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VISION IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC PLAYS: PERCEPTION, DECEPTION, DELUSION

Abstract

Visual effects are, naturally, conspicuous in theatrical performances, but even when we read Shakespeare we can internalise the experience of his characters and visualise the scenes. Vision is also important at another tier, that of his characters themselves, the way they see and experience other characters, the world and, very importantly, themselves. Sometimes because of distorted vision, sometimes because of malevolent input that works on their minds, or just because of inherent subjectivity of perception, the appearance of persons and things was substantially different from reality and that causes a tragic course of events and ultimate catastrophe. So, flawed vision was very much the tragic flaw of Shakespeare's heroes.

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1. Eyesight, appearance and reality

*Those are pearls that were his eyes.
(The Tempest, I.ii.)*

Of all the five senses, sight seems to be the most important for Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Not the tactile, because they could even "speak daggers" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.); not smell, although there is a lot of odour, mortality and brimstone in these plays too; and not auditory, although onomatopoeia, voices and music also play an important role. Words could be toxic like poisons poured into one's ear. But vision is what brings things home, what reassures or dissuades. "For she had eyes and chose me. / No, Iago, I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove", concludes Othello quite logically (III. iii.), not at all easily jealous or self-righteous. On the other hand, what is seen sometimes needs to be verified or challenged, like the Ghost of Hamlet's father or Cordelia's dead body. Vision is most telling and reliable, but many times things are not as they seem to be and, on the other hand, there is much of what "passeth show" within us. Images from the past often haunt us to the verge of insanity, like the primal scene that, according to many analysts, accounted for Hamlet's problematic attitude toward femininity, or the traumatic experience of the murdered victims that hovered over Macbeth's mind in the beginning, and his wife's in the end of this horror story. The inutterable, what was beyond description or comprehension. That is why Lady Macbeth writes and seals letters, mentioning the crimes only in fragments and allusions. In the beginning, the witches talk; in the end, they show the apparitions. When Hamlet swears to avenge his father and to wipe away all other memories from the "book and volume" of his brain, he also demonstrates this tangibly:

My tables, – meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:
Writing
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'
I have sworn 't. (I.v.)

There are opposite examples, – no vision but words – when it was impractical to enact a scene, or indecent to show a bloodbath or an intimate act. *Titus Andronicus* is a play full of such atrocities and patent aggression, as if written by Kyd and not by Shakespeare. Hamlet's father talks about the murder and Hamlet's "prophetic soul" recognizes it as *déjà-vu*. Fratricide is not staged and neither is regicide in *Macbeth* – we get a succinct account of that; the death of Gloucester and Fool; Ophelia's report on Hamlet's frenzied visit at night, when he probably wanted to leave the impression of an insane person and make believe it was love-sickness; the Queen's heartfelt description of Ophelia's death as poetic and innocent, these are all conveyed by narratives, not enacted. Marjorie Garber called such a scene an "unscene", unseen but evoked meticulously and felt as seen by our own eyes (Garber, 2009: 221). Yet, the visual is a very strong tool in persuasion among the characters of this play, so Iago brings the newly emerged circumstances home to Brabantio with vivid pictures of "an old black ram tugging your white ewe" (I.i.), knowing that a visualization of these words would make a detestable picture in the father's mind, an effect identical to his devious account of Cassio's dream in Act III, Scene iii.

2. What seems and what is

Appearance versus reality – that is often a clash between good and evil, the genuine and the false. Iago makes it clear in the very beginning of the play that he will pretend just to serve his own "peculiar end", not his liege's, but he'll definitely wear his heart on his sleeve: "I am not what I am" (*Othello*, I.i.). Lady Macbeth taught her husband to be less transparent and to pretend:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't (I.v.)

just as Hamlet noted that in the dungeon of Denmark people may smile and be villains (I.v.). Well-taught by the time of the banquet, though still traumatised by the memory and guilt, Macbeth says:

Let your remembrance apply to Banquo;
Present him eminence, both with eye and tongue:
Unsafe the while, that we
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams,
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are. (*Macbeth*, III.ii.)

