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Going unseen:
invisibility and erasure in
The Two Merry Milkmaids

In the previous chapter I argued that total erasure is considered divine in early modern English thought. To counter this observation, it might be pointed out that early modern English playwrights are fascinated by the possibility of disappearing from the visible world, with the word ‘vanish’ recurring frequently in stage directions and related dialogue in plays across the period. In addition, a number of plays present characters who become invisible on stage. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Oberon, noting the approach of the lost lovers, Demetrius and Helena, declares ‘I am invisible; / And I will overhear their conference’. The audience are invited to ‘see’ the actor playing Oberon as a character that is sometimes visible but at that moment cannot be seen by other characters. In Christopher Marlowe’s Dr Faustus, meanwhile, spectators are encouraged to accept that Faustus has passed out of visibility when Mephistopheles ‘charms’ him so that he ‘may be invisible’. Similarly, in The Two Merry Milkmaids, the anonymous comedy that is my central example in this chapter, a succession of characters are shown passing in and out of invisibility by putting on and taking off a magic ring.

That playwrights and theatre companies chose to show the transformation of characters into invisible figures on stage is puzzling. It would surely have been possible to indicate that an invisible character was present in a scene without the need for a player to be shown on the stage in that role. This staging solution seems particularly viable when we remember the early modern audience’s supposed ability to ‘piece out’ the ‘imperfections’ of the spectacle with which they were presented. So why did theatre companies make such a point of staging invisibility? And how does stage invisibility relate to the concepts of material erasure that I have suggested were associated with divinity?

In answering these questions, this chapter follows to its logical conclusion my initial claim that early modern English drama is a part of visual culture. Plays in performance are visual, material representations, watched by spectators. The participation of drama in visual culture is therefore not confined to dramatists’ direct allusions to or depictions of visual representations. This chapter therefore differs from previous chapters, which have considered depictions
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of the construction and destruction of visual representations such as paintings, sculptures and brass heads. In focusing on the portrayal of invisibility in The Two Merry Milkmaids, I explore early modern preoccupation with processes of visual construction in a play in which there is very little artisanal activity. Here, there is no representation ‘under construction’, except for the characters and the play-world that they inhabit. Since The Two Merry Milkmaids receives minimal critical attention and is to my knowledge never performed, it is worth beginning this discussion with an overview of the place of this play in relation to the popularity of invisibility on the early modern English stage.

‘Bound about with the ring’: popular stage invisibility

Critical neglect of The Two Merry Milkmaids is surprising given the play’s impressive performance and publication history, which led G. Harold Metz to suggest ‘that it must have been among the most popular stock comedies from the time of its original production until at least 1672’. First produced at the Red Bull and at court in 1619, The Two Merry Milkmaids was revived in Oxford in 1661. Quartos of the play were published in 1620 and 1661, and an abridged version of Act 5 is included in Francis Kirkman’s collection of ‘drolls’, The Wits, or, Sport upon Sport, published in 1662, with a second edition in 1672. The popularity of this play seems to have been connected to its comic depiction of the magic invisibility ring which first appears in Act 3, procured for the conjurer Landoffe by a ‘spirit’ (III.i.262). The message from ‘The Printer to the Reader’ that prefaces the 1620 quarto, for example, assumes readers’ easy familiarity with the events of the play, suggesting that the quarto has only been printed because of the circulation of ‘false copies’, and that the ‘Author’ had rather ‘wisht’ the drama ‘bound about with the Ring’. Kirkman’s extract from the play in The Wits included the parts of the final act of the play in which Smirk, a clown, entertains the Duke of Saxony with a display of invisibility before overseeing a writing competition between the other characters. That the play was famed for this scene is suggested by the emphasis placed on this aspect of the plot in the titling of the droll as ‘Invisible Smirk, or the Pen Combatants’. Similarly, on the contents page, or ‘Catalogue of the Several Droll-Humours’, this excerpt is listed as ‘Invisible Smirk, out of the Milk-maids’.

In its sustained depiction of invisibility, The Two Merry Milkmaids arguably marks the high watermark of a swell of depictions of and allusions to this visual state across the breadth of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English drama. In addition to those instances already noted in Dr Faustus and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, both of which extensively influence The Two Merry Milkmaids, there are a number of depictions of invisibility on the early modern stage. In Shakespeare’s The Tempest (first performed c. 1611), Prospero and his spirit Ariel both appear ‘invisible’ to the other characters marooned on
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Prospero’s island. Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood’s *The Late Lancashire Witches*, first performed in 1634, presents an ‘invisible spirit’ who wields ‘a brace of greyhounds’ and therefore gives the frightening impression within the play-world that the dogs are loose. In James Shirley’s *St Patrick for Ireland*, first performed in the Werburgh St Theatre in Dublin in 1639, the Irish prince Corybreus becomes invisible by means of a magical bracelet provided by the pagan priest Archimagus, an explicit reference to the deceitful, Catholic Archimago of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. Corybreus uses the bracelet in a plot to rape a noblewoman named Emeria, and so invisibility is deployed as part of an anti-Catholic association between ‘religious faith’ and ‘sexual violence’, in a play that is otherwise markedly ambiguous in its attitude to religious controversy.

Many allusions to invisibility in early modern plays mockingly associate this visual state with superstition and deceit. In Thomas Middleton’s *The Puritan Widow*, also known as *The Puritan* or *The Widow of Watling Street* and first performed in 1606, the foolish Edmond is persuaded that he is ‘invisible’ when a wand is waved ‘this, and thus, and again’ over his head. Elsewhere, invisibility is frequently referred to as a mode of disguise; always, in these allusions, the means by which one might become unseen form a part of the dialogue. In Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part 1*, Gadshill declares that he and Chamberlain ‘have the receipt of fern-seed; we walk invisible’, to which the latter replies that Gadshill is more ‘beholden to the night than to fern-seed for your walking invisible’. In Munday’s *Fedele and Fortunio*, surveying the methods via which Victoria might win the affections of Fortunio, the witch Medusa suggests ‘an inchaunted Bean, / To make you go invisible’, an option quickly dismissed by Victoria’s maid, Attila, since ‘if she be invisible … beeing hid’ she will not be able to ‘enjoye’ Fortunio’s ‘companye’. In Barten Holyday’s academic play *Technogamia*, first performed in 1617, meanwhile, in order to avoid being taken to ‘prison’, Magus arms himself, his wife, Astrologia, and the fortune-tellers Physiognomus and Cheiromantes with magic invisibility rings:

> here are foure rings, there’s each of you one, and here’s a fourth for my selfe: put them in your pockets, and when your condemnation is pronounc’d, and they thinke to carry us away, privily slip those rings on your little-fingers, and then crie aloud Glassialabolas three times, and we shall all foure immediately become invisible.

This plan unfortunately fails when the characters’ pockets are searched and their magic aids revealed before they have had a chance to complete their spells. Holyday’s play therefore associates invisibility with incompetent deception. Similarly, in Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour*, which was first performed in 1599, the possibility of invisibility is mentioned as part of a raft of unlikely, superstitious modes of evasion that Puntarvolo promises to shun on entering into a bond with the courtier Fastidious Brisk. Puntarvolo promises that he will not use:
the help of any such sorceries or enchantments as unctions to make our skins impenetrable, or to travel invisible by virtue of a powder or a ring, or to hang any three-forked charm about my dog’s neck, secretly conveyed into his collar.16

These mocking allusions to magic invisibility suggest an intersection between the popularity of invisibility as a theme and comic scepticism about its credibility. In The Two Merry Milkmaids, invisibility is both a joke and very serious. Clown characters, including Smirk, are bewildered as they are ignored by all around them when wearing the invisibility ring; on the other hand, the young scholar Dorilus utilises invisibility to save his beloved, Dorigene, from execution on charges of treason. This mix of amused scepticism and investment in the efficacy and possibility of invisibility perhaps gives some insight into the nature of early modern audiences’ engagement with this popular theme. Without entering into complex speculation regarding spectators’ ‘belief’ in invisibility, we might tentatively suggest that since Shakespeare wrote mockingly of invisibility but portrayed it in two of his plays, it is possible that his audiences entertained, dismissed and mocked the possibility of ‘going invisible’ with equal measures of enjoyment.

