbal framing operates in a selection of Tudor plays, beginning with the manner in which playwrights relied on stage conventions to orient the spectator and enlist his/her imagination in order to give credence to the make-believe world of the theatre.

I would first like to point out the recurrence of the verbs "to show" and "to see" in the early Tudor theatre. Showing and seeing, actions which are related to direct optical contact and visual experience, are key words and concepts in the new condition of post-resurrection faith that was engendered in the hearts of Christ's disciples. Seeing was particularly necessary to the doubting Thomas, who would believe in the risen Christ only once he had been invited to put his fingers into the imprints left by the nails and spear in Christ's hands and side, and once he had actually seen these. Seeing was at first necessary to prove the veracity of His resurrection, and was a way of passing from the state of unbelieving to believing. The real was considered accessible only through the bodily senses, that is to say, through eye-witnessing. Seeing, then, was instrumental in leading to the faith that the crucified and buried Lord had indeed risen.

With the passing of time, eye-witness accounts—written reports—sufficed to engender faith, and we find John (20:29) reporting Jesus as having said:

"Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* believed". Those who believed without seeing were subsequently given a higher status amongst the faithful than those who clamoured for visual proof. These preliminary remarks show how powerful the authoritative texts became, relating eye-witness accounts and foisting upon Christ's followers ready-made ways of seeing which, as time distanced the event, could not be verified through ocular means, only believed. A similar act of faith, when direct optical contact is not possible, is required of the spectator by the poet-maker, who, in Philip Sidney's words, is endowed with "the force of a divine breath" (p. 25) in his capacity as creator.

When Sidney first discusses the theatre in *A Defence of Poetry*, he asks rhetorically, "What child is there that coming to a play and seeing Thebes written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?" (p. 53). He is alluding here to the power of words to evoke an appearance in the spectator's mind's eye, but warning that the make-believe of the theatre is not to be taken as the literal truth. After underlining the fictionality of the stage, Sidney then advocates adhering to the classical unities in order to make the imagined play world more plausible. The popular theatre of the day, he complains, "where you shall have Asia of the one side and Afric of the other", has to rely on actors coming on stage to explain everything: "the player when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived" (p. 65). Here Sidney underlines two seemingly contradictory conventions of the stage: one that demands the audience to believe in the reality of that which is represented and another, simultaneous convention, that stresses the importance of remembering that what is happening is indeed a performance.

Theatrical creation relies on the shuttling from the one convention to the other, and often the seeing audience is addressed directly by an onstage character who, like the Prologue in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, begs the spectators to participate in imagining the scenery and presence of absent characters, dictating to the audience, in fact, how to interpret the material reality of the stage props, and so on:

> Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
> Into a thousand parts divide one man,
> And make imaginary puissance.
> Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
> Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth;
> For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,

Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th'accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass. (*Henry V*, Pro.23-31)

Verbal framing is instrumental here in giving meaning to what is intended to be made visible on the stage. The audience is required to believe in the power of synecdoche. Out of words, images can be created and what is visualised in the mental image is to be taken as a real presence. In the prologue to *Henry V*, Shakespeare outlines the dialectic between fantasy and materiality which is the prerequisite for the theatrical creation. He also shows how dramatic meaning is created through the dynamic interplay between stage and audience. At the same time he illustrates how, in the receptive mental work of "seeing-is-believing-vision", there is a continual interplay of two great symbolic systems, one expressed as imagery and the other as language, how images can be generated by verbal systems, and verbal systems by images. Paradoxically the audience is asked to believe something that is not free from deceit, something that depends entirely upon feigning, upon immaterial fantasy, and not upon trustworthy fact. This is all part of the playwright-audience contract, of course, an instance of words producing images in the mind's eye, revealing how, ultimately, a world may be reinvented and changed by the resulting fully dimensioned images that are created.

In Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we have an illustration of how a playwright can constantly play off opposing theatrical conventions against each other. This is to be found especially in the Pyramus and Thisbe inset play, which tries to destroy the theatrical illusion completely and make it plain that the audience must believe exactly what it sees, that is to say, a man playing a wall, a man pretending to roar like a lion, and so on. In this case, the hempen homespun crew make it clear that the verbal framing is not to influence the spectator, nor to frighten away the ladies in the audience. Much has been written about this play-within-a-play. My concern at present is more with the onstage spectator, Theseus, and the extent to which he may or may not be considered to stand as the spokesman of the ideas endorsed by the play.

