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Shakespearean Comedy and the Senses

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Abstract and Keywords

In Shakespeare's comedies, sensation is both a problem and a solution. It is the source of division and the grounds of unity. This paradox is consistent with the early modern period's mixed conception of the senses. If antitheatrical tracts and clerical literature denounced sensory experience as an impediment to truth and spiritual understanding, printed defences of theatre and a variety of medical and psychological tracts treated the senses as a powerful source of knowledge and judgement. This essay traces how Shakespeare's treatment of the senses relates to both of these traditions. It addresses the connection between this double rendering of sensation and comic form and concludes by considering the ethical implications of sensory experience in the theatre. Examples are drawn from a variety of plays, including *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*.

Keywords: Shakespeare, comedy, senses, knowledge, performance, phenomenology, ethics

YOU don't need to dig very deep to notice how prevalent the senses are in Shakespeare's comedies. Even a quick search in a Shakespeare concordance for terms like 'see', 'hear', 'smell', 'taste', 'touch', and 'feel' shows that they were woven tightly into the linguistic and thematic fabric of the plays. A more complicated task is to answer the basic questions this observation raises: how exactly did the senses function in Shakespeare's comedies? How were they portrayed on stage and how did they generate meaning in the theatre? An instinctive reply might be that the senses are treated with profound scepticism, that stock comic devices such as disguise and mistaken identity portray the senses as unreliable guides to the world, rudimentary in their ability to gather accurate information and vulnerable to manipulation and deceit. Indeed, characters such as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* have remarkably little difficulty fooling the eyes and ears of those with whom they interact. But this is only part of the picture. It is also true that many of the comedies,

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including most of the ones I have just mentioned, achieve at least some degree of resolution through a process of revelation and recognition. They conclude with scenes of collective seeing and hearing in which identities are set straight and community is re-established in a new commons of perception and knowledge.

In Shakespeare's comedies, in other words, sensation is both a problem and a solution. It is the source of division and the grounds of unity. As paradoxical as this may sound, it is consistent with the early modern period's mixed conception of sensation and the senses. If anti-theatrical tracts and clerical literature denounced sensory experience as an impediment to truth and spiritual understanding, printed defences of theatre and a variety of medical, religious, and psychological tracts treated the senses as a powerful source of knowledge and judgement. In what follows, I will be tracing how Shakespeare's treatment of the senses relates to both of these traditions, addressing as well the connection between this double rendering of sensation and comic form. Most of my examples will be drawn from *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It* (p. 237) *It*. I will conclude the essay by considering the ethical implications of sensory experience in the theatre with particular reference to *Merchant*.

The Problem of Sensation

What does it sound like when the senses go wrong on stage? If we had to choose one passage to illustrate this, surely it would be the following:

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note;
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee.

(3.1.130-4)¹

This passage is from *Dream*; the lines are spoken by Titania. The iconic stage image of the Queen of Fairies falling in love with an ass-headed Bottom the Weaver emblemizes in particularly uproarious fashion the susceptibility of 'ear' and 'eye' to manipulation. The scene contributes to a larger theme of conflict between sense and reason in the play. The distinction is made early on when Hermia disobeys her father by choosing Lysander over Demetrius. 'I would my father but looked with my eyes', Hermia complains. Duke Theseus promptly retorts, 'Rather your eyes must with his judgment look' (1.1.56-7). Theseus makes a similar differentiation between sense and reason towards the end of the play when he considers the lovers' account of their experience in the woods:

More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.

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Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

(5.1.2-6)

The tension in these lines is between apprehension and comprehension. The latter is clearly aligned with reason while the former has to do with a way of knowing that is linked to the body. To apprehend means 'to grasp' or 'to seize', and can also mean 'to feel emotionally' or 'to see'.² Graham Bradshaw notes that '*apprehending* involves a predominantly sensory or sympathetic perception, and emphasizes that kind of responsive (p. 238) quickness'.³ Comprehension, on the other hand, is a way of knowing that is precisely not of the body, not of the senses, and not of the material world. John Dee describes it as follows in his 'Mathematicall Praeface' to Euclid's *Elements of Geometrie* (1570):

Things supernatural are immaterial, simple, indivisible, incorruptible, and unchangeable. Things natural are material, compounded, divisible, corruptible, and changeable. Things supernatural are of the mind onely comprehended; things natural of the sense exterior are able to be perceived.⁴

Theseus's problem with the lovers' story is the same as his problem with Hermia's preference for Lysander: both represent the fruits of purely sensory data, a form of knowing that cannot be distinguished from feeling. Later in the scene, he describes it in terms of the body overcoming the mind, apprehension overcoming comprehension:

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 supposed a bear!

