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Shakespeare's secular theatre: a provocative defence of the actor and the spectator

Abstract : Compared to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare seems far more discreet, or even removed from the controversy about the theatre. But appearances can be deceiving: although less visible and more oblique, his responses to the attacks against the stage are nonetheless present in his plays. Against the enemies of the stage who identify theatre as a source of profanation and pollution of bodies and souls, most of the defenders emphasize the virtuous exemplarity of performance. Shakespeare responds in a provocative manner and elaborates another conception of theatre, involving the actor as well as the spectator. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* reproduce the theatrophobic accusations against actors and the contamination of the spectator by the passions performed on stage. Yet even as he accumulates elements of accusatory discourse, the playwright displaces the terms in order to think through the emotional (and thus necessarily impure) experience of theatre and give it a social and moral function: the actor's art turns into a form of magic devoid of supernatural qualities and the spectator's reception is redefined as intelligence through emotions.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, polemics, defence of the stage, actor's art, the status of the actor, spectator, effects of performance, theatrical passions, emotions

Titre français: Un théâtre du monde : l'apologie shakespearienne de l'acteur et du spectateur

Résumé français : Face aux prises de positions explicites et répétées de Ben Jonson, Shakespeare semble se placer en retrait de la polémique sur le théâtre. Mais, pour être moins visibles et plus obliques, ses réponses aux attaques n'en sont pas moins réelles. Face aux détracteurs qui accusent les théâtres d'être des lieux de profanation et de souillure des corps et des âmes, la plupart des défenseurs nient la contamination et la pollution en mettant en avant une exemplarité vertueuse. Shakespeare, lui, répond par la provocation et propose ainsi une autre vision du théâtre, tant du côté du comédien que du côté du spectateur. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* et *Hamlet* reconduisent les accusations des théâtrophobes. Mais tout en accumulant les éléments du discours à charge, le dramaturge en déplace les termes pour penser l'expérience sensible (et donc nécessairement impure) du théâtre et lui conférer une fonction sociale et morale : l'art de l'acteur devient une magie sans surnaturel et la réception du spectateur une intelligence des affects.

Mots-clés français : William Shakespeare, polémiques, défense du théâtre, art de l'acteur, statut du comédien, spectateur, réception, effets du spectacle, passions, émotions

We often consider polemics in general and the debate over theatre in particular as being split into two camps (antitheatricalists vs. defenders of theatre), each with a clear and overt stance. Just as intermediate positions can be held, however, so polemical styles can vary; there are different ways of wielding the pen as a sword. The parallel between Ben Jonson and Shakespeare, though somewhat overworked and at times misleading, remains quite revelatory in this respect. The former, as we know, took part in different quarrels, such as the War of the Theatres, the *Poetomachia*, in which he opposed Marston and Dekker¹: this was first and foremost a playwrights' quarrel with surprising twists that gripped London audiences; but throughout the plays themselves a debate also developed over the function of theatre and of satire in society as well as over the poet's relationship to power, with Jonson advocating the models of Horace in *Poetaster* (perf. 1601) and Crites in *Cynthia's Revels* (perf. 1600). In *Bartholomew Fair* (perf. 1614), the dispute that opposes the Puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy and the puppet Dionysius (V, 5) is at once a quite literal and completely parodic transposition of the polemic.² Even if Ben Jonson's defence of theatre may appear at times ambiguous or relative due to his own "antitheatrical prejudice"³, it is still made explicit in his texts and paratexts openly addressing the questions under debate. Shakespeare's defence of theatre, however, seems far more discreet, or even silent, as if he stood at a remove from the controversy. Indeed, Shakespeare receives little mention in critical literature on the subject. But appearances can be deceiving: although less visible and more oblique, responses to the attacks can nonetheless be found in his plays. Laura Levine has already shown that *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) can be interpreted as replies to anti-theatricalists and their fears about the feminizing influence of performance, with Shakespeare creating the very type of theatre they most feared. Other plays by him

¹ See James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

² The puppet defends himself against puritanical accusations by recourse to the legal authorization of the Master of Revels, his integration as a veritable profession of the *commonwealth*, the lack of impiety in his practice, and above all the fact that he does not cross-dress – and with good reason: he has no genitals and shows as much by lifting up his clothing. On the political dimension of this text, see Laura Levine, "The "Nothing" under the puppet's costume: Jonson's suppression of Marlowe in *Bartholomew Fair*," in *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 89-107.

³ Jonas Barish, "Jonson and the Loathed Stage", in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981, p. 132-154; Timothy Murray, "From Foul Sheets to Legitimate Model: Antitheater, Text, Ben Jonson", *New Literary History*, vol. 14, n° 3, Spring 1983, p. 641-664.

demonstrate the same taste for provocation. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *As You Like It* (?1599) and *Hamlet* (?1600) reproduce the theatrophobic accusations against actors and against the fear of the spectator's contamination by the passions being performed on stage. Yet even as he accumulates elements of accusatory discourse, the playwright displaces the terms in order to think through the emotional (and thus necessarily impure) experience of theatre and give it a social and moral function: the actor's art becomes a form of magic, which is however devoid of supernatural qualities, and the spectator's reception a form of intelligence through emotions.

