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## FRAMING THE STAGE AND STAGING THE FRAME:

### *MAN'S DESIRE AND FLEETING BEAUTY*

Frames, such as prologues and epilogues, are a common feature of early European drama. The rich variety of early theatre, its diversity of players, purpose and place, requires a nuanced investigation of its dramatic frames, but studies so far have tended to offer oversimplified accounts assuming merely practical and/or narrowly didactic functions. This scholarship is also generally based on read experiences of play scripts whereas, in fact, performance research and audience research are essential to an investigation of the effect of frames on audiences. By staging an early play with and without its frame and analysing audience feedback, we shed further light on the multifaceted effect of framing material for the performance and its reception and thus also on the didactic role of early drama.

#### **Importance of Frames**

The action of medieval and sixteenth-century plays is often presented within some form of 'frame' in which the audience are directly addressed. The speaker or speakers may be endogenous or exogenous to the action presented: *Mankind's* Mercy preaches to the audience just as he will preach to the protagonist, and York's Deus introduces himself to the spectator but the angels sing in response; by contrast the Messenger who asks us to 'gyve audyence' to the *The Somonyng of Everyman* disappears after his opening speech, replaced by God's Messenger, Death, and at the end of the play by a 'Doctour' who offers the closing remarks; and Contemplatio stands apart from the action of the N. Town *Mary Play*, in the

same time as its audience, interpreting its scenes with typological hindsight. By the time Henry Medwall writes *Fulgens and Lucrez*, the play frame is sufficiently established to be the butt of metatheatrical humour: the play is introduced by two characters who think they are not part of the action, but in fact are, and the play will end, as these same characters note with some surprise, whenever they finally leave the stage. This sophisticated development did not signal an end to the play frame: John Bale even addresses the audience in his own voice, *Baleus Prolocutor*, to explain what they should draw from his plays *Johan Baptystes Preachynge* and *The Three Laws*, and of course the play frame continued to thrive in the playhouse, in the prologues and epilogues of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare among others, as well as in the more developed Christopher Sly episode with which *The Taming of the Shrew* famously begins.

It is important to exercise caution over potential gaps between the historically remote performance and the written form in which it reaches us today: if the N. Town manuscript was prepared for a reader, then perhaps some elements such as certain speeches of the commentator *Contemplatio* were added or adapted for that reader, and not part of the play as first performed;<sup>1</sup> the 'pre-prologue' which now introduces *The Enterlude*

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Granger's *N Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East Anglia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009) argues that the T Town manuscript may have been compiled or copied for a reader, although the material which it drew together was originally written for performance. She argues for a number of adaptations for that reader, and suggests that 'The theological expositions and dialogues would be more easily comprehended by someone reading and re-reading the text rather than merely hearing it once a year at most' (p.185) although she does not explicitly discuss *Contemplatio* much: she does note that, at the beginning of 'The Parliament of Heaven' episode, *Contemplatio* exceptionally adopts 'a part in the pageant rather than acting as

*of the Godly Queene Hester* as a text by which women may learn 'How to behave your selves in humilitie'<sup>2</sup> is a 're-packaging' device to sell the printed edition and was almost certainly never spoken. Nonetheless, play frames are an enduring feature of early theatre in all its variety. And although our examples so far have been English, frames are just as significant in other European dramatic traditions: for example, the angel opening and closing the performance of Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni* was such a standard feature that a woodcut of an angel became a key way of identifying the genre of the content in early printed editions. In Dutch drama associated with the rhetoricians (*rederijkers*), we find more traditional, shorter prologues and epilogues, as well as more elaborate, dramatised ones. The more traditional and the dramatised prologues could occur alongside one another to frame any given play, and they could even be merged. One play, *King Proetus Abantus* (Coninck Proetus Abantus), starts with a traditional, read prologue (which seems to have been how these prologues were often performed, 'so let this count as a read prologue', *dus laet u dit voor een prolooch gelesen sijn* line 103). This is then followed by a

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Prologue' (p.99). This moment was discussed by Greg as evidence that *Contemplacio* was written into this play at a late stage (W.W. Greg *Bibliographical and Textual Problems of the English Miracle Cycles* (London: A. Moring, 1914, 125-6 n.1) and that the first lines of the play were originally written for Angels and Archangels. Forrest argues instead that *Contemplacio* here assumes the lines of prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Patricia Forrest 'The Role of the Expositor *Contemplacio* in the Saint Anne's Day Plays of the Hegge Cycle' *Mediaeval Studies* 28 (1966) 60-76, esp. 69-73), a view that has been followed by more recent scholars.

<sup>2</sup> *The Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* edited Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell 2000) 410

dramatised prologue, as indicated in the paratextual notes (a dramatised prologue, *Een prolooch speelwys*, fol. 9v) and the stage direction (this dramatised prologue, *desen spelende prolooch*, fol. 9v).<sup>3</sup> In another play, *The Bell Rope* (*De Clockreep*, copied c. 1600), one actor appears on stage to read the prologue only to discover, to his great discomfiture, that the paper he was given (and which was supposed to contain the prologue) is in fact blank. He calls for help from the other actors, but receives no response. He then turns to the audience for help and a spectator – or rather, an actor who was standing among the spectators – climbs on stage to help keep the audience entertained while the first actor exits the stage in pursuit of the missing actors.<sup>4</sup> Read prologues appear to have been so common as to invite metatheatrical comment in this tradition.

### **Frames as Practical and Didactic Devices**

Many scholars assume that frames are devices to deal with practical challenges presented by a pre-playhouse dramatic culture: without specially built theatres or stage curtains, and with only limited artificial lighting, players used prologues and epilogues to mark the

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<sup>3</sup> *Coninck Proetus Abantus* (copied c. 1600) in *Trou moet blijcken: Bronnenuitgave van de boeken der Haarlemse rederijkerskamer 'de Pellicanisten'. Deel 1: Boek A* edited W. N. M Hüsken, B. A. M. Ramakers en F. A. M. Schaars (Assen: Quarto, 1992). The manuscript is digitised at <http://noord-hollandsarchief.nl/bronnen/archieven?mivast=236&mizig=210&miadt=236&miaet=918&micode=2465-5&minr=44696297&miview=inv2>.

<sup>4</sup> *Trou moet blijcken ... Deel 2: Boek B* edited W. N. M Hüsken et al.

beginning and end of their plays.<sup>5</sup> However, prologues and epilogues are also features of playhouse drama. Moreover, early playwrights could use other means of ensuring a quiet and attentive audience; in many German plays, for example, there is a cry for silence ('silete') before the prologue. An alternative, or perhaps a complementary, explanation argues for a didactic use of frames, where frames reiterate the take-home lesson of the play in a straightforward, authoritative way. Bart Ramakers and Hans van Dijk write:

*Middeleeuws toneel is ook bij uitstek auctorieel. De didactische doelstelling leidt ertoe dat voortdurend wordt gezocht naar mogelijkheden de handeling ter lering van het publiek te interpreteren, door het opnemen van prologen en epilogen.*<sup>6</sup>

'Medieval drama is also explicitly authoritative. The didactic intentions result in a continuous searching for possible ways in which the events can be interpreted so as to educate the audience, by including prologues and epilogues.'

