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“The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible”: Shakespeare and the Politics of Perception

Kiernan Ryan

- 1 As A.D. Nuttall persuasively contends in *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, Shakespeare’s mimetic art allows us to see aspects of reality that we would not otherwise be able to perceive.¹ These include, I would argue, as Nuttall does not, the assumptions, expectations, impulses and restraints by which people’s thoughts, emotions and actions are unconsciously governed. Shakespeare was acutely aware of the tyrannical hold that covert forces could have over the individual’s heart and mind. “O unseen shame,” cries Lucrece, “invisible disgrace!” (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 827²). “Then shall you know the wounds invisible”, Sylvius assures Phebe, “That love’s keen arrows make” (*As You Like It*, III.v.31-32). And Benedick, betraying his thralldom to the ubiquitous male fear of cuckoldry, disdains to ‘hang [his] bugle in an invisible baldrick’ (*Much Ado About Nothing*, I.i.226). Far more intriguing, however, are the techniques Shakespeare employs to make visible to the spectator the internalized imperatives which dictate his characters’ fates, but of which the characters remain oblivious. When Prospero commands Ariel, “Be subject / To no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else” (*The Tempest*, I.ii.303-305), the audience is invited to behold personifications of the constraints that invisibly determine their lives too. The effect of such visualizing strategies at their most developed is to empower the audience by revealing the unseen forces that disempower and control them in the world beyond the theatre. In this respect Shakespeare’s theatre provides a perfect illustration of what Peter Brook calls “The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible”: a theatre in which we are able to perceive, and thus become conscious of, “the invisible currents that rule our lives.”³
- 2 Cynical historicist critiques of Shakespeare’s drama as complicit in securing the oppressive absolutist regime of his day could not be wider of the mark. Foucauldian accounts have sought to discern in Shakespeare’s theatre an early modern prototype of

Bentham's Panopticon, and to construe his plays – *Measure for Measure* foremost amongst them – as inducing in spectators the compliant, self-policing disposition that the surveillance society in embryo required its citizens to adopt. Stephen Greenblatt's seductive variation on this view – a view his own more recent work seems to have relinquished – has been equally influential. For Greenblatt, Shakespeare's dramatic art at its most compelling conspires likewise to foster an attitude of passive subjection, but it does so through "the cultivation of anxiety" in his spectators rather than through their internalizing of the panoptical gaze of power.⁴ I cite these obsolescent readings because they underscore the diametrically opposed response that Shakespeare's drama actually seeks to elicit from its audience. The nature of that response, and the means of eliciting it, are implicit in the order Prospero gives to Ariel that I have already quoted: "Be subject / To no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else." The omniscient, omnipotent sorcerer and his ubiquitous, discarnate agent, whose invisibility renders the rest of the *dramatis personae* subject to their sight and will, are made subject by Shakespeare to the sight of the audience, who perceive that the absolute power Prospero wields depends upon deliberately contrived illusions.

- 3 Shakespeare, in other words, grasped long before Jacques Rancière the crucial part played in maintaining hegemony by what Rancière terms "*le partage du sensible*": the systemic definition, allocation and control of what the members of a society are able to apprehend through their senses. The designated place of a person or a group within society, their allotted share in the collective economic and political power at its command, and thus the forms, scope and quality of their participation in the life of that society, are indivisible from the modes of perception that imperceptibly determine what is visible and audible to them, as well as what can be touched, smelled and tasted. Hence, as Rancière explains in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, the equally crucial part played by the arts in not only revealing how this perceptual regime "defines what is visible or not in a common space,"⁵ but also redefining the boundaries of what is *aisthēton* or apprehensible by the senses, and by the faculty of sight in particular. Insofar as "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see,"⁶ works of art are thus inextricably political. They are inextricably political because they are "forms of visibility", whose value resides in their capacity to expand the scope of the perceptible by rendering visible, "from the standpoint of what is common to the community,"⁷ methods of division and exclusion that would otherwise remain unseen. The most valuable works of art seek, through a radical reconfiguring of perception, nothing less than an "egalitarian distribution of the sensory" as a precondition of "the political redistribution of shared experience."⁸
- 4 To put it another way, Shakespeare would have had no trouble endorsing Conrad's celebrated statement of the writer's mission in his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything."⁹ After all, Shakespeare was patently bent from the outset on cultivating in his audience a sceptical attitude towards whatever met their eyes and sought to pass for reality.
- 5 The double helping of dead ringers in *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, offers an object lesson in the wisdom of circumspection in the face of seemingly incontrovertible facts. The spectators are placed in the privileged position of seeing, and therefore understanding, the source of the insane misprisions to which the characters fall prey.

