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The Incorporation of Identity, Performance, and Disguise

in Sixteenth-Century English Literature

Beginning in 1485 and ending in 1604 the reign of the Tudor dynasty ushered in a humanistic Renaissance. Between the invention of the printing press and the translation of the Bible and other important texts from the intellectual vernacular of Latin into the common language of the masses, there was a newfound appreciation for the written word. Still, no changes could have had a more profound effect on as many of the authors or as much of the literature as the consistently oscillating religious preference of the sixteenth-century Christendom. With the cost of outright mutiny against the current ruler's ideas being at best a simple death, authors learned how to cloak their own ideas and grievances. Skilled writers would hide ideas within more complex ideas and concepts within double entendre and metaphorical passages. When looking at the fictitious dialogue of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the various writings of Queen Elizabeth I, the epic allegory *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, and the dramatic play *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, one is given a glimpse of the common themes of identity, performance, and disguise present in sixteenth-century English literature.

In the twenty-first century, ideas on performance tend to be limited to movies and concerts, but even in these modern forms of entertainment it is the words and lyrics that carry on the show. Thomas More's *Utopia* is a performance of words between two fictitious characters. The "nonsense peddler," Raphael Hythloday, and the "fool," Thomas More, engage in an intellectual conversation comparing and contrasting the mythical new world of Utopia and King Henry VII's England. The literal translations of the title characters' names denotes the less than serious connotations that would have been necessary to underrate More's true intentions for writing *Utopia*. In reality the two books, taken together, are both a critique on kings as well as a satire of English customs. In Christopher Burlinson's "Humans and Animals in Thomas More's *Utopia*" he agrees that "More brings [a] textual playfulness, with its attendant questions and ironies, ambivalences and paradoxes, into contact with a set of ethical questions...both in the fictional world of Utopia and the world of early modern Europe" (25). The scene is set "in the garden...on a bench covered with turf" (More 526). This gives the context of the literature the relaxed setting of a meeting simply between friends. The openness of the setting eliminates the inkling that ideas in the book are calling for revolution against the king or the chance that ideas are misconstrued as some sort of conspiracy. More teases the aristocratic for their obsession with gold and diamonds by noting that "nature granted to gold and silver no function with which we cannot easily dispense. Human folly has made them precious because they are rare" (558). Because of his distaste for those who value gold as a statement of self-worth, More chooses to satirize the practice by making gold something that "criminals who are to bear through life the mark of some disgraceful act are forced to wear" (558). More disguises his own intention for writing the book by, at the end, virtually denouncing everything about the Utopian society he had

created. Having spoken as Hythloday through most of the work, his alternative character Thomas More sidelines Hythloday's appreciation for Utopian customs by stating "a few of the customs and laws [Hythloday] had described...were quite absurd" (588). More further denounces the validity of the suggestive nature of Utopia towards changes in England by noting in his closing sentence "there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see" (588). There is a sense of disbelief in the actual credibility of Hythloday, who Thomas S. Engeman believes to be the "only person in the dialogue who has seen, professes to understand, and seeks to teach about the Utopians" (134).

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, there are elements of disguise and performance not only in the writings of subjects but here in the writings of the Monarch herself. In Elizabeth I's "Speech to the House of Commons," the Queen is appearing before Parliament to attempt to alleviate concerns about her unmarried state. To maintain the cooperation of the male dominated Parliament, Elizabeth had to use skilled language to appear meekly feminine and still maintain "masculine" intelligence. Playing to the traditional identity characteristics of the sixteenth - century woman, the Queen humbly acknowledges that "this matter might cause in me, being a woman wanting both wit and memory, some fear to speak and bashfulness besides, a thing appropriate to my sex"(690). Elizabeth I goes on to quote "a philosopher whose deeds upon this occasion I remember better than his name" (691). She is referring to the Greek philosopher Athenodorus and the inability to recall the exact name was just a part of the performance. Looking at the literal context of her writings, it is obvious that Queen Elizabeth is well versed in Greek and Latin, and was educated by many of the popular scholars of that time period. In her poem "On Monsieur's Departure," Elizabeth I articulates having to put on the disguise of

