

## Blood and Disguise in Venice

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### Abstract

There were two ways to attract people's attention on the Elizabethan stage. One is using blood and the other is disguise. Usually, calves' blood was used when they tried this primitive way to attract the audience's attention. But blood may have had some disadvantages. In the indoor theatres, using blood cannot have been very practical, as it must have been very hard to wash it away. Moreover, the gorgeous costume was one of the reasons why gradually real blood became unused.

The other device to attract the attention is disguise. Most of the famous actors belonged to the theatre, so their face was very familiar to the people. Disguise in that period meant that the actor hid their identity behind the roles. But the audience was able to see through the character and find who they really are. This can be a real fun for those theatre-goers. Compared with blood, disguise is a refined, sophisticated way to attract attentions.

Let me begin with blood on stage. Desdemona dies smothered. In the Italian novella by Cinthio, the conspirators—the Moor and the Ensign (both unnamed)—first make a plan of stabbing or poisoning, but in the end the ensign hidden in a closet clubs her with a kind of blackjack (clotty sand in a stocking) when Desdemona approaches the closet to see what a strange sound was. Later, the criminals make up a scene, pretending that her death is caused by debris of a ceiling having fallen on her head.<sup>1</sup> So Shakespeare changed the cause of her death, probably because he thought that they were not able to present the spectacle on the stage.

Of course, it would have been very demanding, if not impossible, to prepare a ceiling which was likely to fall, but the main point was blood. Blood was

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<sup>1</sup> *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1957-1975), vii, 239-52, esp. 250-51.

inconvenient because it was hard to wash out, and also it stained high-cost garments. Sometimes, costumes were much more expensive than the play itself. Here's what Andrew Gurr counted: "Henslowe laid out £35 on plays, . . . and £21 10s 8d on clothing and other 'things'."<sup>2</sup> They had no desire to dirty these valuable dresses every day, if the performance was possible almost every weekday.

Professor Gurr observes that bleeding on stage was not specific to a certain play but very general to many of the plays performed at London theatres those days.<sup>3</sup> He thinks that this kind of device was first developed to attract an audience in the city-settled theatre where every player soon became familiar enough for the regular playgoers to reduce the feeling of innovation.

Using calves' blood on stage was an everyday event, as Professor Gurr admits: "A boy would have had to visit the local butcher every morning before an *Alcazar* performance to get the gather and the 'raw flesh' of Muly's dead lion."<sup>4</sup> The 'gather' which is "also called the pluck, was the heart, liver and lungs held together in a bladder, a kind of raw proto-sausage."<sup>5</sup>

Gurr also concedes that it "created laundry problems." *The Battle of Alcazar*, whose 1601 'plot' we are discussing, was revived at the new-made Fortune playhouse. As Gurr points out, the next year Shakespeare wrote *Othello* for the Globe.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that they changed the way of killing Desdemona to avoid such a laundry problem.

Another device used to attract the audience's attention is 'disguise'. Many of the 'humour' plays very popular during this period may have been invented first to have a kind of 'perspective effect', which was also in fashion among visual arts.<sup>7</sup> The familiar faces and characters were hidden behind the costumes, and the audience's interest was to detect such meta-theatrical overlapping.

In 1596, Richard Burbage's opposite, Edward Alleyn, played the chief role in

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<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare's Opposites* (Cambridge, 2009), 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-9.

<sup>6</sup> For the first performance, I follow Honigmann's edition. The influence of the *Alcazar* plot on *Othello* is shown in *Shakespeare's Opposites*, 150.

<sup>7</sup> 'Anamorphous' techniques meant the same thing. See Mitsuru Kamachi, *Anamorphoses in Shakespeare* (Kenkyusha, 1999) in Japanese, *passim*.

George Chapman's *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*. He changed his disguise many times, as Gurr says, "In Scene 4 as the usurer with his great nose he exits to return only five lines later as the roistering Count with pistol and eye mask (761-66). Later in the same scene he changes from Count Hermes back to Irus while offstage for only six lines (804-10)."<sup>8</sup> Gurr points out that "a reversible gown" may have been effective for these quick changes three times.

