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Staging Allegory in *The Three Ladies of London*

Review of performance staged 23 June 2015 at the Robinson Memorial Theatre, McMaster University, Hamilton ON

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Seeing Peter Cockett's production of *The Three Ladies of London* was a real treat. I have been working with this play off and on for over fifty years (it was a basic part of my 1963 PhD dissertation) and it was central to my first published article on what I then termed 'the estates morality play,'¹ with that term drawn from the title page: 'A Perfect Patterne for All Estates to looke into'. However, I had not dreamed I would ever see this script performed.

I enjoyed many features of this production. The scenes with Mercadorus (Jesse Horvath) and Gerontus (Omar Khafagy) worked well, and I was impressed by Kyle Billie's Simony with his insidious predatory smile and Nick Kozij's Simplicity, a tour de force performance in the tradition of Tarlton and Wilson. In the remarks that follow, however, I make no attempt at an evaluative review (what I think of as hits, runs, and errors) but will concentrate on problems in staging this script (probably for the first time since the 1590s) and some of the things I learned as a playgoer.

Allegory in Action

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Since my current focus is on what I term ‘allegory in action’, I was particularly interested in moments set up by the playwright or the director that combine words and onstage action in a fashion meaningful in allegorical terms. For a simple (and not necessarily allegorical) example, a bit of stage business was provided in scene 4 where Peter Pleaseman (‘I love to please men, so long as I have life’, l. 10)², who lacks Sincerity’s education, is seeking preferment from Lady Lucre. When Simony asks ‘of what religion are you, can ye tell?’ the response is ‘Marry, sir, of all religions: I know not myself very well’ and he adds ‘I warrant you my religion shall not offend her’ (26-9). The actor had entered with a cross visible on a chain around his neck that was quickly hidden when he saw that the wind was blowing in a Protestant direction. This small action italicized the point of the scene.

An even more obvious bit of entertaining stage business was provided in Lucre’s interview with Mercadorus. Starting with the play’s opening lines, the power of Lucre had been stressed (Love tells Conscience: ‘’Tis Lucre now that rules the rout: ‘tis she is all in all’, 1.3), but more than any other spokesman in the script Mercadorus repeatedly spells out his devotion to Lucre. His most elaborate formulation is in scene 3:

Madonna, me do for love of you tink no pain too mush.

And to do anything for you me will not grush.

Me will-a forsake-a my fader, moder, king, country, and more dan dat;

Me will lie and forswear meself for a quarter so much as my hat.

What is dat for love of Lucre me dare, or will not do?

Me care not for all the world, the great devil, nay, make my God angry for you. (32-7)

In one of my favorite moments in the production, Lucre was positioned downstage audience right so that her disciple centre stage moved toward her on his knees so as to create a wonderful theatrical image of the worship of money or gain.

An interesting example of allegory in action is found in scene 4 where Sincerity, an Oxford graduate, asks Conscience to subscribe her name on a letter in his behalf so that he can get a benefice from Lucre. To do this task the playwright has her say: ‘Come hither, Simplicity, let me write on thy back’ and a moment later: ‘Good Simplicity, once more thy body do bow’ (50, 57), but the project is a lost cause as demonstrated later in this scene when Lucre, after reading the letter, responds: ‘I have referred all such matters to my servant Simony’ (130) so that Sincerity realizes that ‘he will do nothing, except I bring money’ (134). All the petitioner gets is the parsonage of St Nihil and empty promises from Sir Nicholas Nemo, a result that Sincerity describes as ‘A living that is blown down with the wind’ (182).

On the one hand, using a clown with Tarlton’s talent as a writing table would have been a source of comic business, especially if round two builds somehow on round one. However, more is at stake here. Clearly Lucre ‘rules the rout’ so that Sincerity with scholarly credentials (as opposed to Peter Pleaseman) but no money for a bribe has no chance of preferment. In such a world the attempt of Conscience to assist Sincerity to gain the favor of Lucre is a principled but unworldly action. By involving Simplicity directly in this process (‘let me write on thy back’), the playwright allegorically calls attention to the naïveté, even simple-mindedness that underlies this attempt to advance a worthy but poor candidate in a world dominated by Lucre and Simony.

The most telling example of allegory in action is found in scene 10 that starts with Conscience singing her broom song followed by her lament over Usury’s power, then her capitulation to Lucre: ‘I think you lead the world in a string, for everybody follows you, / And

sith everyone doth it, why not may I do it too?’ (69-70). The result is the most striking single image in the play: Lucre’s spotting Conscience’s face with black ink and gloating that she has succeeded in marrying ‘Love with Dissimulation, / And have spotted Conscience with all abomination’ (124-5). What makes this moment so powerful theatrically is the combination of Lucre’s action (accompanied by praise of her victim’s beauty – eg, ‘O, how beauty hath adorned thee with every seemly hue’, 111) with Conscience counting her pay-off of five thousand crowns (here depicted in \$100 notes). This juxtaposition of two distinctive actions epitomized for me Wilson’s view of the corruption in London.

