

## Testing Theories of Allegorical Performance in *The Three Ladies of London*

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My own interest in Performance as Research or PAR began with questions I usually ask of Shakespeare. How naturalistically can/should the text be realized, given that some of it or in some cases much of it is also read allegorically? Performance as Research allows a chance to play out the allegory that seems to be part of the original practice and see whether – or how – it works out on other levels. PAR can lead in many other directions combining experimentation or improvisation, but I am most curious about its results as a test for original practice.

Peter Cockett's brilliant production of *The Three Ladies of London* played out in the simplest of stage settings – two brocade-covered rectangular flats at the back, flanked by two doorways curtained in red velvet (or what looked very much like brocade and red velvet), with the audience seated in bleachers on the remaining three sides of the rectangular playing space. This two-door arrangement fit well into Cockett's attempt to test the success of original performance constraints in theatres with two rear entrances. The decision to keep all entrances on one side and all exits on the other, however, was his own best guess about how exits and entrances might have been so arranged by the original actors and it showed how PAR could succeed as a tool for testing ideas about the early movement. Plain as the setting was, the action was anything but plain as the lively and impressively coordinated actors streamed across the stage, always entering from stage right, playing to the audience, and exiting by stage left. We were left with a sense of a world in constant motion and Cockett's innovation was a successful

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performance experiment. Episode followed episode without pause as one actor exited and another simultaneously entered or at least stuck his or her head through the stage-right curtains.

Cockett spoke later in his workshop about having trained the actors in techniques like that of Jacques Lecoq and Meyerhold's biomechanics, and the cast did seem to display the physicality and limberness of Italian commedia dell'arte characters (see Pamela Brown's [essay](#) on this site). This is exactly the sort of training that has been proposed for original performance actors, and Cockett's direction emphasized the multiple non-verbal talents an acting troupe would have displayed. Similarly, like characters in many theories of original practice, Cockett's actors also embraced their connection to the audience when possible, as when Simplicity, the play's clown (Nick Kozij), sang a song lamenting that there was 'No bidding in London for Conscience and Love' (8.171), and kept accusing individual members of the audience of wanting to swallow both him and the song up: 'But yonder is a fellow that gapes to bite me, or else to eat that which I sing' (165).<sup>1</sup> Simplicity's bottomless hunger and focus on food was a running joke that Kozij successfully came back to again and again. But much as his traditional clowning helped shape the action there was little of the most baldly obscene joking that can be seen in other early plays, such as *King Leir* for example, as Roslyn Knutson observed, an absence that helped reinforce the unity and seriousness of what was going on. The little bit of obscenity (when the Beggars sang to the audience) did not seem to fit with the rest of the action, strengthening Knutson's claim about the play. The Queen's Men's *King Leir* similarly kept a rein on obscenity, but *Cambises*, on the other hand, has frequent indecent or offensive remarks, including simulated sex on stage.

Allegory controlled much of the play's action as we watched the fortunes of Love and Conscience trying to make a living in a London ruled by the evil Lady Lucre and her pack of

allegorical knaves. The importance of PAR is that it showed the audience how this performance conveyed not just the allegorical intent but also a relatively realistic sequence of interactions. As a result, the play ran smoothly on two tracks: the first, a moral statement about the failure of Conscience and the disastrous union of Love and Lucre, and the second a representation of socially realistic action in which the good characters like Conscience are overcome and worn away by the machinations of evil forces they had too little will, strength, and wealth to battle. The allegorical statement may command ideal behaviour, but the realistic plane of action shows, as Simony comments, ‘He that would live in this world must not care’ for Conscience’s ideal.

The play has only the slightest through-line and Cockett’s production realized its medley style and variety. Its ‘plot’ is best described as a lively sequence of events that variously illustrate the moral spoken by Judge Nemo at the very end of the play:

God grant, to his goodwill and pleasure,  
That we be not corrupted with the unsatiate desire of vanishing earthly treasure;  
For covetousness is the cause of wresting man’s conscience;  
Therefore restrain thy lust, and thou shalt shun offense. (17.103-5)

The question of allegory did not arise at first when the Prologue (Jamie Kasiama) announced what was not going to follow and what was, selling the play like a shopman his wares. Kasiama gave a fairly straight interpretation that original practice historians would attribute to the Prologue, and one that was paralleled inside the play by Simplicity singing as if his audience was consuming his songs. As the play proper opened, the purely allegorical figure of Fame (Sasha Stevenson) appeared as an angel with a long trumpet, sounded the arrival of Love (Cathy Huang) and Conscience (Roxana Teymourian), whose allegorical names did not limit their more naturalistic existence as two virginal young women dressed impressively but not over-lavishly in

robes with long skirts and roomy capes and hoods. The costumes allowed for later doubling, Conscience's outfit in baby blue and Love's in pink to help distinguish them.