Especially notable in allusions to invisibility in plays in this period is the emphasis on the material processes by which this state might be achieved. This emphasis coincides with dramatists’ and players’ enthusiasm for showing the act of ‘going unseen’ on stage. The constructedness of magic invisibility in early modern English plays can be explained partly through a comparison with medieval depictions of invisibility. The theatre companies inherited a tradition of stage invisibility from medieval religious drama, in which a number of stage mechanisms, disguises and effects were used to portray the inherent invisibility and miraculous vanishings of Christ. As Barbara D. Palmer explains, invisibility was portrayed in the mystery plays using six ‘techniques’ of invisibility: ‘verbal markers’, ‘physical markers’, ‘prescribed and proscribed performance areas’, the use of ‘instruments … to render actors invisible’ and mechanical devices including ‘winches, pulleys, traps, heavens, wires, other hoisting devices, and concealing devices, particularly clouds’.17 The invisibility depicted in medieval drama is divine, as Christ vanishes having broken and blessed the bread in the Towneley cycle, or is rendered unseen in the depiction of the resurrection in the same cycle.18 Divine, ‘miraculous’ invisibility requires no explanation, and so in medieval drama ‘magical’ objects are rarely invoked as the cause of the invisibility depicted.19 In contrast, on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century stages, where the imitation of the divine is forbidden, invisibility can have no biblical precedent or direct referent. The need to ‘explain’ invisibility as magical rather than miraculous arguably produces the focus on the making and unmaking of this visual state in plays.

The materiality of ‘magic’ invisibility in these examples is echoed in the
stage practices thought to have been deployed to convey characters’ invisibility. Philip Henslowe’s Diary famously alludes to ‘a robe for to goo invisibell’ that he acquired for the Admiral’s Men in 1598, and many scholars take seriously the possibility that this type of cloak was used frequently in performances of invisibility on the early modern stage, including in *The Two Merry Milkmaids*. We cannot be certain that the invisibility cloak was deployed in all instances of the depiction of invisibility. Such a cloak would not seem suitable for Ariel, ordered by Prospero to ‘make thyself like to a nymph o’ th’ sea’, and be simultaneously ‘invisible’ (1.2.303–4). It has been suggested that when dressed as a ‘sea nymph’, the actor playing Ariel wore a costume previously used by Richard Burbage as Neptune in Anthony Munday’s *London’s Love, to the Royal Prince Henrie* (1610), a pageant celebrating Henry’s investiture as Prince of Wales. If this were the case, it would suggest that early modern audiences were able to accept that they could ‘see’ invisibility when looking at a costume that might signify very differently in other performance contexts, or even within the same performance. For example, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Oberon declares ‘I am invisible’ there is nothing to indicate that the fairy king puts on a ‘robe’ signifying his passage into invisibility, although we cannot rule out that this may have happened (II.i.186–7). It may be that in early performances spectators accepted that Oberon was invisible to the lovers in spite of the character looking precisely as he did at the moment before he became unseen. Notably, Oberon’s verbally constructed invisibility is still material, in that the audience imagine the fairy king to be unseen while still watching the body and gestures of the actor who plays this role. In this way, the depiction of unseen characters echoes the ‘gross materiality’ of immaterial beings such as ghosts on the early modern stage. Furthermore, the example of Oberon’s invisibility highlights the extent to which the material invisibility of early modern English plays is invested in engaging audience members in the construction of an imagined visual plain to which only they and the invisible character have access. Spectators watching *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are not invited to imagine that they cannot see Oberon; instead, they are encouraged to imagine that the lovers cannot see the fairy king that they can see. In this way, invisibility in early modern English plays is insistently visual as well as material, drawing meaning from the fact that unseen characters are always seen by an audience who also sees the moment of passage into a supposed state of invisibility.

While it may be fair to say that invisibility on the early modern stage is always ‘on display’ as a material state, it should be pointed out that this display usually evades absolute clarity. Much like the brazen head in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, the making of the items which in turn ‘make’ invisibility is often obscured. In *The Two Merry Milkmaids* the magic ring is brought to Landoffe by a spirit from an unspecified location; earlier in the play, reading from Landoffe’s ‘Bookes’, Bernard refers to ‘Asmody, a great King’ who ‘giveith the Ring of Vertues’ and ‘maketh a man invisible’ (I.i.8SD–53). In the 1616 edition of *Dr Faustus*
Mephistopheles uses a ‘girdle’ to turn Faustus invisible; this item is presumably fetched from hell, and there is nothing to indicate that its making formed part of the dramatic action (B-text; III.ii.17). In The Tempest, Prospero’s magic invisibility derives from years of ‘secret studies’ while Duke of Milan, and ‘volumes’ from his ‘library’, with which he was ‘furnished’ by Gonzalo when the latter was charged with ejecting Prospero and Miranda from Milan (I.1.161–8). The origins and content of these books, and also the origins of Prospero’s magic staff, are not specified. Prospero’s ‘rough magic’, however, is explicitly associated with necromancy, as by his own admission, ‘graves’ at his ‘command’ / Have wak’d their sleepers, ope’d and let ‘em forth’ (5.1.48–50). Invisibility emerges therefore as a feat achievable through the sort of black magic condemned in Reginald Scot’s Discovery of Witchcraft (1584), which provides the major source for much of the magic described by Bernard as he snoops through his master’s books and papers in Act 1 of The Two Merry Milkmaids. It is also worth recalling at this point that Belcephon’s hammering of the brazen head in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay is described rather than presented onstage in that play. Playwrights show characters such as Prospero and Faustus drawing magic circles and saying spells onstage, but the making of girdles, rings and staffs used in such necromantic practices is perhaps too sensitive to be shown in performance.

The ambiguity surrounding magic properties in these plays draws on a context of popular magic and superstition which combines the open wearing and exchange of charms with an investment in concealment and secrecy. The healing properties of minerals are explored in Pliny the Elder’s Historia naturalis, a popular text in the early modern period, printed fifty-five times between 1469 and 1600. ‘Natural’ stones such as the toadstone, which are actually ‘the palatal tooth of a fossil fish’, were highly popular in early modern England. Jewels bearing such stones were often ‘inscribed with talismanic incantations’. Elizabeth I, for example, ‘had the magic words IESUS AUTEM (Luke 4:30) inscribed on a ring’ given to the Earl of Essex as protection ‘from thieves when travelling’. The popularity of ‘healing’ charms made using poisons such as arsenic was such that in 1603–4 the physician Francis Herring wrote against their use, firstly in a pamphlet advising on how to ward against the plague, and secondly in A Modest Defence of the Caveat Given to the Wearers of impoisoned Amulets, as Preservatiues from the Plague. Herring’s concerns centred on the fact that medicinal charms were worn close to the skin ‘to allow … magical powers to pass freely’. Herring suspected that an amulet containing arsenic, ‘worne next the skin’ could secrete ‘venymous vapours’ which could be inhaled by wearers, or which would ‘penetrate’ their bodies. Herring’s advice was published ‘for the behoof of the City of London’, and highlights the extent to which the wearing of amulets straddles boundaries between ‘public’ behaviour and private, concealed practices. Although open to public discourse and dispute in the form of Herring’s printed text, amulets were considered most effective when placed
next to the skin, and were therefore often concealed beneath clothing. The need for the talisman to be close to the skin also occasioned its concealment within some jewels. For example, a *memento mori* ring, dated to 1600–50 and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum London, is engraved with the words ‘EDWARD X COPE’, and has a fragment of bone set in the reverse of the bezel so that this would be worn next to the finger (figure 27).
Similarly, the logic of concealment is an integral part of the obscure but popular practice of hiding items of clothing in walls, chimneys, under floorboards and near doorways and windows, possibly as part of rituals designed to protect buildings and their occupants from evil spirits.33 There is no contemporary documentation about this practice, a fact that Dinah Eastop speculates may be partly because secrecy added to the efficacy of any protective magic activated by the concealment.34