Most early drama scholars express little doubt about the effectiveness of the didacticism of prologues and epilogues.<sup>7</sup> Yet studies in Audience Research have shown that 'often the aims

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Hans-Jürgen Diller *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form* (CUP, 1992) 322. Diller pushes back against this assumption.

<sup>6</sup> Bart Ramakers and Hans van Dijk 'Spel en spektakel: Ter inleiding' in *Spel en spektakel: Middeleeuws toneel in de Lage Landen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2001) 9–34, at 15.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Elsa Strietman, "'Every Man, I wyll go with thee and be thy guide': Narrators, Expositors, and Prompters in the Drama of the Low Countries', in *The Narrator, the Expositor, and the Prompter* edited Philip Butterworth (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 11–44, at 20.

of the theatre makers are not, or only partly, realized'.<sup>8</sup> Audiences do not necessarily respond as expected, and do not necessarily receive the intended message – indeed, they may resist that message, or draw their own morals and conclusions. Moreover, as John McGavin and Greg Walker note when assessing audience responses to the performance of moral lessons:, 'it is not in the disruptive behaviour that we find the likelihood of resistance, but rather in those elements which present positive models of conduct and identity'.<sup>9</sup> This leaves open the possibility that even the most straightforward of didactic frames might not have been able to close down alternative modes of engaging with the performance. In fact, many early framing devices tacitly or explicitly gesture towards misinterpretation and divergent spectator responses. A nice example is Contemplacio's opening blessing to N. Town's *Mary* play:

Cryst conserve þis congregacyon,

Fro perellys past, present, and future,

And þe personys here pleand, þat þe pronunciacyon

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Schoenmakers and John Tulloch 'From Audience Research to the Study of Theatrical Events: A Shift in Focus' in *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* edited Vicky Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans van Maanen, Willmar Sauter and John Tulloch (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2004) 15–25, at 19.

<sup>9</sup> John J. McGavin and Greg Walker *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (OUP, 2016) 99, [this is in a footnote, so add: 'at note xx']

Of here sentens to be seyde mote be sad and sure;  
 And þat non oblocucyon make þis matere obscure,  
 But it may profite and plese eche persone present  
 For þe gynnyng to þe endyng so to endure,  
 þat Cryst and every creature with þe conceyte be content.<sup>11</sup>      lines 1–8

These lines reveal anxiety about how practical mishaps such as poor delivery may mar the transfer of the play's message to the audience; they also draw the audience's attention to the possibility that not every spectator will benefit from and/or be pleased with the performance.<sup>12</sup> A further promise that there will be 'fewe wurdys talkyd, þat it xulde nat be tedyous' (line 14) brings the spectre of spectator boredom to the foreground. In the prologue to the second part of Cornelis van Ghistele's play on the story of Aeneas and Dido (1551 or 1552), two malcontent spectators persist in their objections to the subject matter of the performance and finally decide to leave for Paris where, so a third character assures them, they will find plays to their liking. This defense of the play's content does not just

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<sup>11</sup> *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8* edited Stephen Spector *EETS S.S. 11* (OUP, 1991) 1 [Do we need to add the Play name here, or before the edition title? and the line numbers?]

<sup>12</sup> See also William Fitzhenry 'The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater' *Studies in Philology* 100 (2003) 22–43, at 28–29, 32.

acknowledge the possibility of divergent audience responses but expects divergent responses - hence the need to counter such criticism.

The degree to which such frames manage, or even intend, to reinforce the moral message and close down alternative interpretations requires further investigation because it raises important questions about how theatre functioned as a didactic tool in medieval and sixteenth-century society. Furthermore, in several plays the reiteration of the moral lesson in the frame seems superfluous, perhaps indicating that framing material had effects other than, or on top of, the narrowly didactic. Although frames can and did have practical and didactic functions, these arguments alone do not convincingly explain their repeated and sophisticated use in many of the surviving plays.

### **The Performance Experiment**

Performance research is clearly essential to an investigation of the effect of frames on audiences. Of course, performance research is always subject to limitations:<sup>13</sup> firstly, we must acknowledge that a past performance could never be exactly replicated, even if a great deal were known about it. This is true of all theatre, since even with a modern West-End run, performances will vary with actors' energy, or audience mood, or any other number of human variables. Secondly, it is impossible to know entirely what an audience experiences:

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<sup>13</sup> See Elisabeth Dutton 'A Manifesto for Performance Research' in *The Methuen Drama Handbook to Theatre History and Historiography* edited Claire Cochrane and Joanna Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) 249–60

there will be as many experiences as there are members of the audience, and while audience members will influence each other's responses, no one can speak for another. The most conscientiously completed audience questionnaire is unlikely to capture the complete experience of even one individual, and the results of technology that tracks eye movement or neurological response are partial and probably compromised by the audience members' awareness that they are being 'tested'.<sup>14</sup> And if these problems beset research into contemporary audiences, it is clearly impossible that such research could be unproblematically mapped onto the responses of audiences five centuries remote in their circumstances and world view.

On the other hand, we argue that, since all performance research will offer only a partial picture of the audience experience, medieval subjects are as valid as modern ones, as long as the partial and provisional nature of any insight is acknowledged. We decided to stage a play twice, once with and once without a frame, and to use audience questionnaires to explore the effect of the frame on the audience's understanding of and engagement with the play.

### ***Man's Desire***

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Purcell *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

The play we opted to stage is Cornelis Meesz. van Hout's *Man's Desire and Fleeting Beauty* (*Een esbattement van sMenschen Sin en Verganckelijcke Schoonheit*), an example of a Dutch rhetoricians' play. These plays were products of the *rederijkerskamers*, or chambers of rhetoric, which flourished in the Low Countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the chambers provided entertainment during civic festivities, and, like guilds, supported their members' welfare in various ways; they also regularly organized competitions at which the chambers of various cities, towns, and even villages would present plays and poetry in order to win prizes. One type of play that is typical of the rhetoricians' oeuvre, and which was often performed at competitions, is the so-called *spel van sinne*; these are moral plays that employ personification allegory. Many of these would have been performed outdoors in daylight to the general public. These plays could be accompanied by framing materials, including read and/or dramatised prologues and epilogues (as outlined above), although many of them also survive without any frame.