When Theseus chooses the local am-dram group's play for his wedding-night entertainment, from what he says at first, when he justifies his choice, he momentarily stands out as the ideal spectator:

> I will hear that play;
> For never anything can be amiss
> When simpleness and duty tender it. (V.i.82-84)

What he tells Hippolyta, when she expresses doubts about the quality of the entertainment, seems to confirm this impression: "Our sport shall be to take what they mistake" (V.i.90). He sounds like the competent spectator capable of "Piec[ing] out our imperfections with [his] thoughts" that the Chorus in *Henry V* calls for. However, his judgement of the things of the imagination is far from perfect, and we only have to look at the speech in which he expresses his famous world-view to realise that he is the sort of man for whom dreams and fairytales, and what may appear on a stage, are little more than empty shadows, incapable of harbouring truths of any kind. Theseus is the type of spectator who has accepted a pre-invented world, one defined by the patriarchal views of Athens. He speaks as a rational, no-nonsense pragmatist, as is conveyed by his linking lovers and madmen to poets. Hippolyta is seemingly of a different mettle. As Queen of the Amazons, her unconventional upbringing has taught her more incongruous ways of being and seeing that admit the presence of difference and the possibility of change from the oppressive patriarchal culture that sets itself up as the superior, normative one in Athens. In Theseus's cramped world there is room only for the truth of everyday, common-sense experience: all that lies outside this category is "antique fables" or "fairy toys" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.3), and that which is "strange" is almost certainly not "true" (2).

As pointed out previously, whatever sense we make out of the world, it is the human mind that is at work—there is no transcendental power or deity that makes sense for us. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare shows how the mind of a patriarchal law-giver works when confronted with the desires of the younger generation for liberation, with their rejection of the ready-made conventional images of a normal humanity that is shot through with contradictions between its ideals and its reality. Significantly, the youngsters' dream experience takes place in the wild wood, the wood that lies outside Theseus's rational world, the place where states of madness are traditionally engendered, states which may boast of having the powers of healing chaos. The wood in which the midsummer night's dream is enacted is the very antithesis of Theseus's oppressive court: it is the domain of the subconscious, as opposed to the conscious, rational, repressive world of the Athenian court.

The title of the play, of course, signals the importance of dream and its associated modes of knowing: fantasy, imagination, magic. For an Elizabethan audience—and this applies to a twenty-first century one even more—dreams were held to represent kinds of truth. A modern audience will bring to a play the huge body of Freudian and post-Freudian thought which stresses the importance of dreams in the makeup of the human psyche and their ability to reveal knowledge about the subconscious. The significance and importance of the language of dreams is well-established in both classical Greek and Roman, and Judaeo-Christian hermeneutic traditions which Tudor culture inherited. We find obvious examples in Genesis, where, for instance, the imprisoned Joseph interprets the dream of the baker and butler, then that of Pharaoh. In early English texts, such as *Piers Plowman*, there's a clear awareness of the ways in which dream-meanings are encoded in symbols, condensed narratives and displaced images. Dreams are reckoned to tell a truth about what is going on around the dreamer and often within the dreamer. Throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the truth-value of dreams is stressed: upon waking from their dreams, the lovers in the wood find that the therapeutic process of dreaming enables their desires to be accommodated to social reality. The world of dreams and the world of theatrical representation are shown to be analogous to each other throughout the play. The two famous Renaissance conceits—all the world is a stage and life is a dream—feed off one another. The audience is invited to participate in a fiction which is itself dream-like, and to consider the similarities between theatrical illusion and the experience of dreaming. The play argues for the truth of dreams and for the truth of the stage, even though Puck's epilogue ironically dismisses both as "weak and idle", suggesting a Socratic vision that is "No more yielding but a dream" (Epi.6). In Theseus, Shakespeare embodies the attitude of the spectator who is unable to free himself from the "given-to-be-seen" of his upbringing, an attitude contrasted sharply to that of the Amazon Queen, whose unconventional origins prepare her for seeing differently and believing in another world, like the one suggested by the dream experience in the wood.