The Vizard

The most perplexing problem in the script grows out of the staging and subsequent implications of the appearance of Lucre and Love in scene 15. Questions start with the opening stage direction that directs Lucre to enter along with Love ‘*with a vizard behind*’ (15.sd). My impression when first encountering this wording (a reading shared by others at the conference) is that the original boy actor appeared with his face visible and a vizard-mask ‘on the back of the head (giving her two faces)’.³ However, that actor had played Conscience in scene 10 where his face had been spotted with abomination, and Andrea Stevens has documented the difficulty (given theatre technology in the early 1580s) of removing face paint expeditiously during the course of a performance.⁴ Given such theatrical exigency, I now read the signal with an implicit comma after vizard, so that Love, with a vizard concealing the actor’s spotted face, appears trailing behind Lucre – and such uses of *behind* are commonplace in the plays of this period.⁵

The next question is: what does the vizard look like? Is it a plain, unadorned mask or is it something fashioned for the purpose (eg, a grotesque face as in later plays that include masques or other events involving disguises)? That is, is the vizard a practical means to enable the now-spotted Conscience actor to appear as Love and not cause confusion, or is it somehow a comment on the wearer? The dialogue spells out Love's condition with an emphasis on swelling, not spotting. First she laments: 'My head in monstrous sort, alas, doth more and more still swell', and Lucre's subsequent lines provide perhaps the major puzzle in the script:

Is your head then swollen, good Mistress Love? I pray you let me see.

Of troth it is! Behold a face that seems to smile on me.

It is fair and well-favoured, with a countenance smooth and good;

Wonder is the worst, to see two faces in a hood. (13-16)

Given this description, what then is a playgoer actually to see? What is the 'Wonder'?

The sequence of that speech suggests that Lucre first sees and comments on the disfigured Love, then on the 'countenance smooth and good', but, if the actor's face is hidden by the vizard, which of the two options correspond to the vizard (plain or misshapen) and which to the to-be-imagined face? Moreover, Lucre's 'let me see' and 'Behold a face' suggest some action (eg, peeking under the vizard to see something not available to a viewer). The phrase 'to see two faces in a hood' can further complicate interpretation, but, as I discovered, that locution is widely used to denote deceptive behavior and need not be taken literally. Typical is Robert Greene's description of the suitors to the heroine in *Mamillia* that climaxes with 'their dissembling mind, two faces in a hood: to wax with the Moone, and ebbe with the sea: to beare both fire and water, to laugh and weepe all with one winde'.⁶ Somehow, the playwright is providing a major in-the-theatre image, one that feeds into the final scene, but I remain puzzled

as to what that image should be. Peter's eventual choice made sense to me. He chose a plain, unadorned vizard⁷ and then had Love enter trailing behind with her head buried in her cloak, so that for the key speech Lucre pulled up Love's head to reveal the mask but did not look under it.

The Final Scene:

The last scene poses a series of problems for reader and director. First, like others at the conference I can readily conceive of a negative or cynical interpretation of the play's final judgments because Wilson names his judge Nemo (No One), thereby repeating the device used in scene 4 when the only support for Sincerity comes from Sir Nicholas Nemo (whose final speech with its promises of help trails off into nothingness). Unlike that earlier scene, however, here the Nemo name is not mentioned in the script. Peter resolved that issue by 1) having the same actor play both parts (his only appearances in the show) and 2) using the opening stage direction ('*the Crier shall sound three times*', 17.sd) to have the Crier say 'Hear ye. The Court of Judge Nemo'.⁸

The key evidence against Lucre then comes from a letter ('What letter is that in thy bosom, Conscience?') which the judge directs Diligence to 'reach it hither' (37-8). The staging here could have been comparable to *King Lear* 1.2 where Edmund wants the forged letter supposedly from Edgar to be seen and appropriated by Gloucester, but by making the object visible in Conscience's gown Peter chose to provide something akin to Aumerle's letter from fellow conspirators in *Richard II*, 5.2, an item meant to be concealed but found by his father, York.⁹ After all, Conscience is not capable of deception (and here Wilson invokes the proverb 'Conscience is a thousand witnesses', 42). Moreover, Lady Conscience reveals that 'It was put into my bosom by Lucre, / Willing me to keep secret our lascivious living' (47-8), so that Nemo

can now turn to Lucre: ‘This letter declares thy guilty Conscience’ (51). The capital letter in the Kermode text can be misleading. As Nemo points out to Lucre, ‘by Conscience thy abomination is known’ (55) but again the allegorical stage action highlights the role of Lucre’s own conscience in her downfall (literally putting incriminating evidence in Lady Conscience’s bosom) so that Lucre’s final line in the play: ‘O, Conscience, thou hast killed me! By thee I am overthrown’ (54) can be heard as addressed to both the onstage figure and her own inner voice. For a moment, the emphasis is not on Lady Conscience as a stage persona but on the conscience of Lucre that has led to her fall. With the aid of Diligence and the contribution of Lucre’s conscience, a judge has uncovered the truth.

