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Limits of Illusion in the Theatres of John Rastell

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In respect of the idea of illusion in art, Holbein's portrait of the Hanseatic merchant Derich Born, dated 1533, is remarkable. It affords a Latin inscription on the lower half of the painting which states that if the picture were given a voice it would appear to be Derich Born in person. It is questionable, says the inscription, whether the progenitor was his natural father or the painter. The spectator's attention is thus drawn directly to the skilful illusion that poses in a direct way the question of our volume, "Seeing is believing—or is it?" Holbein is noted for such realism in his portraits, and we can be confident that this effect was what the artist sought after. We are on far less certain ground seeking to know whether or to what extent playwrights of the early sixteenth century attempted a similar effect, or indeed whether such an effect could lead spectators to believe what they saw. For, as Thomas More noted in his *History of King Richard III*,

> in a stage play all the people know right well that he that playeth the sultan is perhaps a shoemaker. Yet if one should be so foolish in an inopportune way to show what acquaintance he hath with him and call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of his tormentors might chance to break his head, and worthily so, for marring of the play. (p. 83)

From this it may be possible to infer that audiences, while perfectly knowing about the nature of theatrical illusion, were nevertheless keen not to transgress the decorum of spectatorship in order that the fiction represented might maintain its integrity. Thus illusion and actuality may be seen to be held in some sort of equilibrium amongst playgoers of the early Tudor period.

In terms of seeing and believing, I have always been hugely entertained by the story of John Adroyns that appears in John Rastell's *C Mery Tales* published in 1526. Adroyns, a Suffolk man, had been appearing in a stage play as a devil and on the day of the performance was walking home at dusk still in his costume. His path took him through the local manorial warren, where he came upon the priest with some companions poaching rabbits. On seeing the devil, as they believed this figure to be, they took flight. The said John Adroyns then took their horse and the poachers' catch of rabbits to the manor house to report the incident. When Adroyns arrived at the manor house gate, further misunderstandings arose regarding his apparently infernal identity. The matter was finally cleared up much to every one's amusement. The story has a moral: "On many occasions men fear more than they need which has caused men to believe that spirits and devils have been seen in various places, when there has been nothing of the kind." Thus we may infer that the priest and his companions are represented as misguided and foolish in believing that they have in truth been visited by the devil.

However, elements of the story are apposite to our theme. The man John Adroyns has been appearing in a play. We can only hope that in performance he achieved a similar level of acceptance in his role as was accorded him in the dusk in the warren. We must assume that if he had been suddenly exposed as himself, it would, in Thomas More's terms, have marred the whole thing. What is significant in the story, however, is that, according to its moral, such feigning will only appear actual either to the ignorantly credulous, or, as in this case, to those with something on their conscience. For the former, the external reality represents the literal nature of things; they cannot see through the acting to the artifice behind it. In terms of play-going, this may be regarded as an error of perception. For the latter, the experience strikes deeper and touches a root belief in such a way as to provoke a direct response to the imagined world of the play. In one sense it becomes actual to them. One could say that they are led to believe that the fiction they witness carries immediate implications for themselves in real time. Some proof of this may be found in the case of John Roo, who suffered

a summary jail term in 1526 for playing an interlude critical of government that Cardinal Wolsey felt was too openly directed at himself. Wolsey, of course, as a deviser of pointed entertainments, would more than most people have been singularly aware of this possibility. A corollary of this is Hamlet's comment upon "guilty creatures sitting at a play" (II.ii.585) being obliged involuntarily to proclaim their malefaction. As often recorded in the sixteenth century, such a response serves as a justification for plays as exemplars.

From this we may conclude that belief, *per se*, is a complex and subjective nexus of feeling, imagining, knowing and wishing, in great part culturally determined, that must underlie any act of spectatorship. The pleasure and engagement with the illusions of a fiction call on such perceptions but are also moderated to a greater or lesser extent by awareness of the occasion of performance, an understanding of its conventions and the nature of the illusion with which one is invited to engage. In essence, a spectator will see what he believes rather than believe what he sees.

