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Play-Area as Mediation in the Digby Mary Magdalene

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OVER other possible mediating functions in a play, I have decided to privilege the attempt to communicate to the audience the play's substance, significations and value, i.e., its *aesthetic* impact in performance. To that end I have selected one of the Saints' Plays, which by nature are essentially intent on communication, and will be studying the play-area, a central element in the making of the spectacle.¹

Before I proceed I must make a brief point about my use of the term "aesthetic", too often vague or semantically empty. The Greek verb "aisthanomai" seems to have had two complementary meanings closely rolled into one: a) "to feel through the senses"; b) "to conceive, to understand" (Bailly, pp. 78-79). The semantic duplicity not only refers to the constant strategy of dramatists bent on pleasing and teaching at once, even when the play is not deliberately didactic, but also relates to the experience of audiences constantly exposed to the double appeal of distanced reflection and emotional investment. Ross Chambers, substantially opposing Artaud's and Brecht's views of reception, calls that emotional implication "une contagion" (p. 403).

1. See Jeffrey, p. 82.

My second introductory point is about the basic features of the play-area in pre-modern and modern Western theatre. I shall emphasize three which serve my present purpose.

The first one is about the paradoxical nature of the play-area, since its spatial closeness to and familiarity with daily life is contradicted by an utter alterity which severs it at once from the world of ordinary experience. The cultures secreting theatre nevertheless manage to meet the antinomic presupposition. In his study, *L'espace théâtral médiéval*, Elie Konigson analyses as follows this mixture of contraries in the medieval tradition: “Les théâtres jusqu’au xvi^e siècle ne sont pas *théâtraux* ; ils sont *urbains et théologiques*”. Later, emphasizing their diverse functions (marketplace, traffic way, space devoted to civic, religious or festive ritual and ceremony), he remarks that “à l’occasion de la représentation qui s’y donne l’une de ces fonctions *surgit au premier rang sans toutefois occulter totalement les autres*” (pp. 78-79; my emphasis). Barely acknowledging the medieval tradition, however, one of the Prague School theorists more fundamentally relates the play-area’s composite image and flexibility to the general semantic transformability of the theatrical sign, or sign of a sign.²

This self-contradictory nature, born of the play-area’s intermediate position between two incompatible worlds, accounts for a second basic trait which is capital here: the play-area’s border-line is much more than a “limen”; it is a “limes”, or interval of functional significance. The limes has little to do with conventional taboos of trespass, but much more with the problematics of passing or transferring from one moment, or state, of life to the next. Arnold Van Gennep’s typology of rites describing such transfers and the ternary scheme attached to them is well known. More often questioned is the reading of the scheme put forth by Victor Turner in his several essays on the nature of play. In such a transition he sees a complex moment of creation, an opening towards newness and change, and, in his own words, an anti-structure, in which lies the essence of play (pp. 56-78). Passing over the complex history of the opposition to Turner’s concept,³ I focus instead on another contemporary view of play as linked to the notion of growth and passage, which is derived from the study of cognitive and affective development in the young child. Donald Woods Winnicott,

2. See Fischer-Licghte, pp. 6-10, and Honzl.

3. For a review of the many objections to Turner’s views (centering on the notion and value of play and its relation to reality and nature), see Spariosu, pp. dr-ds.

