

John J. McGAVIN, « Medieval Theatricality and Spectatorship »,
« Theta VIII, Théâtre Tudor », 2009, pp. 183-200
mis en ligne en juillet 2009, <<https://sceneuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta8>>.

Theta VIII

est publié par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
dirigé par Philippe VENDRIX,
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 6576

Responsables scientifiques

André LASCOMBES & Richard HILLMAN

Mentions légales

Copyright © 2009 – CESR. Tous droits réservés.
Les utilisateurs peuvent télécharger et imprimer,
pour un usage strictement privé, cette unité documentaire.
Reproduction soumise à autorisation.

Date de création

Juillet 2009

Medieval Theatricality and Spectatorship

John J. McGavin
University of Southampton

Two apparent paradoxes in spectatorship are suggested by the theme of the present volume. The first is that the spectator imaginatively participates in what is seen and yet is conscious of him or herself as watching it. The second is that the spectator achieves a kind of belief in the reality of the event and yet is aware of it as performance. Although the first concerns the spectator's self-consciousness and the second what kind of reality the theatrical event has for the spectator, both paradoxes point towards a single problematic: the relationship of absorption and action in the experience of the spectator. The present paper concentrates on this topic.

Any spectator will have experienced being so imaginatively focussed on the play that the world around is ignored. This absorption is not distinctive of theatrical experience, however: a good book, or conducting a mobile phone conversation in a busy street can induce the same effect. How this degree of dissociation from the world around is received depends very much on context. Many feel that the private absorption of the mobile phone is impolite in public places, and it is certainly illegal when driving in the UK. Being distracted by one's own thoughts during a conversation can cause irritation, and interlocutors are extremely quick to spot when

this is happening. But western societies value a high level of concentration in aesthetic contexts, where it is regarded as offering a purer experience of the artwork. In literary analyses this condition, therefore, often provides the subconscious benchmark for discussion. The implication is that, when one promotes the reality of the artistic event over the larger reality within which it is only an event, *one is right to do so*. In some dramatic performances spectators may be so engrossed that they will think of the fictive narrative represented on stage as happening in reality, and when they thus fall under the control of the actor's and playwright's power to persuade, they are thought to be responding properly to the demands of the genre. The lights go off in the modern theatre to announce that the spectator may be distracted from everything that is not the play.

This encouragement to aesthetic dissociation is very different from the view in the late-medieval *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, whose author objected to plays, and to some paintings, precisely because they could create an emotional, sensual, and imaginative distraction from true reality, failing thus in two respects: by supplanting truth with falsehood and proper spiritual behaviour with pleasure-seeking. If Christ reproved the women who wept at his Passion, how much more would he reprove those who weep at the play of his Passion? (ll. 107-8). The *Tretise* denies that it is good to be engrossed by an aesthetic representation of spiritually important matters, because to do that is to replace spiritual belief with a lower order belief tainted by human artifice and the delights of the senses. The strength of the *Tretise* author's attack, but also its weakness, is that its criteria of value were established not in the world of drama itself but in the realm of spirituality. Since reality is defined as what is *not* mimetic, there is hardly any point in disagreeing with the author about the characteristics of plays; one must simply accept or reject the *value* which he puts on these characteristics. But the *Tretise* author did not leave it there.

In trying to distinguish which kinds of art might be permissible and which not, the *Tretise* author implicitly acknowledged that style was at the root of the problem, rather than the spiritual impoverishment implicit in all the substitutions of mimesis. Some paintings are permissible, he claims, if they avoid "to myche fedyngge mennus wittis" (ll. 136-37), but, since sensuality and kinesis in plays means that they cannot avoid feeding men's wits, it is their *relative* danger to the soul which brings them within the scope of judgement. This in turn implicitly acknowledges that, within the realm of artistic representation, spectatorial *choice* is as susceptible to moral judgement as is the use of art to represent spir-

itual reality. If artistic representation of the sacred is allowed to be educational in some cases, its worth must be judged in relation to the contingencies of style, spectatorial choice, and the effect on the spectator. According to the *Tretise*, then, the more an art work encourages the spectator towards aesthetic absorption, the more spiritually culpable it is, and, by implication, the more the spectator chooses that form of absorption over others, the more spiritually weak they show themselves in their choices of spiritual action. The *Tretise* is thus as much about watching plays as about “pleyinge”, and indeed the argument does not seem to imply much distinction between the two categories of action, treating actors and spectators as participants in a common enterprise, though that is in part a consequence of the particular dialogic strategy which the author employs.

