

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COURT AUDIENCE: Performers and Spectators

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‘At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance.’
Grotowski *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968)

How do we define a dramatic audience? Of course we can be clear enough in general that it is an ‘assembly of listeners’ (OED), a body of people who hear or watch a theatrical event. The presence of an audience has even been seen as that which defines drama, Stoppard’s ‘single assumption, which makes [the actor’s] existence viable — that someone is watching.’¹

But the sense of a clear division between performers and spectators that informs this notion of the audience inevitably restricts our understanding of the rôles theatre can occupy and the ways in which it can work. It is perhaps another example of how modern assumptions about theatre can tend to blur our understanding of early theatrical events.

Students of early drama have always known that the stage/audience relationships encountered in the medieval and Tudor periods do not always easily match the models offered by twentieth-century theatre. The social rôles occupied by early theatre were different, and reception models were more various. Mystery plays, for example, engage their audiences in devotional as well as theatrical experiences, audiences who were often free to come and go, to view plays a-chronologically, with hiatus and repetition; morality drama offers allegories which enfold and include the audience into their theatrical fictions; even the staging strategies of early drama often question any secure divide between spectator and performer.²

In our own times there has been increasing interest in a participatory model for drama which recognises an ‘interactive relationship between theatre production and reception’³ but even this does not fully accommodate the open, fluid, often active rôle assigned to those who attended medieval and Tudor dramatic events.

One area of early theatre practice where this can be seen particularly sharply is in the court entertainments of Henry VIII. These entertainments attracted little traditional dramatic study, since scripted drama generally played a relatively minor part in the shows, which consisted largely of dancing and spectacular display. But we have relatively rich records of production materials and constructions, and first-, second-, and third-hand

eyewitness accounts that can often reveal more about the circumstances of performance than do play scripts. Shows of this kind have attracted increasing attention in recent years, as studies of the political significance of magnificence in the early sixteenth century have demonstrated their rôle in the creating and asserting of power.⁴

But by focusing specifically on the audience and reception of these events, we can see that they are not just generalised demonstrations of wealth and glamour: they are given their meaning very largely from the particular occasions and the particular spectators for whom they were performed. Both the theatrical strategies and the political significance of these non-repeated and non-repeatable events rely heavily on the selected audience and the selected moment. They can also reveal well how easily sixteenth-century theatre could be used to create and enact, as well as to reflect upon policy.

The object of this paper is to consider the complex rôle(s) of the audience in one specific evening of entertainment: the shows mounted in Henry VIII's specially constructed 'disguising house' on 5 May 1527. The audience consisted of the King, ambassadors from the King of France with whom Henry was involved in peace and marriage negotiations, various other diplomats, and members of the court. The shows involved a Latin oration, choral singing, an allegorical debate between Love and Riches culminating in a combat at barriers, a spectacular pageant disguising with dances, and a series of masks. The elaborate building in which these took place and the events of the evening have been meticulously reconstructed by Sydney Anglo and others;⁵ my aim is to elucidate the very particular and intricate relationship with the original audience on which this entertainment, like others of its time, depended.

Looked at in its context it becomes clear that the different elements of this entertainment, conventional and 'off the peg' as they may seem, are both shaped by, and contribute to, a very specific political process in which many of the audience were directly involved. It is also clear that the mixed and fluid nature of the show relied on an equally mixed and fluid relationship with the spectators who gave it meaning, so that the demarcation between 'performer' and 'spectator' throughout the evening becomes thoroughly elusive or even non-existent.