The one who stood up against pretence and outward “strappings” of love and fidelity was banished and disinherited for doing so. Cordelia said she could not heave her heart to her mouth, counting that the obvious would prevail over hollow phrases. On the opposite side of Iago’s and Edmond’s feigned love and loyalty, Cordelia came across as much worse than she really was. Why Cordelia wanted to keep her feelings to herself and not “wear her heart on her sleeve” like her sisters or, like Iago, who used this phrase describing his strategy, may be rather obvious; she did not want to take part in the farcical contest; why Edgar did not want to be recognised but let his father die in ignorance, that is a more complex issue. Stanley Cavell called both “the avoidance of love” (Cavell, 2003: 512). It was Lear more than Cordelia who avoided love, for he feared the need and the rejection thereof. Disinheriting his favourite daughter and renouncing all blood ties has also been interpreted as his manoeuvre to keep her by his side.

Hamlet is disgusted by the hypocrisy and avarice that surrounds him. His mother’s suggestion that his grief seems so “particular”, provokes his response that heralds his future excessive and violent reactions:

Thou know’st ‘tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET

Ay, madam, it is common.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET

Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not ‘seems.’

‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,

....

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
(*Hamlet*, I.ii)

He abhors the word “seems” because it can coincide with another one he uses in the same reply: “play”. To do him justice, we can corroborate his view with a quote from Iago’s first soliloquy, sharing his tactics and intentions with the audience/readership:

In following him, I follow but myself.
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end.
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, ’tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (I.i.)

Almost identically, another Machiavellian hero plots against his father and half-brother:

A credulous father! and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms,
That he suspects none: on whose foolish honesty
My practises ride easy! I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:
All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit. (*King Lear*, I.ii.)

The verb “seem” appears 21 times in *Hamlet*, 17 times in *Macbeth*, 18 in *King Lear* and 18 in *Othello*. It is mainly associated with appearance, with what is not, but not only as erroneous perception, but also as deliberately imposed delusion, a misleading impression.

The personification of such intrigue and “motive-hunting motiveless malignity” (Coleridge, 1907: 172), Iago, identified Othello’s credulity as “free and open nature, / That thinks *men honest* that but *seem* to be so” (I.iii.).

Passing himself off as a loyal and generous friend, while subtly insinuating the infidelity of his victims who become caught in his web, Iago suggests to Othello, in a nutshell, that all that glitters is not gold. Using a binary system of thinking, Othello has a very simple division of people into honest and dishonest, Iago being most honest. Honesty, for men meant integrity and sincerity, and had an additional meaning for women – chastity. Thus, they judge Cassio:

IAGO

Men should be what they seem;
Or those that be not, would they might seem none!

OTHELLO

Certain, men should be what they seem.

IAGO

Why, then, I think Cassio's an honest man.

and Desdemona:

OTHELLO

No, not much moved:
I do not think but Desdemona's honest.

IAGO

Long live she so! and long live you to think so!

Such words are enough to shake Othello's firm belief:

OTHELLO

And yet, how nature erring from itself... (III.iii.)

3. To see is to believe

“See” in different forms and tenses is used 90 times in *Hamlet*, 42 times in *Macbeth*, 75 in *King Lear* and 77 in *Othello*. Besides the physical sight, it often denotes intuition, premonition or the unconscious. “Methinks I saw my father”, says Hamlet. ... “In my mind's eye”. (I.ii.) Gloucester understands the world and its pitfalls better after the loss of his eyes: “I see it feelingly” (IV.vi.). Gertrude, as a character abandoned to a hedonism and

passion that Hamlet found detestable at her age, also managed to develop her “mental eyes”:

Oh, Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul
And there I see such black and grainèd spots
As will not leave their tinct. (III.iv.)