*Man's Desire* is a typical rhetoricians' *spel van sinne*. It was written for a Leiden chamber of rhetoric to perform at a rhetoricians' competition in Gouda in 1546. Numerous songs and lengthy speeches in complex verse forms provide opportunities for the performers and indeed the author to display their rhetorical skill; the rhetoricians were keen on elaborate verse forms and became (in)famous for their intricate rhyme schemes. The play is clearly educative, encouraging meditation on mortality through the arguments and interactions of its characters, who are allegorical personifications. Fashion and Custom are *sinnemens*, traditional figures that usually occur in pairs and that teach the audience about folly through their corruption of the protagonist. They are similar to the vice figures of English allegorical plays, not least because their didactic function often depends on their

theatrical effectiveness: vices are often entertaining, winning audiences over through their lively singing, dancing, or dirty jokes in order to demonstrate the initial attractiveness of much that corrupts. Fashion and Custom are perhaps less unambiguously evil than vice figures, but they nonetheless urge Man's Desire to pursue Fleeting Beauty; they dress him elaborately and instruct him in the arts of seduction; they then praise him to Fleeting Beauty, encouraging her to follow him into the bower of bliss. There is a great deal of comical innuendo, but when Fashion and Custom open the bower to greet the lovers, they encounter Death and 'on a tapestry in large letters' the warning:

ALL YOU LOVERS OF FAIR FLEETING BEAUTY,  
 PAY HEED TO THIS SHOW WHILE YOU'VE BREATH.  
 EMBRACE WHAT'S ETERNAL, LOVE TRULY,  
 OR YOUR ONLY REWARD WILL BE DEATH.<sup>15</sup>

The play also has an extensive frame. In the opening scenes two local Gouda citizens and a woman from Leiden discuss the performance which is about to take place; the discussion offers some insight into the circumstances of the rhetoricians' play competitions, and the sort of audience they might expect. The Woman from Leiden is a devoted follower who has walked a considerable distance – around 22 km as the crow flies – to Gouda to attend the competition, in spite of blisters on her feet (40). She tells us that she will stay up

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<sup>15</sup> *Man's Desire and Fleeting Beauty: a sixteenth century comedy* translated Robert Potter and Elsa Strietman (Cambridge: Viterbo Press, 1984) p.79 (THERE ARE NO LINE NUMBERS IN EDN). All quotations to this edition.

all night and endure any weather to watch the rhetoricians perform their art (41): it seems the rhetoricians had groupies. The Woman from Leiden's conversation with the First Citizen reveals also that there was a 'grand parade' opening the competition as well as 'songs and poetry' (40-41) and that the plays were judged and prizes awarded. This tallies with information we have about rhetoricians' competitions.<sup>16</sup> She also tells the First Citizen that she attends other celebrations with input from the rhetoricians in Leiden on either New Year's Eve or May Day (41). The First Citizen shows the Woman on her way but comments that, while her passion is for poetry (the plays are equated with poetry, but then the rhetoricians were known for their elaborate poetic skill), his is for business. The Second Citizen now appears and persuades the First Citizen to attend the plays after all, and they hurry to find a place to watch as the prologue-reader arrives onstage: the more conventional read prologue explains the play's Christian teaching, and the *sinnkens* then appear to start the action of the play proper.

At the end the Citizens reconvene to discuss the play: the First Citizen has lost his scepticism and been seized by the play's message; he repents of his interest in material wealth and prays to God for mercy (83-4). The Second Citizen joins him in his prayer although he is more impressed by his friend's speech than he was by the play itself, which

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<sup>16</sup> The Antwerp 1561 competition is perhaps especially well documented and researched. A good account of that event and its prizes can be found in *De Antwerpse Spelen van 1561 naar de editie Silvius (Antwerpen 1562)* edited Ruud Ryckaert (Gent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 2011) 1 19-48. Although the competition in Gouda in 1546 was not as grand an affair as the 1561 Antwerp one, many facets of the competition would have been similar.

he did not understand and could not properly see or hear because of a tall audience member in front of him and ‘two chatterboxes, chattering’ (81). We do not see the Woman from Leiden again, but the Citizens model the diversity of live audience response that makes studying audiences at once so complicated and so engaging.

The play survives in a manuscript copy by Reyer Gheurtsz, a rhetorician from Amsterdam, which is dated 1552. We also know that the Haarlem chamber The Pelican (*De Pellicanisten*) once had a copy as its register notes ‘Item another *spel van sinnen* of Fleeting Beauty and Man’s Desire commences with its prologue on folio 60 and has 8 characters and is altogether 982 lines long (*‘Item noch een spul van sinnen van verganckelijcke schoonheit ende smenschen sin begint sijn prologe in folie .60. ende heeft 8 parsonages ende is Lanck tsaemen ... 982 regulen’*); this version would therefore seem to be near identical to Reyer Gheurtsz’ version given that it has the same number of speaking parts and roughly the same number of lines.<sup>17</sup> Although the volume containing this play text has unfortunately not survived and can therefore not be dated, the surviving volumes in this collection were

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<sup>17</sup> *Trou moet blijcken ... . Deel 8: de boeken I, N, M en R* edited Hüsken et al (Assen: Quarto, 1998) 675. Another entry in the chamber's register notes that the play was performed on the feast day of St. John the Baptist in 1595 (*Trou moet blijcken* 711). Reyer Gheurtsz's copy has 936 lines in the modern edition; the scribe himself counted 930 lines; Brussels: Koninklijke Bibliotheek Ms. 21652, headnote and explicit fols 1r and 22r. Counting lines is not always an exact science and this difference need not indicate that the Haarlem copy had some additional lines although that is certainly also possible.

copied c. 1600 and it is therefore likely that our missing text would have been copied around the same time.

Although both manuscript versions seem to have contained the frame, that frame is actually very specific to its original performance setting as it is clearly set at the Gouda competition of 1546. The play can also easily be performed without it: were both the scene of the Citizens and the read prologue omitted, the performance would open with a call-to-stage of the *sinnekens* (where one *sinneken* on-stage calls to the other *sinneken* who is still off-stage and who then also appears on-stage), which is a conventional opening for rhetoricians' plays. Several of the *spelen van sinne* performed at the Antwerp competition of 1561 start this way, for example.<sup>18</sup> Without the epilogue with the two Citizens, *Man's Desire* would end with the *sinnekens'* moral comments on the plot development – a perfectly sensible place to conclude. Both parts of Cornelis van Ghistele's Aeneas and Dido play end with the *sinnekens'* moralising, for example.<sup>19</sup> The apparent detachability of *Man's Desire's* frame was the reason we selected it for a performance experiment on the effects of dramatic framing: we could stage the play once with and once without the frame, and both

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. the *spel van sinne* of *Der Vreuchden Bloeme* from Bergen op Zoom, of *De Leliebloeme* from Diest, of *De Leliken uyten Dale* from Zoutleeuw, all start with a call-to-stage of the *sinnekens*. Hummelen also notes the traditional character of the *sinnekens'* opening scene; W.M.H. Hummelen *De sinnekens in het rederijkersdrama* (Groningen: Wolters, 1958) 87.