a British psychoanalyst, emphasizes the vital role played by the appropriation, under the aegis of the mother, of an outer space and of objects which he calls “transitional” during the progressive conquest by the baby of his/her identity and transition from non-self to self (pp. 9-15). This process, which seems anthropologically rooted, since it is devoid of links with cultural factors, might easily fit Turner’s view of the “liminal”. It also sits easily, as Winnicott recalls, with man’s common experience in approaching and appropriating an aesthetic object (be it painting, music, discourse, film or theatrical spectacle). The artefact, whose unquestionable quality and profound function, as I view it, is to help define or re-define one’s relation to the outer world, is another sort of transitional object. As such, it offers a mediating surface (or interface), such as commentary, overture or coda, prologue or epilogue, or picture frame—in short, anything that, in the posture of “enunciation” implied by the contact, isolates the enunciated object from its surroundings, enhancing its artificiality or its status as otherness for our appropriation. Lisa Block de Béhar, in an approach of her own, underlines the importance of such a mediator, which she calls “un ‘cordon’ esthétique” (p. d3) of anaphorical function. It is clear to us all that the theatrical artefact, essentially societal, uses different resources to discharge that function. Quite a few papers in this collection show how this is done through characters of various standing. As implied in my introduction, I would myself argue that plays resort as well to other dramaturgical instruments—narrative, discursive, visual or spatial. More particularly, I hope to show that in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the play-area is an element eminently serving that function.

Before proceeding with the play, however, just a few words more about the third feature of the play-area already hinted at: its inherent plasticity. Élie Konigson devotes an article to what he calls “les objets de représentation au théâtre” (pp. 194-95). These, which are neither set nor properties, he sees as constitutive of the play-area proper. Three of them are remarkable, in his view:

- 1) the play-area’s own shape, and its relation to the surroundings;
- 2) the “sedes”, or place of power, either restricted to the seat or throne, or extending to the whole locus;
- 3) the “opening”, or space affording access and exit to and from the play-area.

I would myself add two more: the “central spot” and the “zone of approach or exchange”, which on today’s stage is the borderline between play and audience. It is to be noted that quite a few authors concerned with the mechanisms of theat-

ricality have found the study of the central and liminal portions of the dramatic text and play-area to be of interest.

The Play Area as Mediation in the Digby Mary Magdalene

A long-time interest in the plays of the Digby MS and the staging techniques which are presumed or known to have been favoured for them is one reason behind my choice. Another is the memories I retain of Luca Ronconi's adaptation of *Orlando Furioso* seen in production in 1969 in Les Halles de Paris, Pavillon Baltard. Such memories of what was afterwards termed "une dramaturgie du lieu éclaté"⁴ were powerfully revived by Bob Godfrey's account of three of his own recent productions, in particular the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, staged in the "Place and Scaffold" form. The editors of the text I am using here share the conservative view that the play, possibly travelling from place to place, may have been staged in variants of this form, with the "platea" possibly restricted to a section of the central round, while David Bevington, in his own edition of the play, conjectures that the staging may repeat that of *The Castle of Perseverance*.⁵ While Jeffrey similarly admits such a possibility (p. 84, n. 16), Coldeway in his doctoral dissertation adds documentary support to the hypothesis (pp. 200-14).

Yet, in re-reading the play, I became convinced of the benefits, in terms of aesthetic effect, of the changes Godfrey had effectively introduced, and concentrated on his staging, as documented in the figure to the present article. My remarks are organised under two headings: 1) the layout and salient features of the play-area; 2) bits of evidence plus a set of assumptions about its possible effects on an audience.

Layout and Salient Features: Structural Aspects

I totally share the instinctive feeling voiced by Bevington, among others, that its sheer size and adaptability make such a staging eminently congruent with the story.⁶ The play, of epic dimensions, is a somewhat baffling, but romantic