While the author rejected those paintings which were too crafted, and plays which were, by their very nature, sensual, that is, delighting men “bodily”, his basic premise was that any distracting rather than informing was to be avoided. Unfortunately for modern scholars, he gave less space to discussing what particular styles might be considered as feeding men’s wits and therefore as leading to absorption in the artifice and distraction from the real. However, this was also an insightful strategy, for it silently accepted that spectators’ wits and bodies could be fed and delighted by many different artistic means. Spectatorial absorption is not the inevitable product of a particular style of presentation. For example, one might wish to associate the extreme end of spectatorial “belief” in the reality of what is seen on stage with traditions of naturalistic, indoor, highly-controlled drama. There, the play aims to sustain as long as possible the conviction that what is seen is not just a believable representation of something which *could* occur but *is* actually occurring. But such a theatrical basis for aesthetic belief is very fragile: the spectator’s absorption can be unsettled easily if they spot mistakes in detail, and the effect of the play can be damaged by extraneous non-theatrical circumstances, such as a persistent cough in the audience or a knocking window or a lighting problem. Aesthetic participation thus depends on the continued willingness of the spectator to collaborate: to ignore or, where possible, include elements which are not part of the intended presentation. And this is especially true when the naturalistic style of a play pretends to similarity with the spectator’s real life.

Some theatrical approaches go further than naturalism and attempt to blur any distinction between the conditions in which a spectator views and the fiction being represented. A recent award-winning play about people-trafficking

was put on, and was watched by spectators, inside a container lorry.¹ This was an extreme attempt to ensure spectators' imaginative belief in an event, and the moral engagement which should supposedly accompany the experience. But one can think of comparable medieval examples in which such an effect was created without any dominant tradition of naturalism. For example, how different in theatrical effect is the container lorry idea from those instances where the permanent architecture of the church, such as an Easter sepulchre with its carvings or paintings of the resurrection, was employed for Easter representations which mixed ritual and drama?² In such semi-liturgical events, the world of the viewing spectator must have been so completely suffused with the matter being represented that a different kind of reality was created. In this new reality the spectator, however free to think his or her own thoughts, was physically within the world of the representation, and the biblical and contemporary realms were potentially joined as a single stage-set. One can find such effects operating in street theatre also: the obvious example is the York cycle's *Entry into Jerusalem*, in which Christ so pointedly refers to the city of York's own towers and turrets that his entry is really into a new theatrical world in which York and Jerusalem have shared existence, and, as Pam King has shown, the biblical, civic, and liturgical can all co-exist (King, p. 141). The opportunity is held open to the spectator not just to view the presentation but to view it from a place *within* the action—to be not just engrossed by the event but *incorporated* into it. This seems to me more than just a device to encourage imaginative absorption in what is seen, though it is that. It is a way of declaring that, even when spectators mentally step back from being engrossed in the action, and are conscious of themselves as spectators, they are still within the world of the play, and the stage reality which they observe is also the reality *within* which they observe. Rather than attempting to put to rest a spectator's self-consciousness, this form of theatre attempts to redefine the parameters within which that self-consciousness can operate.