Veiled in secrecy, suppression and controversy in early modern life, talismanic and magic objects in early modern plays are not highly visible or carefully defined as functional objects. For example, in early modern England, rings given as gifts sometimes did not fit; in such situations, a ring might be ‘worn elsewhere – on the hat, ruff, ears and on the sleeve’, or secured with a chain or piece of string attached to the wrist.35 In The Two Merry Milkmaids, however, the ring is alluded to as worn upon the finger, as in the final Act of the play, where Smirk states ‘I will not lose this finger that I have the ring upon’ (5.1.118–19); earlier in the drama, Dorilus loses the ring when it falls from his ‘hand’ while he is ‘plucking off’ a ‘glove’ (3.3.554–5). Whether or not the jewel fits the wearer’s finger is not at issue in this play, as none of the characters that wears it comments on this subject. Furthermore, the ring in The Two Merry Milkmaids does not betray its magical properties through visual signs or inscriptions; hence the ignorance of wearers when they initially encounter the jewel. For example, spying the ring, Frederick surmises only that it is ‘very pleasing … unto the eye’, and that ‘some Lady lost it’, or that ‘it may be / Twas lost a purpose and here dropt for me’ (4.2.592–5). Spectators in playhouses would of course not be able to see tiny inscriptions on jewels shown on stage, but this does not preclude characters from referring to such inscriptions. What is said about the appearance of the ring is tellingly ambiguous. Frederick is able to find the jewel on the ground and to appreciate its aesthetic appearance, but when the Spirit first gives the jewel to Landoffe, its invisible powers are said to be echoed in its matter and appearance:

here is the Ring
Transparent as the day, that makes the wearer
Lost to all sight. (3.2.256–8)

The ring is itself thus barely visible. Landoffe refers to the jewel as a ‘little ring’, ‘purer than Christall’ and ‘full of subtiller flame / Then that which sparkles in the Diamond’ (3.2.271–3). We might surmise that this tiny ring was not seen as such by the audience, although at indoor performances at court, or in Oxford in the 1660s, the jewel used in the performance may have glinted in the candlelight, or, at outdoor performances, caught the sunlight. Just as invisibility enables characters to be hidden from view, so the transparency of the ring can be seen as a mode of visual suppression. This interpretation is encouraged by the fact that the ring is not only transparent, but also, when worn by Dorilus, must
have been hidden by the glove which is removed at the point at which he loses the jewel. The visual suppression of the ring is echoed in its presentation as an object that circulates amongst closed communities, since much of the humour of this play derives from Frederick and Smirk’s accidental acquisition of the jewel as an object that had been intended for use by Dorilus under Landoffe’s instruction. Notably, The Two Merry Milkmaids concludes with further obfuscation of the provenance of the ring, as Landoffe tells the inquisitive Duke that ‘at some fitter time’ he will ‘acquaint’ him with ‘the passages’, presumably from his magic books, that will explain ‘how, and the cause for what it was intended’ (5.1.201–3).

Although ambiguous accounts of the appearance of the ‘little ring’ in The Two Merry Milkmaids indicate that the sight of the jewel may not have been emphasised in early performances of the play, that characters put on and remove the ring and so pass back and forth from visibility is central to the anonymous playwright’s depiction of invisibility. The temporal, material nature of invisibility in early modern English drama demarcates these depictions as renderings of ‘unseen’ rather than invisible figures. The term ‘invisible’ does not accurately describe the invisibility of characters such as Prospero and Faustus, although this is the term that playwrights often use. The earliest adjectival sense of ‘invisible’ mentioned in the OED denotes that which ‘cannot be seen; that by its nature is not an object of sight’, and the example given of this usage is in Richard Rolle’s Prick of Conscience (1340), which describes ‘How God invisible es, And unchangeable, and endles’.36 Prospero, Faustus, Dorilus, Smirk and Frederick are ‘by nature’ objects of sight, and so, unlike God, are not inherently invisible. Instead, characters are ‘unseen’, a state that, Jean-Luc Marion suggests, ‘falls under the jurisdiction of the invisible, but it should not be confused with it, since it is able to transgress it precisely by becoming visible’.37 The unseen can be seen, ‘appearing in the visible’; in contrast, ‘the invisible remains forever as such’.38 It is the material temporality of invisibility in these plays that distinguishes such portrayals of the unseen from divine, limitless and unending invisibility. Significantly, in The Two Merry Milkmaids, the invisibility ring is itself said to be only temporarily functional, since the spirit who brings Landoffe the ring tells the conjurer that ‘when so ere / It is your pleasure it shall loose its virtue’ he must touch the ring ‘with this herbe and it falls in peeces’ (3.2.259–61). The magic of the unseen is thus emphatically a part of the fractured material world.

The materiality of the invisible character marks the meeting point between dramatists’ deference to God as invisible maker, and their engagements with modes of spectatorship which replicate divine omniscience. God’s endless invisibility is linked to his omniscience, since being everywhere at all times means being observer of all at all times. The fantasy of being ‘all-seeing’ significantly influences early modern allusions to and depictions of the unseen. The conjurer Landoffe does not wear the ring himself, but is able, along with audience
members, to see all who wear it ‘and walke invisible’ (3.2.257). Invisibility is associated with special powers of discernment in other plays; in George Chapman’s *Monsieur D’Olive*, for example, the foolish gallant of the title boasts to the King of France that while living in squalid obscurity with a ‘poore roofe, or a paint-house / To shade me from the Sunne’, he thought himself as private as I had King Gyges Ring / And could have gone invisible, yet saw all / That past our states rough Sea both neere and farre’.39 The differences between God’s inherent invisibility as omniscient viewer of ‘all’ and invisibility as an earthly disguise are confronted in an allusion to invisibility in Robert Greene’s *The Tragedy of Selimus, Empourer of the Turkes* (1594). Here, the tyrannical Selimus wants to eliminate his brother Corcut, whom he considers to be one of his ‘corrivals in the crown’; Corcut is therefore forced into hiding in disguise as a shepherd.40 Betrayed by a servant, Corcut is brought before Selimus, who tells his brother ‘we thought you had old Gyges’ wondrous ring, / That so you were invisible to us’ (22.30–1). As Katharine Eisaman Maus has shown, the legend of Gyges was a well-known classical myth in the early modern period which spoke directly to Reformation anxieties about the reliability of external appearances.41 The legend of Gyges is told in Book 2 of Plato’s *Republic* and Cicero’s *De Officiis*. In *The Republic*, Glaucon explains that Gyges:

> was a shepherd in the service of the Lydian ruler of the time, when a heavy rain-storm occurred and an earthquake cracked open the land … a chasm appeared in the region where he was pasturing his flocks. He was fascinated by the sight, and went down into the chasm and saw there, as the story goes, among other artefacts, a bronze horse, which was hollow and had windows set in it; he stooped and looked in through the windows and saw a corpse inside, which seemed to be that of a giant. The corpse was naked, but had a golden ring on one finger; he took the ring off the finger and left. Now the shepherds used to meet once a month to keep the king informed about his flocks, and our protagonist came to the meeting wearing the ring. He was sitting down among the others, and happened to twist the ring’s bezel in the direction of his body, towards the inner part of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to his neighbours … he eventually found out that turning the bezel inwards made him invisible and turning it outwards made him visible. As soon as he realized this, he arranged to be one of the delegates to the king; once he was inside the palace, he seduced the king’s wife and with her help assaulted and killed the king, and so took possession of the throne.42

As Maus observes, the magic ring allows Gyges ‘a shocking liberty from the prescriptions of his social role’, enabling him to commit regicide and to move rapidly from shepherd to King of Lydia and to therefore disrupt ‘fundamental social relationships’.43 The fatal and subversive uses to which the ring is put are reflected in the disturbingly ‘uncanny and perhaps unethical means’ by which Gyges acquires the object, taking it from a corpse concealed inside an artificial construction, in ‘a space trauma has made newly accessible’.44 Gyges’s invisibil-
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Invisibility is therefore rooted in an original disruption of natural order that makes available to human use magical objects concealed deeply within the subterranean chambers of a ‘more than human’ body. It is unsurprising that in Greene’s play, Selimus, a paranoid despot who has himself committed regicide by killing his own father, associates Corcut’s previous unseen state with an agency born of and threatening to social and natural order.

In contrast to Gyges, however, Corcut’s experience of being unseen while disguised as a shepherd leads him to a spiritual revelation that would have appealed to an early modern Christian audience. Before he is put to death on his brother’s orders, Corcut reveals:

Since my vain flight from fair Magnesia,
Selim, I have conversed with Christians
And learned of them the way to save my soul
And ’pease the anger of the highest God.
’Tis he that made this pure crystalline vault
Which hangeth over our unhappy heads.
From thence he doth behold each sinner’s fault,
And though our sins under our feet he treads
And for a while seems for to wink at us,
It is but to recall us from our ways. (22.49–58)

While occupying the position of Gyges, concealed from his monarch, Corcut has come to understand the ‘true’, limitless invisibility of God, as distinct from the magic, material and deceitful invisibility recognised by the corrupt and irre- ligious Selimus.

In this portrayal of Corcut’s attainment of clarity of understanding, Greene engages with a popular contemporary interpretation of the Gyges legend. Maus notes that in Hallward’s account, Gyges ‘sees everything’ when wearing the ring, and thus acquires ‘special powers of discernment’ not mentioned in the classical texts. This is similarly the case in Nicholas Grimald’s translation of Cicero, also printed in 1556, in which it is said that when Gyges ‘had turned the hed of that ring toward the paulme of his hand: he was scene of nobodie, yet he sawe everie thing’. As Maus suggests, early modern appropriations of the Gyges myth afford invisible viewers supernatural levels of agency that rival God as ‘divine witness’. Returning to The Two Merry Milkmaids, however, we may find that this agency is not used for corrupted ends, as in the Gyges legend, but is deployed to interrogate the corruption of visual experience that Gyges represents.

‘Her Angel’s voice’: unseen agents in The Two Merry Milkmaids

In The Two Merry Milkmaids, visual appearances are frequently distorted and manipulated. Dorigene, an ambitious but ‘poor’ gentlewoman living in rural
Saxony, disguises herself as a milkmaid in order to secure a rapid rise in status (I.ii.496). As Dorigene becomes a Duchess, her father, Lodowicke, is made an Earl, and her drunken brother Frederick becomes, according to Smirk, ‘a Count, or I know not what’ (I.iv.799). The family’s social advancement is marked by alterations in appearance. Smirk, who also rises up to become ‘an Esquire’, informs Frederick:

My Lord, as I am a Gentleman and an Esquire, I doe reverence the very invention of your Honours next Sute: I’ll helpe you to a Draper shall give you all your Men Liveries, to make it of Cloth; my Haberdasher ha’s a new Blocke, and will find me and all my Generation in Bevers as long as we last, for the first hansell. (I.iv.805–10)

When the family lose their recently acquired status due to slanders spread by the embittered, elderly politician, Lord Raymond, social manoeuvres are again marked by visual activities. Losing his position as esquire, Smirk turns to his ‘old trade’ of painting, with aesthetically unappealing results:

I have hir’d a Shop not far from Court. And I have painted the most horrible things that many men know not what to make of them, I drew Hercules a great while a goe in the likenes of a man, and now everyone saies he looks like a Lion. Then I drew Acteon hunted with his owne dogs, & they say ‘tis like a Citizen pursu’d with Serjants. (IV.i.342–8)

Smirk produces distorted images which disrupt the relationship between sign and signified; just as the invisibility ring hides wearers from view, so the ‘real’ subjects of Smirk’s images are obscured when rendered visible in his ‘horrible’ work. Frederick here proves himself to be a spectacularly unwise spectator and patron, challenging the painter ‘and thou beest so good a workeman, thou shalt / draw my Picture’, despite the fact that Smirk cannot at this point see him, and has to invite this potential customer to ‘come out of the Cloud’ (IV.i.354–7). Having ‘small store of mony’, Frederick offers Smirk the ring in exchange for having his portrait painted (IV.i.359). In order to produce a visual image, therefore, Frederick loses his privileged visual state and ignorantly conveys this on the painter. It is only on realising that he can hear but cannot see Smirk that Frederick comprehends ‘the vertue’ of the jewel, and is left to lament that ‘the losse / of my invisible Ring has broke my heart’ (IV.i.372, 799–800).

Frederick’s faulty spectatorship echoes the Duke of Saxony’s more damaging failings as a viewer. The Duke repeatedly endorses the subversive malleability of visual appearances with an enthusiasm that betrays his ignorance regarding the implications of that malleability for social hierarchy. He is instantly persuaded that he loves Dorigene when she removes her milkmaid ‘habit’, presenting herself as a rural gentlewoman, ‘Ambitious’ of the Duke’s ‘Love, not of the Title’ (I.ii.597). Congratulating Lodowicke on his earldom, meanwhile, the Duke advises his new father-in-law to decorate his previously ‘naked’ house
‘with Countenance / Cheerful’, making it ‘More glorious then our Pallaces’ (I.ii.637–40). More drastically, the Duke’s insecure judgement is inflected with deceit, as he presents himself as a tolerant king and husband while behaving like a paranoid tyrant. Following her marriage to the Duke, Dorigene attempts to deflect Dorilus’s continuing attentions by setting an impossible task in which he must bring her a magic garland of flowers in exchange for her body (II.ii.502). When Landoffe’s magic allows Dorilus to obtain the garland, Dorigene, overcome with guilt, informs her husband of the bargain. The Duke gives permission for Dorigene to fulfil her promise to Dorilus, claiming it is ‘but one hours losse’ (II.ii.528), but secretly does not approve the liaison, and sends Raymond to spy on the couple to see if the promise is fulfilled. Dorilus and Dorigene resist their mutual desire, but the Duke’s distrust and deceit provide Raymond with the opportunity to act as false witness, so that Dorigene is brought to trial for adultery.