As Shakespeare demonstrates again later in *Twelfth Night* through the same identical twins device, a mere visual freak of nature is all it takes to expose the fragile perceptual foundations on which normal, everyday experience rests. The disconcerting fact that what appears to be the case might prove to be something else entirely becomes equally apparent in *Richard III*, which demystifies majesty by making the audience privy to Richard's ploys from the start, and inviting them to watch the charade of reluctant piety he performs to dupe the citizens of London being devised and staged before their very eyes. The same downstage intimacy grants the audience of *Othello* a vantage point from which they can see that the plausible fiction Iago stages, with Cassio's blind connivance, for the Moor to misconstrue is anything but the "ocular proof" (III.iii.365) the latter takes it for. It is possible, indeed, to view Iago as a personified projection of Othello's jealousy: a way of giving objective, visibly embodied form to the misogynistic anxiety that is endemic to any patriarchal society, and could have flared up without Iago's help, as Iago's evasive mitigation of his calumny insinuates: "I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true" (V.ii.183-184).

- 6 A comparable function is fulfilled by the "secret, black, and midnight hags" (IV.i.64) in *Macbeth*, who put nothing in Macbeth's mind that was not already brewing there, or that he could not have cooked up by himself without prompting, just like his hunchbacked prototype. As Greenblatt remarks in his essay on the play: "If the strange prophecies of the Weird Sisters had been ignored, the play seems to imply, the same set of events might have occurred anyway, impelled entirely by the pressure of Macbeth's violent ambition and his wife's psychological manipulation."¹⁰ What makes the "imperfect speakers" (I.iii.68) theatrically indispensable, however, is their ability to give palpable form and cryptic expression to the self-destructive individualism that produces that pressure: the ideology encapsulated in the ruthless creed of modernity Macbeth embraces: "For mine own good / All causes shall give way" (III.iv.134-135). "What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives us in the form of '*seeing*', '*perceiving*' and '*feeling*,'" observes Althusser, "is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art" through formal strategies of estrangement – what Althusser calls "*internal distantiation*."¹¹ The witches enable the audience to "see" in just this sense – to apprehend aesthetically – the ideology by which "Bellona's bridegroom" (I.ii.54) becomes "cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in" (III.iv.23).
- 7 Through the eidetic power of prosopopoeia Shakespeare throws into corporeal, articulate relief what would otherwise remain an abstract, mute, intangible motive force, an unconsciously absorbed complex of socially acquired emotions and beliefs, masquerading as spontaneous desires and personal convictions. Nowhere is this visualizing strategy of graphic incarnation more vividly deployed than in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Both comedies dramatize the potentially tragic, but fortunately farcical consequences of their romantic protagonists' adoption of affective postures which they mistake for authentic passion.
- 8 The tangled web of fierce romantic rivalry, friendship betrayed and misdirected desire that ensnares the lovers in the enchanted wood of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to their bewildered eyes to have somehow woven and unravelled itself. But the play reveals to the audience alone that the real culprits are the irrational romantic codes, sealed by custom and sanctioned by poetic convention, by which the lovers are unwittingly possessed, as their cliché-riddled couplets confirm. It does so by the

ingenious expedient of transmuting those codes into the humanoid forms of Oberon and Puck bewitching the lovers' eyes with the psychotropic juice of "love-in-idleness" (II.i.168). By this means Shakespeare's imagination "bodies forth / The forms of things" that would otherwise remain "unknown"; his "poet's pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing" – to the unseen, immaterial ideology that grips the lovers – "A local habitation and a name" (V.i.14-17). In so doing, moreover, it identifies the syndrome that afflicts them as an alien, artificial delusion rather than their instinctive disposition.

- 9 In *Much Ado About Nothing*, which advertises its obsession with perception and misperception in the title's homonymic pun on "noting", and in whose maze of "strange misprision" (IV.i.187) every character winds up lost, Beatrice and Benedick are likewise shown being hoodwinked by an unsolicited fabrication, of which they, unlike the audience, remain oblivious. Their gulling grants the spectators an estranged, unblinkered view of their romantic rapprochement and impending marital union. The phenomenon of falling in love, routinely portrayed as a spontaneous subjective experience, is dramatically objectified through Don Pedro's eavesdropping plot as a culturally enforced fiction. The concerted pressure of social expectations is projected into a clutch of characters, who bring a recalcitrant couple into line with sexual convention by inducing them to "hold one an opinion of another's dotage, and no such matter" (II.iii.205-206). The eavesdropping scenes expose the truth of what normally transpires, by showing a man and a woman being inveigled, by external forces invisible to them, into impersonating a couple in love and consenting to wed, in spite of their actual feelings.
- 10 To return to *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado*, as well as Rancière and Althusser, in mind, is to appreciate fully their boldness in baring to the common gaze the ruses employed by rulers to subjugate the ruled. Both plays betray how sovereignty holds sway by revealing the puppet-master behind the scenes and letting the audience watch him pull the strings. Prospero and Vincentio, "the old fantastical Duke of dark corners" (*Measure for Measure*, IV.iii. 152-153), exploit the invisibility conferred by magic and disguise respectively to prevail through internalized surveillance and the cultivation of anxiety – the same techniques of subjection employed for real in Jacobean society, as Greenblatt shows in his accounts of both plays in "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne."¹² But, far from slyly inuring audiences to the use of such techniques beyond the theatre, *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* are designed to put them on display, so that audiences can see exactly how they work.
- 11 That is why we are invited to *observe* Vincentio as he transforms himself into an unseen "looker-on here in Vienna" (V.i.314); blatantly instils groundless anxiety in his subjects to place them at his mercy; and turns Angelo into an exemplary citizen of his nascent surveillance society, who can be safely trusted to discipline and punish himself:

