

Yvonne PHOENIX, « "...and that before mine eyes" (*Cambises*):
The Furious Passion for Stage Images during the Tudor Period »,
« Theta VIII, Théâtre Tudor », 2009, pp. 219-234
mis en ligne en juillet 2009, <<https://sceneeuropeenne.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

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Date de création

Juillet 2009

“...and that before mine eyes” (Cambises): The Furious Passion for Stage Images during the Tudor Period

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When Bottom emerges from his glimpse of life with Titania and her fairies, it might not be as far-fetched as one would think to suggest that his reaction to the “rare vision” (Shakespeare, IV.i.203) he has just seen is basically not unlike that of a Renaissance spectator after seeing the performance of a play. During his time in the forest, an unbelievable spectacle had unfolded before his eyes and enfolded him in its action. Indeed, he was like one of those especially privileged onlookers, common amongst early playgoers, who were drawn into the spectacle. The incredible sights paraded before his eyes seemed to leave him intrigued but on the whole unruffled.

Like many sixteenth-century spectators before him—fictional ones, like A and B in Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrece*, and less fictional ones, such as the audience member asked by the eponymous character in Heywood’s *Johan Johan* to clean his gown (ll. 250-57) or the young woman proposed to by Ambidexter in Preston’s *Cambises* (l. 953)—Bottom participated gamely. An ungainly sight amongst so much daintiness, he allowed himself to be led across the invisible border separating spectacle and observers with bashful expectancy but cheerful acceptance. Taking all this novelty in his stride, even performing awkwardly when required, he still retained his

spectator status, keeping his “self” resolutely intact. In the light of our present discussion about seeing and believing, we may reflect about the relationship between image and viewer and wonder how far the notion of belief is involved here. During the fairy performance, does Bottom believe his own eyes? And, once it is over, how much of this vision and his participation in it still has an effect on him? On a more general level, were sixteenth-century spectators supposed or even required to believe implicitly in what they saw? Was theatrical spectacle rendered more believable by the inclusion of an audience member? To what extent can we determine how playwrights handled the relationship between seeing and believing? How far can we imagine the lasting impact a play could have on its spectators?

In an effort to throw light on such matters, I should like to discuss the general terms of the proposition and its qualification, “Seeing is believing—or is it?”, in relation to the Tudor period. Then I shall cast a glance at what Tudor playwrights tended to want their audiences to see, attempting, finally, a few concluding speculations about the extent to which audiences may have believed, and even believed *in*, what they saw.



The difficulty in answering the question under discussion is already suggested by the manner in which it is posed. The arresting affirmation that seeing does indeed induce belief seems entirely logical when one considers, for example, the importance of eye witnesses in court cases or the fact that, when doubt is expressed, the declaration, “I saw it with my own eyes!”, is often deemed the ultimate proof. When the statement, “seeing is believing”, is applied to Renaissance drama, it seems to proclaim loud and clear the power of visual staging, brooking no argument against the idea that visual effects in the theatre at this time had enough impact to induce the complete adherence of an audience.

However, the statement is then undermined by the graphic hesitation and the tentative question, “—or is it?”, which follow rather like an afterthought. Doubt has set in: this somewhat diffident and halting double-take suddenly blurs all certainty and opens up a debate. Indeed, this juxtaposition is almost a mimesis of the way Tudor audiences could be completely convinced by a sudden flash of visual theatricality, only to come out of the illusion when, just as quickly, the magic fizzled out.

Such uncertainty about the application of the principle is not really surprising, in that, when we consider the medieval and Renaissance periods, we come up against rather a stumbling block concerning the yoking together of the two notions, seeing and believing. When we examine them separately, however, these terms do seem compatible: each of them concerns a vital aspect of life during these times, and both have religious implications.