Accusations against the theatre

In order to hear Shakespeare's response and assess its significance, we must first return to several elements of antitheatrical discourse. In the polemic of the 1580s,⁴ the antitheatricalists condemned the theatres as sites of profanation that defiled bodies and souls. This argument hangs on the fact that a performance plays above all on the emotions and passions of the spectator, which are mobilized through the senses. One image depicts this idea clearly, an image that returns obsessively in antitheatrical texts, that of the senses as the doors through which the devil, vice, and desire insinuate themselves. We find this image especially in the first treatise of the polemic, which then serves as a mould for the religious condemnation of entertainments. In John Northbrooke's *A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other idle pastimes* (1577), when addressing Youth, who claims to have heard men and women say that performances did not awaken lust within them, Age replies, rephrasing Saint Chrysostom:

thou beholdest them [harlots] in an open theater, a place where the soul of the wise is snared and condemned : in those places (sayeth he) thou seest not only *res infaustas*, unlawful things, but also hearest *spurciloquia*, filthy speeches, whereof *incessu meretrices*, the beginning of whoredom, and the habit of all evilness and mischief, where thou shalt by hearing devilish and filthy songs hurt thy chaste ears, and also shalt see that which shall be grievous unto thine eyes : for our eyes are as windows of the mind, as the prophet sayeth, death entered into my windows, that is, by mine eyes.⁵

The spectator's body, which is assailed through the breaches of sight and hearing, is penetrated by temptations, which then entice him to voluptuousness and vice. The theatre

⁴ On the history of this polemic, see Olivier Spina, *Une ville en scènes, Pouvoirs et spectacles à Londres sous les Tudors (1525-1603)*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2013.

⁵ John Northbrooke, *Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine plaies or Enterludes... are reprooved by the authoritie of the worde of God and auncient Writers*, Londres, H. Bynneman, 1577, p. 61.

appears as a school for lust and, more broadly, as a trap for the senses that imprisons the spectator's soul. Other important texts of the polemic, such as those by John Field and Stephen Gosson, equate the theatre with spiritual poison.⁶ At the end of *The School of Abuse*, the latter addresses "the Gentlewomen Citizens of London" to exhort them to stay in their homes and avoid the theatres where their chastity would be in danger.⁷ Here he develops a *topos* of the antitheatrical discourse, that of a woman who is chaste when she enters the theatre and leaves it debauched as a result of what she has seen and heard. He supports his argument, at times implicitly, with Saint Cyprian's epistle to Donatus (*Ad Donatum*), which, in a significant manner, restricts Christ's word on adultery as reported by the evangelist Matthew ("whosoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart", Matt., V, 28) to women:

Adultery is learnt while it is seen; and while the mischief having public authority panders to vices, the matron, who perchance had gone to the spectacle a modest woman, returns from it immodest. Still further, what a degradation of morals it is, what a stimulus to abominable deeds, what food for vice, to be polluted by histrionic gestures, against the covenant and law of one's birth, to gaze in detail upon the endurance of incestuous abominations!⁸

Sight is the definitive vector of corruption, and it takes just one instance to turn a pure woman into a fallen one. In his second treatise, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, Gosson returns to the idea of the theatre as a space for sensual excitement, emotional contagion and complete abandonment to feeling, which leads to vice and sin. To this end, he quotes Ovid who, in *The Art of Love*, suggests that his readers view it as an ideal place for seduction, and he concludes: "As the first, so now, theatres are snares unto fair women."⁹

As we can see from the Saint Cyprian quotation, the actor, and especially the professional actor, is the primary person responsible for the play's nefarious effects and for its deceptive and lust-inducing power.¹⁰ At the heart of this hostility toward theatre not only do we find the person of the actor himself, his power of fascination, his behaviour as well as the properly moral significance of his acting (in particular its irredeemable dimension of falsehood), but also, and perhaps above all, the remuneration of the actor and by extension the existence of the "profession" of acting. For the attacks flare up again at the very moment

⁶ "Cooks did never show more craft in their junkets to vanquish the taste, nor painters in shadows to allure the eye, than poets in theaters to wound the conscience". (Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse, or a pleasant invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters and such like Caterpillars of a Commonwealth*, London, T. Woodcocke, 1579, B6v)

⁷ *Ibid.*, F1v-F4v.

⁸ Cyprian of Carthage (ca 200-258), *Epistles*, "To Donatus", VIII.

⁹ Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, London, Thomas Gosson, s.d. [1582], G6r^o.

¹⁰ Northbrooke tolerates theatre in the context of private performance or secondary schools.

when the theatre constitutes itself as a specific, autonomous, and profitable enterprise.¹¹ This integration of theatre into the economic fabric reignites the accusations of infamy and immorality in particular, for the lucrative nature of the business makes it akin to prostitution.¹² More fundamentally, its “mercenary” quality points to the secularization of the actor’s activity, for commercial theatre is not included in the religious calendar as are the Mysteries or school theatre. It can be argued, therefore, that theatre becomes emblematic of a gradually emerging secular time and a profane public sphere.