The political context of the entertainment determined both the physical and mental make-up of the night's audience. In late February 1527 a party of ambassadors had arrived from Francis I to enter into negotiations with Wolsey and Henry VIII. Francis wished to secure Henry's alliance against

the Emperor Charles V who held his sons in captivity; Wolsey, who was now playing a key rôle in foreign policy, wished to encourage Henry towards the French alliance, as a means of enhancing England's rôle as central and powerful mediator in Europe.⁶ Henry, in spite of his long-held ambition for the throne of France, now had more personal reasons for hoping to secure French support against the Emperor for his planned divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The negotiations were difficult and laborious, but on 30 April 1527, in spite of strong popular antagonism to a French alliance, the French and English negotiators at Westminster signed a treaty of 'perpetual peace' between the two countries, who agreed to work together in all dealings with the Emperor. Depending on Charles V's responses to their overtures, Henry's daughter Princess Mary (then aged eleven) was to be married either to Francis himself or to his second son, Henry Duke of Orleans. On 5 May, after a High Mass, Henry himself signed the treaty; the rest of the day was celebrated with a spectacular tournament, while in the evening the company was feasted and entertained in the newly built banqueting house and the adjoined 'hous ... for revells of dysgysyng and meskelyng'.⁷

The entertainment, then, had a very specific and politically hugely significant event to address; it took place in a highly elaborate, specially constructed building which, as has been thoroughly elucidated by Anglo and Thurley, had itself an important rôle in establishing Henry's position in Europe.⁸

The actual festivities did not simply accompany or celebrate a political event but were recognised as politically significant in themselves. The Milanese ambassador, who wrote home explaining the various European implications of the treaty, carefully pointed out in letters to his lord and to colleagues that:

the festivities and triumphs and the sumptuous apparatus with which this most powerful king has entertained the French ambassadors has surpassed all the splendours of modern or ancient kings.⁹

More pointedly, the Spanish ambassador (who as representative of the Emperor was not invited) observed that the French diplomats were 'entertained, as if their Master himself had been here'.¹⁰ The entertainments themselves were a part of diplomatic currency and comment.

The audience for the evening consisted largely of those most involved in the treaty and its implications: the King and his consort; the French, Venetian, Milanese, and other ambassadors resident in London (but specifically not those of the Emperor) and many male and female members of the English court. The disguising house was carefully designed so that the audience were both surrounding the main action, and also forming a significantly ordered part of the spectacle itself. The Venetian ambassador Gasparo Spinelli was clearly much struck by both the personnel and the rôle of the audience which he described minutely in a detailed account of the evening. The hall, he reported, was surrounded on three sides by three tiers of seats. The King and Queen were set at the end under their cloth of estate:

Within the space for the spectators, on the right hand side, in the first tier, the ambassadors were placed, in the second the Princes [nobility], in the third those to whom admission was granted, *they being few* [emphasis mine]. On the opposite side, in the same order, were the ladies, whose various styles of beauty and apparel, enhanced by the brilliancy of the lights, caused me to think I was contemplating choirs of angels; they, in like manner, being placed one above the other ... All the spectators being thus methodically placed, without the least noise or confusion, and precisely as pre-arranged, the entertainment commenced. One thing above all others surprised me most, never having witnessed the like anywhere, it being impossible to represent or credit with how much order, regularity, and silence such entertainments proceed and are conducted in England.¹¹

The audience was dominated by the chief actors in the political negotiations and those closest to them: and Spinelli responds to them much as if they were themselves part of the spectacle they had come to witness.

The accounts of the running order of the evening suggest that the shows themselves might almost be seen as an extension and confirmation of the treaty negotiations, rather than a merely relaxing distraction for those who had completed them. The show opened with a lavishly dressed figure of Mercury, 'clothed in clothe of golde, and over that a mantell of blewe silke, full of eyes of golde, and over his hed a cap of gold with a garland of Laurell set with beries of fyne gold.' This messenger:

Made a solempne Oracion, in the Latin tongue, declaryng what Ioye was to the people of England and Fraunce, to here and knowe the great love, league and amitie, that was betwene the two kynges of the same Realmes gevynge greate praise to the kyng of England for graunting of peace, and also to the Frenche kyng for suyng for the same, and also to the Cardinal for beyng a mediator in the same.¹²

This description is drawn from Edward Hall, the sixteenth-century English commentator whose definite political bias in favour of Henry VIII often colours his descriptions. But, accurate or not, Hall's report suggests a lively awareness of the potential political nuance that could be carried by such apparently formal and conventional entertainment. In Hall's view the oration publicly asserted a popular support for the treaty that was well known to be lacking;¹³ the careful rhetorical balance of praise for the parties concerned then presents a view of the negotiations which, although ostensibly complimenting the French king, puts Henry in the controlling position, while endorsing, in this national and international forum, Wolsey's central rôle in foreign-policy making. The show performs the version of the truth that the court is to share, inviting or compelling public collusion from the French ambassadors in the audience.

