

The Three Ladies of [Sixteenth-Century] London in Twenty-First-Century

Hamilton

Reviewed by SARAH JOHNSON¹

Citation: Johnson, Sarah, '*The Three Ladies of [Sixteenth-Century] London in Twenty-First-Century Hamilton, Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*, <http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/contexts/SarahJohnson.htm>.

The performance of Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* at McMaster University on 23 June 2015 was 'hybrid' – as director Peter Cockett described it during the conference – in more ways than one. Perhaps the most obvious hybridity involved the blend of an 'open clowning' performance style that had been 'developed for the SQM performances', with 'our own culture's dominant style: psychological realism'.¹ This blend highlighted the tension – much debated during the Performance as Research (PAR) conference to which this production contributed – between the abstractions of allegory and the actors' specific embodiments of character. The performance also embraced hybridity in its efforts to approximate selected Elizabethan theatrical practices, on one hand, and to engage a modern audience in the issues the play might raise for us today, on the other. The incorporation of knowledge about Elizabethan drama and society aligns with the aim, signalled in the program as well as in the production's inclusion in the PAR conference, of 'test[ing] the value of performance as research in the field of theatre history'.² At the same time, several artistic choices worked to 'disrupt the tendency to distance the stereotypes and confine them safely to the historical past', revealing a desire to explore the play's potential current relevance.³ In referring to the conference, which featured this production at McMaster's Robinson Memorial Theatre, I've already suggested a kind of hybridity of the audience members, most of whom were conference participants. While certainly 'an audience of early

¹ Sarah Johnson (sarah.johnson@rmc.ca) is adjunct professor in the department of English at the Royal Military College of Canada and associate editor of *Early Theatre*.

modern theatre scholars is about the closest to the original audience we can hope for',⁴ we were in another sense the farthest away, witnessing the performance only after having already read and re-read the script, formed our own critical stances, and written them down and debated them. In what follows, I consider this hybridity through the production's costuming, treatment of stereotypes, comic rendition of violence, and representation of the three ladies.

Costuming visually linked the present with the past, and the allegorical with character specificity in this performance. The three ladies appeared in long hooded cloaks: Love's was fittingly pink, Conscience's light blue, and Lucre's golden. While not modern garb, the cloaks were also not decidedly early modern, but rather signalled the ladies' status as allegorical figures, with the colours carrying potential symbolic resonance. Blue might suggest sadness to current audiences, for instance, gold obviously connotes the allure of riches, and the soft shades of blue and pink could represent the lack of strength and maturity in Conscience and Love, who crumble when their virtues are put to the test. The solid-coloured cloaks conveyed the seeming simplicity of these characters on the surface, but as an obvious outer layer they also pointed towards a depth or complexity not initially apparent, making them an apt choice for the experience of allegory. The appearance of Conscience sans cloak in the broom-peddling scene evinced her loss of status and protection, with her white shift-like garment rendering her innocence and vulnerability apparent. Dissimulation's jester's hat, cloak, and parti-coloured beard, Simony's clerical garments complete with ostentatious red hat, and Fame's white robe and trumpet, like the ladies' costumes, connected with the characters' allegorical roles. A clear contrast emerged in other costumes between modern apparel, such as the suits sported by Mercadorus and Gerontus, and period-inspired clothing, such as the hose worn by Simplicity and Fraud. This mixture visually acknowledged the gulf of time between sixteenth-century London and twenty-first-century

Hamilton, while also replicating the experience of immediately recognizing markers of identity and status through familiar terms of reference instead of through what we know from scholarship. One message foregrounded in the costuming, then, as for instance the toques and Tim Horton's cups brandished by Tom Beggar and Wily Will, is how easily early modern prejudices and stereotypes can be translated into modern ones.

Avoiding the comfort of relegating the play's stereotypes to the past is a costuming aim explicitly stated in the director's notes included in the program. The Italian Mercadorus was perhaps the most blatantly caricatured in performance. He wore a suit jacket and pants, his chest bare and ornamented with a heavy gold chain. Jesse Horvath delivered Mercadorus's grammatically incorrect English with a convincing Italian accent and made hand gesture as integral to his lines as the words themselves. He brought clowning into his performance, notably in Mercadorus's hilariously enthusiastic renunciation of his faith and country before the judge of Turkey, in his lusty reactions to Lucre, and in conspiratorial glances shared with the audience. While hopefully early modern anti-Catholic and anti-Italian prejudice didn't characterize this particular audience the way it would have been entrenched in Wilson's original audiences, this rendition of Mercadorus won our laughter by staging current stereotypes of male 'Italianness' that we immediately recognized. What does it mean to laugh at Mercadorus's appearance, to find his broken and accented English funny or endearing? Horvath's charismatic Mercadorus was a clear audience favourite and invited us to reflect on the reasons for our favourable response.