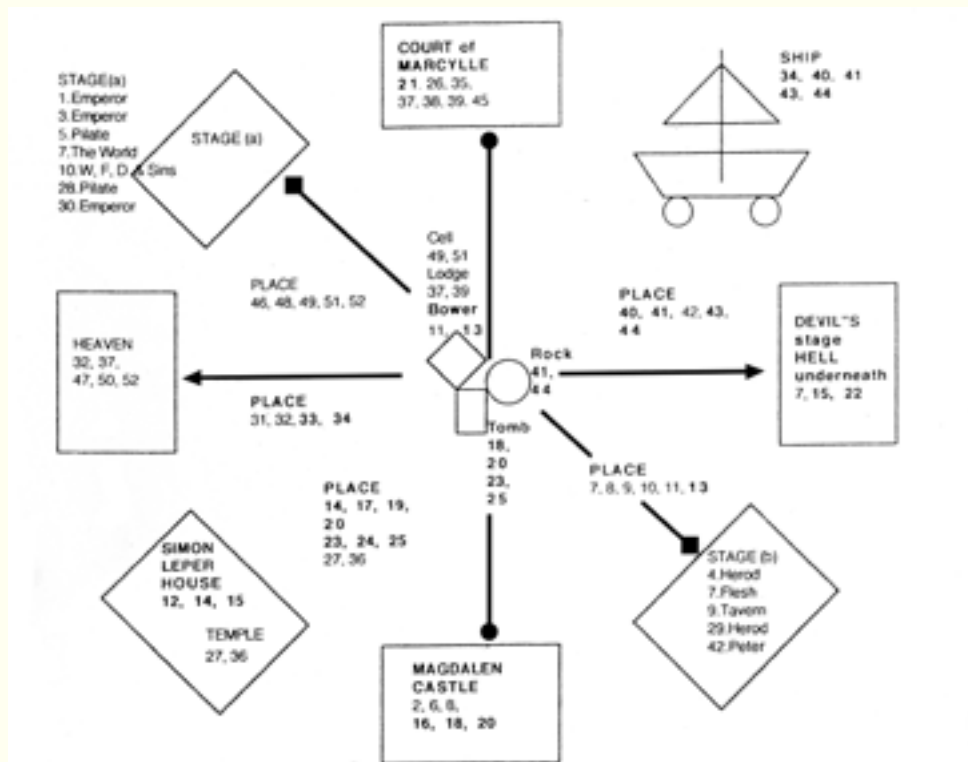
4. The term, used at the time of the production, is retained by Pauly, p. 220.

5. My quotations are from the edition of Baker, Murphy and Hall. For another edition, see Bevington.

6. I am unclear about the exact size of the place used by Bob Godfrey, but Southern's estimate is that the one used for staging *The Castle* must have been 125 feet across. And Eccles, p. xxiii, reminds us that the Cornish rounds did vary from 40 to 126 feet in diameter.

and alluring, complex of three narrative elements: the life of a saint of legendary status (a probable conflation of several evangelical characters and various material) relating her geographical and spiritual meanderings; the divine mission she is entrusted with (converting the King of Marcyllle); the saint's contacts with Jesus, before and after His Resurrection—contacts culminating in an Assumption which replicates that of the Mother of Christ. Without postulating any illusionary quality in the expanse of the area, its ability to accommodate the many places in which the action is located certainly is a spectacular asset for audiences who might have heard of such distant places in sundry narratives, whether sermons, itineraries, relations of journeys to the Middle East, tales of romance or even rumours of the new sea voyages. Any mimetic suggestion in the “platea” of such places of fiction and wonder would effectively activate imaginations fed on so many by-products of contemporary history, romance and myth.

A second factor prominent here (as in *The Castle of Perseverance*) in securing spectacular efficiency is the inscription in specific habitats of diegetic elements of prime semantic value. In the Digby version of the story, these are six in number: 1) Paradise; 2) the seat of the Devil and Hell-mouth; 3) the Castle of Mary Magdalene in Bethany; 4) the Palace of the King of Marcyllle; 5) and 6) the two seats of terrestrial power: Rome (Tiberius) and Jerusalem (Herod). Clifford Davidson and Jean-Paul Debax have each remarked, practically at the same time, on the importance of the East-West axis in the symbolic orientation of medieval drama, insisting on the double tradition, Christian and classical, in which it is rooted. Reading the play (and, obviously, producing it too) leads to more specific remarks about the practical, symbolic and mythical significances with which the *Mary Magdalene* play-area is fraught. One easily notices on the ground-plan of Godfrey's staging that the six primordial seats are distributed around the *platea* in three axial oppositions: 1 <—> 2 (in red), 3 <—> 4 (in blue) and 5 <—> 6 (in green). Though differently oriented on the diagram, the three pairs of stages determine in real space the same geographical East-West direction. All three define one same territory across the Mediterranean, corresponding to the *oikoumene*, the space at once of the Christian myth and the Roman possessions in the Near East. But whereas the first axis (1 <—> 2) relates that space to the cosmic, the spiritual and the mythical, the second and the third (3 <—> 4) and (5 <—> 6) link it to the purely geographic aspects of Mary Magdalene's life, and to the world of mundane politics. Thus, the three pairs of stages spatially construct the triple dimension of