At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, actors found themselves in a difficult, or at least paradoxical, situation: simply put, their status existed in fact but not in law. Despite the success of theatrical entertainment and the formation of stable companies, they experienced religious, social, and legal marginalization. While the *Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds, and for the Relief of the Poor and Impotent*, of June 29, 1572, provided a legitimate legal and moral status for actors who could claim patronage, it continued to conflate them with other “vagrants” who could not claim any legitimate business or profession and therefore belonged to the category of potential criminals¹³. In other words, the “profession” of actor did not exist strictly speaking and actors or impresarios were enrolled in corporations integrated into the system of professions: James Burbage (actor, theatre impresario, theatre builder, and father of Richard Burbage) was a carpenter, Ben Jonson a bricklayer (Tarlton, the famous comic actor, owned a tavern and a fencing school). These activities thus guaranteed them a legitimate place in the London civic body, which their work as actors could not do because it was not clearly defined from either a legal or political point of view. When Nathan Field, actor and playwright in spite of his puritan father strongly opposed to theatre, and friend of Shakespeare's, protested against the attacks of a preacher, he demanded that the Church consider his occupation as “any trade of life”, and as such distinct from that of magicians and sorcerers, who could be damned.¹⁴ Three major issues, therefore, are at stake in the defence of actors: first, it is crucial to define a *savoir-faire* that legitimates the theatre as a profession; second, it is necessary to distinguish

¹¹ Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart. The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought (1550-1750)*, London-New York-Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 125 and following: the target of the enemy of the theatre at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century is the “common player,” the professional actor.

¹² Gosson thus identifies theatres with “markets of bawdry”; *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, London, Thomas Gosson, s.d. [1582], G5v.

¹³ See Pascale Drouet, *Le Vagabond dans l'Angleterre de Shakespeare, ou l'Art de contrefaire à la ville et à la scène*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003.

¹⁴ Nathan Field, “Letter to Revd. Sutton” (Mss. State Papers Domestic, James I, lxxxix, 105, Public Records Office, Londres), in T. Pollard (ed.), *Shakespeare's Theater, op. cit.*, p. 277 ; “conjurers, sorcerers, and witches, *ipso facto* damned”.

the theatre from deceptive arts such as witchcraft, and the actor from the devil's helpers; third, it is essential to reject the accusation that would turn the actor into the instrument of emotional contagion. This last concern lies at the heart of the first scene of *Hamlet* with the players (II, 2). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, Shakespeare connects the art of the actor to the truthful power of dissimulation by reworking the parallel between theatre and magic.¹⁵

The new magic of the Shakespearean actor

Quince's players: a comic archaeology of the profession

While the company invited for the nuptials of Gertrude and Claudius comprises professional actors, Quince and his friends, who must perform an entertainment for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, are a weaver, a tailor, a joiner, and a carpenter. Their rendition of *Pyramus and Thisbe* receives predominantly mocking comments, after making the king's Master of Revels weep with laughter.¹⁶ But in fact their blunders and absurdities enable Shakespeare to set forth a thought-through apology of acting, which, by virtue of its levity, may be more effective than that which is implied in the performance of the professional actors in *Hamlet*.

Most criticism dwells on the play's representation of desire, on its use of the fairy world and its celebration of the powers of imagination. In such interpretations, the amateur actors are considered in light of their performance at Theseus's court as setting forth a comic and parodic interlude, endowed with a decorative status.¹⁷ Indeed, the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not necessary to the plot as the three marriages are concluded at the end of Act IV. However, due to its powerfully comedic effect, the inset performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* constitutes a bravura piece as well as a *finale*. But we are also led to

¹⁵ The links between theatre and magic have given rise to an extensive bibliography (see especially Anthony Harris, *Night's Black Agents. Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth Century English Drama*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1980 ; Jan Frans Van Dijkhuizen, *Devil Theatre. Demonic Possession and Exorcism in English Drama (1558-1642)*, Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 2007 ; Marianne Closson, *L'Imaginaire démoniaque en France (1550-1650)*, Genève, Droz, 2000). The first attacks against the theatre can be found in treatises of demonology to denounce the work of the Devil in a practice of pagan origin that led Christians away from their faith (for example: René Benoist, *Petit fragment catechistic*, Paris, Poupy, 1579, p. 20-22).

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1, 68-70 (all references to Shakespeare are to *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells et Gary Taylor, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986).

¹⁷ With the exception of James L. Calderwood, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Illusion of Drama*", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 26, 1965, p. 506-522, Marcia McDonald, "Bottom's Space: Historicizing Comic Theory and Practice in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", in Frances Teague (dir.), *Acting Funny: Comic Theory and Practice in Shakespeare's Plays*, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994, p. 85-108, and Gisèle Venet, "Préface" to *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été*, trans. Jean-Michel Déprats, Paris, Gallimard, 2003.

question, even more, the underlying function of this piece of “very tragical mirth” in relation to the controversy over the stage: why choose the “hard-handed men”¹⁸ of Athens as actors, in the middle of the 1590s, just when the first campaign against the theatre was reaching its height? Shakespeare’s “discourse” on actors seems to be fundamentally unstable here, since his representation of dramatic practice combines elements taken from the apologetic discourse with arguments taken from the opposite camp. Furthermore, the device of the play-within-a-play and the actors’ mediocrity engender constant reversals. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* thus offers a mocking and somewhat equivocal defence, in the image of the embedded play, which is both grave and grotesque, serious and comic. As such, it demands of its audience an attitude similar to that of its first spectator, King Theseus, who is at once ironic and generous.

Shakespeare plays with allusions to antitheatrical discourse in the little company’s very first rehearsal in Act III. The amateur actors are confronted with a whole series of problems: how to comfort the female audience who will blanch at Pyramus’s suicide or the fearsome lion, how to portray the moonshine and the wall, how to say the correct lines at the right time, etc. We discover the solutions they will adopt: a prologue will explain that Pyramus is not Pyramus but Bottom the weaver; the “lion” will state his identity as Snug the joiner; the moonshine will be represented by one of the men embodying the man in the moon, etc.¹⁹ The artisans come up against the fundamental conventions of the theatre one after the other, first and foremost the difference between the represented action and its representation. Shakespeare takes advantage of the mechanicals’ clumsiness to slip allusions to the controversy into their exchanges. For example, Quince suggests that for moonshine, one of them could “come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to *disfigure*, or to present, the person of Moonshine”.²⁰ Some clay or roughcast will serve “to signify wall”.