Omar Khafagy gave gravity and sincerity to Gerontus that contrasted with the more caricatured Mercadorus. Playing an aggressive, menacing, and greedy Gerontus would have been entirely feasible, but Khafagy opted to portray him instead as exasperated and frustrated at Mercadorus's failure to repay his loan. Then, in the Turkey trial scene, Gerontus became

increasingly agitated in the moments leading up to his intervention to prevent Mercadorus's apostasy, wringing his hands, pacing, and wiping his brow, as if he were experiencing a crisis of conscience in having pushed Mercadorus to this extremity. This sympathetic rendition of Gerontus was problematic in that it gave Wilson and his initial audiences too much credit. It failed to confront the text's antisemitism, allowing the audience a safe and comfortable distance from it, even though elsewhere the production strove to problematize such distance. In another sense, though, this interpretation worked. In the post-performance workshop, Khafagy mentioned the repetition of the word 'faith' in Gerontus's lines as one of the cues informing his understanding of the role – faith was genuinely important for his Gerontus. The contention that Gerontus was motivated to forgive Mercadorus's debt solely by concern for his business reputation came up during the conference workshop, but this explanation does not adequately explain, for me, Gerontus's parting words to Mercadorus once the judge has exited, and they are alone onstage. Rather than privately expressing animosity, here, Gerontus urges Mercadorus not to cheat others and wishes him well. During the post-performance workshop, Khafagy and Horvath expertly demonstrated alternative possibilities for playing Gerontus and Mercadorus, including a clownish, stooped, limping, and practically fawning Gerontus with a false nose, and a Mercadorus with a milder accent and 'correct' English. The more caricatured Gerontus, sidling up to Mercadorus with his repeated requests and threats for payment, elicited no sympathy from the audience and foregrounded the antisemitism in the text. Even the reprehensible Mercadorus seemed better than Gerontus with the visual of a stooping, circling Gerontus alongside an upright and still Mercadorus. The Tuesday evening performance, however, gave us a Gerontus who appeared to possess some integrity and who did elicit audience sympathy. The performance workshop at once demonstrated alternative possibilities for Gerontus and Mercadorus, and –

through the participants' various requests for the actors – a lack of scholarly consensus on how Gerontus should be performed.

If Gerontus's final act of generosity brings him any benefit, moral or otherwise, we do not witness it. We get no indication that he changes his mind about lending at interest, and we see Mercadorus's delight in having cheated him as soon as Gerontus exits the stage. Gerontus's hospitable act is futile just as Hospitality himself is powerless. The murder of Hospitality, however, carries potential as a powerfully dramatic moment onstage, one that could emphasize the horror of what Wilson's London has become. Yet this production significantly downplayed the violence of Hospitality's death by rendering it comic. Usury 'hale[s]' Hospitality 'into a corner' to 'cut his throat',⁵ with Hospitality pleading for help. The script alone does not suggest anything laughable about Hospitality's forced exit, but the audience laughed as Sasha Stevenson's Hospitality flailed about on the ground, trying, in an exaggerated belly-crawl, to escape Usury. The laughter sacrificed this moment's potential impact as a serious statement about the moral decrepitude of a London ruled by Lucre, and yet the choice to render Hospitality's demise as more comic than harrowing made a statement too. The audience that can laugh at Hospitality's plight immediately sees that careless response echoed by Simplicity, and as jovial an everyman as Simplicity is, the comparison is not a flattering one.⁶ We were seduced, along with Simplicity, into mistaking something serious for something of no consequence; we became complicit with the 'bad guys', whose charisma we had been enjoying all along.

The performance of Simplicity's whipping gave us another instance of violence turned comical. Held accountable for a robbery committed by his companions in begging, Simplicity is stripped and whipped on stage, the Beadle promising to 'fetch the skin from [his] bones' (1652). The script provides some basis for comic treatment in this case, with the Beadle's and

Diligence's incredulous response to Simplicity's odd and unnecessary request to be whipped on the skin because he is worried about his clothes being damaged. But again, the infusion of comedy missed the opportunity to contrast Simplicity's demeanour with the darkness of this moment. When his shirt was removed for the whipping, Nick Kozij's Simplicity tried comically to cover his nipples and belly button with his hands, always missing one spot, of course. Simplicity then howled in pain at the mere sound of the whip. Amused at his reaction, his punishers repeatedly cracked the whip near Simplicity, without actually touching him, while Simplicity yelped and flopped on the stage as if in pain. Instead of emphasizing the flesh-ripping cruelty of a legal system corrupted by the power of Lucre, the Beadle and Diligence came across as fairly benevolent, content to torment Simplicity with the singing rather than the stinging of the whip. This performance choice met with laughter from the audience and certainly lightened the scene, but it also lent itself to interpretation commensurate with the narrative. It could imply, for instance, that simplicity or ignorance is its own punishment. It could also suggest that the civic corruption caused by Lucre inflicts psychological as much as physical torment.