On the other hand, it is precisely the physical, tangible, that is decisive for judgment: “I’ll see before I doubt”, says Othello (III.iii.), and this is quite reasonable and patient, unlike the rash and impetuous reactions of Lear and, sometimes, Hamlet. “Give me the ocular proof”, he demands in the same scene, and he is given one – a planted, false one, but a plausible one too. Just like the letter in the forged handwriting of his son Edgar presented to the guillable eyes of the Earl of Gloucester in Act I, Scene II, the eyes that will be plucked out by Lear’s daughters, but that will open new perspectives to him when blind. Incredibly enough, he takes it from the hands of his mendacious son Edmund whom he has never held dear or spoken highly of. But it sufficed. And then the villain staged a tragedy of errors, providing his father with a distorted insight into his honest son’s doings – like a twentieth century TV news editor manipulating with image and sound for propaganda purposes. That is what Iago does to Othello, enabling him to watch Cassio and Bianca, but placing it in a completely different “script”. Shakespeare was aware of the power of image, the ultimate proof and persuasiveness stronger than a thousand words. After all, the visual was the prevailing effect of his plays, composed for playing, not for reading or discussion.

There is something that prevents us from seeing clearly and makes us err, killing the wrong guy even when there is no arras between us. What caused Lear’s wrong judgment and *volte-face* in relation to his daughters, as if he did not know them well enough? What is the mental “arras” that blurs our vision even when nobody whispers poisonous words into our ears like Iago did into Othello’s? The echo of Brabantio’s words must have pounded in his ears when Iago started pouring his “medicine” into his ear: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I.iii.). Iago picks up on this and builds a plausible argument:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most.

OTHELLO

And so she did.

IAGO

Why, go to then;

She that, so young, could give out such a seeming,
To seal her father's eyes up close as oak-
He thought 'twas witchcraft... (III.iii.)

But then, again, even Othello could have known Desdemona from a “lewd minx” (III.iii.) capable of infidelity and lies. Vanity, hurt feelings, worked up atmosphere – that is what prevents disambiguation and mists the vision. Lear refused to see the obvious, and subsequently to admit his sins and errors. His was a wilful blindness, perfectly mirrored in Gloucester's violent, physical loss of eyes, plucked out by the same malefactors who tricked Lear out of his kingdom and favourite daughter. Cupid is blind, but everybody else should keep their eyes wide open when it comes to the interpersonal – lest one get wrought and “perplex'd in the extreme”, or murdered in sleep. Macbeth did not want any star to shine that night, no eyewitnesses to his deed. His act horrified him and somehow he felt that, if not seen and mentioned, it had never happened. Vision is what confirms and incriminates:

Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I.iv.)

On the contrary, his wife in the end yearns for light, holds on to the candle though her eyes are closed, because “hell is a murky place” (Vi.) and she needs light.

Macbeth is said to be the most imaginative of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, because of the hallucinations related to his future and recent sins, but it was Lady Macbeth who later saw blood spots on her hands and recapitulated all the agony in her somnambulism. Her husband was past that by the time, just as he was past fears and any human reaction or emotion, but it was he who saw blood on his murderous hands first:

What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (II.ii.)

Another sight will also hurt the eyes of now changed, arrogant and overbearing Macbeth – Banquo and the line of kings after the third apparition shown by the witches:

Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!
Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls.
...
Start, eyes! (IV.i.)

The following excerpt encompasses all the words relevant for this paper – *see, sight, vision*:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
(II.i.)

4. In the eye of the beholder

“I saw Othello's visage in his mind”, said Desdemona in Act I, Scene III. She loved Othello for the beauty of his soul, his integrity and courage, which was the beauty she needed. Just as many Shakespeare's plays have their counterparts in fairy tales, *Othello* is compared to *The Beauty and the Beast* for the physical discrepancy but harmonious relationship between the two. Iago is sure that this will not last, as

Her eye must be fed;
and what delight shall she have to look on the
devil? (II.i.)