<sup>19</sup> See also Charlotte Steenbrugge 'When is a Prologue (Not) a Prologue?: The Second Prologue in Cornelis van Ghistele's *Van Eneas en Dido*' *European Medieval Drama* 29 (forthcoming), for the lack of closing epilogue in this play.

stagings would seem sufficiently 'complete' for audiences to accept. Furthermore, given that the epilogue seems to offer a somewhat redundant reiteration of an entirely explicit moral, literally spelled out in the play's climactic scene on the tapestry banner, we were particularly curious to see whether the audience who saw the play with the epilogue responded differently to those who did not. In other words, did the epilogue, by modelling responses to the play, add something other than the re-articulation of 'the moral of the story'?

The script has been translated into English with great wit by Robert Potter and Elsa Strietman; we used this translation for the two performances (framed and unframed).<sup>20</sup> Thanks to a British Academy grant, we were able to present the play without charging for tickets, and spectators were invited to attend either or both of the performances.<sup>21</sup> We then asked spectators and actors to complete questionnaires. Of course, for spectators who saw the play twice, the experience of the second performance was inevitably affected not only by the frame but also by the fact that they now knew the punchline; we could not find any way to isolate the effect of the frame from this effect.

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<sup>20</sup> *Man's Desire and Fleeting Beauty: a sixteenth century comedy* translated Robert Potter and Elsa Strietman (Cambridge: Viterbo Press, 1984). As the audience did not have access to the Dutch original, and this article is focused on how the audience engaged with the performance, the original Dutch will not be quoted in this article. The Dutch play is available in a modern edition: *Een Esbattement van sMenschen Sin en Verganckelijcke Schoonheit* edited Medewerkers van het Nederlands Instituut der Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen (Zwolle: Willink, 1967).

<sup>21</sup> The performances took place in New College Chapel, Oxford, on 29 September 2024.

## **The Design of the production**

Dutch rhetoricians' plays were performed on a platform stage with a back wall that had doors on either side of a central reveal. For *Man's Desire* the reveal is all-important: it contains the 'bower' that is the location of earthly delights but also, in the play's punchline, is home to Death. Thanks to the kind support of Dr Erica Longfellow, Dean of Divinity at New College, Oxford, we were able to use the New College antechapel, which has a screen with three arches, the central arch of which has doors which provide access to the main chapel. These doors became the means of our reveal. Simple staging platforms in front of the carved wooden screen created a rhetoricians' stage with an elegantly carved back wall, similar to that imagined in scholarly reconstructions of sixteenth-century stages and contemporary images. However, while the venue afforded a visually appropriate stage, it must be acknowledged that being indoors, in a crepuscular antechapel, contributed to an atmosphere very different from that of an outdoor performance with a jostling and chattering crowd. **PHOTO OF CHAPEL AND ILLUSTRATION OF RHETS' STAGE?**

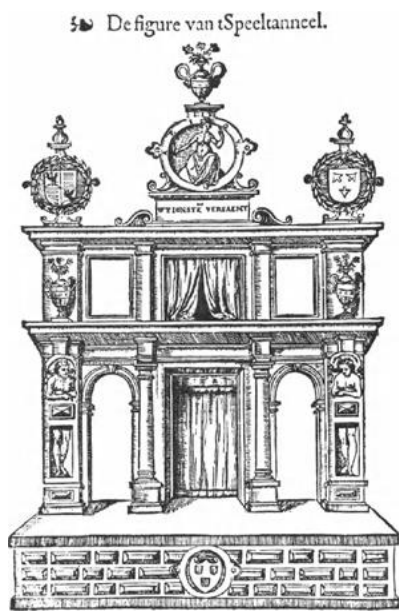


Fig 1 The stage of the Antwerp 1561 competition as printed by Silvius (1562)<sup>22</sup>

The central arch which became our reveal is rather low, and to allow its doors to open, as they do, inwards, the tableau of Death in the bower had to be set rather far back. This created challenges of sightlines and also of lighting, since considerable shadow was cast onto the tableau. As we were already using electric lighting rather than the ambient outdoor light that would have been most authentic, we had no hesitation in adding further spotlights to address the problem of the visibility of the reveal. However, it was impossible to hang the banner which we had printed for the 'tapestry' within the bower at a height that

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example W.M.H. Hummelen *'Typen van toneelinrichting bij de rederijkers' Studia Neerlandica* (1970) 51-109 and Timothy De Paepe, 'Inrichting en gebruik van het Antwerpse rederijkerstoneel tussen 1619 en 1664: Een virtuele reconstructie', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 22 (2006), 316-332

allowed it to be read. We therefore hung the banner in front of the reveal, but covered it with hanging swags of foliage and roses that could be cut to reveal its text at the appropriate moment. The foliage and roses complemented the roses, ivy and columbines with which we decorated the stage and its arches, picking up on references to burgeoning nature in the Citizens' speeches and to the white columbine, symbol of the Leiden chamber of rhetoric putting on the play.<sup>23</sup>

The cast of the main play was all-male, in line with the conventions of sixteenth-century rhetoricians. They wore period costume: doublets and hose for the male characters, and wide-sleeved, square-necked gowns for the females. The gender of the character of Fashion is somewhat undetermined in the play, and the actor playing the role chose to keep his beard although wearing a woman's gown (in dusty pink velvet, matching Custom's doublet) and a wig with a woman's hairstyle. The effect was familiar to modern audiences from bearded drag performers like Austrian 2014 Eurovision Song Contest Winner Conchita Wurst, and went unremarked by younger audience members, although

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<sup>23</sup> The wooing scene between Man's Desire and Fleeting Beauty is in fact riddled with references to the names and the devices of chambers of rhetoric which had been invited to the 1546 Gouda competition in the Dutch original. The mention of marigolds (*goutblûemkens* line 556), for example, references the chamber *De Goudsbloem* ('The Marigold') from Gouda, and the mention of red roses (*rode rooskens* line 594) links back to *De Roode Roosen* from Schiedam. Although the translation does keep some of these references, their impact on a modern audience versus the intended, original audience would be very different. For an analysis of these references in the original, see *Een Esbattement van sMenschen* 11–19.

some older people found it distracting. *Fleeting Beauty* was performed in a powder-blue velvet gown by an experienced drag artist who brought his own magnificent female wigs and make-up: by contrast with *Fashion*, until he spoke he readily passed as female. Man's *Desire* appeared first in a sober long black gown but was subsequently decked out by the *sinnekens* in silver taffeta, with a red heart-shaped cod-piece, large red heart motif on his doublet, and a red velvet cape.