In a world in which the instability of visual appearances is endorsed by a head of state lacking in visual judgement, standing outside the visual field becomes the only means by which to avoid complicity in deceit. I here return to the glittering transparency of the ring as described by Landoffe. The conjurer makes a direct connection between going invisible and speaking the truth when he offers Dorilus the magical ring:

Behold this little Ring
Purer than Christall, full of subtiller flame
Then that which sparkles i’ the Diamond;
Of Vertue infinite beyond its Beautie.
With this Ring Dorilus thou shalt free the Princesse
At least endeavour; ’tis certainly reported
At her Arraignement, as the howre comes on,
She shall have none to pleade her cause for her,
But her supposed crime layde ope, and urg’d
Withall the mouth of law, and so condemn’d:
Yet thou that ever couldst speake well, without
A cause so full of matter and of Truth,
Shalt hidde to all eyes, by vertue of this Ring,
Become an Orator, and pleade for her,
And make the Court amaz’d to heare thee speake. (III.ii.271–85)

In contrast to Gyges’s deployment of a magic ring for self-interested and immoral ends, the magic ring of this play offers access to an agency which is explicitly associated with ‘Truth’. In contrast to the visual distortions found elsewhere in the drama, the ring is aesthetically and ethically coherent, as its appearance as an object ‘purer than Christall’, matches the efficacy of its ‘verte’ (power) in the service of integrity. This supernatural jewel is the means by which ‘truth’ may be rightfully reunited with the word, healing a rupture caused by the
Duke’s poor judgement and Raymond’s rhetorical manipulations. It is this connection to the supernatural revelation of ‘Truth’ that highlights the efficacy of invisibility as a mode of disguise. Disguise is necessary for Dorilus at the trial, since he is associated with Dorigene’s supposed guilt. Unseen, however, Dorilus acquires a divine agency that allows him to override Raymond’s interjections, the latter being silenced by the Duke in favour of the disembodied voice:

Away, I will heare nothing but her Angel’s voice,
And that which spoke for her, which was no lesse,
It held such musicke in it, besides Truth. (III.iii.517)

The success of Dorilus’s invisible intervention attests to the flexibility of ducal opinion in this play; immediately after the trial, Raymond again ‘with a breath’ alters the Duke’s mind, ‘in spight of all those words wasted in aire’ (IV.i.97). The court scene, however, momentarily demonstrates the efficacy of invisibility as a means of appearing in the visible that enables intervention in perceived corruption. Rather than acquiring special powers of discernment, in occupying the privileged space of the invisible spectator Dorilus acquires enhanced powers of oration and the platform to communicate the ‘Truth’.

In his study of vision and ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser, Knapp explains that the ‘central paradox of Christian epistemology’ is ‘that the only path to the invisible truth leads through the visible world’.50 Knapp discusses Spenser’s Protestant-minded negotiation of this paradox with reference to Marion’s Catholic phenomenology, which claims that invisible truth can be reached through ‘phenomenal lived experience’.51 Spenser, in Knapp’s reading of The Shepheardes Calendar, ‘crosses the visible’ in ‘messianic’ passages which function in the same manner as ‘saturated phenomena’ described by Marion, in which invisible divinity is glimpsed and fleetingly grasped through exposure to the sublime.52 In contrast, in the depiction of invisibility in The Two Merry Milkmaids, ‘truth’ is articulated through crossings of the visible which include the imitation of the invisible in the trope of the unseen. As I explain in the next section, however, the incompleteness attendant on the unseen character in performance holds the idolatrous implications of this imitation of divinity at bay, drawing attention to the distinction between the unseen and the invisible. Like the brazen head of Greene’s play and the ‘frame without a face’ described by Lyly, unseen characters deferentially display their brokenness.

‘Nothing left certaine of mee’: invisibility, incompletion and erasure

The incompleteness of unseen characters is multi-layered. They are discursively imperfect because they are material and not divine, but more than this, invisible characters on the early modern stage are imperfectly a part of the visible and material world depicted in those plays. This latter sense of incompleteness is
strongly expressed by characters who wear the ring in *The Two Merry Milkmaids*. The magic ring is first tested out in the play on Dorilus, and his friend Bernard, who is another of Landofe’s students. When Dorilus puts on the ring, Bernard declares his friend ‘into aire vanished, or suncke into the earth’, whilst Landofe encourages his pupil to locate the missing Dorilus:

**Bernard Dorilus, Dorilus.**
* Dorilus Why here man, I am here.
* Bernard Here? Where?
* Dorilus Why here, close by thee, now I touch thee.
* Bernard This is thy hand?
* Dorilus Yes.
* Bernard It may be foote for any thing that I know, but that
Now I feel the fingers, thou maist hold it up at the Bar
And nere be burnt i’the hand Ile warrant thee.
* Dorilus Why? I see thee plaine as I did before. And everything else.
* Bernard But that I have confidence in my Master and his Art, I wud never look to see thee againe. (III.ii.294–306)

Dorilus’s invisibility is marked by incompletion. Both imperceptible and palpable, a visually formless form, the young scholar is neither perfectly external to the perceptual world, nor is he fully a part of that world. So it is that Landofe’s assurances rather than his own physical contact with Dorilus convince Bernard that he will ‘see’ his friend ‘againe’. The play reflects the ontology of a pre-Cartesian world in which existence is confirmed and adjudged through sensory experience, as characters’ disappearances from view resemble but do not quite equate to disappearances from existence. When Frederick first wears the ring, he laments that he is ‘lost’, and that ‘theres no hope that ever I shall be seene againe of mortals; I walke i’the clouds’ (IV.ii.84–5). Of course, Frederick is not ‘lost’; he is still alive, and is even able to speak to Dorilus, who recognises him:

**Dorilus Frederick by the voice.**
* Frederick And Frederick by flesh and bloud as good as any man or woman wud desire, feele me else.
* Dorilus I do feele a hand.
* Frederick And yet perceive no body.
* Dorilus Right.
* Frederick: Right, but by your leuace all is not right; either your eies are drawn aside,
or my bodie is taken assunder, and nothing left certaine of mee but a hand and a voice. (IV.i.303–11)

Frederick surmises that if there is no fault in Dorilus’s vision, then he himself must have been partially removed from the earth, reduced into a ‘nothing’ that is significantly incomplete, since traces of his existence reside in a single hand and in his voice. Landofe earlier describes Frederick’s response to invisibility as
likely to be a sense of total erasure, anticipating that it will be entertaining to let Frederick keep the ring in order to hear him ‘chafe on being lost to all mankind’ (IV.i.286). Frederick’s actual response indicates the ambiguities attendant on the experience of magically ‘going invisible’, registering a sense of being ‘flesh and bloud’ but simultaneously not present.

Ambiguously part of the world, detectable through traces of a hidden body, invisible characters on the early modern stage thus resemble the incomplete figure to which Lyly alludes in his second prose work; they are like ‘Euphues … drawn but to the waist’ so ‘that he peepeth as it were behind some screen’ while ‘his feet are yet in the water’ (p. 159). Functioning like the ‘frame without a face’ that Euphues describes as produced by Parrhasius for Alexander the Great, the material presence of these characters gestures to and explains the absence of their visibility (p. 333). The invisible character is therefore available as an effaced material ‘trace’ which points to a deferred presence in the Derridean sense, a configuration echoed in the dynamics of ‘a robe for to goo invisibell’, a visible item which indicates invisibility whilst concealing, and thus suppressing, the visible ‘presence’ of the body. Such a view is further encouraged by Palmer’s suggestion that the invisibility cloak may have been a black ‘learned man’s robe’, chosen with ‘the intent being to blend in rather than stand out’. Accepting Palmer’s theory, the function of the invisibility cloak as an indicator of deferred presence is reflected in the blank surface of the cloak, which demonstrates the disappearance from view of the visible body of the actor playing Dorilus, Faustus or Oberon.