Medieval drama, building on a supposedly shared ideology, attempts to create this theatrical environment in many ways: through employing contemporary modes of language, action, references and stage properties; anachronism linking the biblical past with the present; direct address by characters to

1 Clare Bayley, *The Container*, produced by Nimble Fish in association with Underbelly Productions; winner of Amnesty International and Big Issue "2007 Freedom of Expression Award" at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

2 See Sheingorn, *passim*.

audience; the merging of contemporary issues with biblical narrative; and even theatrical activities *shared* by spectator and actors, such as the scatological community singing led by the vices in *Mankind* (ll. 332-43). But such incorporation of the spectator into the fiction suggests as much an anxious desire to assert a world of communal values as confidence that those values could be relied upon to promote an aesthetic belief which could then, in turn, re-confirm spiritual belief. It might be more subtle, more extensive, more varied in its methods, and indeed, as much celebratory as persuasive, but this medieval dramatic approach is still, in one respect, an attempt to put the spectator into the container lorry, in order to determine the nature of their seeing. By incorporating the spectators and their world into the play, the intention is that the spectator will more easily achieve the imaginative absorption which will pay ideological dividends, because he or she will see no alternative reality beyond the play or will, at the very least, think of that reality as coloured by the play. The assumption underlying all this overdetermination of the spectator's response must be that spectatorship is *active* and spectators *choose* their level of absorption. The play is organised to influence that choice, precisely because there is no dependable link between belief in the sense of *croyance* and spectatorial belief in the sense of imaginative absorption. Each *may* lead to the other, but the connection is neither predictable nor inevitable, as can be seen if one studies stage "business".

Stage "business" demands from the spectator an aesthetic commitment which has no necessary ideological component. When it seems to be operating on its own terms, the stage world asserts its own reality and commands the assent of the spectator. Thus a character whose words or actions turn the play temporarily into a bravura display of theatrical dexterity is holding the spectators' attention, and asserting the logic of the stage world, without asking them to believe in anything—not even in the larger action which the play's fiction is supposedly representing. Seeing or hearing in these cases may fully absorb the spectator's attention, but this is an aesthetic "belief" in the play which is the stronger because no other kind of belief is being sought. On the other hand, the imaginative hold of stage business, by promoting the immediate reality of the stage in the imagination, can be used to assert stage logic as true, and thus to smuggle in ideological content. In a forthcoming paper, John Marshall has brilliantly shown how stage business might have been used in the Chester *Shepherds* play to resolve into an image of harmony the local racial antagonisms between English citizens and Welsh outsiders present in this border garrison town for

commercial reasons. Among the groups sponsoring this play were the Glaziers: members of this guild, dressed as shepherds, walked on stilts at the Midsummer Show, and when the play's Banns were announced, and may have also deployed these theatrical skills in the play itself. If this was the case, then the belligerent Welsh shepherds they represented were culturally recuperated by their attractive theatrical presence and because the play merged their stage identity with that of the civic guild which was presenting them. At a spiritual level also, recuperation was achieved—by permitting the shepherds, whose interests otherwise are limited to food and sheep diseases, to acquire a modicum of Latin and the desire to become missionaries and hermits. This is a “feel-good” play, whose techniques of distraction, cultural appropriation, covert re-evaluation, visual ambivalence, and idealisation have clear parallels in much modern TV and film. It also reveals in its Chester sponsors an all-too-recognisable wish that imaginative absorption in entertainment should enable the spectator to adopt a happier view of the world.

Chester may have supplanted social antagonism with a theatrical harmony based on the supervening power of stage business. But drama's power to build ideologically upon the spectators' absorption depends ultimately on their willing cooperation with the actors' and author's skill. Achieving a deep imaginative participation is not a *sine qua non* of spectatorship, however valued it might be in literary-critical circles. What spectators want is what *they* want, and that may not always be absorption in the event. In contexts where it is possible to do so, people may adjust their relationship to the theatrical action, including their physical proximity to it, so as to predetermine the extent to which they will be absorbed by the event, and also to control any expectations of that involvement which other spectators might have of them. This in turn will limit the play's ideological command over their experience. Even in closed, blacked-out theatres, some spectators choose seats (within their financial capacity) to determine the experience they will have: on the end of a row, or directly in the centre; in the front stalls or a box. They may even do this to avoid the possibility of being physically involved in the action, if the genre of the play makes that likely. Outdoor events (such as medieval urban plays) offer even more scope for this.