Lucre, of course, 'rules the roost' (40), and as played by Cathy Huang, Lucre's power was connected with sensuality. It makes sense for Lucre to be sexy and alluring, but playing her this way also diminished her force as a commanding presence. This Lucre had remarkably long, golden hair – a wonderful detail that worked to signal abundance, luxuriousness, even strength, but that also signalled moral laxity in that it was not tied back or up. She sometimes accompanied her orders with a touch or caress, culminating in her marking of Conscience with spots from the box of all abomination (which turned out to be a small tin sporting various symbols, including a Canadian flag. My own favourite moment of the performance might have been when Lucre casually called for this box as if it were a common household object). Lucre

carefully smeared black spots on cheeks, forehead, and chin as if she were doing Conscience's makeup, finishing with a kiss on her cheek. The moment seemed pleasurable and intimate, despite the fact that Lucre's influence had driven Conscience to the destitution that led her to accept Lucre.

Just prior to her capitulation to Lucre, Conscience, played by Roxana Teymourian, sang an unaccompanied solo that conveyed the tension between courage and insecurity, hope and despair, Teymourian in turns advancing to proffer her wares to the audience with direct eye contact, and retreating with lowered gaze, her voice rising and falling. The play's songs, thematically linked by requests either for patronage or money, were a highlight of the production. Conscience's song here, slow and tentative, provided a contrast to the merry chorus of Dissimulation, Usury, Fraud, Simony, and Simplicity when they sought Conscience's and Love's favour, reinforcing the link between Conscience's rejection of their service and her resulting condition. The link also makes the point that if she cannot admit Dissimulation and his crew into her company, Conscience herself can be ignored. Although one audience member spared a coin for Simplicity (who exulted over it and dove after it when he almost lost it, improvisation that delightfully encapsulated how Lucre's influence renders people ridiculous), no one relieved Conscience of one of her brooms. The performance thus suggested the audience's complicity in Conscience's fate.

Conscience's fate, as it turns out, is better than Lucre's and Love's – while she is imprisoned in a kind of purgatory, they are consigned to eternal torment. The final scene brought to the fore the tension between allegory and character embodiment. Conscience repudiates Lucre in court, which makes perfect allegorical sense, but witnessing the formerly haughty Lucre plead on a personal level with Conscience not to betray her made Conscience's decision look like self-

righteous finger pointing. Although Judge Nemo or ‘nobody’ sits in judgement at this final trial, the physical characters we saw in institutionalized positions of authority were male. Since all other male characters apart from these authorities were conspicuously absent – the judge even drew explicit attention to the missing culprits, inquiring gravely into their whereabouts – Conscience’s confession and condemnation of Lucre also came across as an unattractive lack of female solidarity. After all, while Usury scoffed at Conscience in her misery, Lucre didn’t let her starve. The critique of the state of London through examining abstract concepts here overlaps with the critique of female characters who fail to succeed in the city, economically, socially, and morally, leaving us – as members of today’s audience – with a reminder of the misogyny frequently inherent in feminizing abstractions or locations. London is going all wrong because of the temptation of worldly things and weak morality – and Wilson is not being original when he gives female embodiment to these key problems. Clearly, these three ladies need to be governed and contained, although with Judge Nemo taking control, the play is not optimistic about the restitution of (male) order in London.

This performance certainly provided a room full of early modernists plenty to discuss over the course of several panel sessions. It was a successful and entertaining iteration of Performance as Research as much for the performance choices it avoided as for the version of the play it brought to life. The performance seemed to go for safer choices in general, opting not to confront us with stark violence, playing down the antisemitism and xenophobia, and not fully exploring the physical component of Lucre’s conquest of Conscience when she brands and kisses her. These choices, and our interpretation of and debate about them, teach us as much about our own cultural anxieties and agendas as they deepen our understanding of this early modern play and the London it engaged with.

¹ Peter Cockett, “Director’s Notes”, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert Wilson, *The Three Ladies of London*, Performance Script, ed. Jessica Dell and Chantelle Thauvette, *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*, <http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/3LLperformancescript/index.htm>. Further citations to the play appear parenthetically.

⁶ Jessica Dell offered this insight in informal conversation during the PAR conference.