If unseen characters in The Two Merry Milkmaids fear that they are fractured, physically present but visually absent, then the depiction of invisibility is even more piecemeal in the visual and imaginative experience of the spectator watching the play. In watching an invisible character, spectators engage with the performance on multiple levels, imagining, at once, that the player before them is the character depicted; imagining that the player that they can see cannot be seen by other characters, and therefore implicitly engaging with the visual experiences of the characters who can still be seen but who cannot see the invisible character. At the same time, spectators observe the privileged visual experiences of invisible characters, and engage with this perspective, enjoying the experience of ‘seeing’ into two visual plains: the visible world and the realm of the unseen. It is a split visual experience that echoes the broader fracture of ‘seeing’, which, spread between the eye, the imagination and the object, is always an incomplete process, even when the viewer seems to see the viewed as complete. The fractured nature of vision has been noted in relation to other examples discussed in this book, such as the ‘double’ spectacle associated with the ‘glass prospective’ in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay. Similarly, Shakespeare’s treatment of spectatorship and spectacle in The Winter’s Tale recalled Augustinian accounts of the fractured nature of mortal attempts to comprehend the invisibility of God. With these
Invisibility and erasure in The Two Merry Milkmaids

examples in mind, the efficacy of the unseen character in highlighting the materiality and limitations of mortal vision can be seen as especially pronounced, since its dynamics engage viewers in a self-reflexive recognition of those limitations that simultaneously gestures towards the divine.

The agency of the unseen character complements the deference to God that is evoked by the incompletion of the unseen. This complementary relationship is sustained by the talismanic nature of stage invisibility. By this observation I mean to suggest that the magic ring of The Two Merry Milkmaids is talismanic in function, but also that the invisible character becomes a talisman of sorts when they ‘go invisible’. This understanding of unseen characters is encouraged by the early modern view of talismans as activated partly by closeness to the skin of the wearer. The close interconnection between the body of the wearer and the talismanic object is echoed in the instance in the 1616 text of Dr Faustus, in which Mephistopheles makes Faustus invisible through a spell which combines material objects, touch and incantation:

Whilst on thy head I lay my hand
And charm thee with this magic wand.

[Presenting a magic girdle]

First wear this girdle; then appear
Invisible to all are here.
The planets seven, the gloomy air,
Hell, and the Furies’ forkèd hair,
Pluto’s blue fire, and Hecate’s tree
With magic spells so compass thee
That no eye may thy body see. (B-text; III.ii.15–23)\(^56\)

In this spell, Faustus is enveloped in Mephistopheles’s ‘charm’, as the demon touches Faustus, conducts the spell with a wand, dresses the scholar in a ‘girdle’ and encompasses him with further spells drawn from several occult sources. The sense that Faustus is smothered into a state of invisibility would have been heightened in early performances if Faustus also wore some form of invisibility cloak. The girdle that Faustus wears could have been a belt, made of fabric, and ‘fitted with an ornamental buckle or pendant’, or it may have been a chain of gold links which could be ‘worn at the neck’ or which may have ‘encircled the waist’.\(^57\) That Faustus is encircled here reflects the popular belief that a circle would protect a conjurer from any spirits summoned. Earlier in the play, Faustus calls on Mephistopheles whilst standing in a circle bearing ‘Jehovah’s name / Forward and backward annagrammatised’ in the scene in which he calls upon Mephistopheles (A- and B-texts, I.iii.8–9). This scene is echoed in the opening scene of The Two Merry Milkmaids, in which Bernard draws out a circle within which spirits ‘cannot hurt’ him (i.66).\(^58\) At the conclusion of The Tempest, the Neapolitans and Milanese are ‘charmed’ as they are herded by Ariel into a ‘circle which Prospero had made’ (5.1.57SD). As we have seen, in Friar Bacon
and Friar Bungay, finally, it is anticipated that once made, the talismanic brazen head will 'compass' and so 'strengthen England' with a protective 'wall of brass' (ii.30–58). The enclosure offered by the circle echoes the enclosure of veiled visibility offered by the state of being unseen, a dynamic explicitly materialised in instances in which characters wear a ring or girdle in order to become invisible. The material magic deployed in these examples encloses and protects characters in ways that match up to the enclosed protection supposedly provided by talismanic jewels. Wearing supposedly talismanic jewels, early modern people believed themselves to be protected wherever they travelled; similarly, to go unseen is to enter into a protected space that moves with the wearer and is activated by contact with the body of the wearer. We can now revisit the notion of going invisible as a material process and amend this to refer to a materialising process, during which the objects which make invisibility also become supposedly 'unseen', merging with the body of the wearer. Faustus's body is in this view 'girdled' into the space of the unseen, becoming the blank thing which projects an incomplete vision of invisibility.

An encircled space that carries meaning at the same time as projecting visual nothingness, the unseen character is comparable to a cipher, a zero. It is not insignificant that the late sixteenth century sees a growing interest in 'the figure and mathematical function of the cipher, due to its association with Hindu-Arabic numerals, which were only just coming into widespread use during the period'. As the OED explains, in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, a 'character' did not yet refer to 'a personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities, by a novelist or dramatist'; a character in the early modern theatre is more like the mark, or 'graven figure', denoted by the earliest meanings of the term. Indeed, characters and the dramatic representation of which they are a part are ciphers, as suggested by the prologue to Henry V, where the assembled cast of characters are 'ciphers' to the 'great account' of the production and the battle depicted (Prologue, 17). Significantly, like Faustus, the ciphers of Shakespeare's play are encircled, as the audience are invited to 'suppose within the girdle of these walls / Are now confined two mighty monarchies' (Prologue, 19–20). The Prologue does not locate the presentation of the monarchies of France and England on the stage alone; instead, the depiction of the battle of Agincourt is held within a girdled, walled space which includes the audience, performance and fabric of the theatre. The theatrical action is thus contained by a shape which consists of performers, performance space and audience. The 'unseen' character functions as a microcosm of this confluence between materiality, performance and spectator interaction; a cipher, visible still to the audience who simultaneously imagine the character to be materially erased from the visible world depicted in the play.

Ciphers are active empty vessels; nothings which stand for something. In this, the unseen character becomes a performing, mobile, interactive model of the
troc of the blank canvas. The talismanic nature of unseen characters facilitates this agency in the position of incompletion. The *OED* states that ‘Talisman’ derives from the Greek *telesm*, τελεσμός, meaning ‘completion, performance, religious rite’, and later taking on the meaning of ‘a consecrated object endowed with a magic virtue to avert evil’. Variants of ‘telesm’ are used in early modern texts, for example in a translation of the Emerald Tablet in *The Mirror of Alchemy* (1597), which refers to the ‘worke’ of the philosopher’s stone as ‘the father of all the telesme of the world’.

According to the *OED*, the first usage of talisman in the sense of an ‘object engraven with figures or characters, to which are attributed the occult powers of the planetary influences and celestial configurations under which it was made’ is in Franciscus Junius’s *The Painting of the Ancients* (1638). Junius’s text indicates that the word is already in circulation in Europe by this date, referring to ‘inaugurated statues, which now adays by them that are curious of such things are called *Talisman*’, and:

> which being set up by skilful enchaunters in some unaccessible chauncell of the temple, or else secretly digged in the ground, were thought to appease the wrath of the Gods, and to protect the Country from hostile invasions … Such a one seemeth that same *Talus* to have been, mentioned by *Appolonius Rhodius*, and many other Authors. *Asius* the Philosopher also made an image of *Pallas* by a certaine observation of Astronomicall influences, tying the destinies of *Troy* to the preservation or losse of that *Palladium*.