At a Grand Pardon which I observed on 25 and 26 July 1996 in St. Anne d'Auray, Brittany, it was possible to discern spectatorial zones defined by distance from the processional route. Being present in these zones meant that one was declaring oneself, by relative closeness to the action, to be a particular kind of spectator.

These zones had notional thresholds, such as the kerb of a pavement, which the spectators themselves acknowledged. Whether one could sit down on the ground, or talk, or talk above a whisper, or move around, or leave the children to move around, or eat an ice-cream were all determined by one's choice of zone. It was also clear from the demeanour of the spectators that they were self-policing these zones, and that their presence in one rather than another might be a matter of compromise between their personal desires and circumstances. Thus a deeply believing spectator with young children might have to compromise personal involvement by standing far enough away from the procession to avoid causing offence if the children started to misbehave. Non-believers who saw in the event only a colourful ceremony ensured that they stood close enough to see but far enough back to avoid being forced to appear and behave as a participating believer. In this example, the full range of spectatorship was evident—from the closest, whose imaginative absorption was such that they had become in effect, actors, participating in the religious action, even if not in the actual procession, to the next circle of watchers, who might be described not just as witnessing but as *bearing witness* to the event, then to those who were simply witnessing it without that level of seriousness, and finally to those furthest away, who were looking at it with mild or quite disengaged curiosity. What was common to this spectatorship, however, was that all those present were *predetermining* the level of imaginative absorption which they would feel, and expressing geographically that liberty to adjust the nature of spectatorship which is more frequently exercised in the mind of the spectator.

Such decisions must surely have been made also by medieval spectators. But the exact nature of imaginative absorption in a play would also have been determined then, as now, by socio-economic factors and gender. A recent experiment, in which Heywood's *Play of the Weather* was performed in its original location in Hampton Court Great Hall, revealed how strongly forces of gender and status, realised through relative proximity to the king and the separation of sexes in the audience, would have varied the experience of the play for different spectators, and would have both controlled and liberated certain kinds of spectatorship.³ At some points, for example, it might have been safer to *pretend* to be imaginatively engrossed in the play, rather than to show Henry VIII that one understood its meaning by turning to see how he was taking it. The dynamics of spectatorship

3 This performance was sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and took place 10 May 2007 under the direction of Tom Betteridge and Greg Walker.

are established not only by what is shown but by the presence of other spectators, and also by the spectator's consciousness of him or herself as an object of view. It is increasingly evident that to interpret a medieval or early modern play one must interpret those dynamics. The variety of spectatorial experiences at cycle plays makes this case clear. Theatrical engagement must have varied in nature and depth depending on where, with whom, and in what capacity spectators were situated; what they were also doing while watching (such as feasting, in the case of the York Council); and how they might be observed by other spectators. York's Dean and Chapter, for example, watched the plays from a room over the gates of the Minster Close.⁴ The nature of their spectatorship was thus already defined by their authoritative elevation above events, and defined in their own minds as well as in the minds of those who watched them watching the plays. The liminality of their location and the reclusiveness of their situation would, in a sense, have separated them from any implication that what was shown could be specifically critical of them, but it might have also acted to intensify their experience of the plays as exemplary.

One thinks also of the difference between, on the one hand, watching the York crucifixion from a spot in an upper room overhanging the playing place and, on the other, standing close to the pageant wagon at street level. Either spectator could have been deeply absorbed by the play—I do not think that this case is like that of the Pardon, with distance from the action mirroring engagement—but their experiences would have been very different.⁵ The watchers in the solar room had a greater freedom to adjust between the scene as action and as contemplated image, but they bought that freedom by losing certain moments of theatrical intensity which could be enjoyed by others not so positioned. In effect, spectators *chose* the nature of their theatrical absorption—where it would occur and what kind of experience it would be—and did so for a variety of reasons within the constraints, financial opportunities and habits of their group. The spectators in the upper rooms lost, for example, the commanding moment when the cross is raised to visibility from an invisible position on the floor of

4 The York *A/Y Memorandum Book* for 1417 describes the tenth station as “at the end of Stonegate at the gate of the Minster of the Blessed Peter” (*Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2: 713).