My next illustration is to be found in *The Comedy of Errors*, where Shakespeare seriously questions the power of the verbal frame to confer identity. Here we find a demonstration of how Renaissance culture erroneously conceived of the materiality of identity. He focuses on the discontinuities that exist between identities and on the external marks that display, support and confirm them. Shakespeare issues a caution about quick judgements based upon appearance alone. As the Abbess

states in the final scene of the play, all the characters in the play make the same "sympathizèd one day's error" (V.i.399), and this suggests that if any had made the effort to find out the reality underneath the external appearance, instead of assuming that distinct identities are manifest in distinguishing visible marks, the confusion and near-chaos of the play-world would have been prevented.

By introducing two sets of twins bearing the same name into his adaptation of Plautus's *Menaechmi*, Shakespeare raises important questions about the location of identity. No logical explanation is given for the siblings having the same names, a deliberate choice on Shakespeare's part, of course. The characters assume, not unnaturally, that name confers identity. When Adriana, the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, believes she is speaking to her husband and servant, she identifies them by their names. The surprised Syracusans take this as proof that she does indeed know them. As confusions escalate, Dromio of Syracuse begins to have doubts about name and identity being one and the same. After Nell, the kitchen maid, reveals knowledge of the marks he bore on some intimate parts of his body, he begins to wonder whether he is not "besides" himself (III.ii.78). "Do you know me, sir? Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I myself?" (73-74), he asks his master. Names become unfounded, as do distinguishing marks on the body: "That you beat me at the mart I have your hand to show" (III.i.12), Dromio of Ephesus answers to the wrong Antipholus as proof that they had met recently. These bodily marks are revealed to be the exclusive property of neither of the twin siblings, and again serious doubt is cast on the fixity of identity, and even on the stability of reality. Dromio's description of his encounter with his "wondrous fat" (III.ii.92) would-be wife inspires genuine anxiety in Antipholus of Syracuse: "If everyone knows us, and we know none, / 'Tis time, I think, to trudge, pack, and be gone" (150).

Shakespeare's *Errors* demonstrates how essential selves cannot be determined from outward marks, how it is wrong for the onstage Ephesian characters, especially, to adhere to the verbal framing that constituted the Tudor conduct manuals and sumptuary legislation which classified status-coded behaviour and determined identities through outward show. The aim of the sumptuary laws was to try and guarantee that who you saw was who you got. Shakespeare seriously questions this assumption in creating escalating confusion that very nearly transforms the comedy into a tragedy.

In an article entitled "'Stigmatical in Making': The Material Character of *The Comedy of Errors*", Douglas Lanier suggests that a considerable amount of strain

must have been put on an Elizabethan audience in requiring them to make a supplementary effort to disregard what they may have seen on the stage in the stead of perfect twins. As he says, Shakespeare no doubt had difficulty in finding two sets of identical twins (p. 318) and the difference would have been played for laughs. Here again, we find an example of a Tudor playwright requiring his audience to rely on verbal framing to guide it in its perception of what was displayed on the stage—imperfect twin siblings, implausible mistaken identities triggering off farcical situations which, if they misfired, would have made the play into a total disaster. Identical costumes may have been the answer, but on the other hand, the biblical knowledge that the audience brought with it to the theatre could possibly have helped engage audience consent to the plausibility of the situations. In the Scriptures, Ephesus had a reputation for sorcery. References to this abound in the play, and are even evoked as being possible causes for the misrecognitions and suppositions that run through it. In this comedy we realise how crucial the role of the viewer can be: "seeing-is-believing vision", consisting as it often does in pre-determined ways of seeing and classifying individual selves, is seriously undermined throughout.

What emerges from all the confusions in *The Comedy of Errors*? The suggestion, perhaps, that appearances need to be probed with the mind. The spectator must learn to become a *voyant* and not content her/himself with the role of the *voyeur* on the margins. (S)he must pass from spying at the edges to seeing at the core if (s)he is to uncover the truth. As we watch versions of the truth that pass publicly without, we need to learn to recognise the private personal truth within.