First, concerning the term “seeing”, we may note that Aristotle placed vision at the top of the hierarchy of the five human senses and emphasized that the path to knowledge was through perception of the visible world. Adepts of Aristotle ardently adhered to this hypothesis across the ages, and in the thirteenth century we find it echoed by Roger Bacon, who declared that “nothing is fully intelligible unless it is presented before our eyes” (Camille, pp. 21-22). This theory promoting optical and visual hegemony was borne out even on the most mundane practical levels, as, to a vastly greater degree than is the case today, the ability to observe and to glean meaning from visual signs was quite simply part of daily existence. The eye was an organ that also helped to decipher, to learn and to memorize, and scrutinizing the heavens and the world of nature in general was a vital survival skill. Furthermore, it is a well-known and well-documented fact that interpreting visual signs was fundamental in the practice of religion, and that the hegemony of visual codes led to a passion for images. As well as being profitably deciphered and interpreted, they could provide emotional comfort and sometimes even quasi-mystical experiences. In fact, the contemplation of statues, relics and holy pictures was considered a deeply meaningful act, which could initiate hours of meditation. Through the act of seeing, the faithful could feel close to God and the saints. They could also reinforce their beliefs by reflecting, for example, on particular aspects of Christ’s suffering whilst seeking to attain a degree of compassion so deep as to induce a state of considerable emotion and even, on occasion, to provoke tears.

Whilst this was an experience available even to the most humble of Christians, wealthier ones could penetrate one step further into the depicted world by paying actually to appear in artistic representations of religious scenes. Seeing themselves side by side with Christ or rubbing shoulders with the saints in the thick of some biblical scene made them feel closer to God and to the salvation they believed in and so ardently desired. Some of these wealthy benefactors preferred to remain modestly on the borders of the paintings or to feature as miniature figures in the lower register of the picture, a tiny addition to the sacred

event portrayed, as in *The Trinity and Mystic Pietà* of Grien. Others, however, had themselves boldly featured as life-size witnesses in close proximity with sacred and biblical figures, as is the case in *The Portarini Altarpiece* of Van der Goes.

It cannot be ignored however, that once the Reformation began, this essentially Catholic passion for religious images was undermined by successive waves of Protestant iconoclastic fever. It became commonplace for those who disapproved of holy pictures and statues to consider them as the equivalent of pagan idols and to advocate their total elimination. But it says much for the strength of this passion that campaigns of wholesale destruction, and the threat of dire punishments for offenders, particularly during Edward VI's reign, failed to eradicate the phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, when Mary came to the throne, hoarded images and cult objects soon emerged from their hiding places. On Elizabeth's succession, the destruction recommenced, but to a much lesser degree, as the queen disapproved of ardent iconoclasts and, despite much pleading on the part of dismayed Protestants to persuade her to the contrary, she even retained a cross and candlesticks in her own chapel. Furthermore, Martin Luther himself had an ambivalent attitude towards religious images. At first totally against them, he later came to tolerate them as long as they were not worshipped in place of God, and he even allowed his translation of the New Testament to be illustrated.

The extreme lengths to which image breakers were ready to go in order to achieve their objectives bears witness to the strength and endurance of those for whom interpreting images was a vital need. Paradoxically, iconoclasts themselves sometimes had recourse to images in order to transmit their own message, thereby using as a means of propaganda the very medium they were out to destroy, employing art as anti-art. This seems to be the case concerning a Tudor group portrait painted by an unknown Elizabethan artist and entitled *Edward VI and the Pope: An Allegory of the Reformation*. The Pope, in full regalia, is shown slumped over in a prone position, flanked by two sinister looking monks, and the picture includes an inset depicting a scene of iconoclasm.

