

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

‘FORMS TO HIS CONCEIT’: SHAKESPEARE
AND THE USES OF STAGE ILLUSION

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IN Shakespeare's age many seem to have taken it for granted that, in Roger Ascham's words, 'The whole doctrine of comedies and tragedies is a perfect imitation, or fair lively painted picture of the life of every degree of man'.¹ Sir Philip Sidney cited Aristotle as authority for defining poetry as an 'art of imitation', and then, alluding to Horace, rephrased it as 'a speaking picture'.² A third point of reference for this commonplace idea of poetry and drama was the phrase attributed to Cicero, but known only from Donatus, often quoted, as by Ben Jonson in *Every Man out of his Humour*,³ and translated by Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors*, where he wrote, 'Cicero saith a comedy is the imitation of life, the glass of custom, and the image of truth'.⁴ Cicero's terms are not equivalent, but they tend to coalesce in Shakespeare's age in a common emphasis on imitation, picture, image of truth, reflection in a glass or mirror; the idea is expressed in various ways and crops up frequently in the drama itself, as for instance, in the prologue to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*:

View but his picture in this tragic glass . . . (l. 7)

The most famous formulation occurs in Hamlet's advice to the players, where he rephrases Cicero's well-known formula in describing the purpose of playing as 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (III. ii. 22) and goes on to condemn actors who 'imitated humanity' abominably.

¹ *The Schoolmaster* in ed. G. G. Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (2 vols., 1904), i. 7; see also Madeleine Doran, *Endeavours of Art* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1954, reprinted 1964), p. 71.

² *Defence of Poesie* in ed. A. H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Renaissance* (1940), p. 414.

³ At III. vi. 206-7.

⁴ *An Apology for Actors*, Sig. F1v; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 556; Doran, op. cit., p. 72.

It can readily be shown that Shakespeare did not simply accept the common equation of imitation and reflection in a mirror, as derived from Cicero. In various passages he seems to think of painting or art as mirroring nature, and providing 'a pretty mocking of the life' (*Timon of Athens*, I. i. 35), or 'the life as lively mock'd as ever' (*The Winter's Tale*, v. iii. 19), but he also envisaged the artist not merely rivalling but outdoing nature:

Look when a painter would surpass the life
 In limning out a well-proportion'd steed,
 His art with nature's workmanship at strife,
 As if the dead the living should exceed . . .
 (*Venus and Adonis* 289-92)

This surpassing of nature implies the possibility of idealization, as in the Painter's portrait of Timon:

It tutors nature: artificial strife
 Lives in these touches, livelier than life
 (*Timon* I. i. 37-8)

But the dramatist's idea of 'imitation' goes further, for Timon is depicted in the presence of the wholly imaginary goddess Fortune, so that the painting is doing something more than copy life, or improve on life.¹ Perhaps Shakespeare's most sophisticated conception of artistic possibilities occurs in *The Rape of Lucrece*, where Lucrece studies a painting of the Greeks and Trojans confronting each other before the walls of Troy, in which

A thousand lamentable objects there
 In scorn of nature, art gave lifeless life.
 (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 1373-4)

In this 'skilful painting' it seems that the figures are brought to life, but not altogether,

For much imaginary work was there, —
 Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,
 That for Achilles' image stood his spear
 Gripp'd in an armed hand: himself behind
 Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:
 A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head
 Stood for the whole to be imagined.
 (*Ibid.*, 1422-8)

Here Shakespeare shows an understanding of the 'necessary incompleteness of all two-dimensional representation', and of the

¹ This point was developed by Madeleine Doran, *op. cit.*, pp. 72 ff.

stimulus to the imagination to complete what is partially shown, a notable effect of illusion in art.¹

At the same time, Shakespeare is of his age in thinking of the artist primarily as the ape of nature, and the performance of actors on the stage was regarded in the same way. Actors were praised for representing characters to the life, as in the well-known elegy on Richard Burbage:²

Oft have I seen him leap into the grave
 Suiting the person which he seem'd to have . . .
 So lively, that spectators and the rest
 Of his sad crew, whil'st he but seem'd to bleed
 Amazed, thought even then he died indeed.