(5.1.18-22)

Like Olivia in *Twelfth Night* who 'fear[s] to find / Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind' (1.5.298-9), Theseus is concerned with bodily responses somehow overcoming rational discernment. He complains in particular about the way a general sensory form of knowledge (I feel joy) can lead erroneously to a particular rational form of knowledge (such-and-such is the 'bringer of that joy'). This is a case of sensation influencing and corrupting reason rather than quashing it altogether, something Theseus finds especially insidious.

This sceptical view of the senses found its most extreme expression in Shakespeare's time in printed attacks on the theatre itself. The authors of these anti-theatrical tracts viewed plays as pathways to sin precisely because they appealed to sensory perception. In Phillip Stubbes's colourful words in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), plays are 'sucked out of the Devil's teats to nourish us in idolatry'. Further on he writes, 'The shameless gestures of

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Plaiers, serve to nothing so much, as to move the flesh to lust, and uncleanness'.⁵ This tract makes a direct link between the bodies of the players on stage ('gestures') and the bodies, or 'flesh', of the spectators in the theatre. The image is of an affective continuum in which playgoers are physically embedded in the fiction on stage. Joseph P. Roach describes the dynamic like this. A player, he writes,

(p. 239)

was able to act on the bodies of spectators who shared that space with him. ... His motions could transform the air through which he moved, animating it in waves of force rippling outward from a center in his soul. His passions, irradiating the bodies of theirs, could literally transfer the contents of his heart to theirs, altering their moral natures.⁶

Of course, this phenomenon does not need to be viewed in negative terms. There was a well-established Aristotelian tradition of defending theatre precisely because of its ability to elicit in spectators a visceral emotional response. In *An Apology for Actors* (1612), for example, Thomas Heywood makes this point in reference to stage comedy in particular:

If a Comedy, it is pleasantly contrived with merry accidents, and intermixt with apt and witty jests, to present before the Prince at certain times of solemnity, or else merily fitted to the stage. And what is then the subject of this harmelesse mirth? either in the shape of a Clowne, to shew others their slovenly and unhansome behaviour, that they may reforme that simplicity in themselves, which others make their sport, lest they happen to become the like subject of generall scorne to an auditory, else it intreates of love, deriding foolish inamorates, who spend their ages, their spirits, nay themselves, in the servile and ridiculous imployments of their Mistresses: and these are mingled with sportfull accidents, to recreate such as of themselves are wholly devoted to Melancholly, which corrupts the bloud: or to refresh such weary spirits as are tired with labour, or study, to moderate the cares and heavinesse of the minde, that they may returne to their trades and faculties with more zeale and earnestnesse, after some small soft and pleasant retirement.⁷

If, as Heywood explains in the first part of this quotation, comedy can instruct and improve moral character simply by displaying the consequences of bad behaviour, it can also affect the bodies of spectators, curing 'Melancholly, which corrupts the bloud' and reinvigorating those who are 'tired with labour, or study'. Heywood bases his defense of theatre precisely on its physical and sensory attributes. For Stubbes and other anti-theatricalists, however, this was what made theatre a threat to moral and spiritual order. Plays were debased because they spoke a carnal language and fostered a corresponding carnality among spectators: 'such laughing and fleering: such kissing and bussing: such clipping and culling: Suche winckinge and glancing of wanton eyes', Stubbes writes derisively.⁸

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For a number of antitheatricalists, this sensuousness was not just ungodly; it was also inhuman. William Prynne in his colossal attack on the theatre, *Histrion-mastix* (1633), (p. 240) uses terms like 'swarme' and 'infectious leprosie' to describe the 'carnall persons' that constitute theatre audiences:

Players and Stageplaies, with which I am now to combate in a publike Theatre in the view of sundry partiall Spectators, are growne of late so prevalent in the affections, the opinions of many both in Citie, Court and Country; so universally diffused like an infectious leprosie, so deeply riveted into the seduced, prepossessed hearts and judgments of voluptuous carnall persons, who swarme so thicke in every Play-house, that they leave no empty place, and almost crowd one another to death for multitude.⁹

