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CHAPTER I

VISUAL MEANING

Your eares vnto your eyes Ile reconcile.

(*Pericles*, IV, iv, 22)

A chapter to show that Shakespeare had an acutely visual imagination which worked in terms of his theatre, and how this truism has subtle consequences in the detail, as well as in the larger effects of his stage-craft, in the conveying of meaning. Examples chiefly from Hamlet, Lear, Coriolanus, Titus Andronicus *and* Romeo and Juliet.

The art of theatre is unique in its power to convey meaning in two simultaneous and confluent streams, through eye and ear: and although the ear is the more important of the two (for a man stone-blind will generally receive more meaning from a play than a man stone-deaf), yet the eye has a great qualifying authority.

Hamlet, in his inky cloak, standing sadly aloof from the gaudy court of Claudius, brings something to our sense of his isolation that no dialogue can so finely disclose; the visual image offers a meaningfulness beyond what can be said. But so familiar has this image become that we no longer notice the stunning visual invention that first thought of it.

There are many passages in Shakespeare the significance of which is doubtful or ambiguous if we look only at the dialogue and ignore gesture, movement and other visual things; and what these things should be is by no means always a matter of subjective opinion. There is such a thing as objective stage-craft, which, if studied in detail, can often certify significance, as I shall show.

Unfortunately, even less is known about how Shakespeare's plays were staged than about how they were printed; yet, even so, touches of his incomparable stage-subtlety are almost everywhere apparent in his plays. Stage-craft is only a small part of dramaturgy, but it is perhaps the easiest part to study first, for it is practical, not theoretic. Our attention to it must first concern itself with the

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things of which we can be absolutely certain, such as necessary movements and gestures, dictated sometimes by explicit stage-directions, but more often by the dialogue itself.

A whole study of Shakespeare's stage-craft would, of course, include far more than this; such things, for instance, as the uses he made of the shape, structure and equipment of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres and halls, public and private, their properties and costume. But unhappily there is as yet no agreement among scholars about most of these things; we do not know with any precision what scenery, machines, traverses, traps, props, painted cloths, variations in level or other devices were available to him. What was at the disposal of his Company at a Court performance may not always have been so readily obtainable in a public theatre, and *vice versa*. But when we turn to the smaller aspects of stage-craft, smaller yet crucial in significance, such as the stance, relative positions, movements, groupings, processions and gestures of actors and their facial expressions, of these visual effects we can often be certain, or at least reasonably well informed. It is here that we can watch Shakespeare's visual skill at work. Let us take a tiny example, unnoticed in the context of stage-craft.

In Act I Scene iii of *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio enters up-stage just after Bassanio has explained to Shylock his need for a loan of three thousand ducats, for which Antonio is to be bound. Shylock notices Antonio's entry: 'Who is he comes here?' Bassanio replies 'This is signior *Anthonio*' and goes up-stage to greet his friend, leaving Shylock to his soliloquy:

> How like a fawning publican he lookes.
> I hate him for he is a Christian . . . (I, iii, 36–7)

How should the actor playing Antonio greet Bassanio as he joins him up-stage? With what expression on his face? Many may think this is a matter of no importance; it is Shylock's moment, after all, not Antonio's. But Shakespeare did not think like this; he specified exactly how the actor should play it, namely in a manner which to Shylock (a hostile witness) should seem a *fawning* manner.[1] This adjective was not put in just to scan: it is there to show the fond joy

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of Antonio's love at the very moment of its indulgence in a great gift. It is a stage-direction. It embodies visual meaning.

It is easy to show that Shakespeare saw the scene he was composing 'in the mind's eye' (a phrase he invented) with peculiar sharpness. Frequent phrases of the kind I have instanced are to be found, and some will show not only that he had all the visual details of the story vividly in his imagination as he wrote, but even that he saw them enacting themselves on a specifically Elizabethan stage. When Hermione laments her miseries at her trial, she reaches their climax with

> Lastly, hurried
> Here, to this place, i' th' open ayre, before
> I haue got strength of limit. (*Winter's Tale*, III, ii, 102–4)

'*i' th' open ayre*' shows that Shakespeare was, at that instant, thinking, not of the palace of Leontes, but of an Elizabethan stage, open to the sky. We shall see a richer example of this presently, but first it is necessary for our argument to re-describe a primary authority, well-known though it be, the famous drawing of the Swan Theatre, made by Johannes de Witt during his visit to London in 1596, and copied by his friend Arend van Buchell into his common-place book (see Plate I). The book is now in the Rijksuniversiteit at Utrecht.