An actor's highest achievement was to play 'as if the Personator were the man personated',³ and by the same token, the dramatist was applauded for achieving complete illusion, as in some prefatory verses addressed to John Fletcher in the 1647 Folio:⁴

How didst thou Sway the Theatre! Make us feel
 The Players' wounds were true, and their swords steel!
 Nay, stranger yet, how often did I know
 When the Spectators ran to save the blow?
 Frozen with grief we could not stir away,
 Until the Epilogue told us 'twas a Play.

Passages such as this (which provides an early instance of the image of spectators intervening in a play, and confusing it with real life) reflect a common habit of taking imitation literally as a copying, or mirroring, of life. It informs not only the praise of actors and defences of the stage, but also, from the sixteenth century onwards, most attacks on the theatre as a source of corruption. In 1597 The Lord Mayor of London complained that plays corrupt young people by impressing on them⁵ 'the very quality and corruption of manners which they represent . . . Whereby such as frequent them [are drawn] into imitation and not to avoiding the like vices'. In this he was echoing Stephen Gosson, and anticipating John Rainolds, who wrote of⁶

¹ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (second edition, 1962), p. 176.

² These anonymous lines, dating from about 1620 (Burbage died in 1619), may be found in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (4 vols., 1923), ii. 308-9.

³ *An Apology for Actors*, Sig. B4^r.

⁴ By 'T. Palmer', in *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, edited A. Glover (10 vols., 1905-12), I. xlviii.

⁵ See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, iv. 321-2.

⁶ *Th' Overthrow of Stage-Playes* (1599), p. 108.

The *actors*, in whom the earnest care of lively representing the lewd demeanour of bad persons doth work a great impression of waxing like unto them . . . the *spectators*, whose manners are corrupted by seeing and hearing such matters so expressed.

The circularity of such an argument passed unnoticed: plays imitate by copying life, and by representing vices (a part of life) players become corrupted; while by watching plays imitate life, the audience learn to imitate or copy the players, and are corrupted in turn.

In such attitudes to acting and the stage, the idea of imitation in the drama is taken literally as meaning to copy, picture or mirror life, and there is no room for a play of imagination, for the fantastic, or the exercise of what Shakespeare called the 'conceit deceitful'. Such attitudes imply a naïve or unthinking concept of stage-illusion, and assume that spectators are totally taken in by a spectacle which is a copy of real life; in other words, they imply that the illusion is complete. The notion that the drama holds the mirror up to life or nature, and that the audience is deluded into thinking what they see is real, has had a long life, and survives tenaciously in present-day criticism of the theatre. In the eighteenth century, a self-consciously neo-classical pursuit of correctness, stimulated by French theorizing, led to a long debate on the validity of the three unities. Imitation as a mirror of life was bound to seek to press Unities into its service, but from about the same period perceptive critics began to recognize, even while condemning excessive irregularity or defiance of the rules, that all plays are likely to contain, in the words of Farquhar, 'several Improbabilities, nay, Impossibilities'.¹ His essay on comedy is especially interesting because of his defence of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, whose plots, he said, were 'only limited by the Convenience of Action'.² There were others who rejected a slavish attempt to obey the rules, but a major impetus to the argument was given by Dr Johnson's forthright treatment of the matter in his Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765).

He was particularly severe upon the unities of time and place,

¹ *A Discourse upon Comedy* (1702), in *The Complete Works of George Farquhar*, ed. Charles Stonehill (2 vols., 1930), ii. 341. Earlier still, Sir William Temple in 'Of Poetry', first published in his *Miscellanea* (1692), and reprinted in *Five Miscellaneous Essays by Sir William Temple*, ed. Samuel H. Monk (1963), pp. 173–203, had objected to the unities and 'rules' of drama, observing that no great writers among the ancients followed the rules.

² Farquhar, *Complete Works*, ii. 338.

recognizing the inadequacy of a naïve conception of imitation as a copy of life:¹

The objection arising from the impossibility of passing the first hour at *Alexandria*, and the next at *Rome*, supposes, that when the play opens the spectator really imagines himself at *Alexandria*, and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to *Egypt*, and that he lives in the days of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

If the auditor is so deluded, then, Dr Johnson argued, he can accept anything, and this struck him as so implausible that he rejected altogether any possibility of stage-illusion:²

The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.