The whole dialogue, then, deals with the theatrical process of signifying, or the relation between sign and referent in the theatre and its eventual instability, in particular for the actor: what reality does he represent? And what is his identity after all? Indeed, the question recurs in condemnations of the theatre which stigmatize the actor’s capacity to signify something other than himself, and thereby his power to “disfigure” what he represents and to provoke a generalized confusion of signs in a world dominated by appearances and lies. But once the idea of “figuring” or “disfiguring” is seen through the comedic lens of the company’s dramatic endeavours, it discredits itself and stands out as the pure fruit of the

¹⁸ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V, 1, 57 ; V, 1, 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 1, 8-66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 1, 54-56 (my emphasis).

naivety of a bunch of unsophisticated men. Later, when actually performing at court, the confusion between sign and referent is no longer possible – Snug cannot be taken for a lion – and the actors cannot be taken for anything other than themselves. Bottom is no Pyramus and “steps out” of his role to contradict Theseus when the latter suggests that the wall should reply to the lover’s curses²¹. In a similar vein, the risk of effeminacy that terrified many English theatrophobes to the highest degree and to which the actor playing a female role was exposed, is undone by Flute’s performance as Thisbe. The bellows mender had in fact shown some reluctance to take on the role, reminding his fellows that he was starting to grow a beard, and an enthusiastic Bottom had offered to replace him. Any inkling of feminization, or even more of contamination, appears as an obvious fantasy.

The play does, however, present the actor's metamorphosis with diabolical connotations. During the rehearsal, Bottom, who had exited the stage, reappears wearing an ass’s head. His transformation is immediately interpreted by one of the mechanicals as a potential intervention of the devil.²² Besides, Starveling describes this state as “transported”:²³ the term harkens back to the critical conception of performance, mostly inspired by Plato and Tertullian, for whom any acting of passion implies a profound and lasting alteration of the actor. And the sexual connotation attached to the ass adds further to the provocation. On the one hand, Bottom is changed into what he is in part, an ass, and on the other hand, it is Puck, not Bottom's performance, that is responsible for this transformation. Moreover, the metamorphosis is the effect of a benevolent touch of magic that will lead to the reconciliation of the couples and a return to harmony.²⁴

Shakespeare plays with two other objections formulated by antitheatricalists and takes them up only to reject them. The first is the eroticizing power of performance. Theseus says it himself, the function assigned to theatrical performance is to distract the newlyweds so that they can wait for bedtime²⁵: in other words, it is a prelude to lovemaking. But, besides the fact that theatre has traditionally held a place among the entertainments for royal or aristocratic weddings, the performance offered by the Athenian mechanicals is hardly fit to awaken lustful desire in the audience. The second objection against the stage is the actor’s profit-seeking motivation. Unable to find Bottom, who remains with Titania after his

²¹ *Ibid.*, V, 1, 180-185.

²² *Ibid.*, III, 1, 99-100 : “QUINCE – O monstrous! O strange! We are *haunted*. Pray, masters” (my emphasis).

²³ *Ibid.*, IV, 2, 4.

²⁴ The fairies in the *Dream* and the magic practised in the play are in this respect very different from the potentially controversial beliefs of the period (See the “Introduction” by Stephen Greenblatt in *The Norton Shakespeare*, London-New York, Norton, 1997, p. 805-811).

²⁵ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V, 1, 32-38.

transformation, they are required to give up the play; thus we see Snug and Flute lamenting the fortune that they will lose, as their entertainment certainly would have pleased the king²⁶. Their ambitions, however, remain very humble and on the whole, their good will, their desire to serve their king and their innocence dominate. Thus, all the *topoi* of the adversaries – the essential deceitfulness of the actor, the protean or even diabolical nature of activity, which inspires lustful desires, greed – find themselves placed at a remove by the comedy and the dramatic practice represented here.

Nevertheless, this distancing effect is undoubtedly weakened by the mediocrity and foolishness of the occasional actors. The metatheatrical sequences tend rather to muddy the waters in a provocative way and create a mocking response to the attacks. Except perhaps on one point: that of the profession. These “rude mechanicals”²⁷, as Puck calls them, clearly have nothing in common with the professional actors performing in the *Dream*, and thus *Pyramus and Thisbe*, on an Elizabethan stage. The clumsiness of their acting, which is the primary source for the audience's laughter, presents itself as a challenge for the good actor and indeed requires experience.²⁸ The rude mechanicals' failed performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a traditional bravura piece, in fact underscores the excellence of the professional actors. With the Athenian mechanicals, we are thus brought to see an image of the predecessors of the professional company (The Lord Chamberlain's Men) which is performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This archaeology of the theatre demonstrates, as if in negative terms, the necessity for professionalization, or even of a proper corporation, as well as the intellectual nature of the profession. The epilogue follows in line with a celebration of the actor's art, yet again by means of an ironic twist: in order to ask for the audience's indulgence, Puck swears that the company will improve and do better next time :

If you pardon, we will mend.
And as I am an honest puck [...],
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long,
Else the puck a liar call.