From this it is clear that the concern of the authors of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* about the effects of fictionalising the bible stories through performance was misplaced. They asserted and attempted to demonstrate that the whole enterprise of play-making "is agenus oure bileve" (p. 100), because "thise miraclis pleyinge ben onely singnis, love without dedis" (p. 98). The truths ostensibly shown through the performances are sententious, all appearance without substance. As such, their lack of integrity is a deception to be avoided and belies the underlying truths of the Christian faith. The writers go on to assert that they are "the most ginnys of the dyvul to drawen men to the byleve of Anticrist" (p. 98). The writers of the *Tretise* thus show little faith in the spectators' ability to resist the wrong message this, despite the fact that they draw attention to a significant distinction between "gode feith withinneforthe" that would certainly guard against such naiveté and "sight withouteforthe" that indicates the vulnerable suggestibility that alarms them (p. 102). There seems, however, in their terms to be no denial that the plays can stimulate, even sustain, belief, but uniquely in the power of evil.

One is then led to ask what the authors of the *Tretise* would have made of Coleridge's oft-cited aphorism that spectatorship depends upon a "willing suspension of disbelief". Leaving aside the fact of its misappropriation to theatre from Coleridge's comments on his own contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads*, we may turn to his Lectures on Shakespeare for a more developed discussion regard-

ing theatrical illusion. There Coleridge writes at length about dramatic performance, whose very purpose, he suggests, "is to produce [only] as much illusion as its nature permits" (1: 178):

> In an interesting play, read or represented, we are brought up to this point [of acceptance], as far as it is requisite or desirable, gradually, by the art of the poet and the actors; and with the consent and positive aidance of our own will, we choose to be deceived. (1: 116)

As is obvious, an audience certainly gathers willingly to a performance. They are, as it were, accessories after the fact. But, as Coleridge stresses, the spectator's involvement is dependent upon being brought up to a point of "acceptance", "as far as it is requisite", in order that the illusion may work with the imagination. The terms "consent" and "aidance" support the notion that we are willing agents in the process. While a necessary part of the act of going to a play may be "choosing to be deceived", it is here expressed as in the spirit of a process of "co-creation" invoked through the skills of the poet and the actors. This interpretation is given support in the value Coleridge put upon the function of the imagination. For him imagination comes in two kinds: a primary imagination, that is, "the living power and prime agent of all human perception" akin to the power of the Creator himself; and a secondary imagination, which echoes the primary but coexists with the conscious will of man. This secondary imagination is the creative imagination of the poet, the artist, and, in the case of theatre, of the actor, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate" (1: 166). He acknowledges "the poetic power of making everything present to the imagination" (1: 193) and suggests that will contributes to this process as part of the human creative impulse in the shaping of art. For Coleridge, the will of the spectator has also to be engaged to participate "as far as it is requisite" in this creative process:

> Stage presentations are to produce a sort of temporary half-faith, which the spectator encourages in himself and supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is. (1: 178)

As before, Coleridge's emphasis is on the very process of enactment as the means by which the half-faith is produced. Thus Coleridge may be seen to acknowledge the dualism that stands as a central paradox in the spectator's experience of theatre. He is also part-way to identifying effects sought after by the movement towards Naturalism that characterised drama of the later nine-

teenth century—that same movement that leads us in the twenty-first century to expect that the whole of theatre is about persuading people to see something that isn't really there.

However, one should never forget the delight in and the influence of the distracting theatrical aspects of a performance. There are those that delight the eye—costumes, scenic devices, skilful dance or physical action—or those that impress the ear—fine speech, singing, musical and sound effects—all of which may contribute significantly to the style and therefore the reception of a play. Nor should one ignore the influence that the presence of an accomplished actor may have, and our apparent capacity to see the actor and the role simultaneously; Olivier's Hamlet, we say, Mckellen's Iago. On the one hand, at their best, the theatrical elements may assist and sustain the growing acceptability of a fiction. Sometimes, of course, on the other hand, our pleasure in these aspects of performance predominates over any experience of "credibility". Furthermore, they are all factors that recent neuro-scientific research has begun to suggest join our being to the world of the actor in an unavoidable physiological and inherently psychological manner. Once we have said yes to spectatorship, thus far certainly an act of the will, potentially we become subject to involuntary mimetic responses to what we see and hear. Rather than "seeing is believing", therefore, the formula might become "seeing is being alive" to a performance in an analogous way.

