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The Performance of Disguise

In spite of the fact that disguise devices are employed in a very large number of extant Tudor and Stuart plays, there has been comparatively little scholarly interest in the use of disguise on the early English stage. In 1915 Victor O. Freeburg, author of what is still the closest thing to a full-scale examination of disguise plots and devices, defined dramatic disguise, quite simply, as 'a change of personal appearance which leads to mistaken identity. There is a double test, change and confusion.'¹ Freeburg's definition is a straightforward one, but perhaps his approach to the plays was too simple because he saw disguise as little more than a device to generate plot. Since Freeburg's book, some scholars have attempted to develop a more sophisticated understanding. One response, originating with M.C. Bradbrook, conflated disguise with role-playing, effectively minimizing its significance as change in appearance. Miss Bradbrook, taking issue with Freeburg, offered an apparently more subtle definition: 'I should prefer to define disguise as the substitution, overlaying or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles. This may involve masquerade deliberate or involuntary, mistaken or concealed identity, madness or possession.'² So, for example, Lear's madness can be understood as disguise. This broader interpretation of disguise was subsequently taken up in books by Thomas Van Laan and Joan Lord Hall, who were concerned largely with the psychological implications of role-playing; for them, all characters, as all people, are in effect role-players, which might well be true, but denies any special significance to disguise.³ Anthony B. Dawson considered more specifically the metadramatic function of disguise, but as a minor part of a broader discussion of dramatic illusion.⁴ Most of the other recent criticism that has examined disguise has been theoretical, and in particular there has been (mainly feminist) concern with transvestite disguise and the implications of the boy actor. There has also been some interest in what might be called trans-status disguise and its relation to sumptuary laws and the transgression of social boundaries. Such scholarship has interpreted disguise in para-metaphorical

ways in relation to social hierarchy, the construction of gender, or the construction of identity or subjectivity.⁵

I do not deny the value of this work, but all of it distracts attention from the technical act of disguising. On the one hand is a strain of criticism or scholarship that has, paradoxically, minimized the very *theatricality* of disguise by drawing it into the broader category of role-playing. On the other hand is a strain that has looked *through* disguise in search of cultural meanings that relate to the ideologies of Early Modern England, but those meanings, while interesting as cultural history, are not of much use for the practical staging of disguise plays, since they cannot be reconstructed on the modern stage. In seeking to find what disguise means, both have, in effect, ignored what disguise is or does. Perhaps this arises from the absence of evidence in play scripts and related documents, but that absence need not prevent speculation based on what is known about performance conditions and costume constraints. I should like here to redirect discussion on to what disguise does.

I will return to the point that Freeburg made so long ago: that disguise involves a change of personal appearance, and I want to consider here how the act of disguising might have been performed and how it might still be performed. Near the end of Joe Orton's play *Loot* the policeman Truscott explains his success as a detective: 'I am a master of disguise. (*He takes off his hat.*) You see – a complete transformation.'⁶ The joke, such as it is, depends upon certain assumptions about the suspension of audience disbelief in the theatre. The audience does not need to be fooled by something that it sees on stage in order to believe that people on the stage have been fooled by it. It is a commonplace that characters on the Elizabethan stage do not penetrate a disguise, even if the disguiser is as intimate as a husband or wife or a twin sister. There are, to be sure, exceptions such as Falstaff's recognition of Hal in *2 Henry IV* (2.4.256–7), but these are rare; in the overwhelming number of cases there is no recognition. Sometimes other characters react to the disguiser's ambiguity, as do Orsino and Feste in *Twelfth Night* in noting Cesario's effeminacy, but this reaction never goes so far as recognition. We need only think of the lengthy and laborious revelation of Viola's identity to her brother in the final scene (5.1.215–51) to realise how completely an Elizabethan audience was willing to accept total implausibility. Indeed, one might argue that part of the pathos associated with the disguises of the faithful Kent and Edgar in *King Lear* arises from the fact that those who love them do not recognize them because they are trapped inside a theatrical convention. On the other hand, the rarity of the kind of disguise trick that Ben Jonson played on the audience in *The*

Silent Woman and *The New Inn* only serves to remind us that the audience did not expect to be fooled by stage disguise. In other words, disguise had to be entirely opaque to characters on the stage and entirely transparent to the audience. The disguiser was thus a constant generator of dramatic irony.