But who would believe Robin Goodfellow? Is this not a means to proclaim by antiphrasis that the actors of Shakespeare's company are above reproach and have no progress to make?²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 2, 18-22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 2, 9.

²⁸ Bottom can appear as the most striking character in the play. The role has been played by a number of legendary actors, such as Samuel Phelps in the nineteenth century and Ralph Richardson in the twentieth.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Epilogue, 8-9 and 11-12.

A Midsummer Night's Dream thus includes a defence of actors, presented in a light and facetious mode. However, as with the comedy itself, it is difficult to pin down its meaning and contours. The play takes up certain accusations against actors to better demonstrate their absurdity, yet it leaves the debate unanswered in that a sloppy example of theatrical practice belies the defence. The same open-ended process occurs when Shakespeare tackles the question of the possible similarity between theatre and magic: the transformation of Bottom by Puck seems to allow the spectator to distinguish between the two practices, but at the same time, the comedy completely relies on magic and plays with this troubling proximity to the extent that Puck suggests – though without completely affirming it – that theatrical experience is of the same nature as the dream. Shakespeare comes back to this analogy in *The Tempest* (IV, 1), but also in *As You Like It* where he returns to the subject of the defence of actors, to complete his response and to be more openly provocative.

Rosalind: the “charms” of the boy actor

With *As You Like It*, we must begin with the epilogue. This time, under the costume of Rosalind, it is the real London actor or more specifically the *boy actor*, with special emphasis on cross-dressing, who addresses the audience. The unique quality of this epilogue, exceptionally spoken by a female character, has often been noted, especially to highlight Rosalind’s dominating role in the play. But the epilogue also serves as a means for Shakespeare to give the *boy actor* his say and to continue to play upon the troubling effects of sexual ambiguity beyond the fiction in order to assert a claim for the charms of the actor.

As François Lecerle has shown, the play strives to highlight the most virulent theatrophobic accusations and to make theatre appear like a Puritan nightmare – or fantasy³⁰. This is particularly true of the epilogue, which announces its insolent or even subversive approach from the start by affirming the transgression of the rule. It then equates the theatre with a tavern, by means of comparison between the tavern sign and the epilogue: “It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; [...]. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, ’tis true that a good play needs no epilogue”.³¹ “My way is to conjure you,” Rosalind argues, that is to say, “to cast a spell on you”, or even “to make use of my charms”. The polysemy of the verb “to conjure”, which means “to submit to a magic influence” and “to implore”, constitutes a

³⁰ See F. Lecerle, “‘La mort par les yeux’ : comédie, scandale et théatrophobie”, *Méthode !*, 2013, p. 261-277, from whom I draw the main points of my analysis of the epilogue. The intensity of the attack had largely diminished since the beginning of the 1590s, but the context remained polemical.

³¹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, “Epilogue”.

new provocation by assuming a link between theatre and magic practices – to which I will return – but the rest of the text possesses an even greater provocative charge.

For the charm that Rosalind will use is one that eroticises the audience and the relationship between audience and stage. She first asks the women in the audience and then the men to cast their votes in favour of the play in the name of the love that they bear one another, thereby transforming the comedy that has just been performed into a prelude to sex, or even foreplay, thanks to the erotic subtext of the word “play”: “And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women – as I perceive by your simpering none of you hates them – that between you and the women the play may please.”³² Then she, or rather “he” – since at that moment the actor takes off Rosalind's mask to remind the audience of his sexual identity (“If I were a woman”) – takes part in the seduction scene both virtually and concretely by conditionally kissing all the men whose beards, faces, and breaths might please her-him. The epilogue thus renews, or confirms, in a virtual but nonetheless suggestive way, the accusations according to which the theatre is a place of lechery, and the actor's profession, an equivalent to prostitution.

Still, the text provides some clues in defence of the practice of the actor and more precisely of the *boy actor*, which invite us to read again certain aspects of play in this light. Although Rosalind seems ready to associate theatrical entertainment with the tavern, a less noble pastime, but one to which a portion of the Globe's audience would certainly turn after the show, she brutally distances herself from vagabonds: “I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not become me”.³³ For the Elizabethan audience, the allusion to the 1572 vagrancy edict would have been obvious, even more so as in 1597, the royal government had published a new, almost identical edict. The detail is therefore significant: the *boy actor* distinguishes himself expressly from those with whom he is sometimes assimilated and reminds the audience of his status as an actor belonging to a company that was under the protection of a great patron, thereby drawing the audience's attention to his own activity.

Direct address, which in theory is a means for the actor to appear before the audience to defend what he has just performed, occurs then in the context of a claim for the profession and at the same time for sexual ambiguity. In fact, the epilogue delights in maintaining this ambiguity beyond the conclusion, through the use of the double-gendered address, the choice of speaker and the delayed elucidation of his sexual identity, which prolongs the circulation of a homoerotic desire largely upheld throughout the plot. Indeed this sexual ambiguity, which

³² *Ibid.*, « Epilogue », 13-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, « Epilogue », 9-10.

bases itself first in the practice of cross-dressing, has been Rosalind's acting principle throughout the comedy, one could even say her *modus operandi*. Rosalind-Ganymede takes Orlando through his sentimental education thanks to a role-play of her-his own invention.³⁴ It is by playing a false Rosalind, with her reproaches and witticisms in a register that is at once intellectual and bawdy, that she transforms Orlando from a stock romancer into an authentic lover. The device created by the heroine is thus strictly analogous to that of the *boy actor*: a young man (the actor/Ganymede) plays at being a woman (Rosalind/"Rosalind"), without seeking to deceive his spectators, at least not completely. Neither Orlando nor the Elizabethan spectators ever completely forget that they are looking at a young man, and this awareness underpins their pleasure in large part.

