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Disguise as Exercise of Feminine Power and Meta-theatre in *The Rover* and *Sir Anthony Love*

If “the art of disguise is knowing how to hide in plain sight” (The Great Game) then one might ask what the use of disguises in Restoration theatre is hiding from our plain sight. At the most basic level a disguise as a plot device is designed to conceal the identity of one character from another. On a deeper level, it might be said that the theatrical art of disguise is to allow a character to disrupt established order and exercise some otherwise unavailable power to achieve a goal that would otherwise be unattainable without structural deception. All the while, the character, protected by the disguise, invites the audience inside the ruse, creating an empathy that may, if performed well, transcend the inherent hypocrisy of the character’s deception. According to new historicist, Stephen Greenblatt, “[t]heatricality, then, is not set over against power but is one of power’s essential modes” (59) Disguise then, as a form of theatricality understood in this way, becomes an expression of power delivered through meta-theater such that the audience may never see it hiding in plain sight.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines meta-theatre as “theatre which draws attention to its unreality, esp. by the use of a play within a play; (also) those particular parts of a drama which exemplify this device” (metatheatre, n.). One form of meta-theater, gender disguise, distorts the line between reality and drama. In Aphra Behn’s 1677 social comedy, *The Rover*, vivacious Hellena dresses as a boy on two separate occasions to attract Willmore and subvert her father and brother’s plan to send her to a nunnery. In Thomas Southerne’s 1690 social comedy, *Sir Anthony Love,* Lucia takes on a male persona to win Valentine and obtain financial freedom. I believe when gender disguise is used, as Greenblatt might remark, it becomes an essential and perhaps singular form of power available to female characters in the Restoration era.

The female characters of Hellena and Sir Anthony Love face similar circumstances as subjects under men’s dominion. As actresses, the women playing these “breeches roles” faced similar scrutiny because they presented women in male attire. Neither the actress nor the character held any actual or structural power. What they did hold was the power to disguise and disrupt. Feminist critics like Elizabeth Howe interpret these roles as a sexual ruse designed only to excite the men in the audience. She believes that because the roles were not written “in a way which might disturb male spectators” and the characters “invariably return, like her Renaissance predecessor, to a conventional female role at the end of the play” (59), then the female characters were not actually challenging the subversive nature of the male status quo. To Howe, gender disguise is merely further tool of objectifying the underlying female role. Nothing is hidden, no power is transferred. I believe this view is too narrow and ignores the impact of disguise on plot and audience.

By the late seventeenth century, audiences were not just made up of men waiting for cheap arousal. Women would have been prevalent in the audience and the need for commercial success, at the very least, might have required some consideration of how these female breeches roles would be received differently by female patrons. While it is doubtful that Behn and Southerne used their female characters as blatant propaganda for sexual, marital or gender equality, it is at least plausible to question whether the more subtle use of disguise was an intended means of exploring and questioning power and gender. As a meta-theatrical device, the breeches role allowed the authors to manipulate the relationship between reality and drama and thereby question the role of women in society without alienating the established male dominated cultural and political norms. In this essay, I will examine the use of masks and disguises as uniquely impactful meta-theatrical female power in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover* and Thomas Southerne’s *Sir Anthony Love*.

Before exploring the power dynamics at play when Hellena and Lucia dawn their gender disguises and the resulting impact of the meta-theater on the audience, I believe we must first consider the social and gender makeup of the actual Restoration audience and how it would have perceived the ruse being offered. In their essay, “Restoration Comedy and Its Audiences 1660-1776,” Arthur Scouten and Robert Hume suggest it is impossible to know the exact make-up of any specific Restoration audience, but it is clear that audiences grew and expanded through the era. Due to emergence of the merchant and middle class, women clearly became a more substantial portion of the theater, but they warn it is important not to “lump the plays of the 1670s with those of the 1690s” (51). Although the 1690s began to emphasize the understanding of male freedom, James Evans suggests in his essay “Resisting a Private Tyranny in Two Humane Comedies,” that female characters like Sir Anthony Love, found themselves “facing circumstances that apologists for the Revolution judged unacceptable for men, a form of slavery, chosen in choosing marriage” (153). Therefore, while the role of women in society did not drastically change in the thirteen years between the productions of these two plays, changes in parallel with the remainder of society were occurring.

