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The Aesthetics of Spectacle

It all starts in Oxford; in the middle of Greene's most famous play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1589). In Brasenose College, an academic disputation is taking place between an Englishman, Friar Bacon and an arrogant German called Vandermast. But these men are not just academics, they are also magicians. Ironically, for a disputation, not a lot of disputing takes place; the emphasis of this scene is on the visual not the verbal. The magicians try to outdo each other by conjuring up a series of increasingly impressive spectacles: people vanish, a ‘tree appears’ with a ‘dragon shooting fire’ and ‘Hercules’ materialises ‘in his lion’s skin’ (*FB* ix). With his royal ‘audience’ looking on ‘amazed’, Bacon wins the day with his ‘strange necromantic spells’ which ‘work such shows and wondering in the world’ (*FB* ix.155, 118, 47–8). In a way, that final quotation – ‘work such shows and wondering in the world’ – encapsulates the focus of this book. This book aims to examine the way in which ‘shows’ – theatrical spectacles and attractions – provoke both ‘wonder’ and ‘wondering’; in short how, and for what purpose, early modern spectacle astonished and intrigued audiences.

Needless to say, this is not the first literary critical study to declare an interest in early modern special effects. If a modern theatre practitioner wanted to reconstruct these various spectacles, they need look no further than Philip Butterworth’s scrupulously researched *Theatre of Fire* (1998), where they could find out precisely how Bacon’s ‘dragon’ might have been made to ‘shoot fire’. By contrast, this book is less preoccupied with the ‘how?’ than with the ‘why?’ Why did early modern playwrights use spectacle? As the Records of Early English Drama (REED) testify, these ‘cheap thrills’ were in fact far from cheap. REED documents substantial payments for the construction, decoration and maintenance of various dramatic special effects. For instance, the early sixteenth-century records
of guild dramas at Coventry record various payments for the construction and repairs to a hell mouth. Documents Relating to the Office of the Revels in the Time of Queen Elizabeth also record substantial payments made for stage tricks involving a fake sword or ‘a hollow knife of plate’. Similarly, the City Chamberlain’s Accounts at Canterbury for the years 1528–30 catalogue the purchase of ‘a new leather bag for the blood, vi d’, to assist with their gory special effects. Meanwhile in London, Henslowe records the payment ‘for pulleys and workmanship for to hang Absolom … xiiijd’ for a production of George Peele’s The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe (1599). Given the expense of theatrical special effects, it seems more than a little naive to assume that spectacle was merely a frivolous way of entertaining the groundlings. Spectacle was not just a decorative bauble designed to dazzle the ignorant, there was also an intellectual ‘strategy’ behind these ‘cunning shows’ (JB 735).

Spectacle was in high demand in early modern theatres. In 1602, Richard Vennar advertised a spectacular public performance at the Swan theatre of a play called England’s Joy. Printed by John Windet, the plot or argument details the action of the play’s nine spectacular scenes. Depicting Queen Elizabeth’s rise to power, the play is reminiscent of a public theatre masque. The plot promises everything from lurid sexual titillation as a ‘beautiful lady’ has her ‘garments and jewels’ torn from her, ‘music’, sword fights between ‘twelve Gentlemen at barriers’ and a spectacular finale as Elizabeth herself is:

taken up into heaven, when presently appears a throne of blessed souls, and beneath under the stage set forth with strange fireworks, divers black and damned souls, wonderfully described in their several torments.

But when the expectant crowd gathered at the Swan, the performance turned out to be a hoax. Vennar gave a rather brief prologue, before beating a hasty retreat, taking the money with him. He was later arrested and, as a consequence of the public outcry, forced to publish an apology. The episode lived on the public’s imagination for some time. As Tiffany Stern has documented, both Chamberlain and Manningham record ‘the cozening prank of one Vennar’ in letters and diary entries. Twenty years later, in Jonson’s Masque of Augurs (1622), a sarcastic reference is made to ‘three of those Gentlewomen, that should have acted in that famous matter of England’s Joy’. The story of England’s Joy testifies to the public’s fervent desire for visual spectacle. The crowd had been prepared to pay twice the normal entrance price to see this theatrical extravaganza. Spectacular drama was evidently a money spinner.