Furthermore, this duality allows Rosalind to untangle the confused amorous intrigues in the forest, notably by redirecting Phoebe's misguided love onto the previously unsuccessful Silvius. With a series of "ifs", she prepares the conclusion and succeeds in making harmony reign supreme:

(To Silvius) I will help you if I can. *(To Phoebe)* I would love you if I could. – Tomorrow meet me all together. *(To Phoebe)* I will marry you if ever I marry woman, and I'll be married tomorrow. *(To Orlando)* I will satisfy you if ever I satisfy man, and you shall be married tomorrow. *(To Silvius)* I will content you of what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married tomorrow.³⁵

The heroine then says that she derives this power from a magician, whom she has known since she was three years old and who is well versed in his art, which she specifically describes as white magic³⁶. But this perfunctory claim does not fool the spectator who knows how to identify magic and cross-dressing, and who with the help of the "conjuring" and the "if" will be able to notice the similarity between this scene and the epilogue. The power of the "if", which astonishes Touchstone a little while later³⁷, has nothing supernatural about it. Indeed, the sleight of hand relies as much on the "if" and the capacity for illusion as on the evolving content of the hypothetical statements. Rosalind-Ganymede does not say the same thing three times, but rather adapts what she-he says about marriage and pleasure according to her-his interlocutor and their relationship, in the same way that, if one knows a card that one

³⁴ See especially Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* [1975], 3 ed., 2003 ; Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies", in J. Drakakis (dir.), *Alternative Shakespeares*, London-New York, Routledge, 1985, p. 166-190 ; M. Garber, "The Education of Orlando", in A.R. Braunmuller and J.C. Bulman, *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan: Change and Continuity in the English and European Dramatic Tradition*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1986, p. 102-112.

³⁵ *As You Like It*, V, 2, 105-112.

³⁶ See *Ibid.*, V, 2, 57-59 and 63-65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 4, 94-101.

is supposed to guess, it is possible to give the illusion of telepathic divination by restricting the interlocutor's choices (between red and black, diamonds and hearts, faces and numbers, etc.). Rosalind executes an elementary conjuring trick, which relies on her-his cross-dressing and on her-his awareness of her-his circumstances – like an actor who knows his craft.

However, this is not merely a case of manipulation and Ganymede-Rosalind's power is also about charm. For example, the meetings between Rosalind-Ganymede-Rosalind and Orlando are about disillusionment but not disenchantment. In Act IV, scene 1, the young woman seeks to eliminate the portion of naïve idealism in Orlando's love and push aside his stereotypical vision of romantic sentiment which could only end in disappointment, but she also gives him the keys to maintaining the magic of love and *enchancing* the rest of married life: cultivate wit to prolong conversation between lovers, never consider possession as acquired once and for all (this is the function of the threats of adultery and her reproaches about his tardiness), and never overlook the body (this is the function of the bawdy jokes).

Scholars have long emphasized the emancipatory power of cross-dressing and the inventive power of transgendered role-play.³⁸ In light of the epilogue's provocation and its echoes with the comedy that it concludes, we can also make of these powers a rather bold defence of the *boy actor*, one which recognizes his pedagogical and socially transformative capacity, and therefore his enchanting powers, but without magic or sorcery. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* shows young people in the "green world" as they undergo an initiatory and regenerating experience, but this time, theatre has appropriated magic to operate an enchanting yet "un-supernatural" manipulation and reformulate it into an art of the actor.³⁹

***Hamlet*, from actor to spectator**

Hamlet brings the question of the actor's profession to the fore once again, and this time Shakespeare links it with the idea of emotional contagion in order to reject the connection. The arrival of the players gives the prince an unadulterated joy, a singular occurrence of this emotion in the play. He greets them with an especially warm and even friendly welcome, in which we can see the dignity that they hold in his eyes: "You are

³⁸ See especially Jean E. Howard, "Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 39, n° 4, 1988, p. 184-203 ; Clare R. Kinney, "Feigning Female Fainting: Spenser, Lodge, Shakespeare and Rosalind", *Modern Philology*, vol. 95, n° 3, 1998, p. 291-315.

³⁹ *The Devil is an Ass* by Ben Jonson also plays on the parallel between theatre and magic, but the idea is one of exclusion rather than appropriation. Devils, demons and disciples of demonology (like Fitzdotterel) remain on the periphery of theatre, either because *city comedy* stages vices far worse than those to be found in Hell, or because they do not succeed in penetrating into the theatre's confines.

welcome, masters, welcome all, I am glad to see thee well, welcome good friends”⁴⁰. The title that he uses for them is perhaps even more significant: the name of “masters” is an acknowledgement of their status as professionals who fully master a craft.⁴¹ This idea will be confirmed with the recitation of the speech Hamlet has requested from the First Player, and the sequence that follows.