In a similar if less grotesque vein, Stephen Gosson in *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) writes that 'Tragedies and Comedies stirre up affections, and affections are naturally planted in that part of the minde that is common to us with brute beasts'.¹⁰ Gosson is drawing on Aristotle who understood the soul, or mind, to be the domain not only of intellectual powers, but also of vegetative and sensitive powers, including all forms of internal and external sensation, appetite, and motion. The intellectual component of the soul was, accordingly to Aristotle, uniquely human, but the sensitive component was common to both humans and animals.¹¹ Gosson's argument, in other words, is that going to the theatre causes the soul to devolve back into a pre-rational, animalistic state. He targets comedies in particular, which he argues have the ability to shut down the rational faculties that manage purely sensory responses. 'Comedies so tickle our senses with a pleasanter vaine', he explains, 'that they make us lovers of laughter, and pleasure, without any meane ... wee laugh so extremely, that striving to bridle our selves, wee cannot'.¹² He concludes,

Where such excesse of laughter bursteth out that we cannot holde it, there is no temperance, for the time; where no temperance is, there is no wisdom, nor no use of reason; when we shew our soules void both of reason, and wisdom, what are we then to be thought but fooles.¹³

Theseus's low opinion of the senses lacks the polemical bite of the antitheatrical tracts, but his words in *Dream* are a product of the same set of anxieties about the relationship between sensing and knowing. One important source for these anxieties was Protestant religious culture, which while by no means uniform in its view of the body still defined itself quite pointedly against the material and sensory investments of unreformed (p. 241) Christianity.¹⁴ In *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), for example, Sir John Davies appeals to the story of Adam and Eve in order to illustrate the problem of sensory knowledge: 'Where they sought *knowledge*, they did *error* find, / Ill they desir'd to know, and Ill they did; / And to give *Passion* eyes, made *Reason* blind'. He continues,

How can we hope, that through the Eye and Eare,
This dying Sparkle, in this cloudie place,

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Can recollect those beames of knowledge cleare,
Which were enfus'd in the first minds by grace?¹⁵

In Davies's poem, the physical eye and ear of the body obscure the metaphysical eye and ear of the soul. Likewise, Richard Brathwaite, in *Essaies upon the Five Senses* (1620), asks his readers to 'fixe here thine eye of inward contemplation', and continues, 'Though the eye of my bodie allude to the eye of my soule, yet is the eye of my soule darkened by the eye of my bodie'.¹⁶

The kind of devaluation of the senses that we find in Davies, Brathwaite, and the anti-theatrical tracts is part of a much longer intellectual genealogy. Indeed, one could trace it all the way back to Plato and see it culminating in the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Plato's writings effect a gradual displacement of the concept of *phronesis*, a practical form of wisdom that assumes action to play an essential role in the acquisition of knowledge, with the concept of *sophia*, an abstract and ideal form of wisdom set in opposition to *praxis* and the operations of the body.¹⁷ Plotinus, too, would come to view all kinds of bodily activity as merely debased forms of contemplation,¹⁸ a hierarchical separation that continued in Roman thought and eventually reached its apex with René Descartes, whose famous commentary on gazing down from a window onto a busy street in *Meditations on First Philosophy* carefully undermines the idea of physical seeing as a form of knowing. Descartes writes, 'When looking from a window and saying I see men who pass on the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men.' 'What', he asks, 'do I see from the window but hats and coats (p. 242) which may cover automatic machines?'¹⁹ This kind of scepticism would propel Europe into the age of modern science, where the gaze of Man is always insufficient, and physical seeing never provides a reliable path to knowledge. Truth unfolds instead through a new kind of vision, once the onto-theological vision of philosophy, now the theoretical-instrumental gaze of modern science.