the play and its various significations, thereby giving visual prominence to the six springs of energy inspiring the whole drama. In an article entitled, “From Jerusalem to Damascus: Bi-local Dramatic Structure in Medieval Shakespearean Conversion Plays”, John W. Velz underlines the bi-local dramatic structure of some plays of conversion, ranging from the Digby plays to Shakespearean romances. I would rather suggest that the circular alignment of six fundamental scaffolds along three symbolic axes, as proposed by Godfrey’s staging, is a forcefully visual rendition of the complex make-up of the *Mary Magdalene* play. The primal forces at work on those stages overlook the *platea*, just as their characters overpower the action. Besides the fact that the six scaffolds (some of them standing very high, according to the stage directions) ensure visibility and audibility by most if not all in the audience, the peripheral forces they contain visually shut up the space of the fictional world. Lastly, this distribution achieves another major structuring effect at the notional and symbolic level: it opposes to the *platea*, mainly devoted to the representation of existential or historical events, a liminal belt of moral or spiritual forces spelling out the structure of the Christian myth. I am consciously accommodating here

Robert Weimann's remarks about "locus" and "platea" in the mystery Plays. So, while the three Mary Magdalene narratives based on heterogeneous material all take place in the *platea*, the mythical "limes" surrounding it imprints layers of different temporalities. These are generated by discrete sequences borrowed from the Christian myth and interfering with the original narrative at the risk of subverting and even disrupting it. It is best to take a closer look at such a transgressive structure from its first appearance in the play.

The Play Area as a Place of Spatio-temporal Liminality

The first occasion for such transgression is when Mary, who has duly repented her juvenile errors and just been freed by Christ from her seven demons, discovers, while back home, that her brother Lazarus is about to die (l. 776). She goes to Christ for help, then prepares for the funeral of Lazarus, who has died in the meantime (ll. 774-818) and will be buried in the *platea* (ll. 819-68). Jesus arrives with his disciples, willing to make a public report of "his Passion to come" and show "a figure" of his future Resurrection by bringing back Lazarus to life (ll. 846-68). After Christ has recalled the inanimate body to life (ll. 869-925), the tale of Mary's earthly life is briefly resumed and the action transported to the Palace of the King of Marcyllle, whom Mary plans to convert (ll. 926-62). But this sequence is immediately interrupted when a devil, "in orebyll aray", as the text says, irrupts into the *platea* and relates the fight that has taken place with the Resurrected One, who, breaking into Hell, threatens to have his own justice prevail there too (ll. 963-92). At this point, the poor devil rushes back into the Hell-mouth, but his narrative inset, already twice removed from the main fiction's line, generates a new insert in its wake: the three Marias of the evangelical tradition (one of the three being our half-legendary, half-mythical Mary Magdalene, now jumping over the fictional "limes"), sail into the *platea* to narrate the Passion of Christ and, without a break, to undertake a Visit to the Tomb inspired by the *Quem Quaeritis* plays of old (ll. 993-1132). On top of this, Mary Magdalene, continuing to play truant in mythical time, sees Christ appear to her in the guise of a gardener (the *Noli Me Tangere* episode) (ll. 1133-48). Only at this point will she return without more ado to her "historical-legendary" status as the Mary of the Digby play, while the main action is resumed on the stage of Marcyllle (l. 1142)