Regardless of any Nemo-No One undercutting of the judgments on Love, Conscience, and Lucre, the play ends with what is in effect an Epilogue though not marked as such. The final six lines (100-5) start with ‘Thus we make an end’ and move to a summary in moral terms: ‘That we be not corrupted with the unsatiate desire of vanishing earthly treasure; / For covetousness is the cause of wresting man’s conscience’. Even if, given the judge’s name, the likelihood of earthly justice may be in doubt, this final sequence completes the frame set up in scene 1 where we are told that ‘’Tis Lucre now that rules the roost’ (18). The wheel has come full circle.

Although I make no claims that Jonson knew this play, I can still see a parallel to *Volpone* which starts with a morning hymn in praise of gold and treasure that serves the same function as Wilson’s opening scene and proceeds to display the power of Lucre in Venice by means of a series of examples wherein the promise of Volpone’s legacy is enough to convince Corbaccio to disinherit his son and Corvino to prostitute his wife. Jonson then ends his play with punishments for the tricksters and birds of prey that result not from the perspicacity of the Avocatori (who are bamboozled in Act 4) but from Mosca’s miscalculations. The reader or

playgoer can then choose from several onstage assessments. The first judge reacts: ‘The knot is now undone by miracle’; Bonario chimes in: ‘Heaven could not long let such gross crimes be hid’; and the final words of the play describe the preceding events as part of a natural process: ‘Mischiefs feed / Like beasts till they be fat, and then they bleed’.¹⁰ For an explanation of the climactic moral ordering we are left to choose among a miracle, heavenly intervention, and some inherent flaw in the wicked, none of which may fully offset the threat posed in Voltore’s earlier rhetorical question (describing the supposed crimes of Bonario and Celia): ‘if these deeds, / Acts of this bold and most exorbitant strain, / May pass with suff’rance, ... Which of you / Are safe, my honoured fathers?’ (4.6.38-43).

Volpone represents perhaps the best display in the period of the power of Lucre and cunning in Venice or London. Jonson’s beast fable, poetry, and staging are far more complex, but Peter Cockett’s production demonstrates how stage-worthy and potentially meaningful is Wilson’s allegorical formulation in *The Three Ladies of London* – truly ‘A Perfect Patterne for All Estates to looke into’.

Notes

¹ ‘The ‘Estates’ Morality Play,’ *Studies in Philology*, 62 (1965), 121-36.

² Citations are from Robert Wilson, *The Three Ladies of London*, Lloyd Edward Kermode (ed.), *Three Renaissance Usury Plays*(Manchester, 2009), 79-163.

³ Kermode’s gloss on p. 157.

⁴ See Andrea Stevens, “‘Assisted by a Barber’: The Court Apothecary, Special Effects, and Ben Jonson’s *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*’, *Theatre Notebook* 61.1 (2007), 2-11.

⁵ See the entry for *behind* in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (Cambridge, 1999), 27-8.

⁶ Robert Greene, *Mamillia* (1583), STC 12269, Folio 3, B1. Other usages include two examples in the 1577 translation of Calvin's sermons, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, sonnet 40 in Sir John Davies' *Wit's Pilgrimage*, Nicholas Breton's *Honest Counsel*, and ten more.

⁷ His choice was generated in part by his discovery online of a vizard from the period:

<http://www.fashioningtheearlymodern.ac.uk/object-in-focus/visard-mask/>

⁸ That the judge responsible for the final moral ordering should be named Nemo, even though that name is not audible in the spoken dialogue, appeals to a modern cynical sensibility.

However, Professor Catherine Belsey has suggested to me that the name specified in the opening stage direction might be only a signal that the actor who had played Sir Nicholas Nemo should double as this figure of justice. If so, the scene's final lines would be taken as straight and not undercut.

⁹ In July 2015 I saw the first preview of *Richard II* at London's Bankside Globe. The actor playing Aumerle in this first public performance had the letter tucked away so that it was not visible to his father or the playgoer, but York, apparently with X-ray vision, managed to see it and pluck it from his son's bosom.

¹⁰ Citations are from the revised Revels edition, ed. Brian Parker (Manchester and New York, 1999), 5.12.95, 98, 150-1.