The drawing occupies a page (16½ × 11 cm.) in this very elegant manuscript. No reproduction does justice to the neatness of the drawing and handwriting, which are both van Buchell's; for whoever did the drawing did the writing on it, and every feature of the writing is to be found in the passages of italic hand that occur in the rest of the book. This is the only drawing it contains.

The drawing, though accomplished, was not made in order to show accomplishment, but to offer information, to confirm and explain a traveller's tale: it is in a sense diagrammatic. Latin labels expound it: *planities siue arena: proscaenium: ingressus*, and so forth. This expository element is also seen in the figure blowing a trumpet at the door of the hut on top. He cannot be supposed to be a part of the play that seems to be in progress on the stage below, for 'when the vicar is preaching the organ does not play', as they say in

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Mallorca.[1] The flag on his trumpet repeats the swan badge to be seen on the flagstaff banner above him; he is a theatre-servant, not a noise off, and his function in the drawing is simply diagrammatic —to show how the hut was used to announce the start of a performance.

The next point to notice is that the drawing is made, as a diagram should be, from the most advantageous viewing-point, that is, from the best seat in the house: everything can be seen from it and it is immediately opposite, and as close as a seat can be, to the actors: they face it and are as far down-stage as it is possible for them to be without falling off.

We can see the sturdy trestles upon which the stage is mounted. We can see, too, that the actors are in the open air, under the sky: the protecting roof does not begin until about half-way up-stage. At the back we see a wall pierced by two great doors with double valves: between them is written *mimorum aedes*. Above there is a pillared gallery in which eight persons are seated. There is no scenery visible on the stage, apart from the property bench, set far down-stage and occupied by what we know to be a boy in woman's dress, seated with some grace. Behind him stands another boy, a seeming lady too: below and to the left of them a bearded man in a hat is making an elaborate leg. He carries a staff in his left hand, which is helping him to balance. He might almost be Balthazar, addressing Portia, in the presence of Nerissa, in *Merchant of Venice*, III, iv, 56: 'Madam, I goe with all conuenient speed.' Apart from these three, the eight in the gallery, the trumpeter and, of course, the invisible de Witt himself, the theatre is empty.

Questions crowd in upon one. If this is a performance, why is there no audience? How did de Witt get the best seat in the house to do his drawing from? How could he have known (unless he came early or stayed late) that there were trestles to support the stage, for would not the groundlings, standing in the *planities siue arena*, have masked them? Why is there no scenery? Can the old-fashioned and romantic notion be true after all, that in the excess of their imaginative power, the Elizabethans preferred to dispense with scenery? And if old-fashioned notions may be true, what has

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happened to the 'Inner Stage' of which we have so often been told, and which—or something like it—seems at times so necessary to accommodate certain situations in many an Elizabethan play? Why is there no sign of it in the back wall, between those two great doors? If it had been there, how could de Witt have failed to notice it? Could he have forgotten it? Perhaps it was not in use in whatever play it was he saw? Perhaps, in his anxiety to label his diagram with *mimorum aedes*, he sacrificed a feature of the building the importance of which he did not perceive? Or perhaps there never was such a feature?

And where are the seats for the gallants on the stage? Where, indeed, are the gallants, of whom we have heard so much from Dekker?[1] Who are those people sitting in the gallery? What is there so special about them that they should be included and the gallants not? Are they diagrammatic too, like the trumpeter, or were they drawn from life?

A possible answer to some of these questions can be found if we suppose that the scene de Witt had drawn was one not in performance but in rehearsal. This conjecture was first advanced by Mr Martin Holmes[2] some years ago and has found endorsement from more recent scholars. I believe it to be true myself and must here elaborate it and, perhaps, carry it a little further.

It is easy to believe that a distinguished and admiring foreign visitor could have obtained permission to attend a rehearsal to make his sketch; he would then have had all the seats in the place to choose from, and none of the elbowings and distractions to be met with in a performance. There would have been no groundlings to interrupt his view of the trestles that support the stage, and no scenery, except for the indispensable property-bench; there would be neither gallants, nor stools for them on the stage. But there might well have been actors, awaiting their turn to rehearse, sitting listlessly in the gallery of their *mimorum aedes* as they watched their colleagues below, doing their routine.

If we look more closely at the eight figures in the gallery, their detail gives some support for this conjecture. As Mr Holmes has said, 'the artist, whether or not he knew anything about theatres,

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certainly knew about drawing': for the figures, both those on stage and those in the gallery, are very expressive (see Plate II).