Oh, my dread lord,
 I should be guiltier than my guiltiness,
 To think I can be undiscernible
 When I perceive your grace, like power divine,
 Hath looked upon my passes.
 [...]
 Immediate sentence then, and sequent death,
 Is all the grace I beg.
 (*Measure for Measure*, V.i.363-367, 370-371)

- 12 The same estranging effect of "internal distantiatio" is created as we watch Prospero using similar methods of emotional and psychological manipulation to exploit the labour of Ariel and Caliban; stage-manage the courtship of Miranda and Ferdinand; and bring the rest of the island's human inhabitants to heel by bewildering and exhausting them. Prospero's dominion depends, however, on his mystifying mastery of the dark arts and on the ethereal minions they place at his disposal. It resides, we observe, not in his own unaided ingenuity but in extraneous paraphernalia, in his books and in the sorcerer's staff and robe, without which he is impotent and, as he concedes in the Epilogue, at the mercy of the spectators he addresses. Shakespeare's last masterpiece widens the visual field of its audience not only by enabling them to perceive the hidden mechanisms that govern their own destinies, but also by enabling them to perceive that such mechanisms are man-made and dispensable, and that there is nothing natural, necessary or inevitable about the oppressive regime they covertly preserve. And when Prospero surrenders absolute power in the Epilogue to the community formed by the audience, the profound political implications of making the invisible visible are plain for all to see.

NOTES

1. A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, London and New York, Methuen, 1983.
2. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works*, eds. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
3. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, New York, Touchstone, 1996, p. 49, 52.
4. See in particular "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne", in Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988, p. 129-163, and "The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs", in Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 80-98.
5. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

9. Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 13.
 10. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched", in Susan Zimmerman, ed., *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Contemporary Critical Essays*, London, Macmillan, 1998, p. 113.
 11. "Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, London and New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 222.
 12. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, *op. cit.*
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ABSTRACTS

When Prospero commands Ariel, "Be subject to no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else", the audience beholds personifications of the constraints that invisibly determine their lives too. The effect of such visualizing strategies is to empower the audience by revealing the unseen forces that disempower them in the world beyond the theatre. Shakespeare's drama furnishes a perfect example of what Peter Brook calls "The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible": a theatre in which we are able to perceive "the invisible currents that rule our lives". Shakespeare grasped long before Rancière the crucial part played in preserving hegemony by "*le partage du sensible*". His plays are intrinsically political insofar as they are "forms of visibility", whose value lies in their capacity to expand the scope of the perceptible by rendering visible, "from the standpoint of what is common to the community", methods of division and exclusion that would otherwise remain unseen. They seek, through a radical reconfiguring of perception, an "egalitarian distribution of the sensory" as a precondition of "the political redistribution of shared experience".

Lorsque Prospero donne l'ordre suivant à Ariel : « Ne sois sensible qu'à ta propre vue et à la mienne, invisible / À toute autre prunelle » [traduction J.M Déprats, Gallimard, 2007], les spectateurs voient personnifiées les contraintes invisibles qui déterminent leurs vies à eux également. De telles stratégies de visualisation, en révélant les forces cachées qui privent les spectateurs de leur liberté d'action dans le monde extérieur au théâtre, ont pour effet de leur rendre cette liberté d'action. Le théâtre shakespearien est le parfait un exemple de ce que Peter Brook appelle « le théâtre de l'invisible-rendu-visible » : un théâtre dans lequel nous pouvons percevoir « les courants invisibles qui gouvernent notre vie ». Longtemps avant Rancière, Shakespeare avait compris le rôle crucial joué par le « partage du sensible » dans la préservation des hégémonies. Ses pièces sont intrinsèquement politiques, en tant que « formes de visibilité » dont la valeur dépend de leur capacité à élargir le rayon du perceptible en donnant de la visibilité, « du point de vue de ce qui est commun à la communauté », à des méthodes de division et d'exclusion qui autrement seraient demeurées invisibles. À travers une reconfiguration radicale de la perception, elles recherchent dans une « distribution égalitaire du sensible » le fondement d'une « redistribution politique de l'expérience partagée ».

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Mots-clés: Althusser Louis, Beaucoup de bruit pour rien, Brook Peter, esthétique, invisibilité, Macbeth, Mesure pour Mesure, perception, politique, Rancière Jacques, Songe d'une nuit d'été (Le), Tempête (La), visibilité

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