A good example of the need for an audience to be aware that a character is in disguise was offered recently by the production of *The Alchemist* presented by Shenandoah Shakespeare at the inaugural conference at the Blackfriars Playhouse.⁷ In this production the disguise of a Spanish grandee provided for Surly was so elaborate that the actor beneath it was unrecognizable. There is no indication in the text that the Spaniard is Surly, nor did the actor make any gesture that would signal the character's primary identity, so that members of the audience who were not familiar with the play could not have known it. I would say that for this scene (4.3) to work properly, it is essential for the audience to be aware of Surly's imposture. In discussion after the performance, the acting company argued that the audience's ignorance of the Spaniard's identity does not detract from the comedy of the scene, but this is surely wrong. The unaware audience will see little more than anti-Spanish satire. The aware audience will see things of much more immediate interest: not only the humiliating mockery of Surly, but also the potential for an ironic reversal of mockery against the unsuspecting tricksters Subtle and Face.

Another important reason that disguise had to be transparent to the audience was that a disguised character had to be distinguishable from a doubled character. Most plays from the period have more characters, sometimes many more, than there were actors in a company, and the audience needed to be aware that an actor who had just entered was playing a disguised version of the same character he had played before rather than a different character. Some differentiating convention was clearly necessary to ensure that when an actor changed into disguise his primary character could always be perceived through his secondary character. There is evidence in the dialogue of some disguise plays to suggest a certain anxiety in the playwrights to ensure that disguise did not mislead the audience. A character intending to take on a disguise usually announces either in soliloquy or to a confidant that he or she is going to do so; the Duke in *Measure for Measure* is given an entire scene to explain the disguise he will take on (1.3). Once in disguise the character offers, through brief moments of soliloquy, through asides, or through self-referential double meanings, reminders of his or her primary identity. Such transparency must surely have been paralleled by a transparency of costume.

Let me take another example from Jonson, the original version of *Every Man in His Humour*. The 1616 Folio of his *Workes* lists ten 'principall comoedians' as acting in the 1598 production. There are thirteen male roles listed, so this did not stretch the company too far – doubling would have been needed for only a half-dozen minor roles. However, the character Musco takes on three disguises in the course of the play, for one of which he steals the costume of the clerk Peto. Since the actor playing Peto almost certainly was one of those who doubled roles, it is clear that it would have been necessary for his costume in his other role(s) to distinguish him completely from his role as Peto. At the same time, the audience would have been kept aware, through the kind of transparency I have suggested, that the person now appearing as Peto was in fact Musco. The costume for Peto must have had something highly distinctive about it to allow its 'identity' to be transferred easily to Musco without concealing the actor. Musco's other two disguises, as an old soldier and as a 'varlet', or bailiff, would have been easy to signify with simple garments or properties associated with those functions.

So, a consideration of the staging of disguise, which is my primary concern, must take some account of the problem of doubling, since both relate in different ways to the question of theatrical 'identity', and both are materially connected to the constraints of an acting company's wardrobe. We know from the work of David Bevington and T.J. King something about the kinds and numbers of roles that were doubled.⁸ However, not much is known about the practical aspects of doubling and especially the difficulties caused by the need to change costume. How, for example, did the eight 'principall Tragoedians' listed in Jonson's *Workes*, perform the 31 named male roles in *Sejanus*? Given that all are ancient Romans and mainly of the governing class, what differentiations in dress were made that would avoid creating confusion for the audience? This is, perhaps, an extreme example, but there are few plays from the period that do not raise the question.

Jean MacIntyre has produced an excellent study of the costume requirements of particular plays and how they might have related to what is known about the extent of the wardrobes owned by the acting companies. While she has much to say about the semiotics of clothing and what dress could signify about the social, moral, or spiritual status of a character, she does not resolve the problem of disguise.⁹ She does, however, provide a hint for how disguise might have been performed. Writing about stage conventions that developed from the fifteenth century she says: 'Within a role, costume change almost always reflects an inward change. A different dress may show that a character

has abandoned good for evil or evil for good, that he has grown up or grown old. . . . On the stage, change was invariably simple.¹⁰ By 'simple' she means some small, emblematic modification. I want to suggest that disguise-changes were carried out in a similar way.

As MacIntyre shows, wardrobe conditions were different for Court entertainments, for professional companies, and for the boys companies; furthermore, the costume inventory of individual companies changed and expanded over time. There were certainly times when plays in which roles were doubled and in which some characters also took on disguise would have exerted substantial pressure on the wardrobe if all costume changes were extensive or complete. We know that stage costume was often elaborate, especially for noble characters, regardless of the play's period or location. This was because much of it consisted of the cast-off clothing of the actual nobility.¹¹ We can see from portraits of the period what this meant. Ruffs were worn by both sexes and pinned at neck and wrist. Men wore rich cloaks and elaborate doublet and hose – MacIntyre informs us that 'tying the points which attached hose to doublet was probably the most awkward part of Elizabethan dressing.'¹² Women wore tied bodices – 'Cut my lace, Charmian' (1.3.71) Cleopatra says, because that would be quicker than untying her bodice; retying it would not be quite so quick – skirts draped and layered over petticoats and farthingales. None of this was zippered, of course, and little of it was buttoned, since buttons were largely decorative; rather, men and women were, hooked, pinned, tied, sometimes sewn into their clothing.¹³ William Ringler claimed that Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* changes from woman's to boy's clothing in 'about a minute of acting time', going on to say 'Changes involving a complete change of identity probably took somewhat longer, but not much longer. Elizabethan actors apparently prided themselves on being quick-change artists.'¹⁴ This hardly seems realistic in the light of what is known about the way in which Elizabethan clothes were fastened; surely quite a lot of time was needed for an actor to undress from one role and dress for another.