The enemies of Love and Conscience worked similarly on both allegorical and naturalistic levels. Once they materialized on the road to London, Simplicity punningly calls them 'a pack of knaves' – 'Fraud (Danny Johnson) is the clubbish knave, and Usury (Rowan Traynor) the hard-hearted knave, / And Simony (Kyle Billy) the diamond dainty knave, and Dissimulation (Daniel Megaffin) the spiteful knave of spades' (2.171-3). All were seeking entertainment from the three ladies. Simplicity denounced Dissimulation as soon as he recognized who he was (a comic moment of recognition that also allegorized the relationship). The latter had on a loosely fitting farmer's coat but underneath he was costumed in a parti-coloured coat and beard, sign of his doubleness. We could judge what a ruffian Fraud was when he entered bragging with sword and buckler, ready for a fight. Simony and Usury entered together, as if already in close conversation, the first dressed lavishly like a bishop, the second in bright blue with a face frozen allegorically in anticipatory delight and greed. The text's stage directions specify that they come in 'hand in hand', but their proximity and statements directly to each other provided a similar connection. Here the performance served research purposes by exploring a different way in which the original stage direction might have been fulfilled. Usury's face was a spot-on characterization as well as being an allegorical sign of Usury and it deserved the laughs it got throughout the play. Later when Usury raised the rent for Conscience and Love – effectively casting them out of their lodgings – he cackled through that frozen-faced greed to make for us an emblem of evil delight. Appropriately neither Lady Love nor Lady Conscience would employ or 'entertain' the knaves, another allegorical move that in this production made equal sense as a naturalistic exchange.

The third of the three ladies, Lady Lucre (Cathy Huang) made her stunning entrance after the knaves had invaded London in search of her. She was dressed in a sumptuous golden gown and her long blond hair fell copiously and brilliantly like gold over her shoulders. Huang did a splendid job conveying Lucre's seductive charm along with her calm haughtiness; she too helped blend the allegorical and representational levels as she employed the sinful servants in a way that made allegorical sense but also showed her, for example, touching Simony flirtatiously on his nose as she spoke.

Cockett chose to play some of the play's villains dressed as allegorical stereotypes and others more as psychologically realistic characters in modern dress – an interesting and successful mix that helped universalize the action even as it departed from original practice. Sincerity (Taha Arshad) was a good plain man (as his simple clerical outfit announced) who was seeking a benefice through Love's and Conscience's support, but got nothing except a promise of the parsonage of St Nihil ('St Nothing') and a dinner invitation from Sir Nicholas Nemo ('Nobody') who entered well-dressed, authoritative, and inviting, but disappeared before he finished the invitation, leaving Sincerity and Simplicity no better than they were. Peter Pleaseman (Zac Williams) was a smarmy applicant to Simony, begging for a living and oozing servility. He happily announced that he was of all religions, and when it looked as if he needed to be a Protestant he quickly slipped the cross hanging around his neck under his shirt. This was a bit of improvisation that suited the naturalistic characterization without sacrificing the allegory. Cogging (Claudia Spadafora) attached herself to Dissimulation like a shadow, a small actor bent into an alert and fawning readiness with her two hands lifted to one side as if she were playing a flute or fingering a purse to lift. Again, I was surprised to see how naturalistic this emblematic posture could be.

The one character that didn't work as well on two levels was Hospitality (Sasha Stevenson). Hospitality was played as a tiny, bent old man with an Amish beard, offering what little refreshment he could to his guests in these hard times. Already weak, he became the image of vulnerability when Usury attacked him later and dragged him across the stage to take him off and cut his throat. Conscience begged Usury for lenience but had no effect, another action in which realism and allegory combined, but the immediate impact of the dramatic encounter worked against the allegory. The choice of a (small) woman to play the part of Hospitality, especially with her modern beard, worked against what might have been considered original practice. It took away from Hospitality's gravitas and added a comic dimension to the otherwise serious character.