One clear distinction between the two historical periods represented by these plays was the economic makeup of English society and the increased bourgeois influence in the 1690s. The interdependence between financial success and audience attendance seems to have driven many of the decisions as the “the Restoration stage was finding itself” (Langhans 12). People attended the theater to watch the play, but they also wanted to be seen by other patrons. Sometimes the emphasis on being seen outweighed the production on the stage. As noted in Edward A. Langhans’s essay, “The Theatre,” we know that for many Restorations audience members, “theatre was a game, like the games played out in so many plays of the period, and patrons enjoyed watching these imitations of immorality that were comfortably (or uncomfortably) like the game of life they played themselves” (15). Part of this game came from the female patron’s participation. Many women in attendance wore masques and used fans to conceal their identities, but this also made is difficult to distinguish the honorable women from the prostitutes.

Within the context of an audience living in an ever expanding economic and social climate, and in light of the audience’s use of disguise to maneuver through the social and cultural milieu of the theater, we can begin to consider how dramatists may have used disguise to manipulate the audience. Peter Hyland’s work on the use of disguise in Early Modern Drama presents an intriguing interpretation of the representation of disguise in theater and I believe a similar application can be applied to the late seventeenth century. In his essay, “The Performance of Disguise,” Hyland suggests the audience willingly suspends disbelief because of the nature of theatrical performance and “does not need to be fooled by something that is seen on stage in order to believe that people on stage have been fooled by it” (78). Because of the basic structure of English playhouses in the Restoration era and the lack of electric lighting, Restoration audiences were necessarily aware of the apparatus involved in staging the play they were watching. This created a natural opportunity for Restoration comedies to use meta-theatre or meta-dramatic devices in staging, language, and action to create a blurred, interactive connection between the audience and actor. In this context, Hyland’s theory suggests that the important of disguise was not that the audience believed the woman was a man, but that they understood the actor and character were inviting the audience member to consider the implications of the trick.

Hyland extends this understanding of disguise as metadrama in his book *Disguise on the Early Modern English Stage* describing the connection between reality and illusion, “metadrama…illuminates the deceptions and illusions that we define for ourselves as reality” (93). Even on the Restoration stage, the illusion and deception of a women dressing as a man is not that the woman is a man or simply that the female character could fabricate a trick, but that the reality created by the disguise allowed some otherwise impossible event to occur. By disguising themselves as men, female characters impact the plot and become more than spectators in the action. They gain power to create their own future and disrupt established order. This deception feeds a fear in the patriarchal structure where “the potential subversion of the male right to control female action” becomes a “deep-rooted complex of anxieties” hidden beneath a comic device (Hyland 141). Because seventeenth century men present in the audiences were likely concerned about losing power to women, those worries and ideologies could be exploited and explored through breeches roles where the audience knew a woman, behaving as a man, was exercising more power than she would otherwise be allowed. This reality, likely not lost on the female audience, takes on new meaning. The moral implications of the female breeches roles viewed not as objectification or sexualization but rather as depictions of power dynamic is substantial. Women disguised as men subvert men’s assumptions about the nature of power while allowing women audience members to question their perceived roles within society. These questions can best be consider by examining the dynamics created in *The Rover* and *Sir Anthony Love*.

Written in 1677, Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*, celebrates the return of Charles II through a nostalgic interpretation of the English Cavalier’s exile in Naples during the civil war. Already a successful playwright by the time this play was first performed, *The Rover* gave Behn another hit. Additionally, it was performed several times at court and regularly revived until the mid-eighteenth century. Although the drama glorifies the masculine Libertine values of superiority, conquest, and power, it also examines women exercising control over their marital futures.