The period costume facilitated gender play and offered considerable humour; on the other hand, it meant that the modern audience had an additional layer of distancing from characters who, for the first audiences, would have more closely resembled them in attire. For the characters in the play frame, by contrast, we chose modern dress, since they represent, in some sense, the audience: the First and Second Citizens wore modern business suits, and the First Citizen carried a *Financial Times*; the Woman from Leiden was in a woolly jumper and beanie hat, and carried a scruffy rucksack and heavy walking boots – she had the look of a festival-goer. She was played by the only female performer in the production: this again reflected her status as representative of the world of the audience in which female performers conventionally play women's roles. Of course, the contrast between the historical periods in which the characters in the main play and the those of the frame were located by their costumes may have led the modern audience to experience main play and frame in sharper contrast than did sixteenth-century audiences.

## **The Questionnaires**

At the end of each performance we invited audience members to complete a questionnaire containing the following questions:

- Did you identify with any of the characters? If so, which one(s) and why? If not, why do you think this is?
- What is the message of the play?
- Was there any moment or aspect of the play that made that message especially clear?
- Do you feel that the message of the play applies to you? Why do you think that is?
- What did you enjoy most about the performance?
- Did the play surprise you at all? Was it what you would have expected of an early modern play?

The questions were simple and open, and may even appear naïve: their aim, however, was to access raw responses rather than sophisticated, academic thoughts. In particular, a single identifiable message of the sort implied in the second question is perhaps never to be found in a literary work: however, the question was designed to test scholarly theories that attribute similarly simplistic motives and functions to play frames. There was one additional question for the second performance to accommodate responses from people who attended both shows: 'If you attended both performances, did you respond differently to each performance? If so, how and why is that?'. Specifically, the questions aimed to get a sense of the effect of the frame on the audience's experience of the play without drawing the participants' attention to the presence or absence of the frame by mentioning it in any

of the questions as this would have influenced their responses. It is often proposed that epilogues and prologues are included for didactic purpose, but we wanted to discover whether, in practice, in our performances, the spectators' understanding of the play's moral was actually affected by the inclusion of the frame. Did the play, with or without the frame, in addition to teaching a moral, encourage a more personal, more emotional, more critical response?

We collected a decent number of responses, but the numbers are still small: three people did the questionnaire for both performances, twenty-five people for the 6pm show without the frame, fifteen people for the 8pm show with the frame. Only one actor did the questionnaire. In our analysis we have added percentages for ease of reference, but it should be borne in mind that a single response will have an unduly large effect on percentage numbers. We also received some longer responses which we will discuss in some detail below.

### **The Findings**

From our data, it appears that the presence of the frame did genuinely result in a different kind of engagement. Indeed, the actors themselves noted this informally, as well as in one response: 'It was greatly enhanced by the inclusion of the frame and the frameless version had palpably less impact in terms of the audience mood and level of engagement.'

Admittedly, the actors were more confident and fluent in the later show, which included the frame, which might also account for some of this sensation, but the feeling that the framed version worked better is actually backed up by the audience responses (though again, this

might be due to the stronger show). However, it is certainly possible that the second show was stronger because of the inclusion of the frame.

From the very first question (Did you identify with any of the characters? If so, which one(s) and why? If not, why do you think this is?) there is a noticeable difference between questionnaires from the two performances. We found that the frame encouraged audience members to identify with characters, but not necessarily characters within the frame, even though these were presented as contemporaries of the audience. Although the frame does significantly enable identification by presenting more characters with whom to identify, it did not appear to enable identification at the expense of characters in the inner play, or imply that the inner play did not contain characters with whom a (modern) audience can identify. It seems therefore relatively clear that the frame enabled spectators to engage on a more personal level with the play, seeing themselves or characteristics of themselves reflected on stage and/or *vice versa*. These findings back up Hans van Dijk's suggestion that the outer plays were added to rhetoricians' plays not simply for 'clarification' but also to further 'the process of identification, a well-tried means of capturing the audience's attention.'<sup>24</sup> However, van Dijk claims that the frame enables identification by allowing spectators to identify specifically with the frame characters as they represent the audience to a degree, e.g.:

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<sup>24</sup> Hans van Dijk 'Structure as a Means to Audience Identification in the Dutch *Rederijker* Drama' in *European Theatre 1470-1600: Traditions and transformations* edited Martin Gosman and Rina Walthaus (Groningen: Forsten, 1996) 113-117, at 115.

This clear recognition of the characters in the outer play facilitates possible audience identification, which in turn greatly stimulates the striking effects of the play's message. Thus the outer play is even more suited than the inner play to express ideas, to teach, which was precisely one of the most important motives of the *rederijkers*.<sup>25</sup>

Our findings suggest, instead, that although the inclusion of the frame did encourage spectators to identify with characters on stage, spectators did not exclusively or mainly identify with the contemporary characters of the frame rather than the allegorical personifications of the main play.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, at the frameless show eighteen out of thirty-five responses (51%) said they did not identify with anyone, but at the performance with the frame only one person did not identify with anyone (out of 18 responses, 6%): however, identification with frame characters amounts to only seven out of eighteen responses (39%), with only two fewer identifications with *Man's Desire* (5/18, 28%). In fact, the protagonist of the outer frame (*First Citizen*) and the protagonist of the inner play (*Man's Desire*) were both named in five instances, so these two count for 28% of the identifications each. For comparison, at the frameless show only four people identified with *Man's Desire* (out of 35 responses, 11%) compared to the five people who named *Man's Desire* at the framed show (out of 18 responses, 28%); *Fashion* was the character that was named most in the frameless

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<sup>25</sup> van Dijk 'Structure' 115.

<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps worth noting in this regard that no-one identified with the *Woman from Leiden*, the only woman in the frame, despite women attending the performance and filling in questionnaires.

responses, but still only five times (out of 35, 14%; Fashion is named twice at the 8pm show, which translates to the roughly equivalent 11%).

Evidently, the inclusion of the frame was associated with a more personal engagement with the performance. This seemed to have encouraged spectators not only to identify with elements of the story being portrayed on stage but also to reflect on how the play's moral message applies to them and their lives. The impression that the presence of the frame stimulates audience identification is strengthened when one looks at the feedback for the fourth question (Do you feel that the message of the play applies to you? Why do you think that is?). Indeed, one longer response made this very clear:

The closing scene of the frame struck me when I saw it as an anticlimax, and I felt rather impatient with it at the time, but after not much reflection I realised it had actually focussed the general theme of the overmastering effect of desire on to more specific questions about the effects of fashion and custom, and I started to think, by analogy, of current discussions about the extent to which online advertising and easy availability of consumer goods foster acquisitiveness, which fosters discontent, and so on in a spiral.