When Iago started his infernal plot, eliciting suspicion against the most beloved and important persons in Othello's life, he suggested that this fascination could vanish fairly soon and Desdemona's perception of Othello might become much more realistic:

But pardon me; I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fall to match you with her country forms
And happily repent. (III.iii.)

Looks do matter, too: it is not by chance that King Hamlet is handsome and comely, while Claudius and Osric look unappealing and disreputable:

This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?
(III.iv.)

In the same scene, the Ghost enters the chamber, but Gertrude fails to see it, despite Hamlet's desperate attempts to make her see him, even talking to Hamlet, not just showing up:

HAMLET
Do you see nothing there?
QUEEN GERTRUDE
Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.
HAMLET
Nor did you nothing hear?
QUEEN GERTRUDE
No, nothing but ourselves.
HAMLET

Why, look you there! look, how it steals away!
My father, in his habit as he lived!
Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!
Exit Ghost
QUEEN GERTRUDE
This the very coinage of your brain:
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

The “coinage” of one’s brain is yet another illusion as deception of a disturbed mind, not of blurred sight. Yet, it is not very likely that Shakespeare wanted us to believe that the Ghost was just Hamlet’s hallucination, because Horatio and the guards saw him in the beginning of the play and that preceded Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost, who would talk to no one else but him. When the Ghost came to “whet Hamlet’s almost blunted purpose”, but also to intervene and placate his son’s fury after the dumb show (“step between thy mother and her fighting soul”), Gertrude has got what Hugo Klajn called “negative hallucination” (Klajn, 1964: 499): absence of vision, not seeing the obvious, as incapability or, rather, refusal to see and admit to the incontestable. Sin is unseen, but it gnaws the soul and necessitates purification:

Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that mattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks:
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. (III.iv.)

The word eye(s) is used 40 times in *Hamlet*, 23 times in *Macbeth*, 53 in *King Lear* and 24 in *Othello*. Besides the primary function, and that of mirroring the soul, eyes also signal life. Macbeth is sure that Banquo is dead and harmless when his ghost appears, because

Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with! (III.iv.)

The eye is also a metaphor of intelligence and wisdom. When Ophelia laments over Hamlet's noble mind overthrown, she says that he was

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down! (III.i.)

Kent wants to stay with Lear, despite the King's degrading treatment:

See better, Lear; and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye. (I.i.)

Ross informs Malcolm, exiled in England, of the situation in the country, saying: "Your eye in Scotland / Would create soldiers, make our women fight,..." (IV.iii.) Eyes are taken for a lower level of perception when the subject is going by appearances, populism or impressionability. Thus, Claudius underrates Hamlet's reputation and popularity with his people, calling them "the distracted multitude, / Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes". (IV.iii.)

When Iago tries to talk Cassio into confession of his love for Desdemona, he suggests

What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley of
provocation.
CASSIO
An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest. (II.iii.)

Also, eyes are viewed as depths similar to the womb where life is begotten and sin committed. Thus, when Gloucester's eyes are gouged out, he will identify the black void with the place of sinful conception, both being synonymous of "nothing" in several of Shakespeare's plays. As the main plot and the sub-plot are parallel and the loop of deception and tragic error unfurls on two tracks, in the bitter *anagnorisis*, no wonder there are many common denominators between the two. Much before Gloucester's eyes were plucked out by Lear's daughters, the King felt the same about the betrayal following his fatal error:

Old fond eyes,
Bewep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you lose,
To temper clay. (I.iv.)

He was emotionally and rationally blind, just like Gloucester with his children, but the latter gained insight, having lost his eyesight: "I stumbled when I saw" (IV.i.). When Regan tortured Gloucester in his own house, asking why he had sent the King to Dover, he said "because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes (III.vii.). And she plucked his.

