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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

I. THEN AND NOW

Hamlet, like any other Shakespearean nobleman, wore his hat indoors. When the foppish and murderous Osric came flourishing his headgear with the invitation to fight Laertes, Hamlet undoubtedly doffed his bonnet in reply to Osric's flourish, and then put it back on. Osric's failure to follow suit led to Hamlet's reproof ('Put your bonnet to his right use, 'tis for the head'). The unbonneted Hamlet familiar to modern audiences is a creation of the indoor theatre and fourth-wall staging, where every scene is a room unless it is specified otherwise, and where everyone goes hatless accordingly. Hamlet in 1601 walked under the sky in an open amphitheatre, on a platform that felt out-of-doors in comparison with modern theatres but indifferently represented indoors or out to the Elizabethans. There was a wall at the back of the platform, fronting the 'tiring-house' or room where the players changed, the offstage area. It gave access to the playing area by two or more doors and a balcony. These places of entry could equally well provide the imagination with the exterior doors and balcony of a house or the interior doors and gallery of a great hall. Hamlet's headgear was worn with equal indifference to the imagined scene.

The wearing of hats on stage is a minor matter in comparison with, say, Hamlet's use of a 'nighted colour' in his clothes, so far as the play's general concerns go. But unless we know Hamlet is himself bonneted the point of his verbal fencing with Osric may be missed. Hats are useful either to guard the wearer's face against the sun, or to keep the head warm. Hamlet's request that Osric should put his bonnet to its right use is taken by Osric to be made out of concern for the hot sun ('I thank your lordship, it is very hot'). Hamlet, having been too much 'in the "son"', denies this ('No, believe me, 'tis very cold, the wind is northerly'), an equally good reason for keeping his own hat on; and when Osric hastens to agree, catches him up on it ('But yet, methinks, it is very sultry and hot for my complexion'). He



Illustration 1. Giles Brydges, the third Lord Chandos, wearing the kind of hat that Osric flourished. From a portrait by the Dutch painter Hieronimo Custodis, painted in 1589 and now at Woburn Abbey. Most hats made in England before 1600 were of leather, with a narrow brim and a seam across the flat crown. The Museum of London has an example. Osric’s headgear, the most fashionable kind of wear, would have come from France or the Netherlands. Horatio’s image of him as a lapwing with the eggshell he was born from still on his head suggests a hat like Lord Chandos’s.

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keeps his hat on with both reasons. Hamlet is not just making Osric look a fool. Hats were doffed (put off) as a gesture of respect. At the end of the gesture they went back on the head. Only a courtier in the presence of the king would keep his hat in his hand. For Osric to keep his hat off in Hamlet's presence was excessively deferential, especially in a creature of the usurping King addressing that King's victim, and Hamlet ensures that the excess is made apparent. Shakespeare made stage business out of similar by-play with hats in *Love's Labours Lost*, 5.1, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.2, and *As You Like It*, 3.3. Unless we know that Hamlet kept his hat on while Osric continued to flourish his, we miss the real point of the incident. It also helps to know that a typical Elizabethan 'bonnet' in 1600 had a high crown, a narrow brim and a round dome – a kind of elongated bowler hat – in order to visualise Horatio's image of Osric running off like a baby lapwing 'with the shell on his head'.

Hamlet makes highly sophisticated use of the theatre conditions of its time. The company of players who arrive in 2.2 were real, not the caricatures of players found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Marston's *Histriomastix*, and the specimen of their work that the leading player offers is a genuine if deliberately archaic set speech, an audition piece, not a parody. Despite Polonius's interruptions, the player delivers his 'passionate speech' about rugged Pyrrhus with such good inward accompaniment to his outward appearance of passion that he changes colour and tears come into his eyes. And all this, as Hamlet bitterly tells himself afterwards, is monstrously for a fiction, a 'dream of passion':

what would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?

All that is really monstrous, of course, is that Hamlet has no more motive or cue for passion than the player; he himself is as much a fiction as the player. What Shakespeare is doing in this scene is to refine the familiar Elizabethan paradox of 'tragedy played in jest', the view that sees murders done for entertainment, and appearances pretending to be reality. The fictitious Hamlet rails at the fiction of the player. Shakespeare's refinement is to make this paradoxical situation not a joke but an emphatic assertion of Hamlet's reality.