This encouragement of personal application is perhaps not surprising as the First Citizen explicitly applies the lesson to himself in the epilogue to *Man's Desire*:

[...] But what it shows is, among others,

That up amongst us many fashions spring.

For example, here now, see – I wear a ring,

[...] I note

Perchance in someone else's house and home

A piece of furniture I wished I own,

Something nice I've never seen before,

And having seen it, want it all the more,

And think of nothing else, both night and day. 82-83

He models personal engagement with the moral for the audience, and this seems likely to deepen the play's impression on the spectators. The majority of respondents across both shows answered that 'yes', they felt the message applied to them (30 out of 42 responses, or 71%). However, the 'no' responses form a significantly bigger portion for the frameless performance (9/24, 38%) than for the framed performance (1/13, 8%); as a result, the 'yes' number is significantly larger for the framed performance (11/13, 85%) than for the frameless version (14/24, 58%).

And yet, only just over half of the respondents of the framed performance found the expression of the moral most clear in the epilogue. While the ending was always principally where spectators found the clearest expression of the moral, this was especially the case for the play with the frame, whereas spectators of the frameless play occasionally were able to – or perhaps felt the need to – find the moral most clear earlier on in the performance. So, in response to the question 'Was there any moment or aspect of the play that made that message especially clear?' eight out of fourteen responses listed the epilogue (57%), with the remainder listing the closing of the inner play (6/14, 43%). The difference is very small

indeed, which suggests that the effect of the closing frame is maybe not as notable as we might expect. For the frameless 6pm show, 66% of responses (25/38) note that the moral message is most clear at the end of the play (which we understand to start with Fashion & Custom's moralising before the reveal of the tableau vivant, although spectators may have had different boundaries in mind), so evidently the end is very important here too. But the list of moments at which the moral was most clear is more varied for the frameless show and includes references to the dressing of Man's Desire (2/38, 5%), the whole play (3/38, 8%), and the fickle nature of Man's Desire (1/38, 3%). None of these alternative sites of morality are very prominent and we do have more questionnaires for the frameless performance, which may contribute to the wider range of answers for this question.

Which brings us to our deliberately naïve question 'What is the message of the play?'. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the frame is often seen as enabling the playwright to articulate the moral clearly, and our frame does indeed do that. But is it necessary? The whole play is full of explicit moralising; as one respondent noted (in a comment that reveals a greater level of knowledge about the genre than could generally be expected in an audience) '*Rederijkerkamers*, [chambers of rhetoric] are not known for unclarity!' As is clear from the discussion above, the whole play and perhaps the closing of the inner play in particular are heavily didactic. Yet one of the most interesting things about the audience responses is the diverse range of morals the audience took away from the performance, from 'Don't trust natural things' to '*media vita in morte sumus*' ('In the midst of life we are in death') to 'Don't be rash – the best things take time' or 'have fun while you may – the end will certainly come (and: you can pull off all sorts of obscene jokes if framing it with a religious message)'. No two individuals seem to take away precisely the same meaning from

the performance, and the questionnaire responses reinforced our sense that we need to acknowledge spectators as individuals, each with a unique response to a performance, rather than treating the audience as a coherent, monolithic whole. McGavin and Walker argue that such an approach is essential in order to ‘appreciate the full range of the early drama’s cultural power.’<sup>27</sup> Rather than trying to determine what the moral ‘really is’ or how the majority of spectators interpreted the play, in what follows we are merely trying to determine the effect of the frame’s presence/absence on two groups of modern spectators’ understanding of the moral message.

The frame does not result in a more uniform response to the play’s moral; there is significant variation in the responses to both shows, and if anything there is slightly more variation in the case of the framed showing. Although some answers could be grouped under wider labels such as ‘avoid temporary things’ or ‘beware Fashion and Custom’, those groupings would only have, respectively, three and two members for the framed show. Many topics in the responses appear only once, e.g. only one respondent notes that the play points out how difficult ‘the pursuit of morality [is] especially within social structures’. The same is true for the reactions to the frameless show, where a great number of answers seem to be unique. However, a greater number here have an overlapping topic or concern. For example, the label ‘beauty is fleeting’ could cover six responses; ‘pursue eternal reward’, five; ‘divine love is eternal’, and ‘*memento mori*’, four each; ‘desire is bad’, and ‘beware Fashion and Custom’, three each. We have ten more questionnaires for the frameless show, which might explain the slightly larger proportion of overlap in responses. The fact that

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<sup>27</sup> McGavin and Walker *Imagining Spectatorship* 8.

there are more unique responses for the frameless show may likewise be due to the larger number of questionnaires. The total numbers of questionnaires are too small, and the variation in number between the two shows too large, to do much more with numbers. Moreover, grouping responses is necessarily a subjective exercise which lessens much of the nuance and depth of the original responses; it is too blunt an instrument to allow for accurate conclusions. However, we can say that the presence of the frame does not result in a greater agreement about any precise moral of the play among the spectators. This calls into question the frame's didactic function - or at least its efficacy as a didactic instrument, if its didactic aim is really as simple as some scholars have implied.

We did not find explicitly personal morals along the lines of 'I should meditate on God's love'. In many ways, this is not surprising given that the moral of the story was presumably intended to be applied generally by the playwright and the spectators were clearly deriving 'universal truths' from the play that apply to everyone. But given the frame's insistence on the personal application of the play's moral to one's own life, as demonstrated by *The First Citizen* in the epilogue, it is nevertheless interesting that there is no sign that audience members explicitly personalised the moral in this way, even at the framed performance for which a significant portion of the audience noted that the moral applies to them personally. The moral of the play was sometimes expressed as a lesson to be applied, using imperative constructions, e.g. 'find everlasting beauty', and sometimes presented as an observation by way of a statement, e.g. 'Beauty is fleeting' for both sets of responses. The proportion of statements and imperatives is extremely similar: eight statements and five imperatives out of fifteen responses for the framed version, fifteen

statements and twelve imperatives out of twenty-seven responses for the frameless show. Again, the presence of the frame does not seem to have an effect.

In both sets of responses what might be labelled 'negative lessons', e.g. 'Against wordliness', 'Consumerism and sex won't last', 'Don't be superficial', are dominant (11/15 for the framed performance; 23/27 for the frameless performance). This may well reflect the play which, while making it clear what *Man's Desire* does wrong, does not stage a positive alternative: *Man's Desire* dies in sin; there is no redemption. The *sinneken's* commentary throughout the play does in fact make clear the moral values that the play seems to want to teach, but it too tends to focus on what mankind does wrong rather than dwelling on how to do right:

CUSTOM: People worship love, you see, with such proud passion,

And are secretly in love with fleeting beauty,

FASHION: Which slips away, like money, gold or booty.