Theseus displays just this sort of scepticism. But he is not the only one. Shakespeare's comedies are full of characters expressing views broadly consistent with the Platonic-Cartesian tradition. Consider *Errors*, a play in which a citywide crisis of misrecognition shakes the very foundations of knowledge. Antipholus of Syracuse's basic sensory question—'what error drives our eyes and ears amiss?' (2.2.187)—finds a parallel in Dromio of Syracuse's basic epistemological question: 'Do you know me, sir? Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I myself?' (3.2.73–4). These fundamental uncertainties about sensation and knowledge haunt later comedies, too. Whether it's Titania's infatuation with Bottom in *Dream*, Olivia's with Cesario/Viola in *Twelfth Night*, or Phoebe's with Ganymede/Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare consistently shows us how prone to error eyes and ears can be. Truth tends to lie beyond the reach of what can be seen, heard, or felt, and it is from this tendency that the comedies derive so much of their hilarity. At the same time, Shakespeare deploys this recurring device at different levels of complexity. For instance, while saying that Antipholus of Syracuse is Antipholus of Ephesus is simply false, saying that Cesario/Viola is attractive to Olivia is not. Plays like *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* remain engaging for modern audiences precisely

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because there *is* a kind of truth in the hetero/homoerotic attraction that exists between pairs like Cesario/Viola and Olivia and Ganymede/Rosalind and Phoebe. Shakespeare's cross-dressing plays show us how desire can challenge conventional ways of understanding the relationship between what we know and what we feel, even as they continue to rely on a basic linkage between sensation and deception.

The Promise of Sensation

For all their scepticism about the senses, the comedies also contain ideas that run counter to the arguments made in the tracts and treatises discussed above. If we turn once again to *Dream*, for example, we find that Hermia remains committed to the notion that her senses, rather than reason or intellect, offer the best means to navigate the world. Here she credits her ear with finding Lysander in the forest:

Dark night, that from the eye his function takes,
The ear more quick of apprehension makes. (p. 243)
Wherein it doth impair the seeing sense,
It pays the hearing double recompense.
Thou art not by mine eye, Lysander, found;
Mine ear, I thank it, brought me to thy sound.

(3.2.178–83)

Even when one sense (vision) is compromised, another (hearing) compensates. A different kind of optimism can be found in act 1 of *Twelfth Night* when Viola addresses the Captain:

There is a fair behaviour in thee, captain,
And though that nature with a beauteous wall
Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee
I will believe thou hast a mind that suits
With this thy fair and outward character.

(1.2.43–7)

In lines that contrast starkly with Theseus's meditation on apprehension and fantasy, Viola finds that seeing is essentially the same as knowing. She rejects the conventional wisdom that surface is distinct from depth, instead describing the Captain as an emblem of the harmony that can exist between 'outward character' and 'mind'.

What these passages have in common is the way they express in vernacular dramatic terms a materialist and monistic worldview. Hermia makes no distinction between feeling and knowing, the body and the mind, just as Viola makes no distinction between outsides and insides. People and things, bodies and emotions, may differ at the level of form, but they are the same at the level of substance. This way of thinking about selfhood would not have been foreign to early modern men and women. Sixteenth-century humoral theory,

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for example, described both physical and mental experience as dictated by the balance of four substances, or 'humours', common to all people. These are black bile, linked to the qualities of dry and cold and prominent in those with a melancholic temperament; phlegm, linked to the qualities of wet and cold and prominent in those with a phlegmatic temperament; blood, linked to the qualities of hot and wet and prominent in those with a sanguine temperament; and yellow bile, linked to the qualities of dry and hot and prominent in those with a choleric temperament. Keeping the humours in balance depended on how one managed six external factors known as the 'non-naturals': air, food and drink, exertion and rest, sleeping and waking, retentions and evacuations, and emotions (or 'passions').²⁰ Systematized by the Roman physician Galen, humoral theory subsequently became deeply entrenched in early modern culture. One study estimates that between 1500 and 1700 there were approximately 590 different editions of the works (p. 244) of Galen published.²¹ In contrast to Platonic and Cartesian dualism, humoral theory is remarkable for the way it relates the body to the mind, and both to the environment. The inner world of emotions and thought, what we would call psychological states, are understood in material terms, as substances or fluids, in humoral theory.²² The dependence of those humours on external elements like food and drink, and activities like eating, excreting, and sweating, which cross the boundary between inner and outer, knit the self into a physical scene that extends beyond the threshold of the body and certainly beyond the threshold of the mind.²³

