

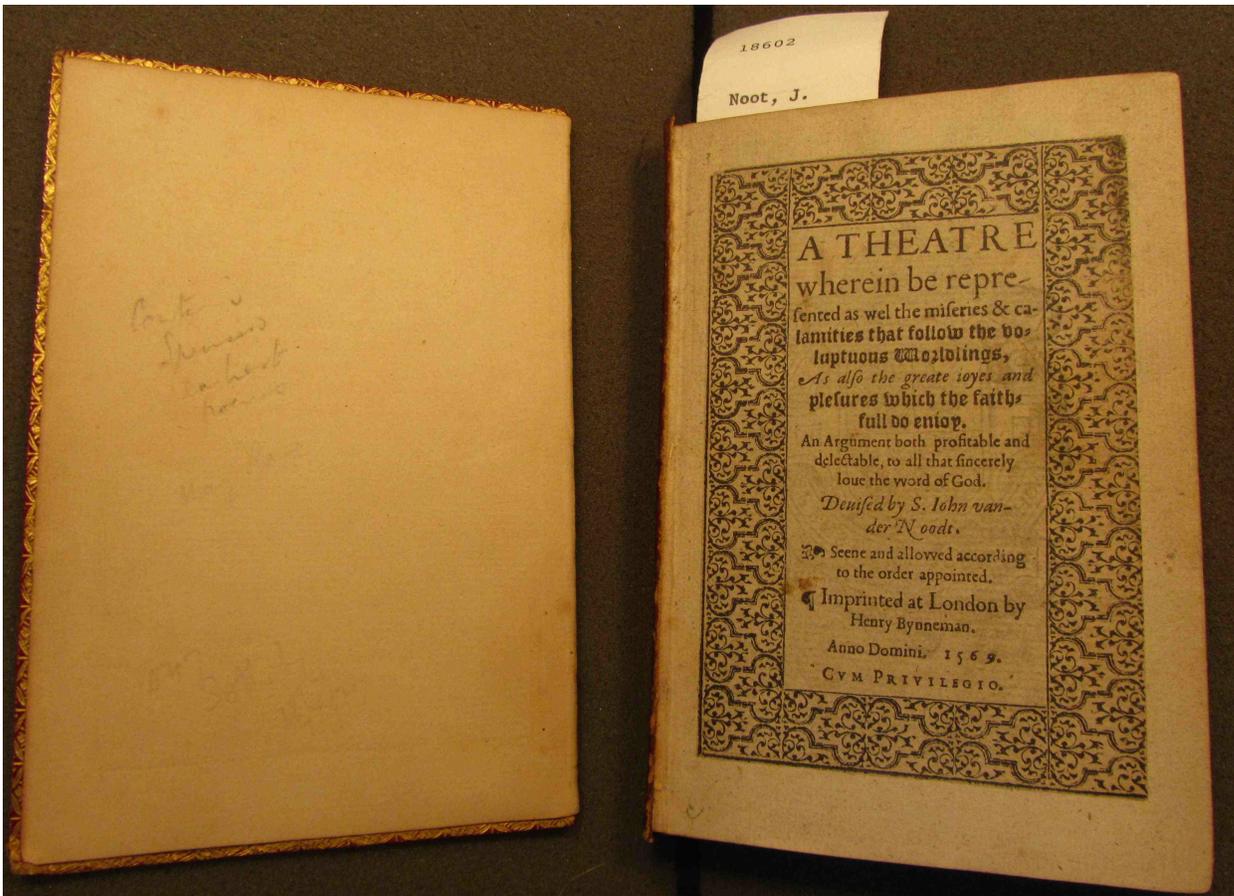
“So many strange things hapned me to see”:  
Myths and Mysteries in the Illustrations of *A Theatre for Worldlings*

My RBS-UVA project, which I’ve presented at a major conference and am revising for print publication, reexamines what is known of the production history of the illustrations for a book commonly known as *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1569). The small octavo volume of visionary poems, emblematic woodcuts, and prophetic prose from the press of Henry Bynneman is important to scholars of Edmund Spenser because it contains his first published work. A teenage Spenser translates into proto-sonnets poems by Clément Marot and Joachim du Bellay, which these first- and second-generation French Renaissance poets had in turn derived from Petrarch. Framed in an apocalyptic context, the themes of fleeting splendor and impending loss are ones Spenser returned to frequently over the course of his career.