The Lawyer was one of the modern scoundrels; with her dress-for-success suit and inevitable smart phone she promised Dissimulation and Fraud to practice law without Conscience in the future. The most successful modernization however was Mercadorus (Jesse Horvath), who featured in a little plot of his own about the love of Lucre. In this case the naturalistic costume and acting took precedence, but the performance kept the allegorical level clear enough. Mercadorus was a sleazy Italian merchant who is dressed like a *Godfather* parody. Shirtless and without socks he entered in a sharp business suit (cuffs rolled stylishly up to mid-forearm), wearing several heavy gold necklaces that glittered between his lapels. Horvath nearly stole the show with his exaggerated Italian accent and gestures, and his enthusiastic declaration that he would betray mother and country to serve Lucre. When Lucre caressed him he was in heaven. At first he was concerned solely with Lady Lucre as he promised to export from England valuable resources like grain, leather and bell metal but to bring back only 'trifles', 'baubles', and 'coloured bones' for the ladies of England to make their jewelry (3.41, 43). So enthused was

he in his dedication to her that he didn't notice for a minute that Lucre had exited and he had to scuttle after her. This was a bit of added stage business that made him more comic perhaps than original practice would have. Later he had three amusing scenes in Turkey with the Jewish moneylender Gerontus (Omar Khafagy), in which he refused to pay back his loan, let alone the interest, and threatened to take advantage of the Turkish law that abolishes all debt for anyone who converts. Gerontus who was played fairly realistically (and without the comic Jewish nose and red hair) didn't want to be responsible for such defection and so forgave the loan – just what Mercadorus had been planning all along. The choice of a non-stereotyped Gerontus was appropriate because a stereotypical stage Jew would not have made Gerontus's decision to forgive the loan. Mercadorus has a comically satisfying moment at the end of the exchange when he congratulates himself for 'cozen[ing] de Jew' (14.54), this one in keeping with his earlier characterization as an immoral rascal.

Another moment that successfully combined blatant allegory with a surprising naturalism was the episode in which Lucre marked Conscience's face with ink from a daintily-decorated 'box of all abomination' (10.89), listing Conscience's previously unspotted features one by one as she dabbed on the appropriate spot. The result of Love's capitulation to Lucre was more ambiguous in the text. Cockett followed the original practice model here and had Love doubled by the actor of Conscience. The manoeuvre was planned well and went smoothly because the compelling black vizard that Love wore covered the Conscience-actor's spotted face and Love's voluminous gown covered the physical difference between the two actors – as female costume would have covered the difference between boy actors in original practice. There were other possibilities for the vizard (for the role of the vizard see Helen Ostovich's '[Doubling Love](#)', on this site). The stage direction is '*Enter [Lady] Lucre, and [Lady] Love with a vizard behind*'

(15.0 sd), which might imply that the actor wore the vizard behind his head and went two-faced like Janus, although Cockett's production kept the vizard in front, maintaining its typical function as a period artifact designed to conceal a face.

Although the scene of the condemnation of the three ladies marked a serious and moving finale in which the serious allegorical import was clear, some of the play's violence was played with black humour that seemed to work against the allegory. When Hospitality was dragged off by his legs to be killed, his scrabbling for a hold on the floor was funny in a cartoon-character fashion. The comedy was reinforced by Cockett's decision to cast Hospitality as a small girl with what looked like a comic beard, although Hospitality's off-stage calls restored some of the sense of serious disaster. Simplicity's final beating, however, was played wholly comically because the Beadle never touched his naked back with the whip and Diligence made the only whipping sound by snapping his belt. Although Simplicity howled each time he heard the belt snap – accompanied by laughs from the audience – he never felt the pain. This evasion prevented our reading of the scene allegorically and marked a departure from the text. It was amusing but did not allow what might have been not only an allegorical but a more sombre interpretation of Simplicity's punishment. In this case Cockett's production allowed research into what portion of the ending was to be taken seriously by testing one of the alternatives on stage. Another larger question about the ending concerns the interpretation of Judge Nemo's name. Are we to see that the only condemnation given is by the allegorical 'Nemo' or 'Nobody'? Or are we to forget the name and take the Judge's final sentences as evidence of actual punishment for the three ladies? Cockett came part of the way toward the first alternative by including Judge Nemo's name in the dialogue, but not perhaps far enough to establish the text's (and the original performance's?)

ambiguity by otherwise making the Judge authoritative and not undermining his reality as he had undermined Sir Nicholas Nemo's earlier in the play.

Despite what might have been seen as a comic distortion at the end, the performance was impressive throughout as a suggestion about what the original conditions of staging might have been and demonstrated how a late Tudor moral play (but see Roderick McKeown's essay, '[The Three Ladies of London and the Pre-History of City Comedy](#)' on this site) could leave an audience edified, thoughtful, and entertained at once. It convinced me that the allegorical implications, which dominate the text, could be realized in a performance that was also lively and realistic.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations refer to Lloyd Edward Kermode's edition of the play in *Three Renaissance Usury Plays* (Manchester, 2009).