The core assumption of humoral theory is that truth and knowledge are available to us only through the senses. In this respect it iterates in historically specific terms a broadly phenomenological way of understanding experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the great twentieth-century phenomenologists, wrote, 'all knowledge takes place within the horizons opened up by perception'. Similar arguments were made by other philosophers working in the same tradition.²⁴ Edmund Husserl, for example, maintained that every act of consciousness, every thought, is directed towards an object of some sort. That is to say, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something: the thought and the thing are never readily separable.²⁵ In Martin Heidegger's version of phenomenology, this approach to thinking meant that consciousness must be understood as being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), in a world 'out there' rather than 'in here'.²⁶ What set Merleau-Ponty apart was the force and precision with which he expressed these ideas, as when he declared, 'there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself'.²⁷ Merleau-Ponty's focus is on the way our senses gather information from a reality that is 'always "already there" before reflection begins'.²⁸ Rather than seeing the world and our actions in it as the products of ideas innate within the mind, (p. 245) Merleau-Ponty argued that we can only *conceive* what we first *perceive*, that thought is largely the product of embodied experience of the world.²⁹

These are seminal arguments within the history of twentieth-century philosophy, but they also gesture back to similarly sense-oriented theories of human cognition within the Aristotelian tradition of philosophy, including Scholasticism and neo-Scholasticism. As I mentioned above, Aristotle thought the mind possessed vegetative and sensory powers in addition to intellectual ones. Thomas Aquinas, following his lead, argued that all

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knowledge and thought starts with the reception in the external sense organs of what he terms 'sensible species' transmitted from the sensible qualities in external objects.³⁰ This Thomistic model of cognition—precisely the model that Descartes's dualistic philosophy sought to do away with—was maintained by later Scholastics during the Renaissance, especially in Spain and Italy.³¹ Indeed, there is something curiously premodern about Merleau-Ponty's sensual account of thought and about the conceptual machinery of phenomenology more generally. He suggests as much himself when he describes the goal of phenomenology as 're-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world'.³²

I point out this link between the modern and the pre-modern in order to emphasize that phenomenology is not a historically fixed set of doctrines. More accurately, it is a practice or a method—a way of describing knowledge as embedded, sensory experience.³³ Defined thus, Shakespeare is a phenomenologist no less than Merleau-Ponty or Galen. The difference, of course, being that his phenomenological practice is poetic and theatrical rather than philosophical or medical. Hermia's confidence in the ability of 'the ear' to compensate for 'the eye' and Viola's contention that 'a mind' can correlate to 'outward character' contribute to something we might think of as a poetics of phenomenology. Other examples occur during the *dénouements* of the comedies when resolution is achieved through a series of visual and aural disclosures. A typical instance can be found at the conclusion of *As You Like It* when Rosalind's true identity is discovered:

DUKE SENIOR. If there be truth in sight, you are my daughter.

ORLANDO. If there be truth in sight, you are my Rosalind.

PHOEBE. If sight and shape be true, Why then, my love adieu!

(5.4.116–19)

(p. 246) Sight and shape are certainly true in this scene, and although it is not good news for Phoebe, the revelation that Ganymede is Rosalind restores a daughter to Duke Senior and a lover to Orlando. Vision, in other words, in addition to being a source of knowledge, also re-establishes communal bonds. This idea is advanced earlier in the fifth act, as well, when Rosalind, addressing Orlando, describes the love that developed between Celia and Oliver:

for your brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner loved but they sighed; no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy; and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage.

(5.2.31–6)

Instead of being associated with confusion or error, seeing in these scenes provides a pathway to concord. It constitutes an act of social creation that transforms desire into marriage and strangers into family.

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This community-making aspect of sensation operates at a broader theatrical level, as well. Shakespeare's comedies often trace a progression from one version of sense experience to another—from confusion to consensus and from error to truth. In this respect, comic form is an expression of the early modern period's contradictory appraisal of the senses. In concrete theatrical terms, it entails an uneven evolution in the way sensory knowledge is distributed among stage characters and spectators. To give one simple example, what makes a play like *Errors* funny is the disconnect between what spectators see (Antipholus of Syracuse) and what characters on stage see (Antipholus of Ephesus). The relationship between sense perception and knowledge is different for each of the two groups that together constitute theatrical experience. The same can be said for act 3 scene 2 of *Dream*, in which Robin Goodfellow hides while imitating the voices of Lysander and Demetrius. Again, comedy is generated by a simple sensory disconnect: the playgoers can hear and see everything; Demetrius and Lysander can hear but not see. In many comedies, this disconnect is remedied in the final scenes. The end of *Errors*, for example, feels like a resolution because characters and spectators at last see and hear the same thing (*this* is Antipholus of Syracuse, *that* is Antipholus of Ephesus). The same could be said for the end of *Twelfth Night* when Duke Orsino slowly comes to terms with the truth about 'Cesario' or the final act of *All's Well that Ends Well* where vision and hearing are once again revelatory. Shakespearean comedy depends for its effects on this carefully managed economy of sensation and knowledge.