In the same year, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed probably at the Theatre. *The Jew of Malta* was not a success first when it was mounted in 1594, according to Holger Schott Syme.<sup>9</sup> But it got later success as it was revived two years later, probably because of the popularity of Shakespeare's play.

If it was 1597 when *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was first mounted at the Curtain, we can be sure that this play is categorized as one of the humour plays. In fact, as Giorgio Melchiori reveals, the (bad) Quarto possesses the title page which describes many of the characters' humours in details: ". . . Entermixed with sundrie variable and pleasing humours, of syr *Hugh* the Welch Knight, Iustice *Shallow*, and his wise Cousin M. *Slender*. // With the swaggering vaine of Auncient *Pistoll*, and Corporall *Nym*."<sup>10</sup> We may say that *Merchant* as well as *Merry Wives* was played during the period when humour plays were popular.

Shylock's nose may be the main point of the actor's disguise. He is not disguised in the play world. He is just himself. Burbage with the great nose shows himself changed into someone else, but was easily found to be himself, which is the point of his disguise. This is the condition in the duopoly atmosphere of 1594, when only two theatres were officially licensed and no other venues could have theoretically existed.<sup>11</sup> That is, familiar faces wearing strange coats were the situation that enhanced the audience's curiosity to look beneath the costume.

If "concealments that did not conceal, disguises that the audience had to see through" were the standard of the early Elizabethan stage, as Gurr wrote,<sup>12</sup> we can

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<sup>8</sup> *Shakespeare's Opposites*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> SQ2010, 4, 509.

<sup>10</sup> *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori, The Arden 3<sup>rd</sup> (2000), 35.

<sup>11</sup> Many antitheses flock around Gurr's article in SQ 2010 winter issue. Most of them are against the idea of duopoly itself.

<sup>12</sup> *Shakespeare's Opposites*, 54.

easily detect the connection between the blood on stage and disguising. That is, blood seems to have interfered with the method of disguising, in that blood made the costume dirty. As Gurr wrote, “Yet the novelty of such attire was in constant contrast to the familiar faces wearing them every day. A new doublet or gown would enhance the newness of the character on show, but while the new garb could offset the familiar faces wearing them it only intensified audience awareness of the metatheatricality inherent in the occasion.”<sup>13</sup> If the old method of using blood to attract people’s attention would have interfered with the method of disguise that worked well among the limited number of actors or venues, it was not clever to adhere to the orthodox or primitive way of using blood. That is, blood seems to be a very direct way of commanding people’s attention, compared to the much more sophisticated way of disguising. Gurr says, citing Neil Carson: “That has made it easy for us to accept Neil Carson’s differentiation between the early ‘theatre of enchantment’, with its blood and its magical shows, compared with the more sophisticated ‘theatre of estrangement’.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Gurr finds a similar point in transvestism and disguise: “Boys playing adult men or boys playing girls generate their own meta-theatrical anti-realism, just as would a familiar player appearing in a new gown in a new play.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in a sense, we can say that almost all the novelties of the Elizabethan theatres were related to disguising. Blood was the older way of attracting the audiences’ attention that may have been done away with when they invented the method of disguising. Costly costumes were introduced at the same time as the hiding of familiar faces, while transvestism can be one type of disguising. Then, we could easily say that Shylock wears disguises because he is just a character in an Elizabethan play.

Life could be a counterfeit, as John Astington defines in his new book.<sup>16</sup> He quotes Hamlet’s Hecuba speech. His idea is based on Stanislavski’s ‘emotion memory.’ Stanislavski recommended the actors to bring their personal lives onto the stage: the tragedies in their family might be a good trigger to start a theatre-shaking emotion. In such a situation, each actor has two reservoirs to draw upon for his own feelings: the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>16</sup> *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time*, Cambridge, 16.

real emotion and the fictional one. In the case of Hamlet, he is confused about where his feelings come from, that is, “It is not this inky coat . . .” or something, but every feeling of his resides in the play world.