When they reconvene in the fields near Dover, the mad Lear and the eyeless Gloucester, the King asks the Earl to read

GLOUCESTER

What, with the case of eyes?

KING LEAR

O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

The King's reply is "reason in madness", as Edgar put it: "Get thee glass eyes; / And like a scurvy politician, seem / To see the things thou dost not." (IV.vi.)

Nature is like a whimsical monarch, furious, merciless and blind to the wretched ones, reflecting the storm in Lear, who:

tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of... (III.i.)

Eyes are Homerically attributed to inanimate forms, like the "dark-eyed night" in *King Lear* (II.i.), or the Cyclops-like "green-eyed monster" in *Othello* (III.iii.). They are the routes of outward stimuli to one's mind, but also the channel of effluent feelings and thoughts, often betraying the one they belong to. Thus, King Lear thought that Regan could never wrong him the way her sister did:

No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse:
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness: her eyes are fierce; but thine
Do comfort and not burn. (II.iv.)

Though Hamlet used the following conversation to deride Polonius, it still shows the undeniable truth that perception is subjective and arbitrary:

Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
LORD POLONIUS
By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.
HAMLET
Methinks it is like a weasel.
LORD POLONIUS
It is backed like a weasel.
HAMLET
Or like a whale?
LORD POLONIUS
Very like a whale.
(III.ii.)

Hamlet played with Polonius' ingratiating attitude, baffling the old man to humiliation. But, again, he demonstrated how "nothing is but what is not", to quote his inverted twin Macbeth (I.iii). Just as the foul can be fair, or, to go back to Hamlet, "nothing is good or bad, but thinking maketh it so" (II.ii).

5. Conclusion

Not everything is supposed to be accounted for or illucidated. Much of the popularity and universality of Shakespeare's plays is rooted in the "negative capability", as Keats called the untold, unexplained or open-ended in poetry (Keats, 1817). That leaves us with enough wiggle room to play with different scenarios, choose different endings, like in postmodernist novels and rewrite the plays together with Shakespeare and his editors. In these terms, the Keatsean term correlates to Klajn's "negative hallucination" because both are about absence and negation. One thing is

for sure, though: Shakespeare's characters are part of a grand scheme of humanity, like spokes to the hub. But they are also individuals, sometimes unruly and unpredictable, independent from their creator. In what they saw, imagined or were made to believe, we find endless ways of reading and subaudition, through the looking glass of our own time, civilisation, science and various theories, but always bearing in mind the Renaissance man who still believed in the supernatural, who wanted to see a good show and a fight, who was susceptible to fears and superstition. Truth is often multi-faceted and this is why we will not find any Manichean character or idea in Shakespeare's works. Even the villains sometimes repent, even the monsters are sometimes pitiable. So, what Shakespeare saw, what he wanted the spectators to see, what they thought they saw and what we see now, after all the dramatic and turbulent history that lies between us, all converges in a confluence of visual cacophony and brings us back to the original Shakespeare, to close-reading of the timeless lines.

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ВИЂЕЊЕ У ШЕКСПИРОВИМ ТРАГЕДИЈАМА:
ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈА, ОБМАНА, ИЛУЗИЈА

Сажетак

Визуелни ефекти су, наравно, истакнути у позоришним изведбама, али чак и док читамо Шекспира можемо да поунутрашњимо искуство његових јунака и визуализујемо сцене. Виђење је важно и на још једном нивоу, на нивоу самих јунака, у смислу начина на који виде свет и, пре свега, себе. Понекад због искривљене слике, понекад због злонамерног утицаја на њихов ум, или само због урођене субјективности доживљаја, они људе и догађаје виде суштински другачијим него што су у стварности и то доводи до трагичног следа догађаја и катастрофе на крају. Дакле, грешка у виђењу чинила је знатан део трагичне грешке Шекспирових јунака.

Кључне речи: Шекспир, трагедија, виђење, очи, вид, видети, изгледати, перцепција, ум, грешка