This dogmatic position provoked an immediate response from William Kenrick, who saw the contradiction in Dr Johnson's argument that Shakespeare's drama is incredible, yet that he remains 'the poet of nature'. He tried to distinguish between delusion affecting our belief, and delusion affecting our emotions, and claimed that 'the deception goes no farther than the passions, it affects our sensibility, but not our understanding'. This was more subtle, but led him to conceive of the audience as merely passive, and to think that our 'convulsions of grief or laughter are purely involuntary'.³

Others attempted to work out a better understanding of stage-illusion, like Lord Kames, who thought of the audience in the theatre as in a 'waking dream',⁴ but it may have been Erasmus Darwin, in the prose 'interludes' in his *The Botanic Garden* (1789), who took the debate an important stage further by introducing the idea of a voluntary participation by the audience; he wrote

if any distressful circumstance occur too forceable for our sensibility, we can voluntarily exert ourselves, and recollect, that the scenery is not real.

So he thought we 'alternately believe and disbelieve, almost every

¹ Ed. D. Nichol Smith, *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare* (revised edition, 1963), p. 118.

² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³ His comments on Dr Johnson's *Preface* were published in the *Monthly Review* in October and November 1795; see ed. Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare The Critical Heritage*, vol. 5, 1765-1774 (1979), pp. 191-2.

⁴ Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 6th edition, with the Author's last Corrections and Addition, 2 vols. (1785), ii. 418.

moment, the existence of the objects represented before us' on the stage.¹ It was left to Coleridge, who had read Kames and Darwin and many other authors who touched on the question of illusion in perception, to develop what remains perhaps the most searching analysis of the issue. In some elaborate draft notes for a lecture written probably in 1808, he rejected the common notion that the audience was in a state of 'actual Delusion', and Dr Johnson's idea that the audience is never deluded. He thought that 'Stage Presentations are to produce a sort of temporary Half-Faith, which the Spectator encourages himself and supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is'; he went on to define this 'voluntary contribution' as a 'suspension of the Act of Comparison', permitting a kind of 'negative Belief', and suggested an image for the process in the dream or nightmare that 'takes place when the waking State of the Brain is re-commencing'.² These notes record the working out of ideas which were later summarized in a letter written in 1816:³

The truth is, that Images and Thoughts possess a power in and of themselves, independent of that act of the Judgement or Understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them. Such is the ordinary state of the mind in Dreams. It is not strictly accurate to say, that we believe our dreams to be actual while we are dreaming. We neither believe it or disbelieve it—with the will the comparing power is suspended, and without the comparing power any act of Judgement, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible. The Forms and Thoughts act merely by their own inherent power: and the strong feelings at times apparently connected with them are in point of fact bodily sensations, which are the causes or occasions of the Images, not (as when we are awake) the effects of them. Add to this a voluntary Lending of the Will to this suspension of one of it's own operations (i.e. that of comparison & consequent decision concerning the reality of any sensuous Impression) and you have the true Theory of Stage Illusion.

This fine conception of a temporary half-faith which the spectator

¹ *The Botanic Garden* (2 vols., 1789) ii. 87. The quotation comes from the second prose 'Interlude' on probability in art inserted in 'The Loves of the Plants'.

² See S. T. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (revised edition, 2 vols., 1960), i. 176–80. The quotations have been checked against Coleridge's manuscript notes in the British Library.

³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols., 1956–71), iv. 641–2. I am indebted to J. R. de J. Jackson's excellent account of 'Coleridge on Dramatic Illusion and Spectacle in the Performance of Shakespeare's Plays', *Modern Philology*, 62 (1964–5), 13–21.

encourages voluntarily by an act of will, suspending his powers of comparison and judgement, while he remains able to snap out of it and see the stage as a stage, explains the famous phrase in *Biographia Literaria*, 'that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith'. In stressing the spectator's voluntary participation and power of withdrawal, Coleridge formulated a concept of stage-illusion which allowed play for fantasy and the imagination, corresponding to something Shakespeare seems instinctively to have felt, as when he answered his own question in the Prologue to *Henry V*, 'Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?' with another image of the 'conceit deceitful': the obvious answer is 'no', but it is made 'yes' by the voluntary faith of the audience as the Chorus cries 'let us . . . On your imaginary forces work'.