Hellena is a spirited woman whose future rests within the familial patriarchy and even before she dons a disguise to enjoy the frivolities of the Carnival season, she proves herself to be an outspoken support for female freedom. Disinterested in the life of a nun that her father and brother expect for her, Helena questions the role the men have in decision making in a meta-theatrical aside “Is’t not enough you made a nun of me, but you must cast my sister away too, exposing her to a worse confinement than a religious life?” (I.i.108-11). Hellena is unafraid to question the patriarchy present within the play, but because this rhetorical question comes in the form of a metatheatrical aside, she also questions the patriarchy present within society. The mere fact that Hellena is an assertive female does not mean that she would necessarily be viewed by the audience as overly aggressive, but her qualities that are more typically associated with masculinity become more easily portrayed while she is in disguise later in the play.

The inherent danger of Hellena’s forthcoming gender disguise and its potential power is marked by several characters. Her brother Don Pedro shares his disgust of the practice of masking, noting that “[m]asquerading! a lewd custom to debauch our youth” (II.vi.108-9). He appears worried he may be made a fool by a concealed identity. English Cavalier, Colonel Belville, explains the sexual benefits of disguise to fellow Englishman, Willmore, “[b]ecause whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer ‘em” (II.i.2-4). Both Don Pedro and Belville reference universal powers that become apparent in Hellena’s eventual use of disguise – concealment, freedom, and deception.

Hellena wants more than the “extravagances” Belville claims are a benefit for men. She uses her male disguise to subvert her family’s plan for her future and empower her to take control of her life. Women have few choices in the patriarchal structure and Hellena has no choice but to conceal her strength beneath a disguise. Infiltrating the relationship between courtesan Angelica and Captain Willmore, Hellena dresses as a boy so she can investigate Willmore’s interest in her. Willmore uses condescending language as a power play when he attempts to persuade “[t]he impudent’st young thing in nature” (IV.ii.319), and “my little mischief” (IV.ii.333-4), to reveal the truth. Although Wilmore eventually recognizes Hellena, she maintains her hidden female identity and name. Willmore appears more attracted to her because of her deception stating, “If it were possible I should ever be inclined to marry, it should be some kind, young sinner, one that has generosity enough to give favor” (IV.ii.394-5). Willmore’s bravado makes him believe he garners the power, but because Hellena escapes without divulging her name, she holds onto control.

By the end of the play, Hellena once again disguises herself as a boy to disrupt her brother’s established order in her life. After defying Willmore’s sexual advances and demanding marriage first, they both finally reveal their names to one another. Connected in a more honest communion, they use the same language to describe the qualities they need in a partner as Don Pedro furiously moves toward his sister who remains dressed as a boy. Hellena entreats Willmore’s masculine, militaristic nature to prove his affection, “Now Captain, show your love and courage; stand to your arms and defend me bravely” (V.i.539-41). She demands both his bravery and “love and courage” to help fight off her brother while maintaining her true nature. Willmore boasts of her nature when he reminds Don Pedro, “I am of a nation that are of the opinion a woman’s honor is not worth guarding when she has a mind to part with it” (V.i.585-6). This may appear as an insult aimed at Hellena, but her response, “Well said, Captain” (V.i.589) shows she is not concerned with conventional thoughts of honor associated with femininity. Willmore commends her for her disguise and ability to conspire against her brother. Consequently, Willmore celebrates Hellena’s abilities using the exact same phrasing she used to describe his militaristic prowess, “Egad thou’rt a brave girl, and I admire the love and courage” (V.i.633-4). Hellena has proven through her disguise that she is brave and shows “love and courage” just like a Cavalier man.

