Sense and Conscience: *Cymbeline*'s Insensible Bodies on the Indoor Stage

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After attending Trevor Nunn's 2007 production of *Cymbeline*, Penelope Woods was concerned that the unconscious bodies onstage—particularly the dummy portraying Cloten's headless corpse—excited unintentional laughter. She concludes, in her essay on "The Audience in Indoor Playhouses," that an early modern audience must have experienced the spectacle of tragic unconscious figures differently; they were more affected, or more willing to be affected, by a boy actor playing an unconscious lady than contemporary audiences would be. She persuasively argues that the "spatial coordinates" of the early modern indoor playhouse "framed and produced relational exchanges"[1] that were more intimate than the outdoor theatres; this site-specificity, coupled with a twenty-first century unwillingness to suspend disbelief and a four-hundred-year shift in phenomenological comprehension, must be the reason Trevor Nunn's audience found Cloten's body "titter-generating."[2]

But would Cloten's body have necessarily been un-funny to early modern spectators? The effect of those unconscious bodies was not necessarily pathos-inducing and humorless. Cloten's dummy corpse is sandwiched between Innogen's near-slapstick swoons—in less than forty lines, she wakes from the anesthetic effects of a

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potion, dozes off again, until she realizes she is lying on a corpse, which makes her faint, where a perplexed crew of Romans find her and rouse her. It is difficult to imagine a staging in which that would not be funny. The sheer amount of bodies sleeping, seeming-dead, coming back to life, swooning again, and straddling the borders of consciousness, suggests that *Cymbeline* is exploring and unraveling the conventions of onstage oblivion, rather than simply making use of those tropes. Historical phenomenologists point out that understanding the impact of bodies on the early modern stage requires recovering an early modern phenomenological perspective as well as observing and setting aside our own contemporary presumptions. I want to bring this work together with a close reading of the narrative placement of bodies in *Cymbeline* as a play written for the King's Men's transition from the outdoor to indoor stage.

Cymbeline is full of familiar tropes—drugs that induce living death, a possessive king and an ambitious queen, a wager and a ring, misplaced heirs to the throne… the list is so long as to be, in Valerie Wayne's reckoning, "uncommon."[3] In fact, just as Wayne reflects that Cymbeline is a "play of mixed genres" in which Shakespeare "reflects on, reimagines, and parodies his previous work while making something distinctly new,"[4] the narrative playfully exposes and reworks conventional images and storylines, re-teaching a changing audience how to look at unconscious bodies. In the process, I want to argue, it reveals a changing attitude towards consciousness and bodies themselves. It is difficult to date Cymbeline precisely, but it was certainly written and performed between 1609 and 1611,[5] just as the King's Men were adjusting to playing at—and writing for—both the indoor and outdoor playhouses. As Woods argues, the proximity and intimacy of an indoor theatre changes the way audiences look at unconscious bodies. Up close and by candlelight, an onstage spectator might be able to see the edges of a boy's makeup, or watch him slowly breathing as he plays dead. Contemporaneous King's Men plays like *Philaster* also pile up nostalgic storylines and well-known scenes from the 1580s and 90s. In other words, *Cymbeline* was part of a trend of plays "marked by. . . a tendency to make allusion to generic convention conspicuous."[6] In the midst of this sea change—both because of the new spatial interaction of the

play with its audience, and this new trend in theatrical fashion—Shakespeare cannily exploits this "hodge-podge"[7] style to create layers of dramatic irony throughout the narrative of *Cymbeline* that remove the spectators from the way they once looked at bodies onstage, and offer new ways of looking instead.

Luckily, Shakespeare offers his audience plenty of exemplary spectators (with a difference) in the pile-up of these 'conventional' scenes. Iachimo's speech as he watches the sleeping Innogen echoes Othello's speech before he wakes Desdemona; both reference a similar passage from *The Rape of Lucrece.* Regardless of the self-promotion on Shakespeare's part, audiences would surely have recognized the classical allusion to "Tarquin" at the top of Iachimo's speech. Just as Othello smells Desdemona's "balmy breath"[8] and Tarquin sees Lucrece's 'lily hand' and 'canopied' eyelids,[9] Iachimo realizes "tis [Innogen's] breathing that / perfumes the chamber thus," as he notes her "canopied" lids and "lily" skin.[10] These near-quotations prepare the audience for a *type* of scene, one in which a man pauses to admire the body of the sleeping woman he intends to harm. In all three scenes, the woman is exposed to their unwanted gaze and to almost certain violence; yet the audience or reader sees an intimate close-up of the body (even if they disapprove of speech-maker's actions) through the intruder's eyes.

