

Greg WALKER, « Acting (and Feeling) Responsible: Lindsay's Pauper and the Problems of Perception »,
« Theta VIII, Théâtre Tudor », 2009, pp. 245-252
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

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

Acting (and Feeling) Responsible: Lindsay's Pauper and the Problems of Perception

Greg Walker
University of Edinburgh

The aim of this brief paper is to examine, via a familiar dramatic example taken from the work of the Scottish poet and courtier, Sir David Lindsay, how what we see—or don't see—in early drama affects our judgement (i.e., what we *believe*) in profound and deeply unsettling ways. But I also want to suggest that the themes of this volume—seeing and believing—point up a deeper truth about early drama: its deep involvement of spectators—the *seers*—in the processes through which it creates its meanings.

Drama has always, of course, been a fundamentally collaborative process, in which writers, performers, spectators and the spaces in which performances occur all have their roles to play in the creation of the overall effects—and affects—of a production. But late medieval and early Tudor drama, I think, took this process a stage further than much of the repertoire of the modern theatre. Not only did the drama afford its audiences a remarkable range of emotional responses (in that respect it was the equal of the modern stage), but with those responses came an overt focus on audience responsibility for making sense of what was happening onstage. What Tudor spectators *saw*—and what they believed as a result—was thus foregrounded as a central part of the process of performance and reception: something overtly

acknowledged in the deep structures of the plays as part of their processes of meaning-creation.

As I have argued elsewhere, early drama did not seek to prompt *catharsis*, in the sense of an emotional journey completed during the performance.¹ It was not, that is, sufficient unto itself as a form. Rather, it aimed to initiate an emotional journey that would continue after the performance ended. And it did this as part of a fundamentally social process, its interests growing out of the communities that produced it, reflecting their agenda and preoccupations.

All performances, of course, seek to involve their audiences emotionally. Cicero, describing the aims and attributes of the ideal orator, claimed that he should learn to demonstrate, to delight, *and to move* his audience. But this desideratum applied especially powerfully to the types of performance central to early drama. It was the Passion plays' affective power, for example, that was identified in the fifteenth-century anti-theatrical tract, *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* as their most troubling and dangerous aspect. By evoking their audiences' pity for a mere show of suffering, the *Tretise* claimed, these plays stimulated audience emotions in bad faith, distracting simple, well-meaning folk from contemplation of their own real sins, and so thwarting God's will:

Ofte syþis by siche myraclis pleying men and wymmen, seyng þe Passioun of Christ and Hise seyntis, ben moyvd to compassion and devocion, wepyng bitere teris.... But þe wepyng þat falliþ to men and wymmen by þe sizte of siche myraclis pleyinge, as þei ben not principaly for þeire oune synnes, ne of þeire gode feiþ wiþinneforþe, but more of þeire sizt wiþouteforþ, is not allowable byfore God but more reþowable. (Walker, ed., p. 198)

But such criticism underestimates the subtle self-awareness of these plays. Early drama was not a detached, rational reflection on religious truth or the human condition; it was a deeply engaged emotional response to these things. It utilised and exploited the imperfect, often unpredictable, emotional dimensions to human experience even as it acknowledged their limitations; and it relied upon those very dimensions of human experience to achieve the full range of its own effects. The Mystery Plays and Moralities did not treat their spectators as passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they encouraged them to be active and responsive spectators—*witnesses* to what they saw in every sense of the word—and used that witness as part of their creative process.

1 See Walker, "Cultural Work". A number of the points made in the current essay are explored at greater length and with greater use of textual evidence in that chapter. I am grateful to the editors for the opportunity to cite it here.

A play is, of course, more than simply a rhetorical text divided among a number of speakers. Its essence lies in the dynamics of performance itself, in the unique range of emotional resonances created when actors perform before live audiences. When the circumstances of those performances were, as with early drama, not cordoned off from everyday life in a theatre but created in the very spaces in which everyday life was lived, the opportunities for such emotional engagement were particularly powerful. My chief example of how this might work in practice comes from Lindsay's magisterial drama, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, a play performed before large, socially diverse audiences in the town of Cupar in Fife in 1552 and in Edinburgh in 1554.² Famously, during what initially appears to be an interval in the proceedings, while the principal characters are not in the acting area and the audience has been told to disperse for refreshments, a man dressed in ragged clothes steps out from the crowd into the playing place and begins to beg for alms, apparently threatening to disrupt the proceedings fatally. In response to this intrusion, the actor playing Diligence, the drama's herald and interlocutor figure, turns directly to the audience (and the civic officers among them in particular), accusing them of not maintaining "ane well keipit place",

Quhen sic ane vilde begger carle may get entres.
 Fy on yow, officiars, that mends nocht thir failyies!
 I gif yow all till the Devill, baith Provost and bailyies.
 Without ye cum and chase this carle away,
 The Devill a word yeis get mair of our play! (ll. 1940-45)

The ragged man remains defiantly in the place, however, and responds to Diligence's attempts to remove him with insults and disobedience.

The man proves, of course, to be an actor playing the part of a beggar named Pauper, and his lines are all scripted, as are those of Diligence himself. But, in the brief period before the audience becomes aware of these facts, his apparent intrusion confronts each spectator (individually and collectively) with a fundamental question, and it asks them to respond, not as spectators at a play, but as themselves.