The Ethics of Sensation

In the final section of this essay, I want to suggest that the collective sensory events I have just described have an effect that runs deeper, theatrically and philosophically, than (p. 247) the narrative resolution they seem to provide. The ability of Shakespeare's comedies to establish a 'commons of sensation' is in fact central to what they achieve ethically. It is during these moments that actors and spectators move from a world in which the grammar of thought and action is 'I' and 'me' to one in which it is 'we' and 'us'. It is here that Shakespeare thinks hardest about the possibility of community and about the way the senses—not just the rational protocols of politics and law—establish the conditions of this possibility.

To draw this final point out, I turn to *Merchant*, one of Shakespeare's most experimental comedies in terms of tone and form. Shylock's famous 'hath not a Jew eyes' speech is a peculiar example of the theatrical phenomenon I have been describing since it occurs not at the end of the play, but in the middle. Also, rather than marking a moment of joyous disbelief and revelation, Shylock's speech responds to a difficult and complex moment of loss in which his daughter, his ducats, and one of his only sentimental possessions has slipped from his grasp. In addition, Shylock has learned that Antonio has defaulted on the

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loan he made him. The speech is, in the first place, a justification of his intention to exact the collateral, a pound of Antonio's flesh:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

(3.1.54–62)

What makes Shylock's speech so arresting is the way it achieves depth through surface. On one hand, the speech is an affirmation of legal personhood issued through an appeal to basic equality and reciprocal rights. On the other, it is an act of moral agency that manifests Shylock as a self worthy of empathy. Importantly, though, Shylock's selfhood is rooted exclusively in outer life: hands, food, germs, temperature, tickling, and, of course, the senses. It is not something unique about Shylock's mental or spiritual core that endows him with the complexity and emotional range required for selfhood. Rather, it is his invocation of a common stratum of creaturely life in which he partakes: his physical and formal presence, his vegetative need for sustenance, and his sensory responses to outer stimuli.

For playgoers—both in Shakespeare's time and our own—Shylock creates a theatre of recognition grounded in the physical: acknowledge my eyes, my hands, my form, all the indicators of my creatureliness. It is a singular moment of self-manifestation, and we know, unmistakably, that we are supposed to care. Why is this exactly? Why do we feel that a recognition of Shylock on the sensory terms he has established matter? The reason, I think, is quite simple, and it forms the core of Shakespeare's ethics in the comedies more generally: because acts of collective recognition are socially affirming; they ground us in an environment of shared experience and common imagination and establish, therefore, the only possible conditions for responsible world-making. In this sense, (p. 248) Shylock has something in common with the twentieth-century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. Both understand human being in non-ontological terms, as something manifest and given within a social collective, rather than something bounded and inward looking. In his two most influential books, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), Levinas develops this idea into a radical ethics of selfhood, one founded on the idea that subjectivity is relational; a property not of hermetic cognitive experience but of the self's encounter with, extension towards, and welcoming of the other.³⁴ While the mainstream of metaphysics explores being from the perspective of the singular, self-identical ego—'I think therefore I am'—Levinas, by contrast, proposes a mode of inquiry that prioritizes interpersonal experience. Levinas was convinced that the horrors of the Second World War were a result of systematized egotism: a culture-wide prioritization of

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the inner life of the one over the outer lives of the many, a failure of recognition and acknowledgement of precisely the sort demanded by Shylock in his speech.³⁵

Of course, Shylock's appeal to outer life—framed as it is by a claim to Antonio's flesh and a steadfast commitment to revenge—is morally more complex than Levinas's. From one perspective, this is as it should be: Shakespeare is a playwright, not a philosopher; he is not setting out to make a programmatic argument. At the same time, there *is* something thematically coherent about Shylock's speech. His invocation of acts of revenge and punishment as part of the fabric of the commons, alongside shared social practices and shared physical presence, is of a piece with the larger imaginative world of the play in which lines of difference intertwine with lines of connectivity, in which people lend as enemies, spit and kick as goods change hands, and break bills but not bread—a world whose heterogeneity is the ground for both its conflict and its consensus.