Talismans, in Junius’s understanding, are protective, consecrated objects such as the Palladium which, having been made under ‘astronomicall’ influences, protected Troy, and Talus, also known as Talos, or Talon, the mythological colossal brass statue said to have guarded Crete. Talus presents a pertinent example for consideration of the function of talismanic objects in early modern drama. Talus is an active, consecrated object, a magical automaton that physically, aggressively protects a specific community. Talus’s active status reflects a performativity implicit in the etymology of ‘talisman’. The *OED* explains that the root of *telesm* is τέλος meaning ‘end’, via τέλειν meaning ‘to complete, fulfil, perform (rites), officiate (in the mysteries), consecrate’. The talismanic object is in this sense the product of a completed, sacred action which is at the same time not complete, in that the performance of the status of the object as consecrated is continually enacted as a condition of its efficacy. The talisman is then necessarily always active, always fulfilling the terms of the inscription that it bears, or the consecration under which it was made, until the moment that it is destroyed.

As mentioned above, the efficacy of the magic ring in *The Two Merry Milkmaids* is said to be undone when it is touched by herbs which will make it shatter into pieces, yet this process of destruction is never shown onstage. Given that, as I have argued, early modern playwrights are invested in destruction
as the preserve of divine agents, talismans may be seen as permanently active objects that cannot be stopped by mortal intervention. Such a reading of talismans as unstoppably active is encouraged by an appearance of Talus as an indestructable ‘iron man’ who accompanies Sir Artegal, ‘the instrument’ of ‘justice’ in the fifth book of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene:

> His name was Talus, made of yron mould,
> Immoveable, resistless, without end.
> Who in his hand an yron flale did hould,
> With which he threshed out falshood, and did truth unfold.63

Spenser’s Talus is a talisman that relentlessly protects the law, his want of feeling making him ‘a perfectly detached arbiter’ of justice.64 In The Faerie Queene, therefore, the object of Talus’s protection is not centred on a specific location, but is mobile, as he accompanies Artegal on a quest to rescue Irena, who is being kept from her ‘heritage’ by the tyrant Grantorto.65 This notion of mobile talismanic activity is particularly useful for understanding the activities of unseen characters who function like Talus: mobile agents, supernaturally empowered to intervene in perceived falsehood.

In The Two Merry Milkmaids, such interventions in falsehood are often inflected with an iconoclastic tone. Smirk and Frederick both use invisibility to launch physical attacks on Lord Raymond and the servile flatterers of the court, represented by Callow and Ranoff, a knight. From the outset of the drama, these courtly figures are associated with artificiality. For example, Julia, Dorilus’s sister and with Dorigene one of the disguised ‘merry milkmaids’ of the play’s title, is amused by Callow’s appearance and manner on meeting him at the Duke’s procession. Julia declares:

> I have lighted upon one of the Egyptian Idols, taught with some Engine to put off his Hat, and screw his Face a little: I cannot speake to it like a man, yet I will to it as if it were one. (I.ii.381–4)

Stage directions indicate that throughout this speech, ‘stroking up his haire, complements with Fances and Legges’, Callow adopts artificial postures in the manner of an unnatural, mechanical ‘idol’ as described by Julia (I.iii.381–4SD). Later in the play, as they rejoice at Dorigene’s imprisonment and imagine Frederick ‘at the Gallowes’ (IV.i.49), Callow and Ranoff are physically attacked by the invisible Frederick, who announces himself as ‘one that’le bestow a little paines with you’ and ‘wipe your Noses for you’ (IV.i.52). Reluctant to ‘draw’, and declaring that they are ‘tender hearted’, the terrified courtiers exit under the ‘guard’ of Cornelius and Ferdinando (IV.i.81). Frederick then encounters Raymond, ‘my Lord of mischiefe with his two Faces, Winter and Summer’, as the deceitful old politician woos Julia (IV.i.89–90). As Raymond pledges to raise Julia to the level of Duchess if she will give herself to him, Frederick again launches an attack,
threatening ‘I will cut your throate’, to which Raymond responds: ‘Swoones it pincht me by the throate’ (IV.i.168). Significantly, where the Duke associates Dorilus’s disembodied voice with celestial figures, the corrupted Lord Raymond resembles Selimus in his attempts to comprehend invisibility, as he declares Frederick some form of idolatrous, mechanical trickery, a ‘scurvie voice’ that ‘troubles’ him because he ‘cannot see / The thing that sets it going’ (IV.i.166–7).

Smirk’s time as the invisible painter-stainer similarly demonstrates the iconoclastic function of invisibility. Callow and Ranoff re-enter, speculating that it was ‘heereabout’ that they encountered the ‘voice that kickt us’ (IV.i.395). The courtiers are now attacked with paint; Smirk has earlier entered the scene carrying ‘severall pots of colours’ (IV.i.313SD), and it seems that while the invisibility ring makes his clothing ‘unseen’, the paints he is holding remain visible when applied to visible surfaces. Smirk threatens:

Smirk I wud kick you againe, but that I have Cornes on my Toes, I will only pencil you now. And because you have so much knavery and want colour for’t I will begin with Orange tawny.
Callow What was that?
Ranoff What.
Callow Something crost my Nose.
Ranoff A Dore, a Dore, the fields are full of them.
Smirk I’ll give you the Dore too.
Ranoff There was another wip’t me in the same place.
Smirk Cause you are a Knight, you shall beare a Crosse
Ranoff How now? Zfoote I think some Bird has wraid in my eye. (IV.i.397–409)

Smirk’s tendency to produce distorted images which do not resemble the subject depicted is put to iconoclastic use here, as his daubing of Callow and Ranoff exposes the distortions which underlie the pair’s assertions of courtly superiority. Smirk mocks Ranoff’s status as a knight, daubing him with a cross. Significantly, having been defaced through a splattering of paint, Ranoff believes that a bird has defecated in his eye. The link between iconoclasm and scatology in early modern visual culture and drama has been established by a number of scholars. Scatological satire is a feature of many anti-Catholic prints of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and early Tudor drama in particular exploits the iconoclastic aesthetic of scatology in anti-Catholic comedy. In The Two Merry Milkmaids, then, paint is a scatological iconoclastic medium, the daubing and smearing of the courtiers in line with the conventions of satiric spectacle during the period.

The integral role of erasure and defacement in the construction of invisibility means that unseen characters function as active, performative versions of the deferential blank canvas that draws attention to its own incompletion. In this, the dynamics of the performance of unseen characters reproduces the deployment of self-effacement in the defence of theatrical display. We might recall
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here the self-effacing puppet Dionysius in Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair, who ‘takes up his garment’ in order to confront Zeal-of-the-Land Busy with the material constructedness of performed spectacle (5.5.104SD). Satz understands this scene as presenting a ‘gesture of desecration’ that moves Busy ‘from disbelief to the theatre spectator’s “willing suspension of disbelief”, or perhaps consubstantiated double-vision’. From the perspective of advice on the conditions of spectating, however, Jonson’s deployment of defacement in displaying the material construction of performance emphasises the role of knowledge about making in the ‘making’ of playgoers. In contrast to Julia, who fears she cannot speak to the artificial Callow, Busy proves what he believes to be the idolatrous status of the puppet by arguing with it as if it were a person, and so conflating type with prototype. It is only when he perceives the ‘mechanism and materiality’ of Dionysius that Busy is converted to a contented spectator who understands the conditions of his interaction with the spectacle of the puppet.