Such a degree of fascination with images, amounting, in certain cases, almost to a hypnotic focalisation on visual manifestations of religion, would seem, quite naturally, to connect the notion of "seeing" to the second term of our subject, "believing", a link which seems further reinforced by the fact that clarity of vision was associated with truth, beauty and godliness, whilst blindness had connotations of sin, ignorance and devilish forces. Such reasoning, however, falters somewhat when we realise that, paradoxically, visual representations of

the most fundamental of all Christian beliefs, God the father, are relatively rare. There is a marked disproportion—concerning both frequency and constancy—between artistic representations depicting Christ as Son of God made man, and those depicting God the Father. On the one hand, the plethora of images of Christ built up a comfortingly familiar figure, always with the same basic features, who became immediately identifiable, an image which was so frequent and constant that its subject could easily be believed in. On the other hand, however, the much smaller number of visual representations of God the Father, as well as their disparate nature, seems to underline the fact that unlike Christ, who spent time on earth, God the Father has never been seen by the human eye, thereby reflecting the statement in the gospel of St. John that “No man has seen God at any time” (John 1:18). Certain Gothic works of art illustrate the belief that only the blessed dead will see God face to face. In his book about Gothic art, Michael Camille refers to two illuminations on parchment which illustrate this theme. The first one, from a psalter c. 1220 (now in Trinity College, Cambridge) shows the unseen godhead, the figure of a man with his face deliberately hidden, presenting the Throne of Mercy to kneeling nuns. In the second one, which is from the *Omne Bonum* (1360–65; now in the British Library), the immense disembodied head of God represents the direct face-to-face vision so resolutely denied to the living. According to Camille, “As so often the Gothic image simultaneously offers something to vision and takes it back, presenting a picture of a promised vision that the viewer will only see after death” (pp. 126–27).

Although visual depictions of God continued to be attempted, even quite resoundingly so in the Corpus Christi cycle plays, in which the role of God the Father was interpreted by actors, they never acquired the same impact and popularity as images of Christ. Perhaps they were too disparate and conjectural to eradicate the sentiment that no truly convincing image of God the Father existed. Nor did they modify the idea that true faith was to a certain extent blind, a precept that could only be reinforced in England as the Protestant Reformation grew in strength, rejecting religious imagery in general and the Corpus Christi plays in particular as relics of a popish past. It would therefore seem impossible to reconcile the supreme act of belief—that in an invisible God—with the supreme trigger of belief: seeing. This notion of blind faith prevents the equation “seeing is believing” from functioning satisfactorily and thereby seems to justify the hesitant double-take in the thematic proposition under discussion.. In fact, to convinced Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, the expression,

“seeing is believing”, must seem incongruous, as they believe unquestioningly in a God who remains resolutely absent from view. Thus the strength of their faith is judged precisely on their ability to believe *without* seeing. To understand the full implications of this, we may consider the apostle Thomas, who was severely admonished by Christ for his need to see (and to touch) in order to believe. In this episode, Jesus indicates clearly that seeing should not be a pre-requisite to believing:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have *seen* the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall *see* in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not *believe*. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and *behold* my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not *faithless*, but *believing*. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas because thou hast *seen* me, thou hast *believed*: blessed are they that have not *seen*, and yet have *believed*. (*The Bible* [Authorized Version], John 20:24-29; my italics).

Thomas, of course, did not lose his chance of becoming a saint, but the effect of this episode was to burden him for all eternity with the disdainful epithet “doubting”.

Further considerations blur the lines of the equation between “seeing” and “believing”, for, at the onset of the politico-religious strife which characterizes the sixteenth century, the term “belief” acquired a whole new set of connotations. People’s beliefs became a form of identity and a means of differentiation. At a time when some fought for their beliefs, others kept them hidden and vast numbers died for them or because of them, the term could not be used lightly. For all the above reasons, in precisely the most crucial area of their lives, that is, their religious beliefs, people had little access to the very kind of visual codes they were so adept at interpreting in other domains. One such domain was obviously that of theatrical performance.

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My main interest now in this paper is to reflect on ways in which Tudor playwrights took such tendencies into account when catering for the tastes, ideas and skills of their viewing public. More precisely, I should like to focus on how they

capitalized on the population's finely honed skills of observation and interpretation, as well as on their readiness to plight their whole being on an unshakeable belief in something completely unseen and impossible ever to see.