Many other details of the play's staging depend on life in Shakespeare's own time. The disposition of the stage for the play-within-the-play, for instance, which has exercised the ingenuity of some commentators, must have followed the pattern for plays at Court. The performers of the play

stand at the back of the stage by the largest opening in the tiring-house wall (the so-called discovery-space), King Claudius and Queen Gertrude sit on the 'state' or throne at the front of the stage in the middle of the amphitheatre yard, facing the tiring-house, Hamlet and Ophelia to one side with a view of both.¹ Another example is the dumb-show, the mimed plot-summary with which the play within the play begins. By the time *Hamlet* was written dumb-shows were still not so archaic that Shakespeare's contemporaries hesitated to use them. Nor were they such rare devices that Hamlet should not have foreseen the players using one. The mistake in prematurely revealing the mousetrap through the dumb-show is partly due to Hamlet's lack of foresight, and his failure to allow for the players' stupidity is a component in the savagery with which he greets them when they come out to start the play itself. Again, when Polonius is stabbed through, as the Second Quarto and the schoolboy joke have it, the arras, it is worth knowing that the cloth behind which Polonius hid hung in front of the 'discovery-space', an alcove or similar structure deep enough to conceal quite substantial properties. The player of Polonius could have called out from the back of the alcove, leaving room for the player of Hamlet to make a full-blooded lunge through the curtain without fear of actually running his fellow through. Polonius could then lie down as a corpse before Hamlet drew the cloth back to reveal him. The duel at the climax in 5.2 must have been similarly full-blooded. Fencing displays were a feature of the entertainment the stages offered to the Elizabethan public, and at least one player (Richard Tarlton the clown) was a Master of Fence. Though Hamlet claims in his opening soliloquy to be utterly unlike Hercules (the archetypal man of action), he would certainly have been required to belie his words when it came to the duel with Laertes.

One feature of the headgear used in the original *Hamlet* was the difference between Hamlet's bonnet and Claudius's crown. On stage a gilded crown was the most obvious mark of authority. Crowns and coronets along with earl's bonnets have an absolutely central function in *King Lear*, where they signify the decline of authority through the play. *Lear* opens with the king wearing his crown and announcing that he will hand his authority over to the two dukes (wearing smaller coronets) who are husbands to his two elder daughters. A third coronet is on hand to be given to the suitor who chooses the third and youngest daughter as his wife. When she refuses the test he sets her, he banishes her and hands the third coronet, an unbreakable ring of gold, to the two dukes, ordering them to split it between them, a small mark of how impossible it should be to divide a kingdom. As his loss of authority becomes obvious Lear acquires a coronet of flowers instead of

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his golden crown, which never appears on stage again. At the end, with one of the two dukes and the youngest daughter dead, the surviving duke tries to hand rule over to two earls, Kent and Gloucester, asking them to ‘sustain’ the gored state of ancient Britain. The earls have no golden headgear, and their response is ambiguous (it differs in the two extant versions of the play). That the last surviving wearer of a golden headpiece should offer it further down the social scale marks how far Lear’s utopian control has degenerated into a dystopia.²

King Lear has another major feature that we ignore today, perhaps rightly, though in recent years it has acquired an oddly fresh resonance: the union of England and Scotland. The idea of Britain as a united kingdom began as an issue when King James of Scotland became king of England at Elizabeth’s death in 1603. James wanted to unite his two crowns and rule over a single kingdom. By 1605 when Shakespeare wrote his play the union of his two kingdoms was an issue being fought out in both parliaments. The play begins with the Earls of Gloucester and Kent speculating over who the King might prefer as his successor, the Duke of Cornwall or the Duke of Albany, or perhaps divide the kingdom. To us Cornwall and Albany are just names, but the first Jacobean who heard this in 1605 would have reared up in alarm, because in that year James, whose younger son had been made Duke of Albany when he was still in Scotland, made his elder son and heir Henry into the Duke of Cornwall, the title that went with being Prince of Wales. So the first audiences would have recognised that the play was about the disunion of the two kingdoms. But there would have been a double take. James was the Shakespeare company’s patron, so the play must have been recognised as the company’s propaganda on their patron’s behalf to satisfy his desire for a single united kingdom. Utopia would be a united Britain, dystopia a realm divided into three, the west (Cornwall and Wales), the north (Albany and Scotland) and the south, England, where Lear says he hopes to end his days with his youngest and most beloved daughter.

The government’s censor of plays, the Master of the Revels, would not normally have allowed any reference to naming living people on stage. He had closed down a play the Shakespeare company set up when James first came to the English throne, about the so-called Gowrie conspiracy. Although it echoed James’s own account of the attempt to assassinate him, it was banned because it dealt with living people, notably the king himself. Shakespeare changed the names from his source play, *King Leir*, into Albany and Cornwall and announced them at the very outset. So the first audiences would have thought first, how could those names be used, and secondly they must have official permission to use them. So as propaganda for the king’s policy of

a united kingdom the play's descent into anarchy and dystopia must have seemed a trick the players had been licensed to use.