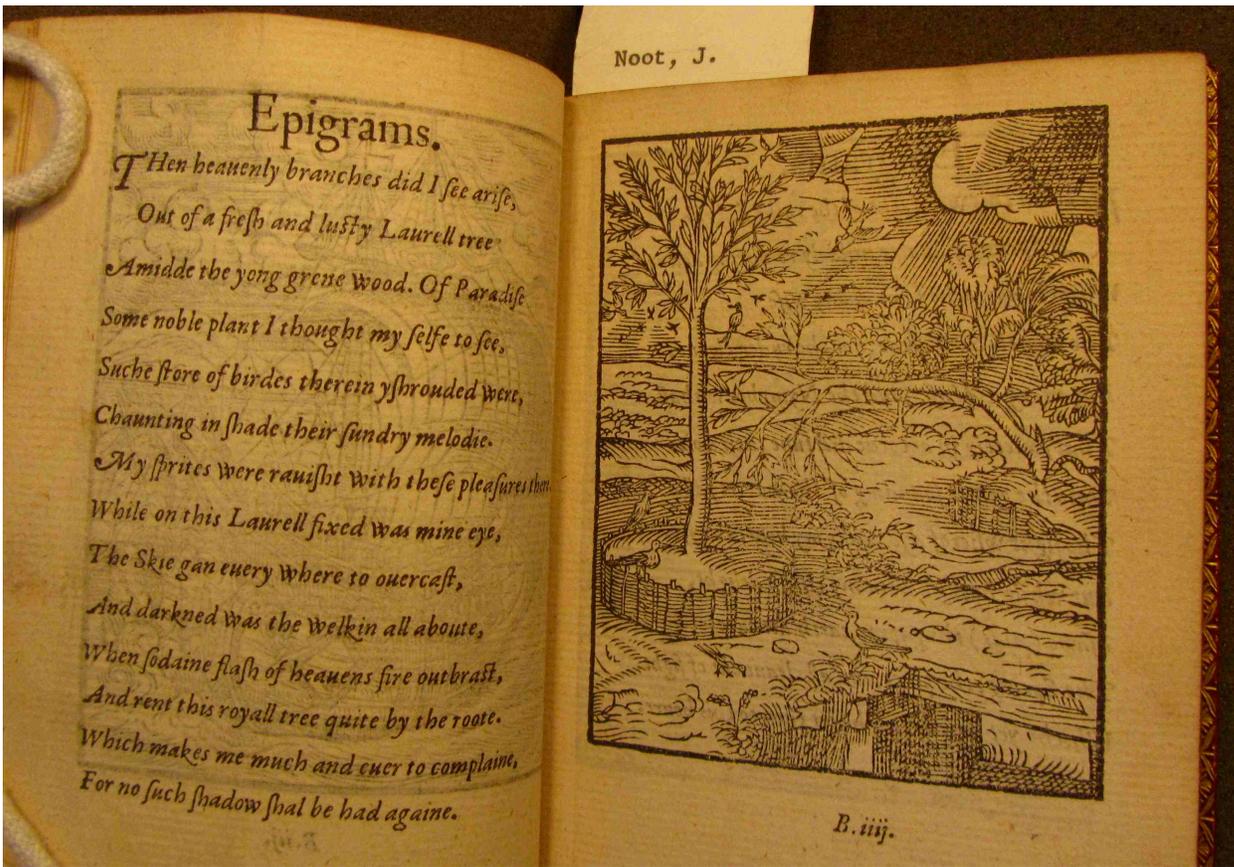
The *Theatre* is also of note to bibliographers because its original Dutch-language edition, *Het Theatre oft Toon-neel* (1568), published by John Day, was the first book printed in England to be illustrated with etchings. Day also published an intermediate edition, *Le Theatre* (1568), in French. The creator and primary author of the *Theatre* in all its editions, Jan van der Noot, is a major Dutch Renaissance poet, credited with bringing the sonnet into his language. He translated Marot and du Bellay’s poems for the Dutch edition and wrote the religious commentary on the poems that comprises the bulk of the volume. Noot was living in London at the time, along with numbers of his artistic and poetic colleagues, refugees from the wars of the Reformation. My study draws on prior studies by Spenserians, art historians, and scholars of the Dutch Renaissance, the implications of which have not been fully pursued, and my own close examination of the Folger copies and various electronic facsimiles, in order to better understand the *Theatre* editions as artistic productions and, perhaps, collaborative enterprises.

In 1988, Michael Bath announced his discovery of a manuscript source for the first six images of the *Theatre*. He also demonstrated that the woodcuts were more closely derived from the manuscript than the etchings, suggesting that the former preceded the latter. This is contrary to our understanding of typical publishing practices in which an original intaglio print would be copied in block form for a cheaper, later edition. Considering Bath’s evidence afresh, alongside details in the printers’ signing of the quires and in the quality of the impressions, leads me to propose a new theory of how and why each of the three editions was prepared for publication.