Although, obviously, no ocular proof could ever be provided concerning their faith, the medieval corpus, still being performed at this time, went some way towards satisfying audiences' need to see aspects of their beliefs by presenting illustrations of the biblical scenes so ardently believed in by the population. For these audiences it was not a question of "seeing is believing", but rather of a permutation of these terms: they were *seeing* a theatrical rendering of *what they believed in*. Even as it underwent a process of secularisation, the Tudor corpus continued in this vein by offering episodes which were rather more allusive, in that certain characters and their stances could remind audiences of biblical figures. One example in *Cambises* is the grief-stricken mother holding her dead child, in a visual tableau very similar to that of Mary with Christ when he has just been taken down from the cross. Whole episodes could be decoded and interpreted in the same manner as biblical scenes: for example, in the play *Apianus and Virginia*, the scene (vii) where Virginius kills his own daughter could be viewed as a typological take on the Abraham and Isaac episode. Similarly, in *Cambises*, the execution of Sisamnes in front of his son (ll. 413-73) could be interpreted as an inversion of the same episode.

By making full and intelligent use of the audience's double, almost paradoxical, capacity involving, on the one hand, impressive interpretative skills and, on the other hand, a readiness to believe unquestioningly and without any visual "proof", playwrights must necessarily have contributed to the development of spectator skills, fostering talented, discerning playgoers. Audiences would necessarily have become adept at interpreting theatrical codes with no need to have things spelled out to them, yet at the same time they must have been willing, for the time of the performance, to believe the unbelievable, ready to accept whatever judicious and astute playwrights could throw at them. Perhaps Bottom's calm acceptance of the fairy world is an expression of this.

I shall now select some examples of what Tudor playwrights tended to want their spectators to see. The selection is difficult to make among the tumult of sights with which they bombarded their audiences. It is important to underline the fact that the choice to show so much was not an easy one to make at this time, given that such techniques were frowned on in influential quarters, that is to say by adepts of esteemed figures in the world of literature such as Aristotle

and Horace. It could have been the stipulation in Aristotle's *Poetics* that character and plot were more important than spectacle which led to a belief that showing was somehow quite crude, a view endorsed some four centuries later in Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In rather the same vein, and even if he did not always practise what he preached, Thomas Heywood, in his "*Londini Speculum, The Third Show*", was later to express the following view: "The vulgar are better delighted with that which pleaseth the eye than contenteth the care" (cited by Bevington, p. 199n32). Similarly, followers of Seneca preferred narrative techniques in plays, as can be seen in Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc*. As well as this reticence in literary quarters concerning showing, the choice to put the accent on spectacle was rendered even more difficult because playwrights had to contend with the fact, alluded to earlier in this discussion, that for reasons based on religious strife, iconography could be deemed suspect.

Nonetheless, some sort of unstoppable force seems to have led Tudor playwrights to flout such precepts and to flaunt boldly their riot of stage images. Perhaps it was quite simply because they were in tune with public tastes that they were able to forge ahead regardless with their own particular brand of vividly graphic and startlingly spectacular theatre.

There is such a vast amount to be said on this subject that I shall be able only to skim the surface here. My comments will correspond to three permutations of the terms of the topic: first, "seeing and believing"; then, "seeing and not believing"; and, finally, "not seeing but believing".