Finally, to confirm this view that a theatre performance is a powerful "actual", as Richard Schechner defines it (pp. 51ff.), there is a persuasive account of the child actors in Elizabethan theatre given by Bert O. States. He writes specifically of the boy companies whose repertoire was largely comedy and satire where, as he says, "actors spend a good deal of their time flirting with the audience". Since the children will be "conspicuously *not* identical with the adult characters they are portraying," he argues, "the medium becomes the message: the form winks at the content" (p. 32). He further generalises then with regard to the "titillating potential of a medium that by its very nature inoculates the audience *against* belief" (p. 32). He points up this collision between artifice and actuality in a concluding reference to Launce's dog in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The dog is "blissfully above, or beneath, the business of playing, and we find ourselves cheering its performance precisely because it isn't one" (p. 34). Thus the paradoxical nature of theatre may be seen to derive from the fact that any illusion created, often within a transparent conventional frame, operates in the situation of per-

formance as a meeting place where actual life itself is always and ever present. So, to conclude, I would want to agree with States that theatre inoculates the audience against belief and, on the other hand, to say that in practice performance works, in Coleridge's terms, to bring the audience up to a point of acceptance of the integrity of the illusion presented.

Acceptance in this context will mean acceptance of the performance as a whole, fiction and artifice working together to convince sufficiently of the illusion, the virtual reality, established for the occasion. But in the end, as Erasmus says, "the feignyng and counterfaityng is it, that so delighteth the beholders" (p. 38). Thus the elements of knowingness and acceptance remain constantly in contention, though perhaps rarely in balance, and that is as far as belief may really go.

Turning now to the theatrical world of the early sixteenth century, I have chosen to make reference only to those plays associated with John Rastell and printed by him, three of which I have taken the opportunity to direct. (Those are *Gentleness and Nobility*, *Calisto and Melebea* and the first part of *Fulgens and Lucres*.) Fortunately, all of Rastell's texts are full of hints about and guides to the relationship that must have existed between the audience and the performers. Certainly, it becomes plain that the relationship is a very fluid one, often shifting its ground by the moment and often taking delight in the pleasures of performance for their own sake. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Nature of the Four Elements*, one of two plays directly attributed to Rastell himself.

Printed some time around 1525, *Four Elements* is, I would hazard, the least familiar of the plays associated with the Rastell's and, because it is incomplete, exists in a kind of theatrical no-man's-land. It is clearly influenced by Henry Medwall's *Nature*, printed somewhat later by John's son William. There are obvious affinities, in that it employs a morality pattern with Humanity as its central concern and the figure of Nature, rather than of God the Father, instigating the action. Humanity is all obedient attention at first to the lessons offered by his mentors. Later he errs in preferring worldly, that is, sinful or non-intellectual, companions such as Sensuality (or Sensual Appetite), who lead him into byways of disorder, mainly in the tavern. Nature insists, however, on recovering Humanity from his error, regardless of how many times he succumbs to temptation. A happy ending is contrived with Humanity back on track to a good life, thankfully able to dismiss and do without his tempters and betrayers. Such a model plot would have been very familiar to contemporary audiences.

In Rastell's play, unfortunately, the final recovery of Humanity remains incomplete, as we have lost the last pages. There is also an important lacuna in the middle, which denies us the knowledge of exactly how Yngnoraunce enters the scene. Thus the model cannot be substantiated in full. There is enough of it, however, to remain confident that the parallel exists. One could argue, indeed, that *Four Elements* in its structure is a quite slavish imitation of its predecessor. It becomes clear even at the outset, however, that whatever debt Rastell owed to the earlier model for the structure of his play, he was employing the model for quite different purposes.