My study concludes with further analysis of the *Theatre* illustrations. Louis Friedland’s 1956 suggestion that Lucas de Heere might be the artist of the etchings, rather than the oft-cited Marcus Gheeraerts, seems now to be accepted amongst art and book historians after an uneven initial reception. I have closely examined other work attributed to de Heere, and my findings shed new light on the project of the *Theatre* and the relations between it and Spenser’s first great work, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). My holistic analysis of prior, separate studies and of unexamined features of the printings reveals how much we still have to learn from these three curious editions, which may in turn illuminate our sense of how poets from across Early Modern Europe, whose oeuvres we tend to approach with modern notions of individual genius, worked together to achieve their visual, literary, and intellectual aspirations.



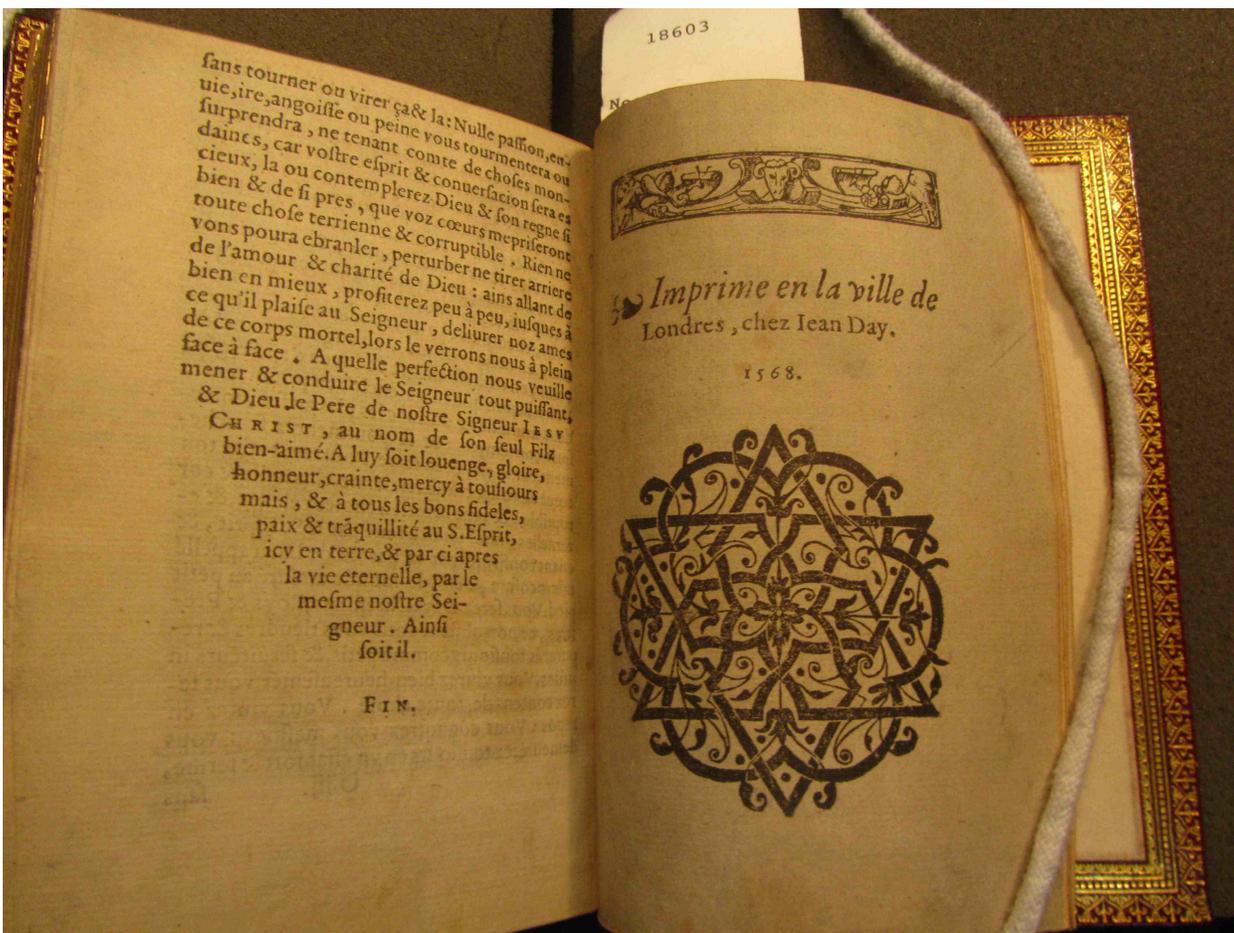
A Theatre,  
title page



A Theatre,  
Epigram 3  
(Spenser  
tr. Marot;  
woodcut)



*Het Theatre,*  
Epigram 3  
(Noot  
tr. Marot;  
etching att.  
de Heere)



*Le Theatre,*  
Day's imprint