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From Morality Play to Court Masque: A Study of Allegorical Performance Costume from Medieval Religious Dramas to Secular Theatre of the Seventeenth Century

Toni Bate, MA

Abstract

This paper will explore the development of theatrical costume from the religious mystery and morality plays of the Middle Ages to the secular court masque performances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With an emphasis on colour, decoration, symbolism and allegory, the progression from ecclesiastical stoles and simple colour association to highly decorative and extravagant costumes will be analysed. Used to convey a moral or political message, these performances and their costumes epitomised the occupation with allegory at this time and provide examples of the obvious one dimensional characterisation prevalent in early European theatre. This examination will demonstrate how religious and secular theatre of this time, often compartmentalised in historical dress and costume literature, were interconnected and inextricably linked in terms of their performance costume.

> Although rooted in Greco–Roman antiquity, allegory became a powerful mode of religious expression during the Middle Ages. Secular and political allegories during the medieval period often involved figurations of Justice, Injustice, Peace, Fortune, time, and the seasons, but Renaissance and Baroque art revitalized such allegories with a renewed interest in Classical conventions and myth. Frequently, artists combined stories and figures from antiquity with the Christian allegorical tradition.[1]

This quote demonstrates the link between the Middle Ages and the renewal of the classical influence of the Renaissance period in terms of the importance of allegory as a tool for storytelling and propaganda. This metaphorical relationship is carried through to the costumes worn for both the religious and secular theatrical performance of this era where the concept of the allegory is used to define character through the performer's clothing. It is clear from original sources from this period that the notion of the allegory was prevalent throughout society at this time and can be seen in the art work and literature from the Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance in the personification of theoretical concepts and qualities (Figure 1).

During the Middle Ages, having been hostile to previous forms of theatre, the Christian church developed their own dramatic representations of bible stories to promote Christian doctrine to a mostly illiterate congregation. The actors were originally members of the clergy and the pieces were performed in church, but by the fourteenth century they were being performed outside the church by members of guilds and considerable amounts of money were spent on staging and costuming the performances (Figure 2).[2]

The costumes for the mystery and miracle plays began as ecclesiastical stoles in various liturgical colours, the clergy playing the roles originally and holding emblems in their hands to suggest their character and its attributes.[3] As conventions were developed, specific colours and garments were designated to

Figure 1
Allegory of April, Francesco del Cossa, 1470, painting–fresco, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, Italy.

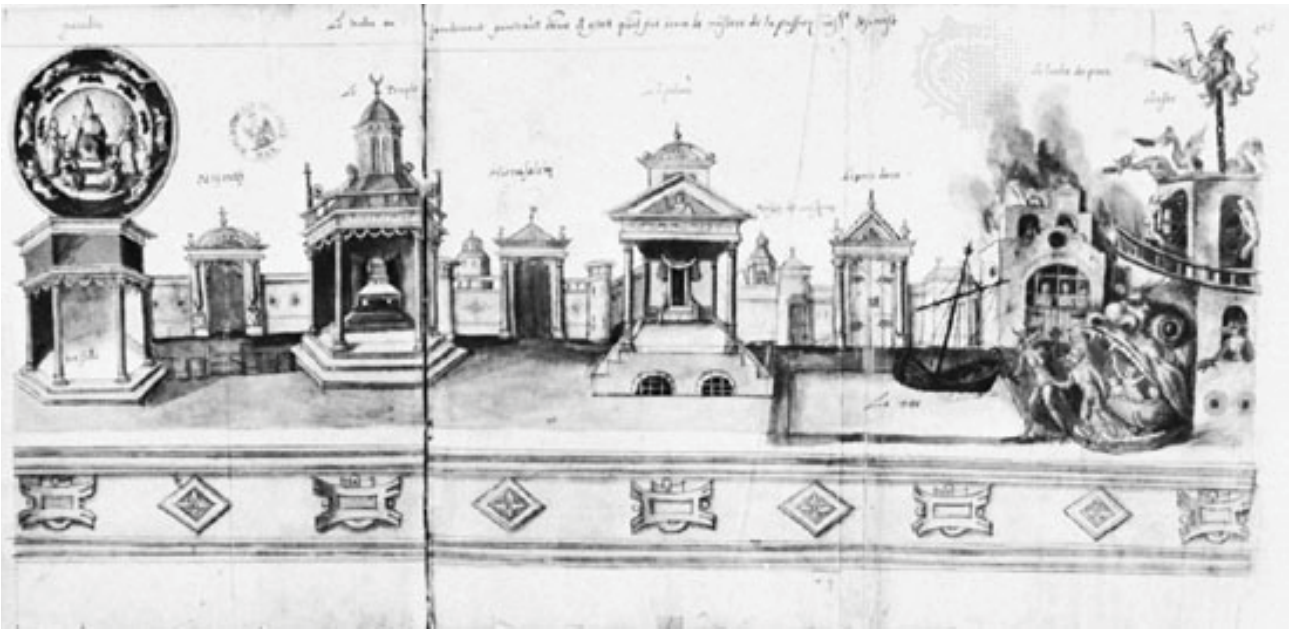

Figure 2
Setting of Valenciennes Mystery Play, Hubert Cailleau, 1547, miniature,
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France, MS Fr. 12356 f. 2.

particular characters. For example, Thomas wore a silk tunic, Daniel wore green, Christ appeared in purple and red, and Mary in various shades of blue depending on which part of her life was being portrayed.