Concerning the permutation, "seeing and believing", I shall restrict my comments to one play, Thomas Preston's *Cambises*. The main point to be made here is that Tudor playwrights seemed to want to show as much as possible to their audiences, and I have chosen this particular play because it spells out this general tendency so graphically. The emphasis on seeing is left in no doubt, as the tautology in the full form of my title quotation indicates: "I shall see the office done, and that before my eyes" (l. 439). Similar mentions of the act of seeing abound in *Cambises*. Devoid of any attempt at subtlety, the play leaves bare and visible to the naked eye its metatheatrical mechanisms. The play practically forces the spectator's gaze onto an impressive array of stage images, while pounding out in fourteeners a running commentary which could almost be described as a metatheatrical handbook, since it stipulates the hows, whys and wherefores of what is being shown and thereby indicates how the actors could play the scenes. The four scenes of cruelty in *Cambises* all follow the same basic pattern: the

king's fury, the condemning to death of a victim and the execution. In classical drama, that of Seneca, for example, such events are carried out rapidly and can be relegated to the off-stage space and the choric function. But in Tudor drama, obsessed with showing, they tend to be long and drawn-out in order to wring every drop of emotion from the audience. It is of course possible, perhaps even probable, that the playwright had in mind the Aristotelian formula of catharsis, especially as Preston was a university-educated academic. However, I tend to think that he may also have been catering to the popular taste for the emotional contemplation of holy pictures. This activity, mentioned earlier in this paper, could solicit in the viewer feelings of overwhelming sadness at Christ's suffering and feelings of anger towards those who caused it. It is possible that the practice came back into its own during Mary's reign and had not yet been stamped out. In Preston's play, the central tableau of each of the principal episodes, the actual death of the victim, is not shown abruptly. It has to be carefully prepared for by a mixture of verbal and visual codes, so that the audience can receive it to full effect and at exactly the right moment. In preparation for this culminating image, there is an immense build-up, as words, gestures and attitudes pertaining to the threatened outcome go around in ever more tense circles. An almost palpable rhythm is achieved by contrasting the slow pace with furious exhortations to speed. Tension is stretched to the breaking point by means of an accumulation of verbally-suggested images accompanied by gestures with weapons—for example, in "At heart of child I mean to shoot, hoping to cleve it right" (l. 534), or "he shall die by dint of sword or else by choking rope" (l. 689). These effects are reinforced by the superimposition of concrete elements, such as the sinister appearance of an executioner or the blood-stained hands of murderers. The stretched-out pace gives the audience time to prepare for the culmination. They know that the final death scene will be carried out in full view. They fear it and at the same time crave it as part of the thrill of theatre.

The central tableau of three of these scenes represents the execution, respectively, of a judge, a child and the king's brother. They are each executed in a different way, by sword, arrow and dagger. Verbal captions accompany the pictures of their demise; for example, when the spectators see the executioner put Sisamnes to death, they also hear the commentary, "Behold oh King, how he doth bleed being of life bereft" (l. 461). Even when the victims are dead, the audience's gaze is directed to the atrocities committed on their corpses. Sisamnes, for example, is flayed, as indicated in the famous stage direction, "Flay him with a

false skin" (l. 464 SD), as well as in two separate verbal captions: first, "*draw thou his cursed skin straight over both his ears*" (l. 438), then, twenty-five lines later, "*Pull his skin over his ears to make his death more vile*" (l. 463). In the same way, the child's heart is cut out and offered to his father: "Behold, Praxaspes, thy son's own heart! Oh how well the same was hit!" (l. 563). No visual detail is spared or allowed to be missed by the audience. Further stage directions indicate almost a choreography for the murder of Prince Smerdis: first, "*They lay hands on him*"; then, five lines later, "*Strike him in divers places*"; and finally, "*A little bladder of vinegar pricked*" (ll. 718 SD, 722 SD, 726 SD).

Such examples of the preoccupation with showing and seeing abound in the Tudor corpus and are handled in such a way as to induce the spectators' willing suspension of disbelief. Even though in *Cambises* there is a heavy, plodding insistence on what is shown, Preston is a gifted enough dramatist to avoid the trap which Shakespeare intentionally lets Bottom and his fellows fall headlong into, and which can be described as creating a situation in which seeing is not believing. Much to the delight of their courtly spectators, these rude mechanicals simply do not credit the audience with the power either to imagine or to discriminate between the imaginary and the real. Of all of them, though, Bottom has more of an inkling about what creates theatricality. Even though he confuses comic and tragic effects, he feels instinctively that, for example, to create "a monstrous little voice" (I.ii.48) for Thisbe would somehow be more entertaining than to use Flute's naturally treble pipes. However, even he never grasps the fact that illusion and imagery are the dramatist's resources. The fact that Shakespeare would include in his play such metatheatrical issues says much about the spectator skills of sixteenth-century audiences. He knew they would be amused by the mechanicals' incapacity to induce their noble spectators to believe what they saw.