This string of insets, branching off from the main line of narrative as offshoots of subsidiary or infra-subsidary status, technically belong to the category

of rhetorical (or narratological) devices which Gérard Genette, after Dumarçais and Fontanier, has called “narrative metalepsis.”⁷ There is no need to comment here on the categories (diegetic, subdiegetic, metadiagetic, etc.) thus created, but the possible reasons and consequences of such narrative bifurcations are relevant to the thread of my argument. It may be that the thematic and generic kinship of Christ’s and Mary’s lives encourages permutations at particular moments, but it is also probable that the layout and functional uses of the play-area further help to trigger them off. It is more important still to remark that such commutations from fiction to fiction create for an audience simultaneous time-systems and concurrent levels of reality: that of the Mary Magdalene legend and that of the Christian myth, freely competing in the *platea*. The audience are in fact submitted to as many as three heterogeneous systems of reference, since the Mary Magdalene world of legend and the a-historical transcendent world of the Christian myth are both actualised in the theatrical re-enactment or *representation*, with a dual Mary-character effortlessly floating in between the two, and inhabiting both. What should be highlighted here is the *enunciation*-posture created by the presentation of the spectacle. It imparts bodily presence (and therefore factual relevance) to the aforesaid mix. The spectacle is actually seen, experienced, and felt to affect the existence and belief of those immediately present around it. Godfrey, quoting the reactions of his audiences, repeatedly implied that it is hard to discount such impressions on purely notional grounds. I would just add that such a concatenation of levels of reality may well approach what Turner calls the “liminality” of play, and also what Winnicott defines as his own main issue of study: “l’aire intermédiaire qui se situe entre le *subjectif* et ce qui est *objectivement perçu*” (p. 10).

Hereafter, since I never saw the production I foolhardily propose to comment on, I shall limit myself to exploiting some bits of textual evidence and, beyond these, what may be presumed of the audience’s response in terms of distanced or empathetic reception.

The Spectacular Efficiency of the “Place and Scaffold” Staging

I shall build here on Godfrey’s remarks and, to some extent, in spite of obvious differences, on my own memories from Ronconi’s “mise en espace de l’action dramatique”. I fancy that the action of the Digby play in that staging would

7. See Genette, *Figures III*, pp. 225–78 (“Discours du récit”, Pt. 5, [“Voix”]), and, for an extended analysis, *La métalepse*, *passim*.

hardly compare with the hectic excitement created in the vast half-lit expanse of Les Halles by Ronconi's six or seven chariots transporting this or that protagonist and madly rushing through the crowding audience, at times avoiding them by inches only. Yet, if I read Godfrey correctly, I presume that, though not submitted to such hazards, the audiences at his production were similarly embarked on the demanding task of constant physical adjustment to the ceaseless shifts of fictional episode and place, and finding their way around if only to keep pace with the narrative. This, among other factors, surely entailed many changes in their position in the *platea* and in their physical distance from the actors. Though the moot question of "aesthetic distance" has never been satisfactorily clarified, the theatre-goer will probably agree that a relation exists between physical distance (or other proxemic elements) and the "aesthetic impact" of play. Surely, quite a few spectators would also admit that accident and unpredictability are additional parameters enhancing the sense of individual live experience.

Apart from that, however, the nature of the events considered certainly is a decisive factor. There must be, I imagine, few elements in the eventful narrative of Mary Magdalene that would not create emotional or intellectual surprise or interest. These include even ordinary actions, like the scene of seduction and surrender between the chaste young lady and the rogue Curiosity in the tavern, or Mary's decision to board an unknown ship for an adventurous passage, or again her visit to the King of Marcyllle by night as an envoy from King Jesus to negotiate Marcyllle's conversion. Simple as they seem, these acts, into which she boldly launches, might well produce in viewers at close range an emotional implication, possibly enhanced by the proximity of actress and acting.