5 Domestic architecture suggests it as highly likely that some watched the plays from upper rooms, and this is supported by the disputes which arose from home owners' desire to have the play stations outside their premises. The *A/Y Memorandum Book* for 1417 states that “in all the years following while this play is played, it must be played before the doors and holdings of those who have paid better and more generously to the Chamber and who have been willing to do more for the benefit of the whole commons for having this play there” (*Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2: 714).

the cart to appear with Christ nailed to it towering above the street-level spectator. That epiphany must surely have been a moment when the *street* spectator was imaginatively held by the action. On the other hand, spectators on the first floor would have then gained physical proximity to the crucified Christ, now raised far above street level, and would have had the sense that Christ's words, "Byholdes Myn heede, Myn handis, and My feete" (*Crucifixion*, l. 255), were actually being delivered straight into their living-room. That effect must have approximated the devotional imagery of Books of Hours. The spectator's situation would indeed have been closely analogous to that depicted in manuscript images, where the female owner of the book is shown privately looking through a window directly into the church where the Holy Family is sitting.⁶ However theatrically powerful the physical action of the crucifixion in the York play, some of the spectators, particularly women of a particular class, would have come to the play with imaginations already shaped by the static devotional image, a habit of physical contact with such images (to the extent of kissing depictions of the wound in Christ's side), and for some, if not many, a wish to experience anew and in company devotional pleasures they had enjoyed elsewhere or in previous exposure to this or other plays.

Theatrical absorption, where it occurs, is demonstrably a willed action on the part of the spectator and almost certainly an intermittent form of engagement with the play. Any spectatorial belief in dramatic reality which results from this absorption must therefore be understood in relation to the spectatorial need which drove it in the first place. For example, desire, anxiety, and unrecognised compulsions must have deeply affected the spectatorship of *Massacre of the Innocents* plays, with their sexualised violence hovering on the edge of comedy and horror, the phallic symbolism of the weapons, including the women's distaffs, and the recognisable domesticity of their street abuse. Personal susceptibility to the actions and themes being presented would have partly determined where a spectator became absorbed in the action and when they remembered their spectatorship, mentally standing back from the event. Such sensitivities in some

6 See, e.g., "The Hours of Mary of Burgundy", fols. 14^v and 43^v, both of which use this "window" motif, the first showing a woman, possibly Mary herself, looking into a church scene, and the second, more pertinent to the present case, though without a depicted spectator, directly onto the historical scene of the crucifixion. The first shows a woman, possibly Mary herself, looking into a church where the Holy Family is seated. The second positions the *reader* as the spectator, looking through a window from the medieval world directly onto the historical scene of the crucifixion.

spectators would also have individually inflected the communal, gender-based, cuckold comedy of *Joseph's Trouble about Mary*. The English biblical plays deal with potent contemporary issues, and the evidence of the plays themselves is that medieval spectators must have gone to have fantasies intensified, explored, satisfied, controlled, and made safe. By implication, the nature of spectators' belief in the action before them, and the times at which they exercised their liberty to disengage from absorption in order to reflect self-consciously on what they were seeing, must have been determined by these desires and fears.