My third permutation, "not seeing but believing", involves what could perhaps be described as "virtual vision" and occurs when the spectators are led to believe they have actually witnessed an imaginary action or event. This aesthetic technique could, of course, be resorted to for practical reasons, as, with the best will in the world, and even if amateur dramatists like the mechanicals believed it possible, playwrights could not show in a graphic or concrete way all the elements needed for every play. But it was, above all, a technique which could intensify the audience's mental participation.

In a manner which was rather different from the Senecan recourse to straight narration, Tudor playwrights used techniques which could stimulate the audience's imagination to such a degree that they came quite close to the

act of seeing. I will refer to this group of techniques as belonging to the principle described by André Lascombes in his work on ostension as “le regard spéculatif” (the speculative gaze). One of the functions of the speculative gaze is to direct the spectator’s attention to the right place at the right time, training this virtual gaze onto a part of the spectacle which is activated, while directing it away from elements which, though possibly physically present in the playing area, are currently inactive.

Nor is this speculative gaze always optical; more often than not, it includes the spectator’s faculty of imagination and the way it has been stimulated by the playwright or theatre practitioner. The situation can even arise whereby the audience’s attention completely bypasses what is optically perceptible on the stage to become absorbed by action which is taking place outside their line of vision. This happens in certain cases of teichoscopy, where the audience, completely engrossed in what is happening “within”, may hardly notice the characters who are actually standing in the playing area. The most spectacular occurrences of this technique in the Tudor corpus are probably those found in *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, for example, when Gammer, Cock and Tib stand at the door of their house observing and commenting on the extraordinary antics of Hodge inside. Completely by-passing the entirely visible characters, who are probably huddled around the doorway, and guided by the comments of Hodge within and by the sound effects of his actions, the speculative gaze of the audience is entirely focussed on this optically invisible offstage space (I.v.10-44).

The fluidity of the staging is another means of activating the speculative gaze, as the neutral nature of stage settings lent itself to quick and easy metamorphoses, which spectators needed to keep track of. They had to be aware, for example, of whether the space functioning earlier as a street had now suddenly become a house or a palace. Strangely enough, the neoclassically inspired structure consisting of two houses was no less flexible than the empty stage and called for just as much alert observation on the part of the spectator. Even though the houses were permanent fixtures, they allowed great fluidity—for example, between onstage and offstage spaces—and they inspired exits and entrances that provoked speculation and anticipation on the part of the audience. Even in the highly connoted house in *Johan Johan*, with its numerous properties, the speculative gaze remains active. It is called upon, at one point, to abandon Tyb preparing the meal and to follow Johan Johan to the priest’s house (l. 313).

I shall briefly mention here some other areas which could capture and direct the speculative gaze. Among these were the proxemics, which in Tudor theatre were quite vigorous, stylized and geometrical. Often leading to bouts of clowning or fisticuffs, they could alert the spectator to changes of mood, attitude or mounting tension. Split scenes and framing devices were more sophisticated ways of organising the proxemics and of guiding the speculative gaze to a particular aspect of the action.