However, *Cymbeline* creates ironic distance between the audience and the viewer through whose perspective they would usually see. Just as Tarquin and Othello bend to kiss their victim, she wakes; Innogen remains senseless to the danger, and sleeps right through as Iachimo (with a lewd aside around 'slippery' and 'hard') yanks the bracelet off her arm. Not only are the audience's expectations for the scene overturned, Iachimo's repeated and less-than-lofty "come off, come off," as he tugs on her bracelet breaks him out of the classical mode in which he has been speaking.[11] This darkly ironic moment of senselessness punctures the "generic conventions" of this scene. Iachimo violates Innogen, but not as other stage predators violate their victims; instead, a small moment of dark absurdity draws attention to the senselessness of Innogen's body, collapsing the audience's inter-theatrical expectations and modifying them. The strangeness and near-comedy of Innogen's unresponsive body creates an ironic alienation from the convention of how characters look at bodies onstage. The proximity of the

audience to the stage could create a sense of shared experience between spectators and characters; Innogen's senselessness, on the other hand, distances the spectators from her experience, and from this sympathetic perspective.

The narrative leads the audience on a journey from seeing Innogen's unconscious body through the eyes of her onstage observer to feeling more and more distant from the characters who look at and interact with bodies. A less subtle irony occurs when Guiderius and Arviragus mistakenly mourn Innogen's death, though the audience knows she is drugged but alive. Already, then, the audience can empathize with the brothers' grief while remaining distant from it themselves. Unlike the post-death scene in *Romeo and Juliet,* another play that makes use of a similar drug, the emphasis of this scene shifts to watching how the brothers mourn, rather than generating pity for their seeming-dead friend. A nice counterpoint to this moment is an audience account from a 1610 indoor performance of *Othello,* which was by that point a well-known tragedy. Watching the dead Desdemona, Henry Jackson found that "in her death [she] moved us especially when, as she lay in her bed, with her face alone she implored the pity of the spectators."[12] In this conventionally tragic moment, Jackson was drawn in by the corpse, who still seemed lifelike enough to "implore." In *Cymbeline,* by contrast, the audience watches Guiderius and Arviragus entertain the same affective pity that Jackson feels, but does not themselves feel the same supplication from Innogen, whom they know is still alive. The boys' heightened pastoral language and rustic traditions, like laying a corpse's head "to th'east,"[13] add another layer of distance between them and the audience. Their grief is punctured near the end of the scene by an adolescent squabble over whether to reverence and bury the headless corpse of Cloten, as well as Innogen.

Would the dummy, then, have been funny? Fake heads, false limbs, and even wax figures were common on the early modern stage, and were accepted substitutes for the real thing.[14] The doltish Cloten's dummy, however, is sandwiched between jokes about his cowardice; dressed in Posthumus' clothes, he invites ill comparison with the cleverer and more morally sound, if misguided, man. Innogen's nightmarish certainty that this dummy (in all ways) has the "shape of [Posthumus'] leg; this is his hand, / his foot

Mercurial, his Martial thigh, the brawns of Hercules"[15] creates empathy for her situation, but not sympathy with her mistake. As Wayne puts it, "the poignancy of her lament is compromised by the ironies of her confusion."[16] If the effect of this ironization is to place the audience at a deliberate remove from conventional ways of viewing senseless bodies—and to classify those conventions as old and therefore comical—it also suggests a perspective shift, both in style and in ways of seeing. Rather than looking at bodies, the audience looks at people who look at bodies. And there they find people who make a lot of mistakes. The world of *Cymbeline* has an uneasy logic to it: sensory information (particularly about the body) must be relied on, but is also entirely unreliable. These characters' identities are continually condensed and objectified by rings, bracelets, and garments. People—and their reputations—are identified by their garb, their distinctive body parts, their limbs and their moles. Yet these reductions cause crucial errors. The dummy's "shape" and Innogen's mole mischaracterize and misidentify them, rather than elucidate who they truly are. These comic moments, then, are directed at foolish onstage spectators who treat their own external sensory experience of someone's body—what they look like, smell like, and sound like—as infallible proof of identity, and are often wrong.