The role of self-effacement in the rebuttal of Busy’s antitheatricalism echoes the function of iconoclasm in distinguishing idols from icons as described by Marion. Marion argues that the icon effaces itself as a result of the intersection of ‘two gazes’, the first gaze being that of the spectator of the icon; the second gaze the intervention of the prototype. This iconoclastic process occurs because the viewer must ‘feel’ themselves to be ‘seen’ by the icon ‘in order for it to function effectively as an icon’. If it were not for the interactivity of spectatorship in early modern playhouses, the self-effacement of staged invisibility might seem to draw attention only to the status of the unseen character as ‘profane image’, before which the viewer remains ‘unseen by an image that is reduced to the rank of an object (the aesthetic object remains an object) constituted, at least in part’, by the spectator’s ‘gaze’. The possibility that the viewer remains ‘unseen’ by the viewed is curtailed in a materially interactive early modern culture in which visual perception is understood to involve tangible contact with the viewed that may have physical consequences for the spectator. In one of Prospero’s most famous speeches in The Tempest, the interconnectedness of spectator and performance is reflected in the simultaneous erasure of both. When a masque organised for Ferdinand and Miranda by Prospero is ‘suddenly’ ended, the masquers having ‘heavily vanished’, Prospero tells a surprised Ferdinand:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And – like the baseless fabric of this vision –
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
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Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.138SD–158)

Performance in this view functions as does the invisibility cloak, the spectacle of the spirits made visible to spectators pointing to emptiness beneath, a ‘baseless fabric’ which is material and simultaneously nothing, in that it is not the same as the prototype. The dissolve immateriality to which Prospero refers is applied to ‘all’ including the spectators of the masque, Prospero, Ferdinand and Miranda. Through this revelation Prospero instructs the ignorant Ferdinand that he is complicit as a spectator in a self-effacing act of production that reveals its insubstantiality as a condition of performance.

The depiction of unseen characters presents a distorted version of Derrida’s assertion that ‘a stage which presents nothing to the sight’ is a space in which the spectator ‘will efface within himself the difference between the actor and the spectator, the represented and the representor, the object seen and the seeing subject’. In the context of early modern performances, spectators engage in the self-effacement of the unseen in ways that reflect back on their own participation in a supposedly imperfect material and visual world. The interaction between spectator and representation that is central to the making of onstage invisibility means that characters are brought into the self-referential self-effacement; like Busy discovering the ‘truth’ about puppets, spectators are engaged directly with the mechanical structure of theatre and their position within this structure. Onstage invisibility is thus a dangerous, interactive and performative model of the ‘blank canvas’ through which Lyly defers to God as divine maker. Where Lyly’s blank canvas alludes to divine perfection in a display of imperfection, the unseen character displays imperfection whilst simultaneously rehearsing the experience of standing outside the visible manifestations of imperfection.

Notes

3 Christopher Marlowe, Dr Faustus, A- and B-texts (1604, 1616), ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, The Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), A·text, III.ii.56. All subsequent references are to this edition.
4 In the introduction to his edition of The Two Merry Milkmaids, Metz quotes Edmund Gayton, who recalls players at ‘Festivities … especially at Shrovetide’ attempting to perform Marlovian tragedies, but ‘forc’d to … conclude the day with the Merry milkmaids’, Pleasant Notes on Don Quixote (1654), pp. 271–2, quoted in Anon, The Two
5 ‘The Printer to the Reader’, in Anon, The Two Merry Milkmaids, ed. Metz, p. 5.
7 Kirkman, The Wits, A4v.
14 Munday, Fedele and Fortunio, sigs C1v–C2r.
20 Henslowe, ‘Diary’, p. 325. In his editorial notes, Metz asserts that Dorilus would ‘put on a special robe’ in the parts of the scene during which he is supposed to be invisible. Anon, The Two Merry Milkmaids, III.ii.290, n. 290. See also Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, ed. Brooks, II.i.186, n. 186; Marlowe, Dr Faustus, ed. Bevington and Rasmussen, A-text, III.ii.58SD and n. 58SD, and Shakespeare, The Tempest, ed. Vaughan and Vaughan 1.2.303, n. 303.
21 See Michael Baird Saenger, ‘The Costumes of Caliban and Ariel qua Sea-Nymph’, Notes and Queries, 42 (1995), 334–6; Gabriel Egan expands and supports Saenger’s original suggestion that the sea nymph costume derived from Munday’s pageant
22 Jones and Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing, p. 248.
23 These lines are taken from Reginald Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft (London: W. Brome, 1584), pp. 385–6. See Anon, The Two Merry Milkmaids, ed. Metz, I. i. 45, n. 45.
24 See Anon, The Two Merry Milkmaids, ed. Metz, I. i. 9, n. 9.
27 Scarisbrick, Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery, p. 51.
28 Scarisbrick, Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery, p. 52.
30 Scarisbrick, Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery, p. 51.
31 Herring, Certayne Rules, Directions, or Advertisments, p. 9.
32 Herring, Certayne Rules, Directions, or Advertisments, title page.
34 Eastop, ‘Outside In’, 245, 251.
36 Richard Rolle (attrib.), Pricke of Conscience (1340), 8231, quoted in the OED.
39 George Chapman, Monsieur D’Olive (1606), in Allan Holaday (ed.), The Plays of George
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40 See Maus, Inwardness and Theater, pp. 36–47.


43 Maus, Inwardness and Theater, p. 39.

44 Maus, Inwardness and Theater, p. 37.

45 Danzig notes the connection between the cave that Gyges enters and the ‘cave analogy’ in Plato’s Republic, in which ‘citizens are portrayed as living … in a cave … in which enchained men are shown images by others who parade objects before a fire, throwing shadows on a wall … It is no coincidence that, by descending into a cave and retrieving a magical ring, Plato’s Gyges gains a rhetorical power that enables him to enslave the people of his political community’, ‘Rhetoric and the Ring,’ 188.

46 Greene’s Selimus is an atheist who declares ‘scorn religion – it disgraces man’, The Tragedy of Selimus, 2.21. Maus links investment in modes of visual concealment analogous to Gyges’s invisibility to atheism when she observes that in Renaissance thought ‘virtue requires God’s surveillance in order to exist … So hypocrisy becomes not merely the concealment of one’s motives from other human beings, but an implicit denial of God’s existence’, Inwardness and Theater, p. 38.

47 Maus, Inwardness and Theater, pp. 38–9.

48 Nicholas Grimald, Marcus Tullius Ciceroes Thre Bokes of Duties, to Marcus his sonne, turned out of latine into english, by Nicholas Grimalde (London: Richard Tottel, 1556), fol. 123r–v.

49 Maus, Inwardness and Theater, p. 38.

50 Knapp, Image Ethics, p. 54.

51 Knapp, Image Ethics, p. 61.


53 ‘The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates,
displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace’, Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 156.


55 On the paradoxical incompleteness of visual experience, see Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, p. 106; see also Ackerman, *Seeing Things*, p. 8.

56 The stage direction is an editorial addition, not in the 1616 text.


58 The commonalities between Bernard and Faustus’s conjuring here probably reflects the stage direction is an editorial addition, not in the 1616 text.


65 Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 5.1.3.

Satz, ‘Attacks on Automata’, p. 46. The emphasis is in the text.
Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, p. 59.
Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, p. 59.
Clark, Vanities of the Eye, p. 45.
Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 306.