As in this passage, Shakespeare's comments in plays on the nature of his art often reflect upon its limitations,¹ but such remarks also reflect his confidence in the power of his art, and his instinctive grasp of the possibilities for stage-illusion. Behind Coleridge's analysis lies a very important distinction he made between an imitation and a copy, observing that our pleasure in an imitation, as in a landscape painting, comes from our consciousness of difference as well as likeness, whereas a copy strives to be identical with the original. Naïve theories of stage illusion start from a confusion between imitation and copy, as in the image of holding the 'mirror up to nature'. The confidence with which Shakespeare exploited this confusion from early on in his career is extraordinary, as is the subtlety with which he played variations on the uses of stage-illusion. In two plays he made it an issue in relation to the performances by companies of actors within the main action. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Bottom and the 'rude mechanicals' his companions spend the time when they might be rehearsing their play on 'Pyramus and Thisbe' for performance before Duke Theseus in anxious debate about problems of stage-illusion. They take for granted a naïve conception of illusion as copy, as Bottom as Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself, which, he says, 'the ladies cannot abide'. His solution is to announce to the audience that he is not really Pyramus, but 'Bottom the weaver': he has made the common error of supposing the audience will be deluded into mistaking him for the real

¹ As Philip Edwards noticed in *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (1968); see also Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962). Both of these books have helped notably towards an understanding of Shakespeare's concern with the nature of his art.

Pyramus. The lion creates even more severe problems in Snout's view: 'Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?'. Again they assume a total illusion, that the lion will be taken for real, and the only way out is for Snug as lion to show his face, 'name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner'. The wall, on the other hand, raises no problem; they realise they cannot build one, and therefore must use an actor to represent it, who, in spite of having 'some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him to signify Wall' is not likely to be mistaken for the real thing. Their anxiety to prevent the audience being taken in, and their habit of confusing their play with life, are funny because the scene exposes how absurd it is to make that confusion, in a dramatic world which begins, like Coleridge's theory of stage-illusion, from the image of the dream, as opening vistas inaccessible to what Theseus calls 'cool reason', and liberating the imagination of the audience through the voluntary suspension of the powers of comparison.¹

So this sequence continues with a rehearsal supervised by Quince, but watched over also, as the audience knows, by Puck, who does a little superior stage-managing on his own account in sending back Bottom, when Thisbe's cue comes, 'with an ass-head', as the stage-direction reads. Quince, Snout, Flute, and the others run away at the sight of Bottom 'changed' or 'translated' (Quince's word), whereas we in the audience see the actor playing Bottom return disguised, to joke with the audience about it in a brief soliloquy:

I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could: but I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here and will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid. (III. i. 120)

Through all this scene Titania is on stage asleep, and Oberon has applied the magic juice intending to 'make her full of hateful fantasies' (II. i. 258) or delusions, but she wakes to see Bottom with the ass-head and cry

What angel wakes me from my flowry bed? (III. i. 129)

Our pleasure in all this is related to our sense of the complex variations Shakespeare is playing on the theme of stage-illusion. The naïve realism of Quince and the 'hempen homespuns' causes

¹ For an exploration of Shakespeare's use of the image of the dream, see Marjorie Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare* (New Haven, 1974), and Jackson I. Cope, *The Theatre and the Dream* (Baltimore, 1973), especially pp. 219-44, where he relates the image of the dream to acting and illusion, with specific reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* among other plays.

them to run away in fright from Bottom, for they see a monster; Titania wakes into a kind of dream to see Bottom as an angel, and fall in love with him; and we see him as the old Bottom, wearing an ass's head. Titania, as Queen of the Fairies, is no less incredible than Bottom transformed, and Shakespeare makes the most of the incongruities in this sexless encounter between embodiments of 'mortal grossness' and fairy grace. For each of them the experience is one of innocent delight. When Oberon releases her into the ordinary world of sight, she cries

My Oberon, what visions have I seen! (iv. i. 76)