If the play alienates its audience from spectators who rely on their external senses, it offers an alternative; the same senseless bodies those onstage spectators were watching, the play suggests, have an internal sensory world of their own. The external senses are not the only ones on which to rely. Just as the audience is further and further alienated from conventional onstage spectators, they gain more and more insight into the internal state of characters on the borders of consciousness. Those senseless bodies seem not to be senseless after all.

Iachimo, to whose vision the audience remains closest, is cleverer than most; he is aware of the limits of the external, and imagines "underpeep[ing Innogen's] lids / to see th'enclosed lights."[17] In fact, the audience does get to peep into her lush, inner sensory world when she wakes, half-dreaming, from her living death. "Yes sir, to Milford Haven, which is the way?" she asks a dream character, and then furnishes the audience with a dream geography: "by yond bush. . . six mile yet?" She dreams she has

been walking all night, away from the place where she "was a cave-keeper / and cook to honest creatures. But 'tis not so."[18] She has divided and confused, then, her internal dream senses from her external ones; she believes her dream trek was true, while believing her past and current experiences to be nightmares. Looking at the headless corpse, she cries, "the dream's still here. Even when I wake it is / without me as within me, not imagined, felt."[19] In his new book on fainting, Giulio Pertile uses literary and dramatic accounts of faints and swoons to explore what early modern audiences imagined when "the mind has been cut off from the world around it"—when it is rendered senseless. "It is not arrested altogether," he argues, "but rather plunged into a layer of itself which normally remains invisible."[20] In *Cymbeline,* this invisible layer is not only acknowledged and described, but staged—and acts as an important plot point. The audience is invited even further into Posthumus's inner mind while he is in prison. They too experience the gorgeous, sensory set piece of a dream sequence, complete with thunder, perfumed smells, and a golden eagle stage prop flown down from the ceiling. Yet, though he and the audience experience the sensory climax of the play (one that, though portable between Blackfriars and the Globe, also makes specific use of indoor capacity for smells), Posthumus dismisses the experience when he wakes. Like Innogen, he regrets "dream[ing] as I have done," only to "wake and find nothing."[21]

Innogen and Posthumus' inner lives—and their mistrust, once awake, of both their dreamt and real senses—conjures another account of senses across the borders of consciousness, written about three decades later:

> when I considered that the very same thoughts which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be something. . . I think, therefore I am.[22]

Descartes, who (according to Paster) "begins the gradual epistemic process towards abstraction that overtakes early modern discourses

of body and mind,"[23] wrote this first iteration of his famous "cogito" theory in 1637. Scholars interested in phenomenology are right to warn twenty-first century viewers to approach early modern depictions of the body and consciousness with care; while reading Shakespeare's plays, they argue, we must recover a pre-Cartesian world in which the mind and the body—and indeed, the self—are not separate, but mutually defined by the humours and the senses.

The early modern body, they argue, creates, expresses, and defines the self. *Cymbeline* has its fair share of humoral references: the grieving Guiderius blames his friend's surprising death on melancholy, and Innogen herself explains away her dreams on "fumes"[24] which could rise up and cause confusion in the brain. Yet clearly, like Descartes, Shakespeare and his audience were also grappling with questions about the fallibility of the body and its senses. Inside *Cymbeline*'s seemingly insensible characters lies a rich sensory world; they can experience senses internally while their bodies lie senseless. Which are they to believe? While a pre-Cartesian approach undeniably reminds twenty-first century readers to reckon with distance between contemporary and early modern understandings, some critics, like Pertile and James Knapp, warn against taking too hard a line on excising conversations about internal and external selves from early modern studies before Descartes. Knapp notes that, in turn-of-the-seventeenth century humoral theory, "the idea that the humors could be regulated suggests that something…was doing the regulating."[25] The emphasis on where the self is located, then, shifts slightly from the body, with its humours and sensations, to the "regulator" of those humours and sensations. This is not to argue that Shakespeare is anticipating Descartes by thirty years; rather, it is to temper the idea that, before Descartes, consciousness was solely linked to the sensing body.