Mercury's oration was followed by a sung and spoken allegorical debate. According to one eyewitness this traditional format was sharpened by Mercury's presenting a request from a baffled Jupiter to pass over to King Henry the judgement 'between Love and Riches concerning their relative authority' (Spinelli 59). An unremarkable compliment in such an entertainment, this nevertheless technically alters the theatrical dynamic by installing Henry within the theatrical event, no longer as separate onlooker.¹⁴ The debate is conducted first by groups of singers, and then by two figures representing Love and Riches who 'plaied a dialog' (Hall 723); undecided, each side summoned three armed knights who fought a combat at barriers in the centre of the hall. The Venetian ambassador's account appears to report that Love's knights were victors; but Hall tells us that the debate was ended by 'an olde man with a silver berd' who 'concluded that love & riches, both be necessarie for princes (that is to saie) by love to be obeied and served, and with riches to rewarde his lovers and frendes' (Hall 723). The substance of this debate, with its mixture of music, intellectual argument, and ceremonial conflict, sounds wholly conventional if not, as Anglo suggests, 'trite'.¹⁵ Yet although suitably uncontentious for a treaty of perpetual peace, the traditional arguments must have been lent

some particular edge by the occasion. The dialogue might initially appear to refer to the marriage planned for the Princess Mary — in which case the Venetian ambassador's memory of Love's triumph would be ceremonially appropriate if literally untrue. But Hall's report implies a more politically governmental interpretation, specifically addressing Henry's position in the festivity as authoritative but generous provider, but more broadly raising issues of state harmony and the proper rôle of monarchy that would underlie all the courtly and political relationships in which the members of the audience were involved. While we cannot recover any particular nuances the debate may have conveyed, the political situation and the courtly audience make it less easily 'conventional' than it may now appear.

The dialogue was succeeded by a spectacular pageant disguising: a wonderful mount appeared bearing eight lords in magnificent clothes who descended 'and toke ladyes, and daunced divers daunces' (Hall 723). The mount then opened to reveal a cave in which sat eight damsels: the Princess Mary, the Marchioness of Exeter, and six others in 'riche cloth of gold of tissue & Crimosin tinsel bendy & their heres wrapped in calles of golde with bonetes of Crimosin velvet on their heddes, set full of pearle and stone' (Hall 723). The appearance of the Princess, the chief prize of the treaty, was clearly deliberate and striking. Spinelli asserts that she 'produced such an effect on everybody that all other marvellous sights previously witnessed were forgotten' as the audience 'gave themselves up solely to contemplation of so fair an angel' (Spinelli 60). While obviously an extravagant compliment to the young princess and her father, this nonetheless underlines the fact that Mary was now the crucial performer. Not just her beauty and dancing skill, but her identity itself became an important part of the show for the rest of the onlookers. She was an embodiment of the terms of the treaty, displayed in performance. Mary's participation makes the dancing, too, not just an aesthetic spectacle but a public statement of her position: 'Dancing thus they presented themselves to the King, their dance being very delightful by reason of its variety, as they formed certain groups and figures most pleasing to the sight' (Spinelli 60). After the signing of the treaty five days earlier the chief French ambassador had been taken to meet the Princess and specifically permitted to dance with her:¹⁶ dance was clearly the accepted form in which the intimate implications of political marriage alliance might be tested and performed.