First, there is a Prologue delivered by a Messenger who seems disinclined to claim any responsibility for the succeeding action of the piece, but only for its intellectual and moral content. The premise is to bring knowledge of nature and geography to an audience whose ignorance of such matters is assumed. The presentational aspects of medieval drama, of course, had always served its authors as a means of communicating essential elements of belief, both sustaining and confirming doctrine. In this case, similarly, there is little attempt to produce affective, empathic responses from the audience or to woo them with the promise of a narrative. Rather, Rastell confronts his audience directly with a number of his own preoccupations, which have no dramatic predecessors. If we take, for instance, the analogous introduction of the Messenger at the beginning of *Everyman*, we find a quite different approach. The *Everyman* Messenger is brief, indicating the narrative of the play, even outlining its implications and introducing "our Heven Kynge" directly to get the action underway (ll. 1-21). The Messenger speech serves, in that case, to focus the audience's attention, invoke the themes of the play and introduce the first character in person. The playwright is conscious of the need to bring the audience along, to engage them with the drama that is about to unfold. By contrast, the Messenger of *Four Elements* offers a different experience. He makes a rather inauspicious start by petitioning the audience for charity because the playwright may "be yngnorant and can lytyll skyll" in respect of this "lytyll interlude" (ll. 5-21). He also expresses clear anxiety about the subject matter of "phylosophy naturall" being presented through the medium of English. Such "matter substancyall" is, by implication, a work of "connynge" of a kind that has not previously found expression in the mother-tongue. English, he says, is mainly deployed for "love or other matter not worth a myte" (l. 40). He has observed, however, that in terms of subject matter other writers in English follow their fancy and write what they will. It

follows, therefore, that this playwright may choose to do the same. Somewhat typically of Rastell, therefore, the Messenger is used to present the author's current personal concerns, in contrast to familiar or fashionable alternatives. The hook of a coherent situation or story line is left in abeyance. Indeed, the tone of contention persists throughout the Prologue. It is obvious that Rastell perceives a need to re-orientate audience expectations, to announce the difference they may expect from this play and to bring a new kind of attention to the unfamiliar subject matter they will hear and see.

I imagine that an audience of the period would have responded questioningly to both the message and the Messenger, as they undoubtedly would have done to the second great "idea" of the Prologue. The Messenger proceeds to develop a common Rastell theme that riches should not be the measure of wisdom, as "is the oppynyon moste commonly / thorowe out the worlde" (l. 60). Without the poor and, by inference, ignorant labourers there would be no riches in the first place, so it is necessary for rich men to exercise their conscience with regard to the commonwealth as a whole. They should make provision "That bryngyth them to knowledge that yngnorant be" (l. 91)—that is, Rastell offers a novel interpretation of *noblesse* (in this case *richesse*) *oblige*. Finally, the statement that learning should entail knowledge of nature and the elements, as well as knowledge of eternal verities, strikes at a familiar clerical educational discourse. This challenge to what could be regarded as an establishment view is spiced by an arch question:

> How dare men presume to be callyd clerkys,
> Dysputynge of hye creaturis celestyall,
> As thyngys invysyble and Goddys hye warkys,
> And know not these vysyble thyngys inferyall? (ll. 113-16)

So, finally, the Prologue challenges the *status quo* from an anti-clerical perspective. The audience is being asked to view this play from a different basis of understanding, even of belief. They must not expect the play to offer them sad matter of a familiar kind.

Despite his rather intense commitment to these new ideas, however, Rastell manifests a showman's consciousness of audience appeal, albeit in a rather crude fashion. He attempts to sugar the pill:

Because some folke be lytyll disposyd
To sadnes, but more to myrth and sport,
This phylosophycall work is myxyd
With mery conseytis, to gyve men comfort
And occasyon to cause them to resort
To here this matter. … (ll. 134-39)

This last citation is one that half persuades me to speculate that this play, despite internal references to hearth and hall, was fashioned for performance on Rastell's own stage in Finsbury. It suggests that audiences have to be persuaded to resort to the performance. It also anticipates that their span of attention to serious matter will be limited and that the play will need to be balanced in favour of "entertainment". The text's title page gives a further hint that Rastell was conscious of this need. We read that this "interlude, yf the hole matter be playde, wyl conteyne the space of an hour and a halfe; but yf ye lyst ye may leve out muche of the sad mater … and than it wyll not be paste thre quarters of an hour length" (p. 30). So the play-text, while aimed, no doubt, at readers, was also apparently aimed at producers who would have a commercial interest in attracting and holding audiences. A little further on the producers are told, "Also yf ye lyst ye may brynge in a dysgysynge" (p. 30), an element that the text would allow. These hints at how to spice up the performance are interesting indicators that merry conceits and antics were thought of as crowd-pullers. This also suggests that lately developed ideas about the integrity of theatrical illusion were not necessarily at the top of Rastell's list of requirements. Rather, he is promising his audience entertainment if they will first accept the representation of some novel and difficult ideas. I would conclude that the tone of the Messenger speech shows that Rastell must have recognised that he was putting himself out on a limb. He persevered nevertheless.