coldness: “I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate/ I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned, / Since from myself another self I turned” (lines 4-6). The use of antithesis and paradox in her writing shows her familiarity with the great male writers of the Sixteenth Century. While the end of her engagement to Alençon, the French duke of Anjou, may have been difficult, her role as Queen didn’t allow her to be consumed by her emotions. This is also an emotional performance by the Queen to Alençon. Biographer Elizabeth Jenkins notes that “the success of the negotiation, which for the last three years had been of extreme importance to English foreign policy, had been due to Elizabeth’s being able to convince Alençon of a genuine if metaphysical passion” (250). In her “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury,” Elizabeth I aligns herself with the identity of a male king in circumvention of the female role nature had cast her in. Her appearance may have been “of a weak and feeble woman; but [she had] the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too (700). Embracing a male identity role, in this speech and many of her other speeches, Elizabeth refers to herself not as a princess or a queen but as a prince.

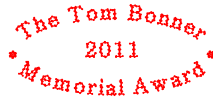
Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* is an exemplary piece of work in which the author uses character, structures, and figures to symbolize important issues of the time. *The Faerie Queene* is most directly one of many personifications of Queen Elizabeth; however, the work as a whole is a dark conceit about the Protestant Reformation against the Catholic Church. Identity plays a major role in this epic because it is through identification of the roles that each character is supposed to portray that the reader is given a better understanding of the allegorical nature of the story. A common man wearing armor “wherein old dint of deepe wounds did remaine, / The cruellmarkes of many a bloody field; / Yet armes till that time did never wield” (lines 3-5), assumes the identity of a brave knight through the simple act of dressing like one. Una, the lady

whom he is sent on a quest to help, is “so pure and innocent, as that same lambe, / She was in life and every virtuous lore” (37-38) and the quintessential damsel in distress. Melissa Sanchez, author of “Fantasies of Friendship in *The Faerie Queene*,” finds that these artificial examples of valor and virtue allow Spenser to “contrast between example and rule, mimesis and force, [and] postulates an audience who views the romance’s characters with both empathy and detachment, so that by evaluating their situations and choices, readers will learn to distinguish between real and apparent virtue” (250).

Written two years before the death of Queen Elizabeth and the end of the Tudor dynasty, William Shakespeare’s dramatic play *Twelfth Night* is less concerned with what is happening with the Kingdom than the aforementioned works. There is little concern for social or religious reform. Rather than the characters being staunchly categorized by their own identities, it is the several cases of mistaking identity that move the play along. Feste, Countess Olivia’s jester, actually begs of his mistress to “give [him] leave to prove [her] a fool” (line 53). Permission granted, Feste then proceeds to condemn Olivia, who admits that her brother is better off in heaven but still mourns him, as “more fool...to mourn for [her] brother’s soul, being in heaven” (65-66). Here the identity of the wise council is taken up by the fool. Viola disguised as Cesario comes to court Olivia for “his” master, Orsino, but Olivia instead falls for Cesario. Literary critic, Jami Ake hypothesizes that it is actually “the inadequacy of Orsino’s ostensibly heteroerotic Petrarchan discourse [which] gives rise to a pastoral poetic of female desire in Viola’s conversation with Olivia” (376). Viola’s eloquent disguise of Orsino’s grotesque speech leads to Olivia becoming mistakenly entrenched with Cesario. Cesario, whose heart “no woman has, nor never none / Shall mistress be of it save [her] alone” (Shakespeare 156-157), is unable to

reciprocate Olivia's love. Orsino, who is the object of Viola's affections, asserts that "there no woman's sides / can bide the beating of so strong a passion / As love doth give [his] heart; no woman's heart / So big, to hold so much..." (92-95) as the love he has for Olivia. This statement characterizes female love as feeble and fleeting, when in reality it is Viola love that remains steadfast. On the contrary, Orsino's love transitions quite easily from Olivia to Viola.

Sixteenth-century literature was a great place to find a world similar to that surrounding the reader and yet somehow different. The themes of identity, performance, and disguise allowed authors to hint at criticisms towards monarchs without being blatantly contrary. This also gave the readers brief and witty synopsis into the lives of the sixteenth-century aristocrats, who were often satirized by learned authors.



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