So too Bottom wakes from sleep to exclaim, 'I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was'. Puck and Oberon do not share their illusion; Puck says, 'My mistress with a monster is in love' (iii. ii. 6), and Oberon, in releasing her, speaks of removing the 'hateful imperfection of her eyes' (iv. i. 63). Shakespeare exploits richly here the spectator's adaptability in response to forms of stage-illusion, his ability to yield to the play of imagination, and yet remain aware that he is watching a play in a theatre. The play brings together figures from classical legend in Theseus and Hippolyta, from fantasy and folklore in the Fairy King Oberon, his Queen Titania, and Puck, and from the peasantry of an English countryside in the workingmen who rehearse their play in a hawthorn-brake. While Quince and Bottom seriously debate a naïve realism of stage-presentation, that debate is set against a dazzling proof of the possibilities of illusion in the visions Titania and Bottom have, visions which seem to them in some way better than the world of the play into which they awake. We both share in their visions of delight, and also, with Oberon, see this love of a fairy queen for an ass as a 'hateful imperfection'. The play exploits and exposes the naïve theory of stage-illusion, implying in the multiple levels of action here, and again in the play within the play in Act V, a recognition of the exciting possibilities the drama offers:

Such tricks hath strong imagination
That if it would but apprehend some joy
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear.

(v. i. 18)

How easily is an ass supposed a monster, an actress supposed a fairy-queen, or an actor supposed an Athenian Duke. Shakespeare maximises simultaneously our sense of the artifice of the stage, and

the recognition that 'strong imagination' can make us 'suppose' anything. The play fittingly concludes with Puck speaking both in his role as a spirit, and out of it as an actor, reminding the audience at once of the way in which the play has shown them visions, inviting the imagination to suppose them for the moment in some sense real, and that Puck and his fellows are 'shadows', a term commonly applied to a semblance as opposed to the real substance,¹ and used here in the way Theseus had done earlier in this scene to refer to players, 'The best in this kind are but shadows' (v. i. 211). Shakespeare understood and relied upon that ability, identified by Coleridge, of the audience to yield a half-faith and yet remain aware that they are watching actors on a stage, to believe anything while knowing all is make-believe.

Shakespeare returned to the issue of stage-illusion in *Hamlet*, which again incorporates theorizing about the nature of acting and drama, most notably in the form of Hamlet's advice to the players at Elsinore, which has often been taken as, in effect, the dramatist's own guidance to us all. Hamlet preaches moderation, from the point of view of a neo-classicist who despises the groundlings as 'capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise' (III. ii. 11). His special recommendation is 'o'erstep not the modesty of nature' (III. ii. 19), since the purpose of playing has always been to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'; in this Hamlet offers a variant of the Ciceronian formula that defines drama as the imitation of life, the glass of custom and the image of truth.² Hamlet is offended by players who strut and bellow, and by clowns who speak more than is set down for them. All this commentary of his may be seen as deeply ironical in relation to his own performance. For on the one hand, he does not follow his own recommendations; if anyone in the play tears a passion to tatters it is Hamlet himself on those several occasions when he loses control over himself, as when he curses Claudius:

Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
Why what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,

¹ See, for instance, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV. ii. 123-5:
For since the substance of your perfect self
Is else devoted, I am but a shadow;
And to your shadow will I make true love.

² See above, p. 103.

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
 And fall a cursing like a very drab,
 A scullion. (II. ii. 582)

Again, if anyone speaks more than is set down for him, it is Hamlet, who takes on himself a role like that of clown, and intervenes boisterously in the play within the play. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that the players performing 'The Mouse-trap' follow Hamlet's advice, and indeed Lucianus, making his 'damnable faces' (III. ii. 253) at the audience, evidently disregards it. In any case, Hamlet's neo-classical taste, perhaps fostered at Wittenberg, is hardly represented in the play within the play, which suggests, with its dumb-show and rhyming couplets, an old-fashioned play in the Senecan tradition written in a style reminiscent of that prevailing in the 1580s. The dialogue of the main action surrounding it is by contrast so much less formal that the play within the play evidently fails to 'hold . . . the mirror up to nature' and frighten Claudius, or 'catch the conscience of the King' (II. ii. 605). He watches the dumb-show and much of 'The Mouse-trap' with indifference, and is alarmed, it seems, not by the image it presents of the past, the murder of old Hamlet, but by the image it suggests of the future, when Hamlet identifies Lucianus as nephew to the Player King, and the play within the play suddenly seems to embody Hamlet's threat to kill his uncle Claudius.¹

Hamlet's own taste seems to be for plays that are 'caviare to the general' (II. ii. 437), as suggested by his choice of 'Aeneas' tale to Dido' when he asks the players to show their quality. Yet this long descriptive speech, more in an epic than dramatic style, allows the First Player to enter imaginatively into the part, and become so absorbed in it that his face and body altogether express his feeling for Hecuba:

It is not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit,
 That from her working all the visage wann'd
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit?