It is transient, corrupting and unsteady.

CUSTOM: People nowadays wholeheartedly are ready

To venture all, for things that will decay. 73-4

The positive alternative is implied, in what few people choose – consideration for others:

FASHION : That's love today. To hell with your fellow man.

Think of yourself; and for the rest, don't worry.

CUSTOM: To think of others, no one's in a hurry. 57

The Citizens' discussion in the closing frame, although it ends with a prayer to God, similarly focuses on the things that are wrong: 'Custom, yes, and also Fashion too /Deceive us one an all' (82).

Nonetheless, among the questionnaire responses, 'positive lessons' can be found too, e.g. 'concentrate on faith & gaining everlasting life', 'Embrace love while it lasts', although they are a minority in both sets. However, more responses to the frameless version had a positive angle: nearly half (13/27) of the responses are positive or contain a positive element, e.g. 'Love of God makes us immortal; Human love leads to death / end'. For the framed version this figure is slightly less than a third (4/15). Here a slight effect of the frame may perhaps be observed, possibly reflecting the emphasis on the negative analysis by The First Citizen; but the small numbers and the relatively great variation in numbers of responses between the two shows also needs to be borne in mind.

In the responses to both framed and frameless performances, a very small number of spectators seem to have drawn a lesson in opposition to what the playwright apparently intended, e.g. 'Embrace love while it lasts' or 'have fun while you may' – both for the frameless show – and 'Don't be rash – the best things take time' for the framed show. These are, in fact, valid responses to the play's narrative: since 'tomorrow we might die', it seems perfectly rational to 'eat, drink, and be merry' today. The Second Citizen seems to come close to this reflection: after a first overview of the moral of the story by the First Citizen, the Second Citizen – who had been unable to see or hear the performance properly – counters:

But I don't quite understand it all. I think

I saw them sleep and eat, feast and drink,

Devote themselves to love-making, true lovers. 82

The First Citizen then delves into another, longer analysis of the moral but the hint of this alternative interpretation is perhaps never entirely exorcised. One respondent noted this ambiguity in the play: 'Well ... it claims to be that we should pursue virtue & external reward. However, earthly pleasures also seem more fun'. These 'opposite lessons' are perhaps at least partly a result of the theatrical attractiveness of the *sinnekens*: audience members took Fashion and Custom as examples of how to enjoy life while we can, perhaps. But this is not the main lesson that the playwright wanted his spectators to learn; hence, presumably, the inclusion of the response in which The First Citizen can demonstrate a more appropriate reaction to the performance. Nevertheless, the presence of the epilogue does not seem to prevent these divergent, simple, explicit morals being drawn, and perhaps even draws attention to the possibility of such 'opposite lessons': the respondent who commented on the ambiguity of the lesson did so after the framed performance.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that the effect of the frame in defining the moral lesson is so difficult to gauge calls into question the accepted notion of its dominant didactic and authoritative purpose. What our responses suggest instead is that the frame facilitates a more personal response to the performance. Although impossible to measure or map precisely – as is probably the case for all things that are worthwhile – the frame has a significant effect on both spectators and actors. To quote more extensive feedback on the performance:

But I still haven't answered the crucial question: why do I feel that the frame is necessary? The first time round proved that the play is perfectly viable by itself. You don't need leading into it: it's easy to get into the allegorical mode, [...] You don't actually need the message rubbing in twice, it's perfectly clear what it is. The rest of the frame could be said to be irrelevant. But somehow it felt right. I still don't know why. It added depth? There were more layers of interest? It started the engine running so that by the time you got to the play proper you could shift seamlessly into top gear? [...] Perhaps it is a matter not so much of content as of dynamics?

On the basis of our observations here, we would like to make three recommendations, and pose one question. Firstly, we should stop thinking about the audience as a whole and focus on individual spectators instead (very much in line with McGavin's and Walker's recommendation). Secondly, we should consider that frames of this kind may achieve much more than 'didactic' effect, in the narrowest sense of communicating a simple or single moral. They may 'teach' in a broader sense, engaging the audience affectively, imaginatively, in ways that encourage individual spectators to personalize the play's moral in varied and perhaps esoteric ways. This observation may in turn invite the question as to whether shorter, more 'basic' prologues rather than more intricate ones that were dramatised might have similar effects, or whether in such cases the more simply didactic function is indeed dominant. (It is interesting to note that *Man's Desire's* more traditional, read prologue is never mentioned in any of the responses; its impact seems to be non-existent. But that may not be the case for plays that only had such a frame.) Our third and final recommendation is about the value of performance in research: of course we can never recapture the effect of a performance from centuries ago, cannot claim that, because a spectator in the present day

had a certain response then spectators in the past must have responded similarly; nonetheless, staging a play may illuminate aspects of early drama that cannot otherwise be seen – in this case, the rich diversity of effects on individual spectators of a rhetoricians' play's frame.

### **Addendum: Fribourg July 2025**

Thanks again to the British Academy, we were also able to stage *Man's Desire* in Fribourg (Switzerland) and collect more audience responses. As the play was now staged as part of a medieval drama festival (International Medieval Theatre Festival, 18 July - 22 July 2025) as well as an academic conference (the 50th Anniversary conference of the *Société Internationale pour l'étude du théâtre médiéval*), we staged it only once – with the frame. Although some cast members, costumes, and props were the same from the Oxford performance, there were significant differences too. Principal among these were that the performance took place in a conventional theatre and that some of the actors were known to some of the audience members. The Woman from Leiden was played by a conference participant and Fashion was read by one of the conference helpers (as the original actor was unable to fly at the very last moment there was no time to learn lines). The gender of actors was the same as in Oxford - with Fashion again being played by a man who cross-dressed but who was in no sense a female impersonator. The fact that some audience members recognised some of the actors would have affected the experience of the performance.

Another important point to note is that most of the audience members of this performance were international early drama specialists who had heard a paper earlier that day on women and spectators in frames of rhetoricians' drama which mentioned the Woman from Leiden as a case study. As a result, we feel that a certain amount of bias and pre-performance knowledge about the play and early drama more generally is likely to have influenced these responses. (English is the second or other language for many of the conference participants, which may also have some impact on the responses.) As we only have reactions to the framed play as well, we do not feel that the Fribourg responses can be compared to the Oxford ones in any straightforward way and we have therefore not included the data in the discussion above.

We nevertheless kept most of the questions the same to make some kind of comparable analysis easier, and also to accommodate non-specialist audience members (and there were some spectators who were not attending the conference, although we cannot know how many, if any, of them filled in questionnaires). However, as we expected the audience to be predominantly made up of early drama specialists who would be aware of the project's interest in the effect of frames – unlike in Oxford – we decided to include explicit questions about the impact of the frame. The questionnaire's questions were therefore:

- Did you identify with any of the characters? If so, which one(s) and why? If not, why do you think that is?
- What is the message of the play?