For the very nature of some of the acts performed in the immediate and live presence of spectators entails much more than mere discomfort born of physical proximity. Meeting Jesus and his disciples in Simon's house, watching Mary yield to the unmentioned but probable magnetism of the young Lord, stooping in front of him, loosening her hair and wiping his feet, as well as the rest of the evangelical sequences, such as the *Noli Me Tangere* scene, must be impressive sights to consider from close-by, even if one never forgets that this is "representation". Later on, the same audience, more or less free to roam about, are invited to attend, and possibly join in, the moaning over the recent death of Lazarus and the collective preparation for a funeral in Mediterranean fashion, complete with bewailing by family and neighbours, and vociferous procession to the tomb. Text and stage directions here may be read as possibly implying physical participation of spectators joining in the action of the attendants:

Primus Miles. Gracyows ladyys of grett honour,
Thys pepull is com here in yower syth,
Wepyng and weylyng wyth gret dolour,
Becavse of my lordys dethe. (ll. 838-41)

And the stage direction reads: “Here þe on knyght make redy þe ston, and other bryng þe wepars, arrayd in blak” (l. 841).

Immediately afterwards, the knight, in the role of funeral organiser, as the closest follower of the departed lord, orders the people about him:

Now, good fryndys sat here be,
Take vp thys body wyth good wyll,
And lay it in hys sepoltur, semely to se;
Good Lord hym save from alle manyr ille! (ll. 842-45)

The stage direction confirms: “*Lay him in. Here, al þe pepyll resort to þe castell, þus seyying Jhesus [in the place] . . .*” (l. 845).

Again, when, moments later, Jesus arrives and inconceivably recalls the energy of life into the corpse, though this is witnessed in close relation to a figural recall of the *Quem Quaeritis* episode enacted earlier, the symbolical significance of the miracle would hardly wipe out the emotional impact of the sequence. The stage direction, here again, hints at the possible interaction of attendants and audience: “Here all þe pepyll and þe Jewys, Mari and Martha, wyth on woys sey þes wordys: ‘We beleve in yow, Savyowr, Jhesus, Jhesus, Jhesus!’” (l. 920).

As Godfrey has pointed out, some moments of immediate live experience of what may afterwards be sorted out as illusionary rendition left such a strong impression on audience’s minds that they would actually encroach on the “limes” and join in the action (push the “ship” along, for instance [Godfrey, pp. 179-80]), illustrating what Chambers calls “contagion”. One might account for the corporeal quality making such attendance experientially far weightier than ordinary theatrical reception by suggesting that the events represented are poised between two potent appeals. The funeral ceremony must for many be a pressing temptation to partake with the crowd in anthropological rites which, tracing their origins to the origins of human culture, grasp imaginations and minds.⁸ Contrarily, for some in the audience at least, the mystic and ritual re-

8. In Chapter Four (“La voix du chagrin”) of a series of essays entitled *Les morts*, Robert Harrison, addressing issues related to the force of cultural links between the living and the dead, power-

enacting of the three women's Visit to the Tomb demands instant adjustment to another type of acceptance or refusal to participate that is difficult, if not disturbing, even for non-believers. At any rate, the close collocation (here, as at other moments when Mary's existence coalesces with figural equivalents in the dogma) seems meant to create in the audience an intermediary category of experience which is of a piece with the spectator's uncertainty as to his position in the manifold time-space of the play.

In a final set of remarks, I would like to point out that such moments of emotional/intellectual participation in the spectacular action are no accidental occurrences merely due to the joint presence of a particular play-area and bouts of narrative metalepsis, but the result of a conscious strategy of involvement on the part of the dramatist, pervading the whole play-text and its staging. In providing a few instances of that determination to keep audiences off their guard, caught between the antagonistic stances of investment and detachment, I shall briefly return first to the motifs of nourishment and dress in which Theresa Coletti, in a thoroughly convincing article, sees potent elements of the "structural design of the play" (p. 314). It is indisputable that the accumulation of these motifs throughout the linguistic and syntagmatic system of the play-text builds up a metaphor of intellectual force for the legendary sinner's conversion to hero and saint, especially for audiences extremely sensitive to the availability or want of those two commodities. But it surely makes that argument all the more convincing to remark the theatrical ostension of the two themes in spectacular scenes carefully set at commanding articulations of the long eventful story.