The problem is where the reality resides. If a player brings his personal life on stage, saddened by some tragic event in his family--parents’ death, financial trouble--, the player cries because he takes the plot of the play so hard to his heart and feels like the protagonist. Where is the reality and where is the shadow?

Astington tells us that Falstaff cannot be ‘natural.’<sup>17</sup> He means that Falstaff is too exaggerated to be in an everyday life. By the same analogy, we can say that Shylock is too typical a Jew with his nose and costume to be believed as lifelike. His way of behavior in the play, his eagerness for money, his seriousness, severe strictness, and no smiles, all indicate that he is just ‘typical.’ This typicality makes this world of Venice as a fiction. Venice itself was a fiction for most of the Elizabethan Londoners. Very few have been to Venice. We may remember an episode of Shakespeare mistaking Bohemia as a coastal country. Similarly, London citizens would have easily been cheated if they were told that Venice is an inland city. Shakespeare himself did not visit Venice or other Italian cities in his lifetime.

It is usually said that Belmont is a dream world compared with Venice, which is, as many critics admit, an everyday society. But for me, Venice with this typical Jew is no more dreamlike than Belmont. Shylock is a ‘caricature,’ if I could use the term Astington applied for Falstaff. There is no seriousness in a caricature. His scenario becomes a comedy, not a tragedy.

It is often said that when an actor plays in the *locus*, a playing area, he is taken as a character in the play world itself, but when he comes to the front and faces the audience in the *platea* where Hamlet soliloquies, his identity (as an actor) is revealed to the audience and they have great fun. We can imagine that the real thrill of watching a play occurs in the *platea*, where we can detect who the actor actually is, especially when they are disguised under unfamiliar costumes. It is said that just a glance at Tarlton sticking his head out of the curtain made people laugh: “. . . how the first sight of his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 19.

face alone, peeping through the hangings at the back of the stage, could start people laughing.”<sup>18</sup> Also, Astington writes: “It needs only a certain movement of the face or intonation of the voice for us to begin to laugh . . .”<sup>19</sup> Here we can see a hint as to the identity of an actor.

When an actor is playing in the *locus*, it is our unacknowledged consent that we should not reveal his identity. He is Shylock, Hamlet, or Lear, any character in a play but he is not Richard Burbage himself, and we should not talk about who he is himself. But when he comes to the front and talks to the audience in his own voice, we are relieved to look at the actor himself and enjoy the disclosure of his true identity, that is, we are free to share the secret with each other and in that we feel a kind of catharsis. This can be done, for example, when Hamlet soliloquizes. We are feeling that the actor himself is talking to us, and at that moment, we are feeling Stanislavski’s effect to the full. The actor and the character become one.

If we talk about Shylock’s disguise, we should keep this in mind. Shylock mainly resides in the play world (*locus*), and he doesn’t come often to the front, except when he makes his “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech. Here, Shylock is talking as a general Jew, or we can say that he is talking as a representative of the human race.

At the end of *Shakespeare’s Opposites*, Gurr uses the word “disguise” many times. One of them concerns the London Mayor Roger Oatley, who is described as the “antithesis of Simon Eyre” in Dekker’s citizen play. Gurr wrote, “The figure of Oatley was Dekker’s thin *disguise* for the citizen who had been London’s Lord Mayor in 1594-95, Sir John Spencer” (*Opposites*, 179, emphasis mine).

Many London citizens of the time hated Spencer because he objected to theatres and plays, and he was too strict in his way of challenging their tastes for entertainment. Gurr writes, “Spencer’s *acquisitiveness* made him the antithesis of Simon Eyre.” We could easily suppose a similarity between him and Shylock. They are both covetous. They are unpopular among citizens. Spencer refused, like Oatley in Dekker’s play, to marry his daughter Elizabeth to her devoted lover, who escaped from the confinement in a washing basket, just like Falstaff.

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* (Cambridge, 2004), 153.

<sup>19</sup> *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time*, 121.

Everything on stage should be used for good reasons. Everything is used for the sake of performance. Baskets, disguise and costumes were used to hide something on the Elizabethan stage. The audience's curiosity was to reveal something beneath the disguise.

In Venice, no blood is shed, but the crime is sure to be revealed.

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