(II. ii. 551)

¹ The debates about the staging and interpretation of this scene are summarized by M. R. Woodhead in 'Deep Plots and Indiscretions in "The Murder of Gonzago"', *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1979), 151-61, an essay which is instructive on the various levels of irony at work.

The First Player here shows to Hamlet, and at the same time Shakespeare demonstrates to us, the inadequacy of a naïve realism that would tie drama to the image of the mirror of nature, an imitation or copy of reality; here the emotion is generated by an involvement of the imagination (or 'conceit') in 'a fiction, in a dream of passion', just as in the soliloquy that follows this Hamlet himself builds up a passion out of nothing and falls 'a-cursing like a very drab'. In his own actions Hamlet seems to contradict his theorizing, for as theorist he prefers neo-classical and formal modes of drama which have little to do with 'truth to life'.¹

This is one of the ways in which Hamlet is 'placed' in the play, and it relates to Shakespeare's larger fascination with the nature of drama as fiction, dream, illusion. Perhaps the most daring feature of this play is the presentation of the Ghost in Act I, as a figure armed from head to toe. Whether audiences in Shakespeare's time had a greater readiness to believe in ghosts than theatregoers now do cannot be determined, but this Ghost does not wear conventional costume, and when he was poisoned old Hamlet was sleeping in his orchard, so that by the introduction of the Ghost in armour Shakespeare exploits not belief, but disbelief, or rather our willingness to yield a temporary half-faith to anything in the theatre. Perhaps it would be truer to say that with this startling and improbable apparition Shakespeare maximises both belief and disbelief. On its first two appearances the Ghost is merely seen and does not speak. At one point, according to the Quarto direction it 'spreads his arms', when Horatio accosts it, but, silent, it remains an apparition, to harrow with fear and wonder, as Horatio cries 'Stay, illusion'. If it is an illusion to him and Marcellus, what is it to the audience? When it next appears in 1. iv, it speaks to Hamlet, and now is no longer an 'illusion', but becomes 'real'; for the moment it talks, the Ghost becomes Hamlet's father, as if he were alive,

A figure like your father,
Armed at point exactly, (1. ii. 199)

as Horatio describes the 'apparition'. In 1. iv the Ghost literally does 'assume' the 'noble person' of old Hamlet, as if he were brought back to life. When he speaks to Hamlet, we listen not to an

¹ And when occasion demands he can 'rant' as well as Laertes (v. i. 284), or any player who tears a passion to tatters. I have found very helpful Roy W. Battenhouse's discussion of 'The Significance of Hamlet's Advice to the Players', in *The Drama of the Renaissance: Essays for Leicester Bradner*, edited Elmer M. Blistein (1970), pp. 3-26.

'illusion' or 'apparition', but to a father admonishing his son, to an ordinary human being—for this ghost has a temper, has passions, thinks, is affected by a range of emotions, including horror and disgust. The Ghost abuses Claudius, reproves Gertrude, moralises on virtue and lust, describes the murder of old Hamlet as if he had been a spectator at it, and is especially outraged at the manner of his death:

a most instant tetter bark'd about
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
All my smooth body

(I. v. 71)

The variety of his utterance registers a suffering, angry, and rather tedious figure, to whom most respond, like the Prince, as to old Hamlet indeed. Yet the whole thing is make-believe; Shakespeare challenges our incredulity by putting the Ghost in armour, yet paradoxically makes him more credible because he assumes the person of, and turns into, the old warrior King who smote the sledded Polack on the ice.