Although *The Rover* and *Sir Anthony Love* were originally performed thirteen years apart, it is quite apparent that Aphra Behn’s writing influenced Southerne’s play to such an extent that he adapted the Charlott and Floriante marriage plotlines from Behn’s novel *The Lucky Mistake*. Therefore, if we assume that at least to some extent Behn’s Hellena uses disguise to expand her power and influence over the men in her life within the patriarchal and marital structure of her setting, then Southerne’s Sir Anthony Love’s conquest of masculinity through disguise must be viewed as assault on the conception of masculinity. Perhaps is takes a male author to create a female character so full of the libertine spirit that her disguise is not so much a trick, but an opportunity to live her true nature.

Disguised as a man, Anthony Love assumes the role of the male rake. This change of external identity allows her to freely explore the supposedly innately male capabilities and powers she already possesses as a female. She does not necessarily desire to be a man, but rather to make an inclusive expression of her full identity, “I am for Universal Empire and would not be stinted to one province; I would be feared, as well as loved: as famous for my action with the men, as for my passion with the women” (I.i.14-18). Anthony Love refuses to passively wait to be told how to live as a female and instead asserts her desires unapologetically. The “Universal Empire” she wants is the space and freedom to express a personal identity without the restraint of any traditional gender role imposed upon her by society. “Action with men” and “passion with women” summarizes the male and female qualities she intends to explore in her dual identity.

Anthony Love learns to sword fight and have “conversation among men” (I.i.25), expressing physical abilities and social freedom that were inherently present or possible already. The act of violent swordplay is believed to be inherent in men, yet Anthony uses education to master the skill. For adventure, she actively pursues women (for the benefit of other men) and recognizes that her abilities to pursue and persuade are not solely masculine qualities but part of her inherent nature, “I am not for many words when I have a mind to be doing” (III.ii.44-5). Physical aggression, relational conquest, and sexual desire are not gender specific qualities or desires, yet Anthony Love is only permitted to explore and display them while wearing pants. Sir Anthony Love is unlike other men encountered in the Restoration theater because although she rejects her female physical identity to display male dominance, as a woman posing as a man, she uses the power of disguise to display her inherent strength.

Much critical thought has been spent arguing the impact of the Restoration theater “breeches role” on feminine subversion. Some believe the roles blur the lines between the sexes while other claim the roles mock male behavior. Elizabeth Howe argues the roles produce a “minimal shift in the balance of power” (59) but primarily they are “another means of displaying the actress as a sexual object” (59). Howe claims because characters like Sir Anthony Love offer “no real threat to the established order” (60), they become representative of “a freak rather than the norm” (60). I disagree. Sir Anthony Love moves beyond expanding the female gender role and seeks to balance and integrate the powers socially assigned as male and female. By playing her male character she brings to fruition capabilities, powers, and desires that were inherently present within her as a woman. This does not just contradict female gender assumptions or highlight her female persona’s place as a sexual object. Rather, it challenges the core assumption that male and female gender roles are unique and separate. Anthony Love’s disguise makes it socially acceptable for Love to actively pursue a desired outcome instead of passively hoping Valentine falls for her. She expresses her understanding of the integration of her identities by expressing that she is sure Valentine “likes me, and likes me so well in a man, he’ll love me in a woman” (I.i.66-7). She is not suggesting it is the disguise that creates affection but rather the expression of the masculine aspects of her identity. Anthony Love’s inherent characteristics are there with or without the breeches. This fact undermines the notion of male dominance or power. The breeches do not mock Sir Anthony Love or make her a freak, they free and empower her.

Valentine claims Anthony Love “has all things as well about him, is as much respected by the men, and better received by the women, than any of us” (I.i.401-3). This statement could be perceived as metadramatic in nature because of the duality of the phrase. Anthony Love might well be loved more by female audience member willing to verbally call out their excitement. When her identity is eventually revealed, Valentine is not disgusted or insulted. Perhaps his homosocial desire is reflected to him though Love’s imitation of a masculine qualities. He immediately kisses her and seems to love her as a woman and like her as a man. The qualities she possesses are necessarily not reserved to men, but the confined and limited nature of her defined role as a responsive and passive female leave her without opportunity.