A performance of *Four Elements* can be built around three diverse principles of action. The Prologue, containing a direct presentation of the author's own preoccupations with matters of social and cultural concern, is a kind of sermon or lecture. It serves more as a justification for the author's fancy than as an introduction to a drama. The envoi, "The pleyers begyn to appere in presence; I see well it is tyme for me to go hens" (l. 144), almost suggests an opportunistic intrusion rather than an introduction. The play proper that follows opens with a formal introduction by Nature. It is remarkably similar in tone to those street-pageant performances prepared to greet eminent visitors. It was a form in which Rastell was himself experienced. Thus, the opening exchanges between Nature,

Studious Desire and Humanity are in rime royal, the chosen stanzaic form for the majority of such public addresses. As Nature explains his role and lays down the themes that are to be a central concern of the "sad mater" of the play, his persona is reflected in the rhythms and vocabulary of his speech:

> Wherfore I am the verey naturate nature,
> The inmedyate mynyster for the preservacyon
> Of every thynge in his kynde to endure,
> And cause of generacyon and corrupcyon.
> Of that thynge that is brought to distruccyon
> Another thynge styll I brynge forth agayne.
> Thus wondersly I worke and never in vayne. (ll. 148-54)

The character proceeds to draw attention to the two regions of the great world, the ethereal above and the mundane below, "Conteynynge these four elementis beloo: / The fyre, the ayre, the water, and yerth also" (ll. 167-68). Nature appears dignified, and authoritative, at ease with himself and with his role. He has the authority to command obedience and respect for his utterance and to take an initiative in the instruction of Humanity. Thus far the audience is invited to accept the imagined situation presented with such solemnity.

After two long introductory speeches in this vein, however, Nature departs, consigning Humanity to the care of Studious Desire. At this point the scene is invaded by Sensuality, and two shifts of awareness occur. First, the audience will be struck by the different rhythms of the popular tail rhyme that is substituted for the more formal rime royal of the opening. Furthermore, the familiar "Make room" is used to indicate that the comic characters may enter from amongst the audience. The dialogue lightens up with more shared lines and interjections showing a degree of animation previously absent. The character Sensuality, coming as he does from among the audience, is a living presence that unites him with them in both present and theatrical time. This is a trick that had already been exploited in both of Henry Medwall's plays, but nowhere more blatantly or with such consummate skill as in his *Fulgens and Lucres*. That play is too well known to need detailed analysis, and it is sufficient to point out that the behaviour of A and B at all the major shifts of action in that play serves a similar end. Sensuality, like them, seems to exist in both theatrical spheres simultaneously. He takes on Studious Desire and later Experience in a lively and contentious fashion. He makes frequent appeals to the audience, whose delight in the performance will derive both from the situation represented and from its association with

actual misrule. In addition, we are offered a series of set-piece actions with jokes dependent upon innuendo and other word-play. Anti-feminism, scatology and folly of many kinds all feature as part of this. This third mode of performance seems to rely most on the actors and their exploitation of their authority within a theatrical frame. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that at times the merry conceits in which the actors indulge run the risk of overwhelming the circumstances that sustain the serious matter.

This is especially true towards the end of the play. Yngnoraunce specifically targets the pretensions of the studious characters:

> I love not this horeson losophers,
> Nor this great connyng extromers,
> That tell how far it is to the sterres;
> I hate all maner connyng. (ll. 1137-40)

Instead of the foolish "losophy" that "has made you [Humanity] mad", Sensuall Appetyte proposes an entertainment to "fet hyther a company, / That ye shall here them syng as swetly / As they were angellys clere" (ll. 1242-44). He proceeds further to introduce

> Another sort
> Of lusty bluddys to make dysport,
> That shall both daunce and spryng,
> And torne clene above the ground
> Wyth fryscas and wyth ganbawdes round,
> That all the hall shall ryng. (ll. 1245-50)

Yngnoraunce supports Humanity's enthusiasm for this dancing and singing by further suggestion that the audience has had enough of the serious stuff:

> So shalt thou best please
> All this whole company.
> For the folyshe arguynge that thou hast had
> With that knave Experiens, that hath made
> All these folke therof wery. (ll. 1296-1300)

He even suggests that the audience are in fact his devotees, for they

> Love pryncypally
> Disportis, as daunsynge, syngynge,
> Toys, tryfuls, laughynge, gestynge:
> For connynge they set not by. (ll. 1303-6)

Again, here there are clear echoes of A's remarks at the opening of the second half of *Fulgens*, where he speaks of "Dyvers toyes" and "tryfyllis" that are impertinent to the action of the play, but which it is nevertheless expedient to include: "For some there be that lokis and gapys / Only for suche tryfles and japys" (Medwall, pt. 2, ll. 23-31).

But Rastell, through the interjection of Sensuality, also seems genuinely to recognise that his audience might indeed welcome a change of gear. And there is some truth in the suggestion that the speeches of Experiens, in particular, however objectively interesting, have indeed gone on too long, especially with regard to the "figure" brought on at the beginning of the action by Studious Desire. This figure seems to have been either a very large map of the world or possibly a large globe. Though it is acknowledged by Nature when it first arrives on stage, he leaves it to be explained by Experiens. The latter leads the audience in a long lesson of what Rastell would call "natural philosophy". The character points out and lists lands local and familiar, as well as distant, and thereby reveals all the countries of the then-known world, including the Americas. He goes on to describe at further length how sea-goers may determine from observation, as they leave the shore, that the earth is round. Finally, if we haven't quite got the point, he gives a demonstration of the roundness of the sea with the help of a globe, a candle and the model of a ship. That the figure is an object both to arouse and, through the explanation, to appease curiosity is undeniable. It is present throughout the play. The late admission that the explanations might have become tedious to a general audience is perhaps to Rastell's credit. Whatever we may choose to make of the mixed education and entertainment of *Four Elements*, the playwright's handling of them reflects a theatrical intelligence at work. Choices have been made in face of a real expected audience, and the results, though perhaps appearing unsubtle and even clumsy to us, are nevertheless illustrative of the perceived interactive nature of performance reflected in these plays.

This interactive quality becomes differently apparent in the later sequences of *Four Elements*. The wonderfully up-beat song of "Tyme to pas wyth goodly sport" is welcomed by Yngnoraunce but criticised with the strange remark that "it is pyte ye had not a mynstrell / For to augment your solas" (ll. 1326-27). Sensuall Appetyte makes light of this deficiency and promises a dance, also without a minstrel. Humanity then turns abruptly to the audience and says "Now have amonge you, by this lyght!", to which Yngnoraunce adds, "That is well sayd, be God almyght. / Make room, syrs, and gyve them place!" (ll. 1332-34). Doubtless the

a-capella singing has produced a charming effect in its own terms, and now the performance space has to be enlarged for the subsequent dance. Thus any suggestion that this play might consistently invite belief in an illusionary action can be put to rest here, as the audience is involved in activity quite outside dramatic time, moving about to accommodate the dancing. The climax of this episode of *Four Elements* is the performance of a ribald nonsense song by Yngnoraunce, which serves to carry the element of entertainment into an area of extreme abandon. That this song is interrupted by the re-entrance of Nature, long forgotten, brings a timely reminder of the first purpose of the play. Nature is forthright in his condemnation of such wildness. He makes it clear that while Sensuall Appetyte is a necessary companion for Humanity, excessive self-indulgence leads to folly. A balance needs to be observed between study and moderate relaxation:

> If thou wylt lerne no sciens,
> Nother by study nor experiens,
> I shall the never avaunce,
> But in the worlde thou shalt dure than,
> Dyspysed of every wyse man,
> Lyke this rude best Yngnoraunce. (ll. 1438-43)

At this point, the text comes, unfortunately, to an abrupt end. On the basis of our understanding of morality structures, however, we can easily accept its tendency to return Humanity to the straight and narrow path. It remains possible to argue that the wild shenanigans of dancing and singing show a necessary extremity of disorder within the fictional frame of the play, that is, they fulfil some expectations of a drama. This episode was no doubt hugely entertaining and would have been a high point in the performance. It may even have worked to make Humanity's return to the fold of good sense acceptable to audiences as a final action. But as I have demonstrated, the manner of its occurrence undermines expectations of the kind of dramatic integrity that invites belief and thus persuades us that the late notions of Coleridge do not quite match the nature of this and other early sixteenth-century theatrical events. The same is true of the somewhat overdone seriousness of the "sad mater" that could, on the author's own admission, be left out to advantage. Regularly throughout the piece, the audience is shifted in and out of attention, and therefore in and out of any "belief" in the illusionary consistency of what they see.