Thus, the isotopy of the festive repast shared in the harmony of a close friendly group (to take that theme only) certainly is a terrestrial figure of the fundamental symbol of Christian dogma, the rite of Communion. But it also proposes, three times over, that the audience (at least vicariously) participate in the royal family's actual festivity up there in their mansion. In the initial scene of the play, when Tiberius on his stage makes the usual tyrant's boast demanding instant silence and compliance, a cry of submission instantly comes from

fully underlines the functions of the funeral *planctus* and, borrowing from Ernesto De Martino's *Morte e piante rituale* (1975), based on material from Southern Italy, highlights its integrative and unifying effects upon the sympathetic crowd of attendants around those who, known as "les perdants" ("the bereaved"), were closely assisted by the neighbourhood in pre-1960 Southern France.

his soldiers and retinue: “*Here answeryt all þe pepul at onys: ‘Ȝa, my lord, Ȝa!’*” (l. 44). Thereupon, the Emperor asks for a stately refreshment of wine and cakes to be brought, inviting *all* to share in the convivial exchange (l. 47). Though the wording does not explicitly include the audience, some of them may feel tempted to join in the unanimous cry and the feast-attending community. The very next scene, staged on Cyrus and Mary’s family castle in Bethany, has King Cyrus announce that he gives his possessions to his children and then similarly feast with his family in royal fashion and in full view of the crowd (ll. 49-113). Though the “wyn and spycys” served are explicitly meant for “þes ladys of jentylnes” (ll. 113-14), the direct addresses of the King confiding his plans and feelings to his subjects, as well as the intimacy of the responses of the three children to their father, surely strengthen here again a sense of togetherness in the audience. A third repetition of the scene takes place much later, when Marcyllle, the third royal in the story, after boasting of his power and his wife’s beauty, calls his knights to a repast of wine and spices, similarly staged on one of the scaffolds at the periphery of the play-area (ll. 926-62). My assumption is that, in the “aesthetically oriented transaction of the play performance”, the motif, basically of semantic value, additionally functions in optical and acoustical terms as an *icon* of *paradigmatic* force, sending from the outset to the audience the signal of (get)togetherness that they must welcome as recognition of their attendance.

Lastly, one could argue the contrary case that the parody of a mass said at Marcyllle’s by the heathen priest and his boy, asking the audience to go down on their knees and, minutes later, to adore the relic of Mahomet’s bones, is meant to entice the audience out of their spontaneous unanimity (ll. 1143-48). Just so, later still in the play, the successive accounts of Christ’s Passion, announced by Pilate to Herod, and then passed on by Herod to Tiberius as a fake (ll. 1248-80, 1281-92 and 1293-1335), are immediately denied by Mary, while the heavens’ opening and Jesus’s apparition to her instantly validate her version.

Such twisting of the spectators round the dramatist’s little finger as to their potential for participation in the fable represented is far from innocent. Possibly meant by the dramatist to keep on this side of reproaches that his play might encourage superstitious belief, and contradictorily to enforce audience-submission to the lesson of his play, the technique may also be intended to show that the constant game of seduction is an additional and deliberately conscious titillation provided by the knowledgeable dramatist to an audience which is thus made to race, at a moment’s notice, through the whole gamut of reception atti-

tudes comprised between Artaudian subservience to emotion and Brechtian alienation. If this is the case, such complicity between the efficient dramatist and the able spectator, those two sides of the same coin, surely sheds some light on the reasons behind the reputation of the Digby *Mary Magdalene* for being excellent theatre.

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