In the gallery, on our extreme right, there are two, profoundly bored, with their backs to one another. One of them wears what seems to me a somewhat bumpkin hat: he is no lord or gallant. Next to this pair, moving leftwards, are two figures, one of which seems to be leaning against a pillar and looking towards the Balthazar-like figure below. The other figure is turned away from the stage and watches a bearded man, next to him in the gallery, who is glaring down at the actors and violently gesticulating. He is the central figure up there and the only one in movement: to the left again there are two men in hats rather more lordly than that worn by the man on the extreme right; they are seemingly engaged in casual converse, perhaps commenting upon the actors below. At the end of the row, to the left, the figure of what I take to be a young girl (or boy dressed up: could it be Jessica?) reclines on one elbow and looks expressionlessly on.

Surely these are actors waiting for their turn? May it not even be that the gesticulating figure is their director, their Peter Quince, concerned to ensure that his actors, when far down-stage, could still be heard from the expensive seats where the lords and gallants paid to sit and to be seen?

But why, if it is a rehearsal, are the boy-girls in full costume? This is a reasonable question and has a reasonable answer: they have to learn the manage of their skirts.

There is yet another point of interest in this drawing which I think no one has mentioned. The only entrances shown are the doors in the back-wall: consequently, on such a stage as this, all entrances and exits must be made up-stage, and all action (save that which concludes a scene) must tend to gravitate down-stage.

With this picture in mind, let us now turn to a passage in the second act of *Hamlet* which shows, in an extraordinary degree, how Shakespeare visualised the play he was composing in terms of just such a theatre; the very dialogue derives a sequence of ideas from it. The passage begins after the dismissal of Voltemand and Cornelius (II, ii, 85), when the King and Queen are left with Polonius '*here in*

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the lobby', as we learn later (II, ii, 160). Polonius suggests—and the King agrees—that Ophelia, whom Polonius has ordered to 'locke her selfe' from the resort of Hamlet, shall be 'loosed' (that is 'unlocked') to encounter the Prince: meanwhile the King and Polonius are to be placed behind a convenient arras, to overhear what goes on between the supposed lovers. 'We will try it,' says Claudius (II, ii, 166) and at that point we get the stage-direction in Folio:

Enter Hamlet reading on a Booke.

We know the conspirators see him coming, for the Queen points him out to them:

But looke where sadly the poore wretch comes reading.

He must enter from one or other of the great doors: let us suppose it is from the door on our right: if so, we may suppose the royal group to be on our left, and somewhat further down-stage (shielded a little from him by the pillar perhaps?): Hamlet comes down, passing without observing them, for he is reading. (He is, indeed, brought on '*reading*' in order that he may do so; though Shakespeare is economical enough to use the book again, later in the scene, when Hamlet quotes from it.)

Polonius takes command of the situation:

Away I do beseech you, both away,
Ile boord him presently. *Exit King & Queen.*

The King and Queen slip up-stage and off, leaving Polonius to turn down-stage towards Hamlet, who is by now below the pillars, out on the apron: this is no conjecture, as the dialogue presently shows:

will you walke
Out of the ayre my Lord?

What Polonius is thinking is that the fresh air is no place for madmen: dark rooms were what really did them good, as we can see from Malvolio's case. Polonius is inviting Hamlet (whom he believes to be mad) to come back *out of the fresh air* (that is, *off the apron*) into the 'lobby' (that is, *above the pillars*). The remark could only have been written for such a stage; for how can one 'walk out of the

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air' on the stage of an indoor theatre, bounded by a proscenium arch? But on a stage like that of the Swan Theatre, the meaning of Polonius's remark is instantly obvious, as obvious as that which I have just quoted from Hermione.

To Polonius's well-meant invitation, Hamlet strangely replies: 'Into my Graue?' Hamlet is certainly 'much possessed by death', and this surprising answer is one example of his possession. But to Shakespeare, thinking of Hamlet standing out on the apron, near or on the grave-trap into which the Prince would presently be leaping to grapple with Laertes over the corpse of Ophelia, it was a very natural, one might almost say an obvious, thought. That the grave-trap was far down-stage is certain from the Folio stage-direction in the last act:

Enter Hamlet and Horatio a farre off. (v, i, 55)

Afar off can only mean up-stage, since all entries (at least in such a theatre as the Swan drawing shows us) must be up-stage. The trap must therefore have been far down.