In performance the scene creates an instant of profound disorientation, a dramatic moment that seems at first to be one thing, yet proves to have been another, but which, for a brief time at least, is both together, or neither, leaving

² For further analysis of the scene in question, see Walker, "Spoiling the Play", and McGavin.

audiences suspended in a moment of pure, dangerous possibility and forced to rely upon their own intellectual resources and moral values for guidance. And in that moment, seeing and believing are manipulated to profoundly unsettling effect.

For the duration of that period during which the audience is unsure of who or what he is—and what they are watching happening before them—Pauper threatens disturbingly to collapse the distinction between “actors’ space” and “audience space”, creating a liminal event poised uncomfortably between the two. If we, for a moment, imagine ourselves among those original spectators in Cupar or Edinburgh, how might we have reacted to Pauper’s arrival in the acting space? What might we have thought, and more importantly what might we have *felt*? Suddenly, unexpectedly, someone has crossed the powerful divide between “us” and “them”, audience space and stage space, and events seem about to go embarrassingly wrong for all concerned. At that moment we would all, quite suddenly, become participants in something apparently spontaneous and unpredictable—an event taking place in real time in which we are personally involved. In that instant we are not just spectators any longer but also our everyday selves: citizens, neighbours, members of a community, perhaps even one of the civic officials, the “Provost and bailies”, whom Diligence identifies as personally “to blame” for the intrusion. And the acting space itself stops being a space set apart; it too steps out of role, as it were, and threatens to become part of our own world again, a realm in which the “normal” rules of courtesy and social deference, law and order, apply. Unsure of both our/their own role and the nature of the space we/they inhabit, each spectator is prompted to look at Pauper and ask themselves, “is he one of them or one of us?”, and, “if he is one of us, what is he doing onstage?”. At that moment the awful prospect arises that it is actually *we* who are responsible for Pauper, and not the actors: one of *our* number is threatening to spoil the play, and it is down to us to do something about it.

In that moment of realisation, “social responsibility” becomes an immediate and *felt* issue for each audience member individually, rather than just a “theme” of the play, something to be looked at and thought about in the relative comfort of personal detachment. What is to be done about the plight of the rural poor is a recurring issue in Lindsay’s play, but nowhere is it addressed more insistently or powerfully than here, at a point, paradoxically, when the play does not seem to be securely identifiable as a play at all. Suddenly we feel—and thus we *are*—responsible for something that is happening “onstage”, and each of us might react in a different way. In this moment, Lindsay’s “Interlude” (the

punning, ambivalent term used in the surviving text to identify the scene) offers a telling example of the cultural work of early drama in general: a striking instance of its capacity to address its audiences on an intensely personal, affective (even visceral) level, provoking equally personal and *affected* responses (“Oh my God, what should I do?”). If this is didactic theatre, it is so in a special, heavily marked sense, for which the words “didactic” or “educational” seem hardly sufficient. A scene like this teaches us on the level of felt experience as well as imparting lore or knowledge.

Critics have quite rightly drawn attention to the capacity of early drama, and of the medieval biblical plays especially, to present religious events and doctrinal truths through spectacle and stage picture, on the principle of “behold and believe!”—not so much representing the events of the Passion, as performing them afresh for each new generation of believers to witness. But we should not lose sight of the emotive dimension to this process. In scenes such as the entrance of Lindsay’s Pauper, the action implies not just “behold and believe”, but “watch, listen, and *feel* the truth of this”. A spectator was thus not simply *shown* a performance but engaged by it. All of the physical senses, and all of the modes of communal life (social, moral, spiritual) were to differing degrees appealed to, stimulated, affronted, teased, and provoked by dramas such as these; and their responses cannot always be predicted.

Creating a sense of moral and social responsibility was thus a key element of early drama’s cultural work. The Pauper episode in Lindsay’s *Satyre* represents it in a stark and immediate form, but it is implicit throughout the surviving canon. Early drama was and is always drama to some purpose beyond mere education or entertainment. It raises questions of (and issues challenges to) its audiences and patrons, and of those scholars who seek to understand and describe it. And each spectator might react to that challenge in a different way. The complex, often unpredictable reactions that take place in different spectators as they attempt to reconcile what they see—or what they think they are seeing—with what they believe

(about themselves, their world, and their responsibilities within it) create equally complex and unpredictable effects. And the fact that this process takes place in the special, intensely marked real time of a performance makes the experience all the more volatile and powerful. Such is the special power of the early theatre as both an artistic and a socio-political phenomenon.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

LINDSAY, David. *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. Greg Walker. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 534–623.

The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. Greg Walker. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 196–200.

Secondary Sources

MCGAVIN, John J. “Working toward a Reformed Identity in Lindsay’s *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*”. *Interludes and Early Modern Society: Studies in Gender, Power and Theatricality*. Ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüskén. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 239–60.

WALKER, Greg. “The Cultural Work of Early Theatre”. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

_____. “‘Spoiling the Play’: The Motif of Dramatic Intrusion in Medwall and Lindsay”. *Outsiders Within (Dedans/Dehors): Figures of mediation*. Ed. André Lascombes and Richard Hillman. Collection Theta – Théâtre Tudor, vol. 7. Tours: Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance, 2007. 179–96. (Publication on line: <http://umr6576.cesr.univ-tours.fr/Publications/Theta7>. Accessed June 2009.)