With this scene, Shakespeare in fact responds to the enemies of the theatre through an allusion to a specific passage in Plato’s *Ion* (535a-536b). In this text, Socrates dialogues with Ion, the rhapsode, to show that the passions which the latter feels change him permanently and are transmitted to the listener, which links them both to the poet in a chain of possession. This idea will be taken up again in the *Republic* (Book X) with details concerning the nature of these passions and their destructive effects. The scene in *Hamlet* presents a triple allusion to the Platonic dialogue in *Ion*: firstly, the setting is one of recitation; secondly, the speech requested by Hamlet is Aeneas’s account of the massacre of Troy — it evokes the suffering of Priam and Hecuba, like the pathos-filled passages about which Socrates questions the rhapsode —; finally, the recitation has a powerful effect on the listeners and on the actor, to the point that Polonius believes him to be beside himself and asks him to stop.

But the reaction of Polonius is a naïve and clumsy one, as befits his character. On the other hand, the actor demonstrates his perfectly mastered craft. In satisfying the Prince’s request, his memory never falters for a second and he immediately embodies this pathetic role, whose effect on the audience has already been mentioned. Even though “he has [...] turn’d his colour, and has tears in’s eyes”⁴², as the startled Polonius remarks, he has absolutely not taken leave of his senses as Socrates would have it. When Hamlet later entrusts the company to the courtier and formulates his desires for the following day’s performance, the actor replies with simplicity and obedience. He is therefore capable of dropping his role in an instant, thereby demonstrating the difference that exists between the *persona* that he plays on stage and his own identity. He is therefore not permanently altered: the passion that animated him a moment before has gone; it was only a “dream of passion” as Hamlet calls it in his monologue.

Hamlet dwells in speech upon what has just been shown in action. He analyses the astonishing capacity of the actor as the effect of a specific type of work:

Is it not monstrous, that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

⁴⁰ *Hamlet*, II, 2, 423-424.

⁴¹ And later: “They are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (II, 2, 526-527).

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, 2, 521-522.

Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd.⁴³

The actor's skill consists in shaping his whole being according to his "conceit", or thought. Hamlet's comment shows that this process, while difficult in practice and almost mysterious because of its very difficulty, can in fact be analysed rationally: the mind generates the thought to which the actor then "bends" his soul, shaping it according to the *ethos* of the fictional character and the situation; and finally the soul communicates the marks of passion to the body. The mind is thus the source of what the body shows and what the voice expresses, through a process that is perfectly mastered by the actor. This description not only identifies the actor's practice with an art, one which is furthermore not purely mechanical (as opposed to liberal), but also, and more importantly yet, it puts aside the danger of emotional contamination.

This danger, thus averted for the actor, is also eliminated for the spectator. Before returning to the monologue of Act II, a look on Act III will allow us to see how Shakespeare ironically plays on the discourse of the detractors of the stage once again. Critics have often invoked *The Mousetrap* as an apology for theatre, but as Ellen MacKay has pointed out, the device is a trap and therefore an unfair trial that forces confession from its suspects⁴⁴. This interpretation can be taken a step further. Act III, I argue, does not truly present as a plea for the theatre. It seems rather to muster the elements of an antitheatrical argument.

The third act centres entirely around the performance of the murder of Gonzago, renamed *The Mousetrap*: the play leads the spectators on stage to comment on the action and influences what follows, in particular the scene where Hamlet refuses to kill the praying Claudius and where he converses with his mother, Gertrude. Certain aspects of the text directly contradict the arguments in favour of the stage and others replicate theatrophobic criticisms. As entertainment for the king, which is meant to distract him from affairs of state and strengthen the prestige of his court, the play is a resounding failure. What's more, the prince's temporising can be linked to his taste for the theatre, which seems to have here a softening influence of the kind so often denounced by its detractors. Indeed, Shakespeare specifically alludes to Gosson's treatise *The School of Abuse*. In this work, Gosson, a former playwright himself, deplores the emasculating effect of entertainments that turn lawful sports and games into unlawful riotous behaviour, as they turn "courage to cowardice", "running to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II, 2, 552-555.

⁴⁴ Ellen MacKay, *Persecution, Plague and Fire. Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 47-66, in part. p. 56-58.

riots”, and “wrestling at arms to wallowing in ladies' laps”.⁴⁵ When he arrives for the performance, Hamlet’s question to Ophelia is precisely: “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?”; meeting with resistance from the young woman, he corrects himself: “I mean my head upon your lap”.⁴⁶ The prince then goes on to make a host of jaded and bawdy remarks, in part offensive to Ophelia; this episode of the performance also contributes to a certain extent to the despair that leads her to commit suicide. More generally, the embedded play exacerbates passions and conflicts, thus tying in with the discourse of the adversaries of the stage, rather than its defenders. Claudius, who is full of anger, interrupts the performance and decides to hasten Hamlet’s departure for England (and thus his death). The queen sends for her son in order to rebuke him for the offence that *The Mousetrap* has caused to the king and Hamlet’s reproaches against his mother are so violent that they provoke the appearance of the ghost. In short, the play’s effect is the very opposite of a *catharsis*. In laying out this trap, it is true that Hamlet was not truly seeking to restore harmony to the court of Denmark, but the goal that he set for himself is not fulfilled either: the performance does not give rise to the expected revelation; and Claudius does not confess his crime, as he simply leaves the room.

It is not entirely accurate to say that Claudius never admits his wrong, however. After the performance, he acknowledges his crime for the first time in the play, but only for the benefit of the audience, in the monologue during which he attempts to pray and repent :

O, my offence is rank! It smells to heaven,
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t,
A brother’s murder. Pray can I not.⁴⁷

This points to an eventual positive effect of the theatre, which appears in contradiction to all the negative impacts that previously intimated its condemnation. This effect, however, is in fact a unique reaction on Claudius’ part, which has no mimetic relation to the performance he has just seen. It is not the fruit of emotional contagion. On the contrary, the king is eaten away by guilt and terrified at what awaits him after death. Thus analysed, *The Mousetrap* scene and its later consequences on Claudius invite us to consider afresh Hamlet’s monologue in Act II.