- Was there any moment or aspect of the play that made that message especially clear?
- Do you feel that the message of the play applies to you? Why do you think that is?
- What do you think the purpose of the prologue and epilogue was?
- Do you think that the prologue and epilogue had an impact on the performance and/or on your experience as a spectator? If so, can you clarify how?
- What did you enjoy most about the performance?
- Did the play surprise you at all?

The findings for this particular performance are broadly in line with those for the framed Oxford show, though there are differences as well. This variation is to be expected, as every performance and every audience and every audience member are different. However, the Fribourg responses generally reinforce – and certainly do not contradict – our points about the impact of the frame outlined above.

Thus, more people identified with characters on stage (16/23, or 70%) than not (7/23, or 30%) in Fribourg. This is more similar to the responses for the Oxford show with the frame, where the majority also identified with the characters, than the frameless Oxford show, where the majority did not identify with characters on stage - even if a much larger proportion of spectators in Fribourg did not identify with characters (30%) than at the Oxford performance with the frame (6%). It therefore seems that the inclusion of the frame again encouraged – or, at least, did not discourage – identification with the characters on stage.

On the other hand, there is quite some difference in the characters with whom people identified, as a greater number of identifications in the Fribourg data are anchored in the frame. The First Citizen (6/24, or 25%) and the Woman from Leiden (5/24, or 21%) are named most, and Man's Desire and the Second Citizen are both named three times (12.5%). For comparison, at the Oxford framed show, only 7 out of 18 responses (39%) indicated an identification with a frame character, and the protagonist of the outer frame (First Citizen) and the protagonist of the inner play (Man's Desire) were both named in the same number of instances. The Woman from Leiden was not mentioned at all in the Oxford feedback.

These differences could be due to any number of causes. In Fribourg, the Woman from Leiden was played by one of the conference participants and – unlike in Oxford, where she exited backstage – went to sit in the auditorium among the audience to watch the inner play. As mentioned above, many spectators would have heard this character mentioned in an academic paper just before the performance, which may also have drawn attention to her. The actor playing Man's Desire in Fribourg was much younger than the one in Oxford, and maybe the age difference between the majority of the spectators and the actor may have played a part. It is interesting to note that the level of identification with the First and Second Citizens – who were played by the same actors at both venues – is roughly identical across both sets of questionnaires: the First Citizen is named five times (out of 18, or 28%) in Oxford and six times (out of 24, or 25%) in Fribourg, and the Second Citizen twice (out of 18, or 11%) in Oxford and thrice (out of 24, or 12.5%) in Fribourg. This may suggest that the actor and other changes in the staging are most important in explaining the differences. Howsoever that may be, it is undeniable that more people identified with frame characters

in Fribourg (14/24, or 58%). However, as a significant number of people identified with characters of the inner play, we can still say that the frame seems to encourage spectators to identify with characters on stage, but not at the expense of characters in the inner play.

As in Oxford (11/13, or 85%), the majority of respondents feel that the message of the play applies to them (19/23, or 83%). Here, again, the frame may play its part, although as for the Oxford shows, the spectators' interpretation of the moral of the story is varied and we, again, find 'opposite lessons' and an awareness of the ambiguity of the play's didacticism. The latter was most clearly expressed in the response 'I think it [i.e. the moral] is NOT that we must seek eternal love – the ending is too abrupt. The pleasure of the seduction outweighs the pedantic ending.' The Fribourg data would support the notion that the impact of the frame with regard to clarifying the precise moral message seems to be limited. Despite the majority of spectators noting the personal implications of the play's teaching, the moral itself is again never framed as a personal application. We find observations (e.g. 'following fleeting beauty is doomed') and imperative constructions ('Don't trust anyone wearing velvet'), but nothing along the lines of 'I should not trust anyone wearing velvet'.

The epilogue is also not named most frequently as the site where the moral of the play has clearest expression. The tableau of the lovers encountering Death is named most often in this regard (11/25, or 44%), with the epilogue coming second (5/25, or 20%), and the amorphous 'the end[ing]' third (4/25, or 16%). This makes the epilogue noticeably less important than it was in the Oxford responses to the framed show where just over half of the respondents named the epilogue as the place where the moral was most explicit.

Many Fribourg respondents nevertheless felt that the primary function of the frame was didactic. This becomes evident in relation to the two questions assessing the spectator's views of the purpose and impact of the frame. Numerous answers make this clear, e.g. 'make the message explicit', 'audience comprehension', 'to drive home message'; and, on a more personal level, 'epilogue gave me confidence I DID in fact understand', 'if the show ended on "don't have sex or god will kill you" I would have a much worse feeling'.

Yet many spectators also commented on other aspects of the frame, aspects which may perhaps be labelled practical and metatheatrical: e.g. 'I think it was to show the importance of theatre and how it can influence a person's perspective', 'The prelude connects the play to our presence, the prologue asks for the audience's attention', 'The frame adds the second level, making the performance more ironic and entertaining', 'To add layers of pleasure to playgoing', 'Another frame of spectatorship. A way to reflect on our own situation – encouragement to do so', 'It set up our role'. This awareness and appreciation of the metatheatrical element of the frame, perhaps particular to an audience of theatre specialists who are also, in many cases, performers, links back to an intriguing picture which emerges in the Fribourg data, as identification with frame characters is often – though not always – explicitly linked to aspects of spectatorship. For example, one audience member identified with 'how captivated the First Citizen was in the epilogue[.] I often find myself enamoured with the show that I watch.' Another felt a connection with the Second Citizen's 'experience of not quite being able to see the play', while a third could relate to the Woman from Leiden's late arrival: 'It feels like something I would do.'

Both the quantitative and the qualitative data from Fribourg align with the findings in relation to the Oxford experiment and thus reinforce the notion that frames have a significant impact on performance that exceeds the narrowly didactic function of clarifying the moral message. While its presence seems to result in a greater level of identification with the staged matter and a greater appreciation that the moral message applies to the spectator, the frame does not seem able to ensure that a uniform moral lesson is derived from the performance. It is nonetheless seen to have a didactic function by many respondents, although many spectators also noted (their enjoyment of) the frame's other effects, with particular emphasis on layering and metatheatricity. These aspects are often directly linked to spectatorship, e.g. 'My favourite bit! I enjoyed being mocked as unruly audience members'. It would therefore be interesting to see whether a dramatised frame that does not stage spectators would garner similar feedback to the performances of *Man's Desire* or whether the impact of such a frame would yet again be different. That is another question to add to the list.

*What do we put for place: Universities of Sheffield and Fribourg?*

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