

Illusion in the Renaissance and in Shakespeare

Renaissance art and thought embrace illusion and show

- 1. Castiglione: the courtier needs to put on a good show**
- 2. Machiavelli:**
 - a. Always seem good, but don't always be**
 - b. The people as audience**
- 3. Changes in the Renaissance theater**
 - a. Medieval theater (e.g. *Second Shepherds' Play*) was anti-illusionistic**
 - i. Songs: the actual songs from Christmas services**
 - ii. Characters and subplots: deliberately modernized**
 - iii. Language: oaths by Christ's cross, bad leaders speak French**
 - iv. Result: The story is about "us" – not an entertainment**
 - b. Renaissance theater**
 - i. The physical theater (see web site): what you see is always framed, always a "box of space"**
 - ii. It may seem non-illusionistic because later theater goes even farther into illusionistic**
 - iii. Language creates the illusion of distance, perspective, scenery**

- 4. Shakespeare's history plays (e.g. I Henry VI, the first he wrote)**
 - a. Illusion that "you are there" in a historical event: language, characters with "realistic" motives and feelings**
 - b. No interaction with audience: they play the "mutes" at court**
 - c. No direct references to anything modern**
 - d. A dishonest realism: all is Elizabethan propaganda, must be cleared by the censor**
- 5. Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies:**
 - a. Characters not modernized but abstracted: "universal" characteristics are emphasized**
 - b. Part of the entertainment is being off in distant lands and far-away places (on a stolen afternoon in London) – created by illusionistic language**

Shakespeare's chief goal: use this theater to question illusion itself

- 1. Illusion as an evil force**
 - a. Hamlet to father: "Stay, illusion"**
 - b. Pretend to be insane: become insane (Hamlet)**
 - c. Create an empty show for the court: become an empty show (Claudius)**
 - d. The rigged fencing match**
 - e. Polonius killed while a "mute"**
 - f. Pervasive illusions lead all to keep their defenses up**
- 2. As something more neutral or ambivalent**
 - a. Actors who can turn tears on and off at will**
 - b. Claudius show of praying**
 - i. Makes him more aware of his crime**
 - ii. Deters Hamlet**
- 3. As a good force (esp. in the comedies)**
 - a. The mousetrap scene: reveals truth about Claudius**
 - b. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola matures by posing as a man**
- 4. If you strip away the illusion, what is left?**
 - a. In *Twelfth Night*, loving people who marry each other**
 - b. In *Hamlet*, nothing**
 - i. Ophelia's madness and dirty talk**
 - ii. Yorick's skull**
 - iii. "To be or not to be": the appeal of decay and death**
 - iv. The final carnage, framed by Fortinbras' reaction**