If we take the word "believe" to mean "to hold as true, free from deceit, unfeigned, agreeing with reality"(*OED*), my next example will tentatively reveal how a process of indoctrination may be operating in certain conditions in which the given-to-be-seen is dictated, as it were, in advance. This could well be the process at work in the play entitled *Misogonus (*1571?*)*, attributed to Anthony Rudd, in which the Vice-character Cacurgus is bent on disproving the veracity of the proverb, "Children and fools, they say, can tell no lies". Proverbs, invested as they are with great authority and experience that has been tested out, are favourite targets of the Tudor interludes and moral drama, wherein they are turned inside-out. In *Misogonus*, Philogonus, the father of the eponymous prodigal son, is totally blinded by the power of the proverbial saying, which influences his judgement of his servant Cacurgus, who plays the counterfeit fool and simulates the language and behaviour of the natural, rustic fool. Two kinds of fool are combined in this

Vice-character, as Cacurgus can be seen to play the crafty, malicious trickster and the simpleton who traditionally tells all he has on his mind without lying. The son is not fooled by his games, and, when seeing Cacurgus with the long ears of the traditional fool's costume and learning that his father considered Cacurgus to be his "natural" (I.i.316), reacts with surprise at his father's gullibility:

> Fie of all folly! How blearest thou his eyne?
> Is my father to fools become so liberal?
> But did he think thou wert a fool indeed?
> He were never so foolish to think so of thee! (I.i.317-20)

When the Vice's game is up, and the demonstration of Philogonus's misplaced trust in the proverb is over, Cacurgus nonetheless tries to sell his services to a new master by advertising his skills in the market-place, filling the audience's ears with his smooth talk, as if trying to erase the image he had given of himself previously in the play, and as if trying to make the age-old magic of the proverb start working again on some other gullible master:

> O, o, o, oyez!
> If there be any gentleman
> Or any gentlewoman
> O'th'town or o'th' country
> That will, for Saint Charity,
> Receive a stray fool,
> One is here on this stool
> That can roll out dough
> And that can peel a potato;
> That can chare flies
> And that can peck pies;
> That can rock the cradle
> And that can bare a bable;
> That can gather sticks
> And that can chop leeks. (IV.ii.21-35)

The author of *Misogonus* gives a full demonstration of the pitfalls involved in accepting ready-made ways of seeing and believing.

My next illustration will focus on the stage incarnation of the Wild Man myth and the manner in which travel literature greatly affected ways of seeing the foreign other. In the anonymous *Mucedorus* (1598), the wild man character called Bremo shows how the author of this play conceived of the concept of

wildness, savagery, and barbarism as being embodied in the universal myth of the animal-like wild man. From biblical times, the Wild Man was associated with the idea of the wilderness—the desert, forest, jungle, and mountains—those parts of the physical world that had not yet been domesticated in any significant way. At the time that *Mucedorus* was written, the conception of the wild man was undergoing change due to travellers' tales about antipodean monstrous peoples. Sixteenth-century English playwrights were brought up in a Calvinistically tinged version of the Christian faith, which refocused and renewed the traditional polarity between salvation and damnation, as well as the mediating role of divine grace. The world remained fundamentally "theonomic", in the expression of Hayden White, who attributes to this fact the tendency to categorise humanity according to appearance:

> … in a universe that was thought to be ordered in its essential relations by moral norms rather than by immanent physical causal forces, how could radical differences between men be accounted for, save by the assumption that the different was in some sense inferior to what passed for the normal, that is to say, the characteristics of the group from which the perception of differentness was made? (White, p. 9)

White places the figure of the Wild Man in this context. On the model of the Old Testament "rebels against the Lord" and their depraved descendants (p. 14), the Wild Man stands as a visible sign of the withdrawal of God's blessing, marking "a fall into a state of degeneracy below that of 'nature' itself, a peculiarly horrible state in which the possibility of redemption is all but completely precluded" (p. 13). It is not surprising, then, that when travellers brought back captives to England from the New World, the people who paid to see them thought they were encountering subhuman wild men, naturally vicious, damned peoples from the cursed antipodes.