It is also fitting that sensory experience is deployed in Shylock's speech in a way that seems at once morally serious and deeply cynical. This kind of double vision is consistent with Shakespeare's treatment of the senses across the comedies, which, as we have seen, display both suspicion about sensation's relationship to knowledge and optimism about its ability to deliver truth. In this respect, the comedies participate in two disparate genealogies of thought: a dualistic tradition that starts with Plato, includes certain forms of Protestant polemic, and culminates in the scientific scepticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and a nondualistic, phenomenological tradition that stretches from theorists of the humours to twentieth-century thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. The senses, therefore, offer a unique and especially rich site of meaning in Shakespeare's comedies. Central to both the thematic and formal structure of the plays, sensation connects the comedies to the culture of their time while also facilitating serious philosophical speculation in our own.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ All references to Shakespeare's plays are from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁽²⁾ *OED* v.7, v.8

⁽³⁾ Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Skepticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 41.

⁽⁴⁾ Euclid, *The Elements of Geometrie* (London, 1570), p. iiiiv.

⁽⁵⁾ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), L6r, N6v.

⁽⁶⁾ Joseph P. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 27. See also William N. West, 'Understanding in the Elizabethan Theaters', *Renaissance Drama* 35 (2006), 113-43, esp. 114.

⁽⁷⁾ Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (London, 1612), F3v-F4r.

⁽⁸⁾ Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, N8r-v.

⁽⁹⁾ William Prynne, *Histrion-mastix: The players scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts* (London, 1633), **6r-v.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582), F1r.

⁽¹¹⁾ Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 1-205.

⁽¹²⁾ Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, C6r, F5v.

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(¹³) Gosson, *Playes Confuted*, F5v–F6r.

(¹⁴) Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For an important counter-argument dealing with the positive role played by the body in Protestantism, see Jennifer Waldron, ‘“The Eye of Man Hath Not Heard”: Shakespeare, Synaesthesia, and Post-Reformation Phenomenology’, *Criticism* 54, (2012), 403–17, Special Issue on ‘Shakespeare and Phenomenology’, ed. Kevin Curran and James Kearney, and *Reformations of the Body: Idolatry, Sacrifice, and Early Modern Theater* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

(¹⁵) John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum This Oracle Expounded in Two Elegies, 1. Of Humane Knowledge, 2. Of the Soule of Man, and the Immortalitie Thereof* (London, 1599), 2, 3.

(¹⁶) Richard Brathwaite, *Essaies upon the Five Senses* (London, 1620), A3r, 1.

(¹⁷) Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Heidegger and Arendt* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 108.

(¹⁸) Plotinus, *Ennead III*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2–7, 8; *Ennead IV*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4, 13.

(¹⁹) René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Kress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 21.

(²⁰) Harold J. Cook, *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart London* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 423.

(²¹) Andrew Wear, ‘Medicine in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700’, in Lawrence I. Conrad, Michael Neve, Vivian Nutton, Roy Porter, and Andrew Wear, *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 253.

(²²) Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

(²³) See especially Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett Sullivan, eds., *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), as well as Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press,

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2004), and Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli, eds., *Politics and the Passions, 1500–1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

(²⁴) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2008), 241.

(²⁵) Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000) and *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983).

(²⁶) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 78–90.

(²⁷) Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, xii.

(²⁸) Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

(²⁹) Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

(³⁰) Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Human Nature*, trans. Robert Pasnau (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002).

(³¹) Ted Schmaltz, 'The Science of Mind', in Donald Rutherford, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 157. On neo-scholasticism, see M. W. F. Stone, 'Aristotelianism and Scholasticism in Early Modern Philosophy', in Stephen Nadler, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Early Modern Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

(³²) Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

(³³) Kevin Curran and James Kearney, 'Introduction' *Criticism* 54, (2012), 353–64, a special issue on 'Shakespeare and Phenomenology', ed. Kevin Curran and James Kearney.

(³⁴) Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969); *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

(³⁵) This discussion is drawn from Kevin Curran, *Shakespeare's Legal Ecologies: Law and Distributed Selfhood* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 131–4.

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