Introduction

Discoveries on the Early Modern Stage

This is a study of the dramatic use, treatment and staging of performed "discoveries" – actions which the theatre is uniquely able to exploit visually and explore verbally. The motif of discovery – in the now almost obsolete sense of uncovering or disclosing – is prominent in the language and action of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline plays. Visual discoveries are used repeatedly through the period by virtually every playwright, regardless of company or venue. These discoveries are of two different but related kinds: the *disguise-discovery* – the removal of a disguise to uncover identity; and the *discovery scene* – the opening of curtains or doors to reveal a place or the removal of a lid or cover to effect a disclosure. This is the first analysis of staged discoveries as such; in it I show how and why these actions are essential to the way a play dramatizes and explores such interrelated matters as deception, privacy, secrecy and truth; knowledge, justice and renewal. I also consider the symbolic quality of these performed revelations and how this element would have created or added to their meaning for playgoers whose mode of understanding had been at least partly conditioned by emblem books and other didactic art. Similarly, the idea of discovery is central to the language and imagery of Christianity, which would have both helped to determine the uses of dramatic discoveries and influenced playgoer responses to them.

On about 350 occasions in early modern plays a character's disguise is removed on stage; there are also roughly 260 times when a curtain or door is opened to discover a scene; and about thirty instances when a container such as a coffin or casket is opened to reveal the contents or another kind of small discovery occurs. To put it another way, about 330 plays by Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights include upwards of 640 performed discoveries of some kind. If nothing else, these numbers indicate that the business of discovery was popular with both playwrights and playgoers.

One reason is obvious: revelations make good theatre; but the kinds of discovery that were used and their effects within the plays suggest more specific reasons for the development and use of a convention with wide-ranging but related formal, thematic and theatrical functions.

The *OED* gives a number of definitions for *discover* and *discovery* that are now obsolete or rare, but are directly relevant here. In particular, early modern usages of *discover* in "Senses relating to the removal of a physical cover or covering" include: "To remove the covering (as a lid, clothing, etc.) from; to uncover; (sometimes) *spec.* to bare (one's head)" and "To unmask oneself, to take off one's disguise; to make oneself plainly visible."[1] And an especially relevant contemporary meaning of *discovery* was "The action of exposing or revealing something hidden or previously unseen or unknown; disclosure, revelation; exposition."[2] Furthermore, in early modern English translations of Aristotle, his concept of *anagnorisis* or *recognition* was defined as "a change from ignorance to knowledge"[3] and rendered as *discovery*, reflecting the idea of revelation. It is important to realize that when *discover* occurs in stage directions or dialogue to signal an action in plays by early modern playwrights, it is being used in one or more of these obsolete or rare senses.[4] At the same time, though, the action of uncovering or opening usually exposes something previously hidden and makes possible new knowledge or understanding: what today we would refer to as *a* discovery. My broad focus in this study is therefore both the physical action of discovery and its consequences in plays written for public performance between 1580 and 1642. But the primary emphasis is on those instances when the event has both formal and thematic significance; that is, when a discovery capitalizes on the inherent potential of the action to create and convey dramatic meaning.

Theatrical discoveries are complex events that use and connect sacred and secular ideas of truth and its revelation in a range of interrelated religious, cultural and political contexts. These contexts apply differently and to a greater or lesser extent depending on the kind of discovery and its location and function in a play, but these ideas can be seen as sources for or

[1] The second definition includes the note "Formerly also *intr.* in same sense (chiefly as a stage direction). Now *rare*." ("discover, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016).
[2] "Discovery, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. September 2016.
[3] Lily B. Campbell, *Scenes and Machines*, 68.
[4] With reference to Robert Greene (but applicable more generally), Reid Barbour notes that "Modern readers need one proviso if they are to understand the patterns of discovery. Greene's term refers to a mode of representation, not (as we might have it) to the act of the audience. For *discover*, the modern reader should substitute, more often than not, something akin to *reveal, uncover*, or *represent*" (*Deciphering Elizabethan Fiction*, 44).