Instead, *Cymbeline* is a piece of work sensitive to the shifting circumstances of entertainment and determined to be on the cutting edge, specifically distancing itself from more "conventional" pieces. Rather than considering the audience alienation around conventional scenes simply as a balm to ease the switch to indoor playhouses, perhaps *Cymbeline* has a finger on the pulse of a larger cultural shift: one probing the borders of consciousness and placing

a firmer emphasis on the "regulator of the senses, the humours, and the body. *Cymbeline*—a play that alienates its audience from their usual ways of looking at unconscious bodies while simultaneously giving them ever-more lush sensory experiences that take place in the mind of those seemingly senseless characters—outlines a separation between the internal and external senses, and blurs the lines between these states. The characters, then, must dramatically "regulate" for themselves which experiences are the more "real," just as Descartes does.

Other cultural artefacts from the early 1600s point to a growing movement towards Decartes's emphasis on the internal self by exercising good judgement over the corporeal senses. In a series of engravings in 1544, Georg Pencz allegorized the five senses; immensely popular since the middle ages, series of "five senses" engravings were copied and printed through the eighteenth century.[26] In the 1610s or '20s, Willem van de Passe printed a series as well. Pencz's print personifies Tactus, or Touch, as a female weaver, with coiled braids and an elaborate spiderweb stretched across the window.[27] Here, the sense is transformed into an allegory, surrounded by images that evoke both the sensation of texture (from smooth hair to soft wool) and the idea of touch as sensory knowledge (spiders receive information through the vibrations on their web). By the 1620s, Tactus had morphed into van de Passe's scene of a man, richly clothed, fondling a naked woman's breast while in the corner, the figure of Cupid is bitten by a parrot.[28] The spider and the parrot are both traditional emblems of touch—the spider feels the world through its web, while the parrot is notorious for biting through flesh—but while the first image allegorizes Tactus, the second is a cautionary image to viewers who might overindulge in the sense (even as the depiction of fabric, hair, feathers, and skin invites imagination). The emphasis shifts, then, from the singular senses to the regulation and moderation of those senses.

Rather than think of the decades before 1637 as *non*-Cartesian, then, perhaps it would be helpful to emphasize the "pre-" in pre-Cartesian; this play, and these examples, are not explicitly separating mind from body. Instead, these examples help us see how the cultural, phenomenological emphasis shifts from imagining the senses informing and controlling the self to imagining the senses

as information gatherers which then need to be dissected and judged by a controlling intellect. For example, Bartholomeo del Bene's *Civitas Veri, Sive Morum* (The City of Truth, or Ethics)—a moral poem based on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics—was first published in 1609 along with a series of engravings, depicting the self as a city and its senses as the city's five gates. The protagonist must travel through all of the channels in order to progress to the center, which holds the Temples of Intelligence and Wisdom—the epistemic ability, in other words, to control and interpret sensory information. The central self, then, is this governing part of the body, which not only receives sensation but can assess and evaluate the sensations.

In *Cymbeline,* the ability to govern the senses acts as a rubric for moral judgement as the truth is revealed in the final scene. While the doctor reveals the queen's villainy, Cymbeline himself takes on blame (though not generously, and rather too late) for misinterpreting his sensory experience and being unable to "read a woman." "Mine eyes / were not in fault, for she was beautiful; / [nor] mine ears that heard her flattery." He could not help but believe his own senses, he implies; and yet "it was folly in [him]."[29] Where Posthumus and Innogen, after some thought, are ultimately able to distinguish between their external, real senses and their internal, dream senses, Cymbeline unquestioningly believes his queen's external "seeming" and must ask forgiveness for the harm it caused.

But the end of the play—and indeed, the mercy that Cymbeline grants himself for misjudging his wife's "seeming," and Innogen grants Posthumus for believing Iachimo's evidence—raises questions about what, exactly, these characters ought to base their knowledge on at all. "It had been vicious to have mistrusted her," Cymbeline reasons, just as it was vicious of Posthumus to mistrust Innogen.[30] In a scene where justice should be meted out, the characters are in a double bind. If they cannot believe in their senses—if bodies are not to be trusted, either as indicators of their own identity nor as gatherers of accurate sensory information—how are these characters supposed to know what they know?

Curiously, though many characters disguise themselves successfully throughout the play (Posthumus switches armies, not once, but twice without being suspected), these disguises are often

undercut by what Cymbeline calls "rare instinct."[31] Cymbeline, Guiderius, and Arviragus all sense something about "Fidele"—distinct from all the sensory information about who he is—that draws them to him against their logic. "I know not why / I love this youth,"[32] Arviragus wonders; echoing him, Cymbeline "know[s] not why, wherefore" he is drawn to save Fidele's life.[33] This kind of sixth sense or internal intelligence, accessing senses that the body cannot define, recalls Pertile's "invisible layer."