This monologue (beginning with “Now I am alone. / O, what a rogue and pleasant slave am I!”)⁴⁸, in which he accuses himself of weakness and cowardice, immediately follows

⁴⁵ Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse*, London, T. Woodcocke, 1579, B8v^o-C1r^o: “But the exercise that is now among us, is banqueting, playing, piping, and dancing, and all such delights as may win us to pleasure or rock us asleep. Oh, what a wonderful change is this? Our wrestling at arms is turned to wallowing in ladies’ laps; our courage to cowardice, our running to riot [...]”.

⁴⁶ *Hamlet*, III, 2, 107 and 109.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 3, 36-38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 2, 550-606.

the actor's recitation of Aeneas's account of Priam's murder and connects to it very directly. In fact, it is because Hamlet watches the actor performing the text and being moved to tears that he is able to reflect on his own situation and inaction. The actor has no reason to be affected by the fate of Hecuba, for "what's Hecuba to him?" – and yet he weeps for her. By contrast, Hamlet, who is trampled on by a villain and suffering real pain, remains immobilised and takes no revenge. Watching the actor, he is forced into this recognition and spurred to look at himself. The actor playing Aeneas represents a reversed double of the prince; it is through a consideration of the relation between actor and character (Hamlet knows theatre well enough not to be contented merely with the fictional scenario), that the prince can think about himself. He is swept up by pathos as he listens to Aeneas's account, but this sentiment sends him back to his own life; and his emotion – a form of indignation at himself, mixed with anger and shame – emerges precisely from the relationship that he establishes with the actor as well as the characters evoked in the recitation.

Hamlet's reaction thus does away with the idea of emotional contagion, according to which the spectator comes to mirror the character's dangerous emotion. It also averts the risk of feminization denounced by Gosson in that theatre is precisely what reminds the prince of his inaction and drives him to manly action. Incidentally, we could remark that Hamlet's request concerns a speech which, although classical, does *concern* him (it is the evocation of a royal family including an ideal father, Priam, and an accomplished avenger, Pyrrhus), as though he were seeking to consider his situation through a poetic representation. The scene also revises the dominant model proposed by the defenders of the stage: indeed, most of them counter the accusation of emotional contagion by replacing sinful passions with good ones, and harmful with virtuous exemplarity. They contend that the stage shows how vices are punished and virtues rewarded. The very principle of the emotional process does not differ from that of the discourse of the accusation: the force of the staged affects sets a movement on the spectator's soul, whether the emotion is sinful or righteous. The representation of dramatic effects on Hamlet (and Claudius) suggests instead a much richer relationship between character and spectator than that of a simple mirror image, as the movement of identification is counterbalanced by a movement of differentiation, thus giving rise to a whole range of emotions and reflections.

Hamlet's relation to himself is constructed through the mediation of theatre, a mediation that is even double. On the one hand, the prince imagines the signs that should manifest his suffering in reference to the conventional portrayal of the avenger character. On the other hand, he considers his life as a role:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I
A dull and muddy mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.⁴⁹

Hamlet laments his incapacity to play the role of his life well, both literally and metaphorically – the gap between his behaviour and the theatrical code pointing to a singular, deeper form of interiority.⁵⁰ The actor's performance of Aeneas's story is thus at the origin of an exercise in subjectivity, and thereby of an understanding, or even a fashioning, of the self. The spectator's experience shown by Shakespeare here is thus quite different from that which a mimetic model of reception would have produced. For Hamlet, and to a lesser extent for Claudius, theatre is the occasion for a meditation on one's own life, and the performed story thus becomes the object of a subjective appropriation. The end of the monologue further confirms this idea: to break the deadlock, Hamlet decides to have a play performed that will reveal his uncle's guilt; in other words, theatre is not a purveyor of roles, but a test of the real.

To conclude, Shakespeare does indeed engage in the polemic on theatre that marked late sixteenth-century London. In a pointed and consistent manner, he replies to detractors, who denounced theatre as a trap for the senses through which the audience is submitted to diabolical attacks, and who claimed that actors were malevolent individuals who endanger salvation and spread deceit. His response is sometimes indirect, even distorted as the plays seem to reproduce some of those criticisms. We can perceive a clear taste for provocation here, as well as a desire to acknowledge a portion of truth in the theatrophobic discourse, without adhering to its religious and stigmatizing aspect. The playwright implicitly claims the status of an economic activity for theatrical practice; he also underlines the essentially sensorial dimension of dramatic experience, which makes of it a fully secularized and profane phenomenon. The actor's work is a profession like any other; nevertheless it requires intellectual artistry and grants him surprising power, though one with nothing supernatural about it — the power to bring dreams and appearances into existence, as well as to charm, or

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 2, 561-570.

⁵⁰ I develop this idea at length in *Seul en scène. Le monologue dans le théâtre européen de la première modernité*, Genève, Droz, 2010, p. 360-364.

even change men and women. As for the experience of the spectator, Shakespeare suggests a kind of reception far from Platonic presuppositions, one which is simultaneously reflective, cognitive, and affective, and suspends the opposition between active individual and passive spectator: in other words, by drawing on affective intelligence, it is a kind of reception which produces a new relation to one's self and to the world.

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