concepts in the background of the action of discovery on the early modern stage. For playgoers of the period, these frames of reference helped to create expectations and satisfaction; but for modern readers and audiences they might barely register unless specifically called to their attention. The early modern business of discovery cannot be completely reproduced – or the experience recaptured – today; but the different instances of this explicitly non-realistic performance convention can tell us a lot about how and why it was used to create meaning. Insofar as is possible, therefore, my concerns in this study are the original conceptual and performance contexts in which the device was deployed. Moreover, my analyses are not detailed studies of the plays as wholes but are focused on how actions of discovery in the plays work both structurally and thematically.[5]

In his 1548 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Franciscus Robortellus observes that "Discovery occurs when we are led from ignorance to knowledge of some matter, out of which springs either grief or joy – nearly always joy, for Discoveries are, with good reason, placed in the last part of a comedy, where the disturbance in affairs begins to subside."[6] Indeed, whereas Aristotle had described *anagnorisis* and its effects in tragedy, by the time the discovery device came to be used on the early modern stage, it was more common in comedy and tragicomedy than in tragedy. In particular, fifth-act discoveries typically initiate the telling of truths crucial to the denouement, and for the most part those revelations make understanding and forgiveness possible.[7] This is especially apparent in tragicomedy when a figure who is revealed in the final act has been thought dead, so the action of discovery is what shifts the play from tragedy to comedy.

Matters to be considered when discussing the formal functions of physical discoveries in drama therefore include where in plots discoveries occur and how they help to determine a play's structure. Particularly significant is how often a discovery initiates a denouement, thereby dramatizing the satisfying idea that truth will be revealed in time. Certainly

[5] Many of these plays have of course been extensively analyzed from various different angles; but unless other discussions are directly relevant to points I am making about discoveries, I have generally not included references to them.

[6] Franciscus Robortellus, "On Comedy," 233.

[7] Plots that end with a revelation of truth are common in both Greek and Roman drama, and plots happily resolved by revelations are also a feature of Greek romance, with its formula of lost and found, which was later adopted and adapted by writers of novellas in both Italy and France. These earlier works certainly influenced the use of discoveries in early modern plays, but in classical drama the revelations are typically verbal, not physical, and prose romances might describe a physical discovery but do not – cannot – show it.

the thematic significance of discoveries frequently depends on the action as a revelation of truth, which can lead to further truths. In addition, the element of surprise encourages playgoers to be aware of discoveries as tools of the playwright's art, an aspect often emphasized by dialogue that uses the language of discovery. As explicitly visual events, these staged discoveries are inherently theatrical. Moreover, they are almost necessarily non-realistic, artificial, contrived actions that call attention to themselves as such. The element of "not in real life" is built into their meaning. This quality is often heightened by the presence of observers in the play with whom playgoers share the experience, while also being separate from it. These are moments of truth for both characters and playgoers, but the level and kind of awareness are different for each.

Discoveries in the Pictorial Arts

Discoveries are also a feature of the pictorial arts from the medieval to the early modern periods. Indeed, the discoveries in roughly contemporary works of art indicate a common awareness of how, by its nature, a visual medium invites emblematic representations of such moments of revelation, both sacred and secular. An early and basic trope is the exposure of Truth by Time. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of the discoveries in paintings and other visual media of this period are of events central to Christianity – especially the Annunciation, Nativity and Resurrection – and associated rites. Other works of art depict curtains drawn back to show events or places associated with secrecy, privacy or hidden knowledge, especially beds, studies, tombs and also anatomies.

The trope occurs in paintings, engravings and woodcuts; on title pages and in other book illustrations; in emblems and iconography. In these works of visual art as well as on the stage, discoveries heighten a viewer's awareness not only of the action of revelation, but also of what is discovered and of her- or himself as a viewer analogous to but separate from the figures watching in the play or work of art. The use of a discovery also implicitly creates a relationship between the author or artist and the viewer. Sometimes visual art includes a discovering figure, like a discoverer in a play; and when no such figure is present in a painting, the discoverer is implicitly the artist, and analogous to an invisible playwright who has engineered a revelation.

Because they are essentially visual experiences – for both characters and viewers – discoveries in plays have their full effect only in performance, so they have much in common with those in works of pictorial art. Plays can

show both the discovery and responses to it, and although a painting presents only the moment of discovery, these moments can have an imagined "back-story," such as when the subject matter is mythological or Christian. Regardless of the context, moreover, discoveries in plays and visual art are always non-realistic, and usually have an allegorical or symbolic dimension. Whether the effect on the viewer is titillating or satisfying, discoveries in both media encapsulate a moment of revelation, sacred or secular. More particularly, discoveries in the two forms share some common motifs and themes, such as the association of light with both illumination and insight, or the relationship between time and truth.