Shifts in appearance caused by disguise devices usually had to be carried out rather more quickly than changes in costume for doubling, and sometimes entailed moving back and forth between the primary and secondary persona (think of the shifts between 'Face', 'Lungs' and 'Jeremy' in *The Alchemist*). This suggests that such shifts could not have involved a change of costume as such, but were signalled by some kind of costume shorthand, like Truscott's hat – a wig, a beard, a different coloured cloak, perhaps reversible, some kind of badge or emblem of a trade – something simple but unambiguous, that would provide

'a complete transformation' to the view of other characters on stage, but would keep the audience fully aware of what was going on. The exceptional situation to this seems to have been transvestite disguise. The attractions of transvestite disguise for the playwright are obvious: the boy actor was able to spend most of the play dressed as a boy. However, it was all the more necessary to remind the audience of the (supposed) woman beneath, and so there are more direct addresses to the audience through soliloquy or asides, or self-revealing double-entendres of the 'I am not that I play' or 'I am not what I am' sort. In *As You Like It* Rosalind is off the stage for three scenes to take off her maiden weeds and put on doublet and hose but has only seventy or so lines to get back into woman's clothing. It might well have been the practical problem caused by insufficient time for changing in this play that caused Shakespeare to leave Viola in her man's attire at the end of *Twelfth Night*.

For almost all disguise situations, however, it is essential for the audience to be constantly aware of the dual level of being – that the Friar is 'really' a Duke, that Caius is 'really' Kent, that Piato is 'really' Vindice – to see the character and his creature simultaneously. To be sure, there may well be more subtle arguments to be made about these disguises – about the hypocritical linking of secular and spiritual power through Vincentio's disguise, or that, as the honest, loyal servant, Kent is still himself when he is Caius, or that no matter how hard he tries Vindice cannot distance himself from his dark creation – and perhaps these arguments might be strengthened by the very transparency that I am suggesting. Playwrights reacted to the practical restrictions involved in the need for a change in or addition to a character's role by exploiting the theatrical possibilities opened up by those very limitations. Transparency was not just a necessity but indeed the point. Theatrical identity is ludic and fluid, and this transparency, in which we see, as it were, the rabbit and the duck simultaneously, revels in that fluidity. That is what disguise does.

Notes

- 1 Victor O. Freeburg, *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama: A Study in Stage Tradition* (1915; rpt New York, 1965), 2.
- 2 M.C. Bradbrook, 'Shakespeare and the Use of Disguise in Elizabethan Drama', *Essays in Criticism* 2 (1952), 160.

- 3 Thomas Van Laan, *Role-Playing in Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Joan Lord Hall, *The Dynamics of Role-Playing in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York, 1991).
- 4 Anthony B. Dawson, *Indirections: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion* (Toronto, 1978).
- 5 The volume of writing on transvestite or transgressive disguise (especially the former) is too large to list here. Representative examples are Phyllis Rackin, 'Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage', *PMLA* 102 (1987), 29–41; Susan Baker, 'Personating Persons: Rethinking Shakespearean Disguises', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992), 303–16.
- 6 Joe Orton, *The Complete Plays* (London, 1973), 224.
- 7 Blackfriars Playhouse Inaugural Conference, Staunton, Virginia, 11–14 October 2001.
- 8 David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, 1962); T.J. *Casting Shakespeare's Plays: London Actors and Their Roles, 1590–1642* (Cambridge, 1992).
- 9 Jean MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres* (Edmonton, 1992).
- 10 MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts*, 13.
- 11 Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (1978; rpt Harmondsworth, 1988), 259.
- 12 MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts*, 208.
- 13 See Virginia LaMar, *English Dress in the Age of Shakespeare* (Washington, 1958); Jane Ashelford, *A Visual History of Costume: The Sixteenth Century* (London, 1983).
- 14 William A. Ringler, Jr., 'The Number of Actors in Shakespeare's Early Plays,' in *The Seventeenth Century Stage*, ed. Gerald Eades Bentley (Chicago, 1968), 120–1.