All fictions are possible on stage. The actor playing the Ghost playing old Hamlet is moved to anger and horror at the narration of his own death; the actor playing Hamlet is moved by the passion generated by the player in a play within the play, over Hecuba mourning for the death of Priam, to burst out, forcing his soul to his own (and Shakespeare's) imagination, with the passion of 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I'. Shakespeare had a much more complex understanding of his art than Hamlet, and does not hold the mirror up to nature; he rather extends our capacity to give faith to anything, ghosts, fairies, witches, spirits, while playing upon our awareness of the make-believe of the theatre. At the very centre of emotion, the heart of a character's most powerful moment of dramatic life, he can pull us up short by this consciousness—as in *Macbeth*, for instance:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more

(V. v. 24)

Through Shakespeare's exploitation of the audience's readiness to yield a temporary half-faith, and his simultaneous exploitation of their knowledge that they are in a theatre watching actors, there runs a deeper sense of the complex relation of life to drama, of the way we all play roles for our own audiences. Shakespeare's practice leaves room for and encourages the imaginations of the

audience to collaborate with his 'conceits deceitful', and to animate by their own projective participation the dramatic world of his plays. In his mature plays Shakespeare seems to anticipate by two centuries that subtle understanding of the nature of dramatic illusion worked out by Coleridge.

I have been concerned with dramatic illusion as a concept refined during the eighteenth century by critics who were attempting to understand the experience of audiences in theatres without darkened auditoria, and to explain especially the working of illusion in relation to Shakespeare's plays. The trend towards realism in the nineteenth century was accompanied by refinements in theatre lighting and design which led to a kind of drama that attempted to mirror life, with the audience watching from the dark a brilliantly lit stage representing a room with the fourth wall removed. This led to the common use of the term 'illusion' to refer to stage-sets and plays which sought to copy real life, and to acting which pretended the audience was not there.¹ Effectively this produced a fundamental change in the implications of the word, for whereas Shakespearian uses of stage-illusion activated the imagination of the audience to share in relating and completing his dramatic images, the effort of scenic illusion was to deny participation by providing a stage-picture so 'real' and detailed that the audience would not need to use their imaginations at all. The reaction against this, which, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, was given an early impetus by Harley Granville-Barker,² was slow to take effect in the commercial theatre, and it is only with the new drama of the last twenty years that a sense of the possibilities of exploiting audience awareness in relation to stage-illusion has been recovered for serious drama. However, this recovery takes on a specific and limited character in relation to the two modes of drama which have most prominently been associated with it. One is the post-Brechtian drama of political commitment, as exemplified in the work of a dramatist such as John Arden, which has been seen as breaking away from a dominant nineteenth-century tradition of a drama of scenic illusion, a theatre of acceptance, persuading the audience to leave their 'critical, questioning faculties outside', into a new mode, a drama of

¹ The erosion of the Shakespearian or Coleridgean concept of the term is already to be seen in Charles Lamb's essay on 'Stage Illusion' (1825), which begins, 'A play is said to be well or ill acted in proportion to the scenical illusion produced. Whether such illusion can in any case be perfect, is not the question. The nearest approach to it, we are told, is when the actor appears wholly unconscious of the presence of spectators'.

² Notably in his British Academy Lecture of 1925, 'From *Henry V* to *Hamlet*'.

challenge, 'a theatre of scepticism and questioning'.¹ The second is absurdist drama, which tends to devalue language, and to emphasize the isolation of individuals who cannot readily communicate with one another. Such drama, with its 'indifference to the distinction between illusion and reality', is concerned with lonely figures preoccupied with appearances and role-playing; their only reality is the 'performing self', the self they create, since external reality presents itself as an inexplicable and impenetrable network of social and political relations.²

This concern with audience awareness and illusion in recent drama seems narrow in relation to Shakespeare's far more wide-ranging exploration of the uses of stage-illusion. These culminate in the late plays in a demonstration of the power that the deceptions, metamorphoses, and illusions which are the stuff of art possess to enlarge our sympathies by giving life to images of coherence and reconciliation, as, for example, in the disguisings and tricks which run through the later part of *The Winter's Tale*, and lead to the final grand use of illusion in the play within the play, stage-managed by Paulina, in which Hermione appears as a statue, coming to life to be reunited with the penitent Leontes, who thought he was to be 'mock'd with art' (v. iii. 68).³ The fact is that the word is often still, confusingly, used in its more limited sense, as if realism gave us 'a theatre of total illusion';⁴ and a recent handbook on changes in the treatment of Shakespeare in the last hundred years concludes with the triumph of 'non-illusion', confusing stage-illusion with scenic illusion in pointing to Peter Brook's 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an attempt to 'deny all stage-illusion, leaving a sufficient vacuum to be filled by the imagination of the spectator'.⁵