Frantz Fanon has given an account of his own different experiences of viewing Tarzan films at home in Martinique, where he identified with Tarzan against the villainous Negroes, whom he regarded as African, and then seeing the same films in Europe, where he felt the white spectators' gazes identifying him as the black man, fellow to Tarzan's enemies. Fanon then felt a compulsion to revisit this construction of his identity by seeing the films again and again.⁷ It is surely reasonable to consider that such issues of identity would have arisen with medieval plays. One might *assume* that a Jew would have avoided the biblical plays, but equally he might have been driven, as Fanon was, to see himself and his co-religionists portrayed, even if (or possibly *because*) they were portrayed with enmity. He could well have rejoiced in the Abraham and Isaac plays, but have mentally censored their typological reference. Would he have felt the gaze of Christian spectators? One might think that this particular problematic would have been rare, but it could have been less rare than we think, especially on the continent. And other non-racial versions of this problem must have been frequent. One thinks of the complex spectatorship of a local magistrate viewing plays which opposed earthly authority to the heavenly, but located the conflict in a recognisable version of his own late-medieval courtroom, with all the legal language he was accustomed to use in his court-room business, as in the York Passion sequence. One thinks also of the churchman seeing Christ's clerical enemies dressed in contemporary Christian vestments. We know for a fact that one of the earliest Scottish reforming plays did take the next step—*explicitly* identifying Caiaphas, Annas and the Pharisees spiritually with the modern clergy, in whose vestments the actors had been traditionally dressed (John Knox, cited by Mill, p. 291). A clerical spectator's aesthetic engagement with plays must have been affected by such pressures, and the nature of his imaginative absorp-

7 This is discussed in Christian, pp. 221 and 225-26. See also "retrospectatorship" in White, pp. 194-216.

tion would have altered as a consequence. For spectators who felt personally or professionally defensive about the plays' message, spectating may have been less a matter of achieving imaginative absorption in the reality of the play than of managing spectatorship itself as a penitential act.

The decision to spectate is a decision to act, and to act in a way which has consequences. Drama has long been thought of as collaborative: spectators in a sense give licence to the performer by attending; they give encouragement by applause; they may control their consciousness of extraneous details so as to preserve the illusion of the play.⁸ They may be conscious *ab initio* that the act of watching has got ethical implications, and may manage their spectatorship, including the possibility of being absorbed in the show, with such considerations in mind. This becomes particularly obvious, for example, when films show violence.⁹ It is true even of well-intentioned televised crime documentaries, which re-enact offences in order to catch criminals but, in doing so, also entertain through mimesis. Recent legislation in the area of child pornography has reversed traditional notions of the spectator as passive recipient of images, and has argued that the spectator's desire to watch encourages the production of the abuse on which it is based. In this respect, modern law is beginning to approach the more sophisticated view of causation held in the Middle Ages: while the image may be the *formal* cause of the spectator's experience, that experience is the *efficient* cause of the image. Recent arguments about the propriety of representing the story of Anne Frank in a musical indicate how the ethics of spectatorship are inflected by genre, and are not simply to do with whether watching is a legitimate act in itself.¹⁰ But in some contexts, where watching can be interpreted politically as bestowing a kind of licence, and maybe even more—a bearing of witness to the legitimacy of what is seen—the only sanction left to the dissenting potential spectator may be “not to see”: to turn off the television, to refuse to attend an execution, and so on, and, if they feel strongly enough about it, and if they are able to manage it, to ensure that others “see” their refusal.

If spectatorship is a special kind of action, it follows that the strange combination of absorption and self awareness which the spectator feels when engaged in this action is also special. One does indeed feel that the self-

8 Elam describes these as “transactional conventions” (p. 88).

9 See, for example, Cubilié's section entitled “Ethics in the Field?”

10 Anne Frank's only surviving relative complained that other genres were acceptable because more “realistic”. See van Gelder.

consciousness which attends spectatorship is different from the self-consciousness which attends normal activities. When I look at the countryside passing by the train window, I may also be aware that I am looking at it. I just don't think that my looking is interesting or relevant to the experience, nor that it is a *part* of the experience. Neither is my self-awareness of looking a significant part of the experience. Looking is simply the means by which I see the countryside, and occasional self-consciousness about it is just the consequence of ego or habits of thought. However, the term "theatre", as we know, derives from *theatron*, the place from which the seeing was done, not the location where what was seen took place. And, in a theatrical context, where the event is specifically provided for one's notice, "looking" seems more significant as an action; our self-consciousness of that action, far from being an interruption of the experience, and far less an obstacle to absorption in the experience, is a necessary concomitant of its significance.