The totality of Love’s behavior and statements suggests that Southerne is not using the breeches character as a sexual object of mockery but as a tool for questioning gender power and norms. This conclusion is enhanced by a consideration of the actual nature of the “breeches” Love wears. I believe it is possible that the pants worn by Love become a more complete representation of her identity than when she must wear petticoats. The petticoats hide the more masculine nature Anthony Love feels. In Act One, Anthony explains the hypocritical stereotype that men have more power because they can wear a sword, “’tis only the fashion of the world that gives your sex a better title than we have to the wearing of sword” (I.i.22-3). Contextually, the use of the word “fashion” could have double meaning because it could mean “trend,” but it could also reference clothing. A sword does not make a man brave or strong, just like wearing a petticoat does not make a woman meek. Twice Love references petticoats as the familiar clothing worn by females, and she puts them on only when she needs to appear publicly female. When she reveals her identity to Valentine, she explains she is Anthony Love in, “All but my petticoats” (IV.ii.72). The petticoats become the mask more than her pants. Later, when she helps Floriante escape the nunnery, the two women must switch clothes. Love is once again masked as a woman, “[n]ow for my petticoats again” (V.vi.72). There seems to be a negative connotation as Love uses the word “petticoats again” suggesting perhaps she feels like an imposter in a dress because it comes with a devaluation of her person. The petticoat also acts to restrict her freedom, both physically because it is harder to move and fight in a dress and mentally because women were subjected to the established patriarchal structure.

In the characters of both Hellena and Love we are presented with the power of disguise to influence gender roles and understandings. Both characters use disguise to achieve personal ambition otherwise unavailable. As a modern audience member we feel empathy for these characters, but we must acknowledge that what is actually occurring is self-motivated deceit. The characters are exercising power through deception which, while dressed in palatable meta-theatrical comedy, remains an exercise of power. More specifically the women characters are lying to the men characters in the play and deceiving them. The trick is played on the character but not the audience and in this way the male character is reduced in power against both the woman on stage and the woman in the audience. Because both sexes seem to be free of negative consequences by the end of the play, the “sin” seems excusable. The theatrical use of disguise in Restoration comedies seems to suggest that “few theater goers would have looked to a comedy…for serious moral or religious edification” (Scouten and Hume 51). However, a reader who is less distracted by the glitz of a theatrical performance “might well reflect on the provincial moral that adorns this tale” (Scouten and Hume 51). Scouten and Hume claim that, “not until the middle of the eighteenth century were audiences inclined to take the moral implications of old plays very seriously” (69). While this might be true, at least in the case of *Sir Anthony Love*, audiences of men watched their leading male character be made a fool by a woman dressed in pants. The nature of this deception, and the implicit commentary on the fluid power gender identity, was likely not lost on the audience.

In both the *Rover* and *Sir Anthony Love* disguises function as an exercise of female power in male dominated social structure. Perhaps in part because the audience is aware of the ruse it is more inclined to pull for the characters to achieve their goals despite their disingenuous behavior and breaking of social and cultural norms. We know both *The Rover* and *Sir Anthony Love* were successful and I believe it would be naive to assume the popularity was solely due to the nature of the costume. The popularity of a play containing women dressed as men likely featured more than the titillating exposure of an actress’s leg or body. Maybe the disguises in these plays and the nature of meta-drama allowed the patrons to consider new possibilities and relax preconceived notions of power. These popular female roles questioned the power structure of society while giving actresses an opportunity to express the own power on the stage. Perhaps the true power of the gender disguise was hiding in the plain sight of the audience and it is time to reconsider breeches as subservice power rather than sexualized plot.

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