I have included a number of illustrations, and have also provided links to additional images available online. An internet search will, of course, find one or more examples of all the images on various sites.[8]

Topics and Approaches

A governing premise of – and justification for – this study is that an understanding of how performed discoveries are used in early modern drama is fundamental to an appreciation of the degree to which the plays are artefacts of another era. Discoveries exemplify the essentially non-realistic mode of this drama and, in particular, highlight its medieval-Christian dimensions. One of my chief aims in focussing on the business of discovery, therefore, is to call attention to these pre-modern qualities and to how they relate to playwrights' use of the convention. Simply to list the many uses of disguise-discoveries and discovery scenes would not serve these purposes; only description and analysis can even begin to show how the discoveries *work*. Quotation of stage directions and dialogue is, I believe, the best way to show how discoveries of both kinds are prepared for, cued, performed and reacted to. But I am also very aware that summaries of action can be tedious to read, and I have tried to explain how the contexts I am providing are relevant to the particular aspect of the discovery convention I am discussing. It is perhaps significant, though, that my sometimes lengthy descriptions reflect the complexity of many plays with discovery plots and subplots. Indeed, this complexity might be one reason why many of the most complicated plays are also the most "early" and least "modern," and consequently are rarely read, edited or performed today. This problem is especially acute with disguise-discoveries, partly because what can be easily shown takes a lot of describing, and partly

[8] Notably, The Web Gallery of Art and Wikimedia Commons.

because we find it difficult to accept the premises that allowed disguise to flourish on the early modern stage. I nevertheless hope I have been successful more often than not in straddling the line between pertinence and excess.

Moreover, because my purpose is to examine and better understand the uses of a performance convention in plays written four centuries ago, I have concentrated on early modern contexts. I have not included interpretations or analyses that depend on or reflect later ways of seeing, nor, for the same reasons, have I considered how these actions are dealt with in modern productions. Instead I describe the pre-modern beliefs and perceptions that, I contend, influenced both how Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights used discoveries to dramatize meaning and how playgoers might therefore have responded to those actions. I hope that my focus on the convention and its uses will act as a reminder that the plays in which it was so common are the products of an earlier time.

Chapter 1, "Kinds and Uses," is a survey of the two basic kinds of discovery in early modern drama: disguise-discoveries and discovery scenes,[9] including one-off or unusual examples. After providing statistics about usage, I outline the characteristics of each kind before turning to more detailed discussions with examples, first of disguise-discoveries then of discovery scenes, including what might be called discoveries-in-little. I then provide some examples of plays that include both kinds of discovery. With these contexts established, I then consider the formal, structural and therefore generic uses and effects of staged discoveries. Again, I provide statistics about where in a play discoveries are deployed and examples to illustrate my points.

Chapter 2, "Time and Truth," is the first of two chapters about early modern ideas and beliefs that would have been part of the conceptual framework that (I contend) is reflected in how playwrights used discoveries, and therefore would have influenced how playgoers responded to them. The basic idea that truth will be revealed in time and justice will prevail is central to the use of the device; indeed, a performed discovery is typically a literal manifestation of that belief. In this chapter I provide emblems and other non-dramatic illustrations of the interrelationship between time and truth (including anatomies

[9] I use this term in the absence of a better one, but in an early modern context it is anachronistic; the *OED* gives 1781 as the first instance of the phrase, by R. B. Sheridan, "One of the finest discovery-scenes I ever saw" (*The Critic*, iii. i). But he is referring to a scene in a play when the discovery of a relationship occurs, not to a literal, physical discovery. The phrase is not used again until the twentieth century ("discovery, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016).

with liftable flaps), then turn to instances in plays where the idea underlies both the manner and matter of the action and, especially, the outcome.

In Chapter 3, "Religious Rites and Secular Spectacle," I discuss the Christmas and Easter rituals of the Catholic church – especially their use of curtains for revelations – as early versions of performed discoveries of truth. Again, non-dramatic instances in the pictorial arts and other media are pertinent. The discussion moves from discoveries in religious rites, to discoveries in medieval religious drama, to analogous instances in secular drama that seem to show the influence of the earlier uses. I then turn to the secular world of courtly masques and City pageants, with their more spectacular but not unrelated discoveries, and again consider analogous examples in plays.