The eight ladies' subsequent dance with the lords was interrupted by the sudden entry of a 'mask': six male courtiers richly disguised and

masked, 'there garmentes were long after the fashion of Iseland, and these persones had visers with sylver berdes, so that they were not knowne: these Maskers tooke Ladies and daunsed lustely about the place' (Hall 724). This 'mask' format had by 1527 become highly popular in Henry's courtly entertainments.¹⁷

A team of courtiers, magnificently dressed in richly extravagant and matching costumes, masked 'so that they were not knowne' either to the audience or from one another, would 'sodenly' enter. At first the spectacular visitors would simply dance and leave again: an irruption of wonder, strange and exotic and yet, unlike professional performers, beneath the finery both known and equal in status to those they visited. Later in Henry's reign the maskers would, as here, not dance only among themselves but choose partners from among the 'spectators', the masked disguiser entering a relationship both of performance and intimacy with the unmasked 'spectator'. It was a performance mode that both dissolved and yet enhanced the separation between 'performer' and 'onlooker', joining the two together and yet dependent upon a playfully acute awareness of the distinction.

What then followed was another popular but even further sophisticated version of the mask:

Then sodenly the kyng and the viscount of Torayne were conveighed out of the place into a chambre thereby, & there quicklie they .ii. and six other in maskyng apparel of cloth of gold and purple tinsell sattin, greate, long and large ... there faces were visard with beardes of gold: then with minstrelsie these .viii. noble personages entred and daunsed long with the ladies, and when they had daunsed there fill, then the quene plucked of the kynge's visar, & so did the Ladies the visars of the other Lordes, and then all were knownen. (Hall 724)

Masking was an entertainment that seems always to have been performed not by entertainers but by the court to and for itself; but from very early on in his reign Henry had shown a lively enthusiasm for personal participation, delighting to show off his skill in dancing and glamorous grace. Initially it might seem that the purpose of the disguising is to make the King anonymous, first by putting on a mask, and then by appearing as one of an identically dressed team. On this particular occasion special efforts were made to uphold this fiction: Spinelli reports that the maskers were 'all wearing black velvet slippers on their feet, this being done, lest the

King should be distinguished from the others, as from the hurt which he received lately on his left foot when playing at tennis he wears a black velvet slipper' (Spinelli 61). Even in disability the King is not to be singled out. In theory this produces a delightful social levelling as the King makes himself neither more nor less important than his companions.

But the disguise in such courtly entertainment is clearly double-edged. If Henry is masked it is in order to demonstrate the real grace and splendour of his dancing performance, to prove his own capacity. For the performance to have its intended effect he actually needs to be recognised, concealing his identity only in order to confirm it. Castiglione, discussing exactly this kind of courtly masked play, explains:

In this point the prince, stripping himself of the person of a prince, and mingling himselfe equallye with his underlinges (*yet in such wise that he maye bee knownen*) [emphasis mine] with refusynge superioritye, lette him chalenge a greater superioritie, namelye, to passe other men, not in authoritie, but in vertue, and declare that his prowes is not encreased by his being a prince.¹⁸

If the King's performance is to prove his natural superiority, then the person of the king must at some point, in some way, be seen through the mask: the accounts by both Hall and Spinelli show the vital significance for the entertainment of knowing that it is the king who performs. This seems to lie behind what had become the standard conclusion to such masks, that at the end 'the quene plucked of the kynges vysar ... and then all were knownen'. The pleasurable revealed identity of the king confirms his regal status and becomes a sign of the king's gracious generosity to his courtiers.

Of course the extra political significance of this particular mask is that the King is partnered in matching disguise by the French ambassador. The implication is that, while they are dancing, the two cannot be distinguished.¹⁹ The king confers honour on the Viscount of Turenne, the representative of Francis I, by as it were sharing his identity with him in this spectacular performance. In fact the performance itself turned literally into a display of largesse on Henry's part, for 'then the kyng gave to the viscount of Torayn, the maskynge apparel that the kyng hym self ware & also the apparel that the viscount hym self masked in, which were very riche, for the whiche he thanked hym' (Hall 724). This kind of largesse was one Henry often used. There is a striking example in the 1511 celebrations for the birth of his son where 'the kyng was dysguysyd [In] a Garment of Sarcenet powderid wt Rosys and othir devysis of massy goold'

which he decided to donate to the ambassadors' servants. Turning even this generous gesture into a participatory performance Henry arranged for the recipients to be placed 'at a certain place where he shuld passe by, when the dysguysyng was endyd, and that they shuld not ffere to pull & tere the said Garment ffrom his body'.²⁰ Henry is clearly deliberately celebrating himself in his disguise as a reified emblem of magnificent liberality, giving away parts of his performing self as gifts and rewards.