Innogen and Posthumus attempt to use good judgement to separate out their internal and external sensory experiences. But while their cautious conclusions seem at first to be good judgments, neither one is correct. Innogen's pastoral cave dwelling experience is so far removed from the rest of *Cymbeline*'s Britain in tone and plot that her verdict that they were a dream and the beheaded nightmare reality makes sense; but the audience knows it is not true. Likewise, Posthumus recognizes that his dream, which seemed so real, is "gone / and so I am awake."[34] In fact, however, both dreams were more real than either cautiously judged. Not only did Innogen's "dream" of her friends reveal true brothers with whom, by "rare instinct," she connected, but Posthumus's ghostly vision of his family leaves a wholly real tablet behind. The book, he hopes, will not be a 'garment nobler than it covers' but "most unlike our courtiers, / [be] as good as promise."[35] And it does exactly that: just as the bodies onstage contain hidden worlds, this book holds more insight inside than out.

As audience members, we are supposed to let our external senses trick us into believing that what we see, hear, and smell is true—even if our more metatheatrical intelligence judges it to be false, since we know we are watching a performance. With new proximity, candlelight, and new smells and sounds, even familiar plays and scenes might suddenly seem strange to early modern audiences watching the King's Men play indoors for the first time. If they were concerned about whether to pay more attention to their new external sensory experience or their internal imagined sense of what was happening, *Cymbeline* offers a compromise: metatheatrical laughs, spectacular dreams, and flashes of rare instinct.

Notes

1. Penelope Woods, "The Audience of the Indoor Theatre," in *Moving Shakespeare Indoors,* ed. Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 158.

2. Lyn Gardner, "*Cymbeline*—review," *Guardian,* 30 May 2012, quoted in Woods, 158.

3. Valerie Wayne, "Introduction," *Cymbeline,* ed. Valerie Wayne (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017) 28.

4. Wayne, "Introduction," 30.

5. Wayne "Introduction," 30 and Bart Van Es, "Reviving the Legacy of Indoor Performance," in *Moving Shakespeare Indoors,* ed. Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 249.

6. Van Es, "Reviving the Legacy," 248.

7. Wayne, "Introduction," 29.

8. William Shakespeare, "Othello," in *Shakespeare's Plays, Sonnets and Poems*, eds. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004), 5.2.17.

9. Ibid, *Lucrece,* lines 397, 386.

10. *Cymbeline,* 2.21.15-24.

11. Ibid, 2.2.36.

12. Quoted in Woods, "Audience," 155. I follow Woods' translation of "spectantium" as "spectators," rather than Antony B. Dawson's "audience."

13. *Cymbeline,*, 4.2.254.

14. Woods, "Audience," 157.

15. *Cymbeline,* 4.2.308-310.

16. Wayne, *Cymbeline,* footnote, 305.

17. *Cymbeline,* 2.2.20-21.

18. Ibid, 4.2.290-299.

19. Ibid, 4.2.379-380.

20. Giulio J. Pertile, *Feeling Faint* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 172.

21. *Cymbeline,* 5.4.131-2.

22. René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason," trans. John Veitch (Edinburgh: Sutherland and Knox), 74.

23. Gail Kern Paster, *Humouring the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 246.

24. *Cymbeline,* 4.2.300.

25. James Knapp, "Beyond Materiality in Shakespeare Studies," *Literature Compass* 11.10 (November 2014), 684.

26. Carl Nordenfalk. "The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art," *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institute*s 48 (1985), 4.

27. Georg Pencz, "Tactus, from The Five Senses," c. 1544, engraving, 77 x 51 mm (London, British Museum). Accessed 25 April 2019. https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=621838001&objectId=1569745&partId=1.

28. Willam van de Passe, "Tactus," c. 1620. Engraving, 226 x 167 mm (London, British Museum). Accessed 25 April 2019. https://www.britishmuseum.

org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=127018001&objectId=1351018&partId=1.

29. *Cymbeline,* 5.5.74-79.
30. Ibid, 5.5.109.
31. Ibid, .5.464.
32. Ibid, 4.2.24-5.
33. Ibid, 5.5.110.
34. Ibid, 5.4.137-9.
35. Ibid, 5.4.136-140.