In *Mucedorus*, a box-office success in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is the wild man of the European tradition that sent a chill down the spine of the theatre-goers, who must have gone home believing that there was such a bogeyman as Bremo lurking in the wild forest the other side of the walls of civilised London town. Bremo presents all the characteristics that the tradition had endowed the wild man with: he is hideous, a cannibal who "glut[s]" his "greedy guts with lukewarm blood" (xi.18). He eats wild fare; his world is the forest and abundant nature. He also shows signs that he could be tamed by love for a sweet lady, Amandine, who arouses his sexual appetite, but then his destructive violence when she tries to escape his clutches. Bremo is the only wild man in the

extant plays of the period to be portrayed with all the conventional wild man characteristics. In other plays of the period, he is transformed. We find no simple variants but wildness increasingly becomes associated with foreign otherness, as my ensuing discussion of *The Tempest* will show.

When Shakespeare created Caliban, he probably had in mind, not only the wild man of European myth, but also descriptions of the different kinds of monstrous races reported by ancient and contemporary travellers alike—races of men with one eye in the middle of their heads, feet turned backward, a double sex, men without mouths, pygmies, headless men with eyes in their shoulders, and dog-like men who bark rather than speak—all of which appear in medieval iconography as representations of wild men. Such given-to-be-seen images of pre-invented worlds abound in the lies of the travel literature, which easily became impressed on credulous minds. In Trinculo's and Stephano's attitudes towards the misshapen islander, Caliban, there are traces of what Renaissance romances and travel tales had led them to expect in terms of encounters of the monstrous type. In this case, the way the characters see and believe what they perceive is affected by what they think they have learnt from maps and reports. Seeing and believing in this instance is pre-scribed, and the world is apprehended under conditions dictated in advance by what has been previously given to be seen.

Shakespeare's Italian castaways were brought up with such ready-made ways of seeing differentness, as their various encounters with Caliban reveal. Trinculo's reaction when he comes across the grotesque creature is one example. His imagination quickly conjures up the possibility that the "strange fish" (II.ii.26) he lights upon is potentially a profit-making commodity, the equivalent of "a dead Indian" (31) that could rake in money from crowds visiting the exhibitions of American Indians in London. A similar example is provided by Stephano, who plans to take the "monster of the isle" (62)—presumed to be of a savage nature—back to Italy to sell him "if [he] can recover him and keep him tame" (65). In another scene, when Ariel's spirits "of monstrous shape" (III.iii.31) make the Italian courtiers start believing in unicorns and headless men, from that moment on they are ready to confirm the veracity of all the travellers' tales they had ever heard, however tall.

In these scenes, Shakespeare provides an explicit demonstration of the power of verbal framing. With their heads full of travellers' lies, they not only see what they expect to see, but believe that they actually see what they had previously been given to see in tales and illustrations on maps. Characterisations

such as these show how old beliefs die hard and especially how, dating from the Middle Ages, there was a tendency to describe anything new in terms of the familiar. An enlightening parallel may be drawn with the way Christopher Columbus recorded his observations.

Stephen Greenblatt points out, in *Marvelous Possessions*, that Columbus's "act of writing" what he saw "depends upon a structure of expectation and perception in which the word is at least as fully implicated as the eye", and that if his observations do not conform to his preconceptions, "they will be demoted from the status of signs and not noticed any longer" (p. 88). Those preconceptions, in turn, were nurtured and shaped by cultural constraints. Columbus no doubt had his vision impeded by, amongst others, the Church fathers who had rejected the idea of the possibility of other human peoples on the other side of the earth. That would imply nations not descended from Adam. It was safer for the orthodoxy and credibility of travellers to tell, like Othello, of "Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (*Othello*, I.iii.143-44) than to hint of an unknown race of ordinary men and women. While reporting that he himself encountered no monsters but quite well-built, beautiful wild people, Columbus elicited confirmation from his native interlocutors that the *Othello*-like monstrous truly existed elsewhere—further on, over the horizon (Greenblatt, p. 75).

Seeing-is-believing vision in the theatre, and on the larger stage of the world, I shall conclude, is often in conflict with the human processors that interpret the data received by the eye in the process of visualisation. Verbal framing can seriously undermine the plastic representation of reality, since it imposes a conceptual image which can involve the eye's transformation of what is perceived and what it believes it sees. What is more, if the verbal framing happens to flirt with what the early modern period judged to be heretical thinking, then what is visibly truthful is not to be believed at all.

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