While Hall leaves his account of the entertainment at this point, Spinelli recalls a final moment which confirms both the political significance to its audience, and also the intricate interplay of spectator and participant. When the King and his disguisers unmasked:

the Princess with her companions again descended, and came to the King, who in the presence of the French ambassadors took off her cap, and the net being displaced, a profusion of silver tresses as beautiful as ever seen on human head fell over her shoulders, forming a most agreeable sight. The aforesaid ambassadors then took leave of her.

(Spinelli 61)

In this report the Princess forms the political, sexual, and theatrical conclusion to the performance. As the gift that cements the treaty, the concrete manifestation of the binding of the two countries in amity, she is publicly presented to the audience and particularly to the French ambassadors. Her father's dramatic releasing of her striking silvery hair from the elaborate disguising headdress provides a vividly theatrical moment of revelation. It is not wholly clear whether the loose virginal locks were a demonstration of Mary's marriageable status; or whether on the contrary they confirmed the reported opinion of the Viscount of Turenne that although very beautiful (*molto bella*) she was 'so thin, spare and small (*cosi magreta et scarma et picola*) as to render it impossible for her to be married for the next three years'.²¹ Since the English position during much of the negotiation, despite pressure from the French, had been that the Princess was as yet too young for marriage, it may well be that the apparently otherworldly appearance was seen as deliberately emphasising her delicate youth.²² Certainly, since Mary's age was known by all involved to be an issue in the negotiations, the gesture would have invited conscious interpretation by the courtly audience and the ambassadors. After this apparently climactic moment the party then all returned to the banqueting house to round off the night's festivities as dawn approached.

We are fortunate in having such detailed evidence of this entertainment, since it reveals not only a good deal about what actually happened but also important aspects of contemporary reaction to and understanding of these shows and their significance. The fact that both ambassadors and historians felt the performance worthy of such detailed record suggests that it was not considered as mere pastime. The amount spent on the banqueting and disguising houses, their decoration and the evening's shows was vast.²³ It reflected not only the importance of the treaty and Henry's wish to demonstrate his own international magnificence, but the weight attached to the festivities themselves. They were not just a relaxing interlude, not even simply a celebratory comment on the completed treaty, but an important diplomatic event which in themselves contributed to the relationship between the two countries and how it was perceived by others.

The seemingly conventional spectacle was carefully crafted towards specific political meaning, and Henry had determined performance rôles for himself, the ambassadors, and his daughter, which enhanced and extended the provisions of the treaty. These depended upon a performance situation in which performers and spectators were often interchangeable. The King may be the gracious onlooker to whom performance is presented, yet he is also the agent and arbiter of the action, a disguised yet starring actor, a presenter of others' performances. The ambassadors must, as audience, bear witness to the version of political events that the shows perform; but their leader also performs for others, with Henry, the league and amity between their countries and the gracious relationship of patronage that the English King extends to them. The Princess, both watching and participating, performs for the French court and her own the political rôle she has been allotted.

This complex theatrical situation depends upon a very particular and enclosed audience. It could not be engendered by professionals since much of the significance of the entertainment depends upon the 'offstage' identities of the performers. The political and personal relationships between the members of the carefully chosen audience are what constitute and give meaning to the entertainments they watch. Just as the shows themselves are political acts, as well as comments upon political acts, so the audience are performers as well as onlookers of the shows they see. The model of the masked disguising, in which unknown but known actors who are members of the audience dance with onlookers who become actors

sums up the fluid interaction of 'performer' and 'spectator' in this subtly manipulated theatrical event.