The collaboration fundamental to theatre rests on the shared assumption that both doing and seeing are active parts of the event. Both those on the stage and those watching are active in the event; without one, the other has no meaning. A spectator is conscious in advance that his or her looking will be an important part of the experience, not just the means by which the event will be "consumed". The onlookers at the Grand Pardon who kept at a distance were not just controlling the effect of the event on them, but also the significance which their watching would have for themselves and for anyone who observed them as spectators. They were resisting any demand that their watching was part of the event itself. It is hard to conceive of a deliberately public act in which someone is not expected to take on the role of a spectator and thus be implicated in the event. The spectatorial role may vary in extent, nature, or significance from genre to genre: at the ritualistic end of theatricality (as opposed to drama), a funeral or even a mass, for example, the action does not absolutely *require* spectators to take place, though, in fact, funerals were among the most striking public performances in the early modern period and still have that status in some communities, and it is only the Orthodox Mass that can proceed without a lay communicant. But the closer one gets to what we would call plays, the more the event demands, from the outset, not just to be seen but to be consciously and publicly witnessed. Self-consciousness about spectating is thus not that normal awareness of self which happens all the time anyway, but an aspect of the activity which is required of the spectator, and upon which the whole event depends.

Temporary periods of imaginative absorption, when one is wholly engrossed in the play and lost to all but its ongoing sensations, give way inevitably to the spectator's returning awareness that he or she is a watcher, that spectatorship is part of the *final* cause of the performance, and that therefore the self-consciousness of watching is proper to the action of spectating, not a distraction from the true business of being absorbed.

Because spectators are purposely given something which they have purposely chosen to receive, their looking becomes part of the event, not just the means of experiencing it, and drama thus stages both events *and* the perceiving of them. The experience is of necessity a binary of imaginative engagement in the events as they go by and reflective self-consciousness about viewing them. But which of these conditions has primacy in the experience of spectatorship? If one of them might be considered entailed by the other, the paradoxical condition of spectatorship proposed at the outset of this paper could be resolved within the definition of a "Hegelian" reconciliation, as posited by Žižek: "not . . . an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but . . . the redoubling of the gap or antagonism—the two opposed moments are 'reconciled' when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms" (Žižek, p. 106). But it is hard to see that either absorption or self-conscious reflection, both of which are apparently interdependent and inevitable phases within the same action of spectating, could be considered the superordinate term, or that activity which contains both itself and its opposite. Certainly, I would argue that the distinctive quality of spectatorship is not that it permits imaginative absorption in the action or the world of the play. It has this power in common with many activities. But the same is true of self-consciousness of one's actions. One might suggest, instead, that the key term for exploring the paradoxes of spectatorship is "adjustment"—a term which at once reflects the spectator's sense of kinesis and of unforeseen changing experience, while also carrying within itself the notion of measurement, of a capacity to identify, within the flux, the separate stages through which the spectator moves, such as, for example, phases of absorption or self-conscious reflection.

Spectators know that, when they see a play, they are embarking on a process of constant adjustment. If anything, that adjustment is drama's enhancement of the ordinary processes of change which one encounters in everyday living. Just as the ordinary processes of looking, and being self-conscious of one's action, become individually and mutually charged with significance in the

theatrical event, so the process of living with change is fore-grounded by theatre through its demand that the spectator adjust between the stimuli which it offers. In Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy says, "in this day to day life you live no more than in that moving and transitory moment" (p. 423 [6.16-18]). Drama, on the other hand, powerfully asserts the sensation of the passing moment, mirroring the passage of time through a sequence of events which it presents to its spectators as meaningfully sequenced, requiring that the spectator acknowledges the potential significance of that sequence, but, most fundamentally, demanding that the spectator *bears witness* to the theatrical event by adjusting to its changing demands. Bearing witness to drama is not just a matter of highly-charged looking; it is a commitment to the "life" of the drama in its demands on the spectator to adjust between states. Frequently that adjustment is between moments of imaginative absorption and moments of reflective self-consciousness, but it is implicit in all aspects of the experience. It is also present in the pleasure of mimesis itself, when one acknowledges the gap between the dramatic event and that which it represents. The spectator enjoys adjusting between the representation and what seems to be represented; between attention to the character *and* awareness of the actor. Just as one takes pleasure in an old building because its verticals and horizontals are no more than allusions towards an ideal verticality and horizontality, so one becomes self-conscious of theatrical mimesis in order to enjoy it sometimes *as an allusion*, not just as the illusion achieved when the spectator is wholly absorbed in the action.