In Chapter 4, "Revelation and Belief," I focus on theatrical discoveries that use the same language and imagery as that found in both religious and secular non-dramatic contexts, and which are often a feature of pictorial revelations. In particular, references to seeing on the one hand, and to light on the other, are combined in plays to signal, describe and react to discoveries. Often the result is an experience of surprise and recognition shared by observers both in the play and outside it. I provide a range of examples to show the different ways this imagery is used in dramatic language and action. I also consider how the use of property lights in discovery scenes might have been not only to symbolize illumination but also actually to provide it.

Chapter 5, "Private Places and Hidden Spaces," is concerned specifically with discovery scenes – those occasions when a curtain or door is opened to reveal certain locations, typically a study or other private space, such as a tomb, cave or tent. Shops are also discovered, but with somewhat different implications. My focus in this chapter is thematic: the relationships between ideas associated with such places in the real world and their staging as discoveries. Questions and theories about the staging of such discovery scenes are addressed in the Appendix.

In Chapter 6, "Invention and Artifice," I provide examples of some of the more complex and often explicitly metadramatic discoveries in early modern drama. This study does not consist of a continuous argument in which one point or chapter is contingent on the others; but the ideas I advance are interrelated and cumulative, so the examples in this chapter collectively serve as a conclusion. More generally each of the quite different discoveries included in this chapter illustrates how the business of

performed revelations was developed and deployed to create or enhance and convey meaning.

At the end of each chapter I turn briefly to the basic fact underlying this study: all the discoveries that constitute my evidence were written for performance on an early modern stage. Both as a reminder of this context and as an encouragement to further studies, I offer some thoughts about how these original circumstances might have influenced or determined a playwright's use of the device; how the action itself could have been emphasized in performance, particularly in relation to the non-dramatic visual contexts that I describe; and how these elements would thus have affected the playgoers' understanding of what they saw and heard.[10]

In the Appendix I turn to the practical matter of how and where discovery scenes were staged. Today, most theatre historians agree that there was a "discovery space" – a term coined in the 1950s to refer to a large curtained opening in the centre of the tiring house wall. But (among other problems) there is no early modern term for such an opening, the Swan drawing does not show one, and the evidence adduced for one is weak. That discoveries were effected by opening a door or drawing a curtain is not the issue. They were, and they were almost certainly placed at or in the tiring house wall. But many of these scenes could have been staged in one of the two doorways (for the existence of which there is an abundance of supporting evidence). Other discoveries could have been staged by opening curtains hung temporarily in front of the tiring house wall.

I address this problem separately because it is largely unrelated to my ideas about the uses of discovery scenes – although if we knew how they were staged they would be easier to discuss, and how we imagine the staging of these discoveries will almost certainly influence how we interpret them. Nevertheless, I do not offer definitive answers because, in the absence of more and better evidence, they are simply not available. What I try to do is to provide a survey of the principal theories of recent years and an evaluation of their merits and demerits. In the context of these theories, I also offer my own speculations about staging possibilities and probabilities.

Quotations from all early modern works are from the earliest edition, with signatures provided in parentheses. Original spelling and punctuation are retained but i/j and v/u are modernized. Stage directions are reproduced in

[10] A searchable Excel database of the evidence I gathered and on which I based my analyses and conclusions is available on the CUP website, http://admin.cambridge.org/academic/subjects/literature/renaissance-and-early-modern-literature/discoveries-early-modern-stage-contexts-and-conventions?format=HB.

italics, regardless of how they appear in the original text. Original italics in dialogue and non-dramatic works have been removed unless otherwise indicated. Quotations are from the STC- or Wing-number copy available on Early English Books Online (EEBO) and listed in Primary Works. When quoting from Shakespeare's First Folio, I use Hinman's through-line-numbers (TLN); if a manuscript play exists in a Malone Society edition, I cite its line numbers; so too with other modern editions of manuscript plays. Dates in parentheses after early modern works are of composition (certain or approximate); publication dates are given in the lists of Primary Works.