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NOTES

1. Tom Stoppard *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Faber, London, 1968) Act 2, page 45.
2. See *The Castle of Perseverance* edited Mark Eccles EETS 262 (1969) especially the staging plan; 'sittet rume and wel atwo / That men moȝt among eu go', 'The Cambridge Prologue' lines 3–4, in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* edited Norman Davis EETS SS 1 (1970) 115. For some discussion of stage/audience geography see Meg Twycross 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited R. Beadle (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 37–84.
3. Susan Bennet *Theatre Audiences: a Theory of Production and Reception*, (Routledge, London, 2nd edition 1997).
4. Sydney Anglo *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969); Gordon Kipling *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance* (Leiden University Press, The Hague, 1977); Roy Strong *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Boydell, Woodbridge, 1986); John Scattergood 'Skelton's Magnyfycence and the Tudor Royal Household' *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993) 21–48.
5. Sydney Anglo 'La Salle de banquet et le théâtre construits à Greenwich pour les fêtes franco-anglaises de 1527' in *Le Lieu théâtral à la Renaissance* edited J. Jacquot (CNRS, Paris, 1964) 273–88; also Anglo *Spectacle* 211–224; Simon Thurley 'The Banqueting and Disguising Houses of 1527' in *Henry VIII: a European Court in England* edited David Starkey (Collins and Brown, London, 1991) 64–69.
6. See Charles Giry-Deloison 'A Diplomatic Revolution? Anglo-French Relations and the Treaties of 1527' in *Henry VIII: a European Court in England* 77–83. See also entries for 1527 in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII* edited J.S. Brewer (PRO, London, 1872) 14:2.
7. PRO, S.P. 2/Fol. C, folio 323 (quoted Anglo *Spectacle* 215).
8. Although the immediate audience for the festivities was strictly limited, Henry seems to have recognised the potential to enhance his prestige more widely. He apparently commanded that the lavish temporary structures 'with Cupbordes, hangynges, and all other things ... should stand still, for thre or foure daies, that al honest persones might see and beholde the houses & riches, and thereth came a great nombre of people, to see and behold ye riches & costely devices':

Edward Hall *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* edited Henry Ellis (London, 1809) 724.

9. *Calendar of State Papers: Milan* edited Allen B. Hinds (HMSO, London, 1912) I 512.
10. *Calendar of State Papers: Spanish* edited Pascual de Gayangos (HMSO, London, 1877) 3:2 182.
11. *Calendar of State Papers: Venetian* edited Rawdon Brown (HMSO, London, 1871) 4 59. Hereafter 'Spinelli'.
12. Hall *Union* 723.
13. On popular dissent see e.g. Hall *Union* 721; or the remarks of the Spanish ambassador, *Calendar of State Papers: Spanish* 178.
14. Compare the much more politically significant use of this theatrical motif in the interlude presented before James V of Scotland in Linlithgow, 1540. See Greg Walker 'Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaits* and the Politics of the Reformation' *Scottish Literary Journal* 16: 2 (Nov 1989) 5-17.
15. Anglo *Spectacle* 221.
16. *Calendar of State Papers: Venetian* 57-8.
17. Sydney Anglo 'The Evolution of the Early Tudor Disguising, Pageant and Mask' *Renaissance Drama* NS 1 (1968) 3-44. See also Meg Twycross '“My Visor is Philemon’s Roof” in *Le Théâtre et la Cité dans l’Europe médiévale* edited Jean-Claude Aubailly and Edelgard E. DuBruck (*Fifteenth-Century Studies* 13: Hans-Dieter Heinz, Akademischer Verlag Stuttgart, 1988) 335-346.
18. Baldassare Castiglione *The Book of the Courtier* translated Thomas Hoby (1561), (David Nutt, London, 1900) 2 117: quoted Twycross 'Philemon’s Roof' 343-4.
19. There is a record of a disguising visit of Henry VIII to Wolsey where the identity of the King becomes the subject of a deliberately dramatised guessing game in which Wolsey is, apparently, unable to distinguish Henry from his masking companion Edward Neville: George Cavendish *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* edited R.S. Sylvester EETS OS 243 (1959). See Twycross 'Philemon’s Roof' 341-3.
20. *The Great Chronicle of London* (Guildhall Library MS 3313) edited A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (London, 1938) 374.
21. *Calendar of State Papers: Venetian* 58.
22. See Brewer *Letters and Papers: Henry VIII* 1333.
23. Anglo *Spectacle* 211-219.