Medieval and early modern drama seems to promote adjustment rather than absorption as the leading characteristic of spectatorship, and does so at all levels of its activity. For a final example of this, I would choose the *Killing of Abel*, by the Wakefield Master in the *Towneley Cycle*, which, in a very short space of time, takes the spectator through a series of quite bizarrely different and mutually inconsistent conceptions of the event, and of Cain himself. Over 476 lines, Cain changes from a mythic figure out of the folk world of plough plays and men dressed as animals into a character from biblical narrative. He then passes through a series of recognisable contemporary identities: a bad-tempered neighbour, a bad tither, a flamboyantly cruel master. He then becomes the mouthpiece for the spectator's *own* rebellious thoughts, and thus their surrogate. Finally, he takes the audience through major tonal shift: first as an entertainer whose stage business is conducted with sheaves of corn, then as the first murderer, and eventually as a comic stooge who is made fun of by his apprentice. As a consequence,

the spectator repeatedly has to adjust between action, enaction, exemplification, rhetorical play, narrative representation, and game. Cain moves in and out of focus as a Biblical or contemporary character, and the world of the play similarly shifts between localisable, definable space and spaces which are ambiguous in reference or are just the play space itself. The many different kinds of action are imaginatively engrossing, but it is in the adjustments between them that one finds the distinctive pleasure of this dramatic spectatorship, and these adjustments cannot be managed without both imaginative involvement and self-conscious reflection. Early drama thus suggests that we need in one sense to pass beyond the binary of absorption and action with which this paper started, but also to re-instate it as a dual force within the fundamental processes of adjustment which characterise theatre.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- BOETHIUS. *The Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*. New ed. Trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1973.
- The Crucifixion (York, the Pinners)*. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. Greg Walker. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 134-41.
- The Hours of Mary of Burgundy: Codex Vindobonensis 1857, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek*. Commentary by Eric Inglis. Manuscripts in Miniature. London: Harvey Miller, 1995.
- Mankind. The Macro Plays: The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind*. Ed. Mark Eccles. Early English Text Society, 262. London: Oxford University Press for The Early English Text Society, 1969. 153-84.
- MILL, Anna Jean, ed. *Mediæval Plays in Scotland*. 1924; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969.
- Records of Early English Drama: York*. Ed. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson. 2 vols. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979.
- The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. Greg Walker. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 196-200.

Secondary Sources

- CHRISTIAN, Laura. "Fanon and the trauma of the cultural message". *Textual Practice* 19.3 (2005): 219-41.
- CUBILIÉ, Anne. "Grounded Ethics: Afghanistan and the Future of Witnessing". *S&F Online [The Scholar and Feminist Online]* 2.1: *Public Sentiments* (2003): <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/cubilie.htm>. Accessed 10 March 2008.
- ELAM, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New Accents. London: Methuen, 1980.
- KING, Pamela M. *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006.
- MARSHALL, John. "Walking in the Air: The Chester Shepherds on Stilts". *Medieval English Theatre* 26 (forthcoming).
- SHEINGORN, Pamela. *The Easter Sepulchre in England*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1987.

VAN GELDER, Lawrence, comp. *New York Times* 4 February 2008. Online http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/04/theater/04arts-ANNEFRANKMUS_BRF.html?ref=theater&pagewanted=all. Accessed 10 March 2008.

WHITE, Patricia. *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.