Other procedures which involved showing in a virtual way and thus catered not to the eye but to the mind's eye could be described as narrative-based techniques. There are a whole wealth of them, ranging from simple lists which can conjure up objects and places to vignettes which provide the mind's eye with vivid glimpses of activity not shown on the stage—for example, the church episode in *Apus and Virginia* (recounted in ii.241-43 and 642-49). Then there are the spectacular panoramas, such as those depicted throughout Heywood's *Play of the Wether*, when each of the characters brings into the playing area his own time and space. At the more sophisticated end of the scale, there are the various types of metalepsis and general storytelling, like the miracles recounted by the priest in *Johan Johan* (ll. 537-82). As well as enhancing the depth and substance of a play, such techniques can contribute actively to the audience's mental participation in the dramatic issues. For example, in *Apus and Virginia*, the spectator is confronted with four different images of Virginia. Only two of them are actually visible, but those existing in the mind of Virginius and that of Apus are vividly communicated and become just as convincing.

All the above-mentioned techniques helped Renaissance spectators to follow and enjoy a play, which would seem to suggest that, in a similar way to Bottom, audiences could take in their stride the strangest and most amazing sights. Whilst remaining receptive to the metatheatrical aspects they were allowed to glimpse, they could permit themselves to be fascinated and transported during the time of the play, believing in what they saw as it was happening. But the question I would like to raise now is what happened to this belief once the play was over and the theatrical magic had fizzled out?



In Bottom's case, which, of course, is a caricature but is perhaps nonetheless instructive, after having been fleetingly transported into another world, rather

like a spectator at a play, he is left with an overall impression, which, of course, he describes as “Bottom’s Dream” (IV.i.214) and which, though imprecise, has a resounding effect on him. He is reeling from the experience, to such an extent that his sensory perceptions are completely shaken up. However, he refers to it as chiefly a visual experience, a “most rare vision” (203). The niceties of it seem unimportant and in any case go unmentioned. But after his initial shock, the general experience seems to inspire him. In fact, despite his confusion concerning the details of what he saw, Bottom appears refreshed and somehow more clear-minded. He is still the same person, but his qualities appear enhanced. Fired with an even more exhilarating enthusiasm than before, he is keen to spread the theatrical message. This multi-faceted message, threaded through the play since the first appearance of the mechanicals, involves a number of aspects pertaining to theatrical activity, including its ubiquity in this golden age of theatre and its technical functioning. It is a message which places the accent on theatre as a fully-fledged art and, in fact, shows the difficulties involved in putting on a play. One of Shakespeare’s aims here appears to involve the development of spectator skills, either to spark off or to cater to an awareness among the play-going public as to how theatre functions. The artisans’ scenes abound with metatheatrical terms and involve much pondering about staging techniques. They also point out the pitfalls and evoke the fiasco that can result when the aimed-for effects misfire. Yet this message is full of indulgence for those who try but do not quite make the grade. Bottom’s role in spreading the message is of prime importance. After his experience in the woods, he becomes less obsessed with his own personal performance and acting talents and more concerned with the play as a whole. He bolsters up the flagging enthusiasm of his fellows, ensures that they have all the right properties and costumes and that they meet the deadline, and then sets out to lead his troupe to success at the Duke’s court. It is, in fact, Duke Theseus who rounds off this theatrical message with some indulgent comments to Bottom: “your play needs no excuse. Never excuse” (V.i.341-42). For even if it is “a palpable gross play”, it has been entertaining and “hath well beguil’d / The heavy gait of night” (353-54).

Bottom’s experience in the forest seems to suggest that what counted was not an unshakeable belief in individual elements of the spectacle, which can turn out to be artificial and fickle once the sparkle has faded. What is important here is the building up of an overall belief in the theatre itself. Couldn’t we say that, in a similar way to Bottom’s experience, in the Renaissance theatre, seeing is a

trick which is not intended to provide pure truth from beginning to end? The visual show is there primarily to be enjoyed, but also to allow access to certain metatheatrical aspects made accessible by the playwright. In order to profit from the show, isn't the main thing to believe this pack of lies for the duration of the performance, to revel in all its capricious and vacillating sights and sounds, and to end with a belief—a lasting one this time—in the quality and enjoyment of the theatrical art in general?

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