Other plays have similar features that were aimed just for their time. Othello's colour is one of the most obvious, though its immediate reason is long lost. In 1601 Edward Alleyn, leader of the Admiral's Men at the new Fortune playhouse, restaged one of his old favourites, *The Battle of Alcazar*. Alleyn played the leading villain, Muly Mahamet, who in the play opposed the virtuous Moor Abdelmelec. As Muly Mahamet Alleyn made himself like what the play calls 'a Negro Moor' in blackface, while Abdelmelec was white-faced. It was a simple use of Christian imagery, white for virtue and black for devilry. Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) noted that the devil was thought capable of appearing to humans in the shape of a blackamoor: '[Bodin] sometimes alloweth the divell the shape of a blacke Moore.' (sig. H5). Alleyn's black make-up used the standard assumptions of his time. When Shakespeare wrote *Othello* a year later he used two standard ideas which had served routinely on the stages of the time, one the devilish blackamoor, the other the simple soldier. But he reversed them, making black Othello a simple soldier and soldier-like Iago a black-hearted manipulator for his own devilish ends.

2. ORIGINAL STAGING PRACTICES

Awareness of the original staging can tell us a lot about Shakespeare's times, and the complex games he played with his audiences. His plays throw up many features that seem anomalous to us today, Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity in Act 4 being only one such case. We can too easily forget that even *Romeo and Juliet* was radical in its own time, setting young love above what has in the last few years become known in British law as 'forced marriage'. If there is any Shakespeare work that can be seen as directly prompting a total reversal in social attitudes it is there. But we always rewrite Shakespeare into our own image, and in the process lose much that originally enriched the plays. *The Taming of the Shrew* has had a hard time for a century now because of its ostensible misanthropy, the image it sets up of an independent-minded wife as a hawk to be forced into obedience. We lose sight of the play's ingenuity and originality in shifting attention from the romantic wooing that anticipates marriage to life after marriage. Most modern viewers of the play find it hard to take Baptista Minola's two daughters as a pair of opposites, the elder shrewish because the younger and prettier is her father's favourite, while the younger relishes her

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pretence of being submissive while she is wooed and won but turns wilful shrew as soon as she is married. The elder by contrast fights her way into a bargain with her enforced husband, and ends with the prospect of an energetic and lively marriage as a result. Awareness of the social preconditions for such stories is a major help if we are to draw on their truly Shakespearean strengths.

Shakespeare's language is always in need of translation. Historical shifts are a feature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries that we have to translate for ourselves. A basic adjustment is also needed to our idea of what theatre can and should do. The Shakespearians were against illusionism. We need only to look at the lamentable comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to see that the moonlight, the lion and the wall were quite implausible illusions. Bottom says that his company will need to protect the audience from too much belief in what they are to be shown. The ladies must not be made to tremble at the sight of the lion. That concern was expressed in joke many years before the most famous stage direction of all appeared, '*Exit pursued by a bear*', when stage realism was similarly made an occasion for comedy. We now tend to think of Shakespeare, thanks to Olivier, Branagh and Al Pacino, as a would-be maker of film scripts. Cinematic realism, however, is almost antithetical to Shakespeare's idea of what theatre can do. It was not only Bottom who was afraid of too much realism in Tudor times.

The hatred of plays and playgoing that boiled up out of English churches from the 1570s onwards was far more positive and considered than we think it now. It was much more than a knee-jerk reaction by puritans to ordinary people getting pleasure. Behind their diatribes sat a real fear of illusion, a revulsion against the deliberate dishonesty and pretence that theatre is based on. Stephen Poliakoff applied the term 'Breaking the illusion' to one of his plays, reflecting the high value we now give illusion. Such a valuation terrified many Elizabethans because it used the work of the devil. William Perkins, the sharpest reasoner of the late Elizabethan church, put the case against any form of deception succinctly. 'An illusion,' he declared, 'is the work of Satan, whereby he deludeth or deceiveth man. And it is two-fold: either of the outward senses or of the minde.'³ The sermon in which he made this statement was aimed at witchcraft, the most overtly Satanic of the various trickster professions that used the arts of illusion. Like witchcraft, play-acting was a deliberately deceptive business, and so must be the Devil's work. When what we call Elizabethan drama got going in the 1580s and 1590s excessive realism was a constant concern. It shows itself in everything the playwrights created. Metadrama, the explicit acknowledgement that



Illustration 2. A vignette from the titlepage of *Roxana* (1632) by William Alabaster. It shows hangings (a cloth of ‘arras’) behind the players. Audience are on both sides of the players, some above them on the balcony, and more sit on the pit benches below. The rail round the flanks of the stage suggests it was a hall playhouse, though it is doubtful whether the engraving was meant to portray any specific venue. Note the audience on both sides of the players, as well as in the galleries to each side, which are not shown. For the doubtful reliability of this picture, see John H. Astington, ‘The Origins of the *Roxana* and *Messallina* Illustrations’, *ShS* 43 (1991), 149–69.

a stage-play was a work of illusion, where boys played girls who dressed as boys, is only the cream on the many-layered cake the players fed to their audiences. They were rarely allowed to forget that they were engaged in a con-game in which they were willing participants.