¹ Albert Hunt, *Arden: A Study of his Plays* (1974), pp. 24, 28. Hunt claims that Arden's drama is like both Brecht's and Shakespeare's in this 'scepticism and questioning', but he goes on to define it in ideological terms which illustrate rather how radically different it is from that of Shakespeare.

² See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1978), pp. 86-7, 91-3, and Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self* (1971); cf. also Harold Pinter's comment on the characters in his plays: 'Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing up on them, which is frightening . . . we are all in this, in a room, and outside is a world . . . which is most inexplicable and frightening' (quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, 1970, p. 35).

³ See N. S. Brooke, 'Shakespeare and Baroque Art', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxxiii (1977), 66-8, for further comments on illusion in this play and *The Tempest*.

⁴ J. L. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience* (1975), p. 170.

⁵ Id., *The Shakespeare Revolution* (1977), Chapter 11, 'Shakespeare, Peter Brook and Non-Illusion'; the quotation is from p. 230.

All productions tend to fix a play in the images imposed by the director, but by the same token none completely restrict the imagination of the spectator. There can be no such thing as a theatre of 'total illusion'. At the height of naturalism, Strindberg understood this, when he wrote in his preface to *Miss Julie*:¹

As far as the scenery is concerned, I have borrowed from impressionistic painting its asymmetry, its quality of abruptness, and have thereby in my opinion strengthened the illusion. Because the whole room and all its contents are not shown, there is a chance to guess at things—that is, our imagination is stirred into complementing our vision.

The notion of a theatre of non-illusion is as misleading as the idea of a theatre of total illusion, and both reflect a simplistic and crude concept of the way illusion works. It is strange that criticism of the drama and of Shakespeare especially should suffer from such misconceptions, for recent studies of the uses of illusion in painting, and in relation to reading literature, especially the novel, have provided a basis for recovering a much subtler understanding of the way it works. These have been concerned in particular to emphasize the complex nature of the illusions by means of which all art functions, exploiting the 'power of expectation, rather than the power of conceptual knowledge' in the viewer or reader, his readiness to project and complete images in accordance with his own 'mental set'.² So Wolfgang Iser argues that in reading novels, illusion in effect means

our own projections, which are our share in gestalten which we produce and in which we are entangled. This entanglement, however, is never total, because the gestalten remain at least potentially under attack from those possibilities which they have excluded but dragged along in their wake. Indeed, the latent disturbance of the reader's involvement produces a specific form of tension that leaves him suspended, as it were, between total entanglement and latent detachment. The result is a dialectic—brought about by the reader himself—between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking.³

If in reading fiction our involvement is potentially under attack from excluded possibilities, so that there is a dialectic between

¹ This is reprinted in A. M. Nagler, *Sources of Theatrical History* (New York, 1952), reissued as *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (New York, 1959), p. 583.

² E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, pp. 188–90.

³ *The Act of Reading* (1976; translated into English 1978), p. 127. In relation to illusion in the novel, see also Robert Alter, *Partial Magic* (1975), and Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (1979).

'illusion-forming and illusion-breaking', then this is more vividly true of the theatre, where the audience is conscious of watching a performance by actors playing roles. The most naturalistic drama cannot do away with that dialectic, however much it may seek to minimize it; perhaps the most exciting aspect of Shakespeare's extraordinary achievement as a dramatist is that he realized the rich possibilities that lay in maximizing it, and playing upon his audience's consciousness of being in a theatre. If we are to appreciate fully the uses of stage-illusion in Shakespeare's plays, as distinct from scenic illusion, we would do well to bring to bear on them that exploration of the concept that began in the eighteenth-century, led to the fine perceptions of Coleridge, and has been revived in recent analysis of the visual arts and of the novel.