The sequence continues; presently Polonius, routed, takes his leave. As he moves up towards the exit-doors he runs into Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are making their entry: 'You goe to seeke my Lord *Hamlet*;' he asks, then, pointing down-stage with as much officious vanity as if he had himself laid the egg of their meeting—perhaps he had—'there hee is.'

The young spies join their Prince in the open air below the pillars, and presently we hear Hamlet saying to them:

> ... this goodly frame the Earth, seemes to me a sterrill Promontory; this most excellent Canopy the Ayre, look you, this braue ore-hanging, this Maiesticall Roofe, fretted with golden fire ...

Glendower speaks of the 'frame' of the earth (*1 Henry IV*, III, i, 16), as Hamlet does; but in the context of thought I am attempting to uncover, it is relevant to note that *frame* was the technical name of the surrounding walls of a theatre, the walls at which Hamlet is pointing; it is the word used for them in the Fortune Theatre contract.[1] As for *sterrill Promontory*, what better description could he have found for the huge stage of bare boards on which he and his

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companions are standing? And then his eye turns upward to the sky to see the *excellent canopy of the air* above his head, with the thought added of *a majestical roof, fretted with golden fire*, which must have crowded into Shakespeare's head, as he wrote the passage, from the pent-house roof with its star-spangled ceiling called 'the heavens', that we see supported on the Swan pillars; thence his imagination comes back to Hamlet, standing out on the apron, and so down to his feet, below which stands the human concourse of his audience, their faces looking up at him: and a last thought comes to him from them:

What a piece of worke is a man!

The structure of the theatre suggested the structure of this speech.

Having shown reason for thinking that Shakespeare composed with sharp visual awareness of the theatre for which he was writing, I may steer my argument deeper into the same play, towards the unearthly scene of fugal hysteria when Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are sent, in startled rushes, across the huge stage, to and fro, by the ghostly voice from below. Hurriedly as they move, 'shifting their ground' so as to make a maximum of visual effect, they are followed by the pursuing voice that, wherever they are, seems to come up from immediately below, crying '*Swear!*'

In a modern theatre this scene goes for nothing; a stationary voice cries, not from below but from the wings; and this is meaningless. The voice does not even follow the fugitives. Modern Hamlets, on their smaller stages, usually are seen to take a few sedate and token steps, to 'shift their ground', not seeming to know why, or how to make them effective. But on a stage like that of the Swan they would know well enough and the astonished eyes of the audience would see the three swiftly-moving figures race in fear from side to side, and hear the voice always directly beneath them.

This is 'to amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears'. But what sort of stage-craft have we here? Is it a sensational trick, or has it some real significance? Why should this sudden thing happen?

Sensational it is, but it is part of the play's deepest meaning too. It is safe to say that Shakespeare never uses violent stage-effects for

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the sake of their violence; he draws on resources as wild as Webster's, but always in the service of theme. Let us look once again at the Swan drawing; there we see the penthouse supported by pillars, that was called 'the Heavens': below it, the great flat stage—our world: and below that again those lower regions that traditionally stood for Hell.[1] That Shakespeare was aware of this mediaeval significance in theatre-structure is evident from his use of it, if we look into the detail of this passage; a voice from this lowest region could suggest a voice from Hell by an illusion half visual and half auditory, especially if reinforced by hints in the surrounding dialogue.

Shakespeare prepares us for this suggestion by insinuating it into the language of the play long before giving us the full impact of it in sight and sound: on first seeing the Ghost, Hamlet says:

> Be thou a Spirit of health, or Goblin damn'd,
> Bring with thee ayres from Heauen, or blasts from Hell...
> (I, iv, 40–1)

and later,

> Oh all you host of Heauen! Oh Earth; what els?
> And shall I couple Hell? (I, v, 92–3)

The idea, thus planted in the dialogue, alerts the audience for its flowering into the action, and when the hysterical fugue begins, it is recalled and confirmed by further touches. That the voice comes from *below* is stressed by Hamlet himself:

> you here this fellow in the selleredge (I, v, 151)

and the astonished group above it is seen to move, as if to avoid an infected place. But the voice moves too and Hamlet notes that it does:

> *Hic & ubique?* Then wee'l shift for grownd*... (I, v, 156)
>
> * [*F; Qq read* shift our ground]

Let us pause to consider the meaning of this Latin phrase; it is to be translated '*here and everywhere*' of course: but who in the Universe can be both here and everywhere? Only God and the Devil: certainly not a ghost. That this simple piece of theology was also known to Shakespeare and was, indeed, in his mind at the time

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