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The lies inherent in illusionism were visible on stage immediately, in the players' clothing. Dress bespoke the person, and stood out as the most obvious form of deception. The Tudor sumptuary laws dictating what kind of dress and fabrics should be confined to which social classes grew out of the view that clothes ought to depict the wearer's social status, if not character. Concern that outward appearance should reflect the inward person became a weapon in the case that playing was a devilish deception, and there were nearly as many attacks on players for their misuse of dress as for their bawdry. The poet and courtier Sir John Harington once offered an ironic defence of what he called 'dissimulation' through dress in his defensive *Treatise on Play* written in 1597, the decade when professional playing got its first official recognition as a legitimate recreation for Londoners. To Harington 'play' included all forms of recreation, from dicing to theatre, and he took care to give a summary of the range of the games of outward deceit used in everyday life.

Wee goe brave in apparell that wee may be taken for better men then wee bee; we use much bumbastings and quiltings to seeme better formed, better showlder, smaller wasted, and fuller thyght, then wee are; wee barbe and shave oft, to seeme yownger then wee are; we use perfumes both inward and outward to seeme sweeter then wee be; corkt shooes to seeme taller then wee bee; wee use cowrtuows salutations to seem kinder then wee be; lowly obaysances to seeme humbler then wee bee; and sometye grave and godly communications to seem wiser or devowter then wee bee.⁴

To which, as the exhibitionistic charmer he was, he added that the potential gain from such deceits was that the users might actually become what they pretended to be. Players posing on stage as kings or great lords in the velvets and satins that the sumptuary laws preserved for noble status offered clear examples of the misuse of dress in public to claim a non-existent eminence.

Metatheatricality was the stage custom, and it manifested itself in many ways. Two in particular should illustrate how pervasive was the suspicion of illusionism. The first was, in the absence of any of the modern trappings of illusion such as an invisible audience, the obviousness of the location's identity as a theatre, in full daylight with instead of a scenic backdrop half the audience visible beyond the actors, and frequent addresses made from the stage directly to the visible audience, the folk standing around the stage who Hamlet with lordly contempt called groundlings, small fish with big mouths. Secondly was applause, which might be prompted at any point in the play, not just at the end. And with the ending's applause for the performers went comic song-and-dance jigs, even at the close of a tragedy.

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Many theatrical benefits came from the avoidance of illusionism on stage. One was games exploiting transparent disguise, recognisable to the audience but not to the characters in the play. Once there were only two companies entertaining all Londoners in the 1590s the eight or ten speakers in each play became instantly recognisable in their human as well as their player shape to the many habitual playgoers. An uncrowned and therefore unkingly Henry V wrapped in Erpingham's cloak, the boy playing Rosalind playing the boy Ganymede, Bottom in his ass's head before he turned up at court as Pyramus were all immediately recognisable to the audience despite their disguises. Another feature of non-realism was the noble or serious characters speaking in verse. When Laurence Olivier started his career as a film director with the 1944 *Henry V* he found the verse a big impediment to cinematic realism, and cut out two-thirds of it. He also started the film tradition of speaking soliloquies to camera mute-faced with a voice-over. To Elizabethans spoken soliloquies and asides were of a piece with the overtly non-realistic rhythms that verse entails, addressed directly at the wholly visible audience. Prologues and choruses compering the story along with commentating characters speaking asides directly to the audience like Richard III, Edmund in *Lear* and Iago who keep the audience informed of their acts of deception were all components in the apparatus of anti-realistic staging.

This non-realism was part of the pretence, of course, and at times it created its own problems. A bare stage with no curtains or lighting to put the scene into darkness for instance could make getting rid of on-stage corpses awkward. The murdered soldier-hostage in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* gets up and sings at the end of the farce, but we might well wonder what happens to the three corpses left onstage at the end of the tragedy of *Hamlet* when there was no obvious means or order to remove them. Funeral processions were used as closing spectacles, and orders were given to carry off most bodies, but *Hamlet* was an exception to this rule. After Hamlet himself has been carried off 'like a soldier', as Fortinbras orders, King Claudius is left lying there by his throne with his crown, his Queen Gertrude nearby, and bloodied Laertes is left on stage too. Nothing in any of the three texts of the play says what happens to them. Getting to their feet and walking off was one option, but there was another, which is worth conjecturing about once we know a little more about how plays routinely ended.

Contemporary comments refer to 'plaudities' at the end of a performance, but nothing says that the whole cast, dead or alive, appeared to take a bow. Dudley Carleton, an enthusiastic playgoer, wrote in a letter in 1603 about 'all the actors being together (as use is at the end of a play)',⁵ but he