This text, like all of those of Rastell, demonstrates the continuing paradox of the theatrical experience. My argument would be that this was manifest in this

early period through experimentation with new subject matter and new forms. The process might be said to have begun with *Fulgens and Lucres*. Dealing as it does with a woman's choice in marriage, and having in my view direct links with court matters of the 1510s, it plays fast and loose with the perceived relationship between performers and audience. We are constantly transported between theatrical and real time. Medwall's play achieves a level of consistency and immediacy in spite of such playfulness, whereas Rastell, aspiring to a similar spirit of playfulness, often lacks the assured and deft touch of his predecessor.

In his *Gentleness and Nobility*, for instance, despite the promise of "divers toys and gestis" on the title page, they are slow to materialise and amount in the end to not very much. The figure of the Ploughman certainly relates to the audience in a comic and confrontational way. His horsewhipping of his opponents might astonish, affront or even win the approval of some of them. The departure and return of the Merchant and the Knight towards the end serve also to disturb the process as the Ploughman, in a brief metatheatrical moment, suggests that "For exortacyons, techyng, and prechying, / Gestyng, and raylyng, they mend no thyng" (Rastell, *Gentleness*, ll. 1002-3). The Philosopher who provides the epilogue is similarly interposed between the audience and the action in a way reminiscent of the Messenger in *Four Elements*. Thus the debate form itself offers something between exposition and theatre, and Rastell's own theatrical sense explores the dramatic possibilities offered by it, while perhaps remaining unconfident about its effect.

Only in *Calisto and Melebea*, a moral tale deriving from a Spanish original and the fourth of Rastell's printed plays to survive, is the audience drawn into the action of the play in a way we might recognise. Melebea opens the action with a solo speech in character. In this case the narrative, borrowing largely from its source text, is indeed developed in a believable way. Only through its comic absurdities, rather than deliberate transgressions of the stage time, are the audience distanced from the fiction—that is, until the final moments, when the character of Melebea's father, Danio, steps out of the frame of the action. Like the Philosopher in *Gentleness*, he delivers what one has come to recognise as one of Rastell's characteristic speeches of exposition. Beyond the action of the narrative Danio, directly addresses the audience on the subject of good and responsible upbringing of the young and the making of laws that would encourage this. In these final moments and outside the frame of the source text, the boundaries of illusion are transgressed with what appears to be a moralising addition.

Rastell's innovative approach to theatre in terms of subject is thus revealed in the range and difference of his chosen plays, all secular and all committed to investigation and debate on issues of humanistic concern. He exhibits a consistent desire to use theatre as a proseletysing medium. He seems everywhere to be searching for appropriate styles to achieve this end. He uses familiar morality structures, story, debate, expository speech and farcical excess. But at no point does he seem to engage with problems of reception in terms of an illusion of reality. In light of this, it may be concluded that theatre as manifest in Rastell and his contemporaries certainly did not embrace what appears to be Holbein's agenda for naturalistic representation. This does not mean, however, that contemporaries were not subject to responses tending to belief of a more fundamental kind, as this last unattributed anecdote from the end of the sixteenth century bears witness:

> Certaine players at Exeter, acting upon the stage the tragicall storie of Dr.Faustus the Conjurer; as a certain number of Devils kept every one his circle there, and as Faustus was busie in his magical invocations, on a sudden they were all dasht, every one harkning other in the eare, for they were all persuaded there was one devell too many amongst them; and so after a little pause desired the people to pardon them, they could go no further with this matter; the people also understanding the thing as it was, every man hastened to be first out of doors. (Cited by Chambers, 3: 424)

This encapsulates almost perfectly the paradox inherent in spectatorship at a play. It identifies precisely the interposition of belief, illusion and actuality to which this paper has been addressed. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the devil appears thus to be the agent of such a paradox of reception, representing as he does those very powers of transformation that are the essential province of the actor in performance.

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