In *Costume in the Theatre*, James Laver cites an original source from Smith's company of Coventry where it is clear that Pilate (at least in Coventry) always wore a green coat, Herod a gown of blue satin and that the angels wore wings, vestments and suits made of gold skins.[4] In another Coventry pageant the saved souls wore long white tunics and the damned souls black. Adam and Eve sometimes wore white leather to suggest nudity, the murderer Cain wore red, Truth wore green, judges were depicted in yellow and white was associated with Abel and with Mercy.[5] As the costumes became more sophisticated symbols were developed to help the audience recognise the characters, such as God being represented in white with a golden face and, while still ecclesiastical in origin, they were made of expensive materials and heavily embellished with symbolic details.[6]

In the article *Stage Presentation of Allegorical Characters in Skelton's play Magnyfycence*, Olena Lilova discusses allegorical characters from the early sixteenth century and how their costumes were part of the symbolic code interpreted by the audience as part of their experience of the performance,

> The moment an allegorical character appeared on the stage dressed in a certain way and fitted out with certain objects that revealed its inner essence, it evoked a whole range of associations with the viewers. Sloth, for instance, was usually presented as an untidily dressed, unkempt lazybones in sagging breeches with a pillow under his arm to have a rest whenever he wanted. The character's visual dimension was an essential pre–condition for the creation of a dramatic allegory, with every element of its outward appearance making its contribution into conveying an allegorical meaning.[7]

The one character which was not ecclesiastical was the devil who wore a character costume. One description of such a costume from the thirteenth century discusses its scaly skin and its two faces where one of the mouths is also an anus. It compares the costume to the classical furies, again suggesting the link between the classical ancient world and the religious imagery of the Medieval period.[8] This is further supported by James Laver who suggested that, 'Sometimes the devil was shown covered with hair as if to demonstrate his lineal decent from the ancient satyrs, sometimes he wore leather, sometimes black cloth or a mixture of black and red to suggest the flames of hell' (Figure 3).[9]

Figure 3
Devil's Costume, Unknown Artist, thirteenth century, available at http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/stage/early%20stages/medievalcostume.html.

Figure 4
Allegory of the Seven Deadly Sins,
Unknown Artist, circa 1500, print, 395x276mm, British Museum, London, England, BM 18650708.92.

Figure 5
Allegory of Music from Les Echecs Amoureux,
Robinet Testard, circa 1500, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France, 143, detail of f. 65v.

Morality plays arose during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and explored the duality and fallibility of mankind. The main character was representative of the common man, his struggle for salvation and the battle between good and evil. Other characters were represented as personified abstractions of vices and virtues and would compete for man's soul. The most famous of these plays include *Everyman* and *The Castle of Perseverance*.

While there is little visual contemporary evidence of the costumes worn in these plays there is an abundance of medieval art which demonstrates the preoccupation with allegorical personification (Figures 4 and 5). Characters in these plays included the Seven Deadly Sins (who would also carry objects such as sword for wrath and a mirror for lechery), Knowledge, Mischief, Understanding, Perseverance and the four daughters of God; Mercy, Justice, Temperance and Truth.[10] Other characters included Poverty, the World, the Soul, Death, Strife, Patience, Vice, Conscience, Hypocrisy, Tyranny and Avarice as well as the different desires and characteristics of man such as Greed, Pride, Vanity and Good Will. As well as the addition of comical characters, dances and songs, to liven up the performances the costumes were made as elaborate as possible.

In *Costume of the Theatre* Komisarjevsky states that the costumes,

> were either modern or ecclesiastical with allegoric touches added to them. For instance, the Soul wore a white brocade dress decorated with precious stones and a black cloak, Consolation was dressed in blue, Pieta in white and Whoredom wore a wonderful mask. Venus had a dress of yellow silk painted with hearts with silver wings. Sometimes the allegorical characters had inscriptions or were accompanied by boards or flags to make their meaning plainer to the audience.[11]

A costume change was also frequently used to symbolise the conversion from sin to salvation. In the 1513 play *Hickscorner*, the character of Wisdom represents Christ while Amima, representing the soul

with her three powers Mind, Will and Understanding, is dressed in black and white to represent her mixture of reason and sensuality (Figure 6). The three powers are tempted into sin and adopt the clothing of town gallants, but reappear later in their original clothing to show redemption.[12]

The morality plays are significant as they mark the end of the biblical cycle of drama and form the link between medieval theatre and the beginnings of the modern play. They were 'an intermediate step in the transition from liturgical to professional secular drama, combining elements of each'.[13]

Possibly the best primary visual source we have to demonstrate this link are the 1615 paintings of the *Ommenganck* (Figure 7). Preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, they depict an annual procession, which began in Brussels in the fourteenth century to honour a statue of the Virgin Mary. It consisted of a parade of guilds, clergy, magistrates and religious orders accompanied by symbolic cars depicting various biblical scenes such as the Nativity but with other cars portraying classical figures such as Apollo and the muses. Devils and angels are also represented and although the paintings are from a later date the origin of the costumes in medieval drama can still be appreciated.[14]

Figure 6
Contemplation, Pity, Freewill, Imagination, Hickscorner, Perserverance, page 132 of *Six Anonymous Plays*, Unknown Artist, circa 1510–1537, University of California Libraries, California, United States.

Figure 7
Details from *The Ommenganck,* Denys van Alsloot, 1616, oil on canvas,
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England, 5928–1859.

In the fifteenth century the church power which had mostly dominated the Middle Ages began to be overtaken by more secular influences and during the Reformation, which began in 1517, religious drama was suppressed and Henry VIII subsequently banned any drama which was a threat to Protestantism.[15]

The court entertainments of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I developed into the elaborate court masques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The masque performances had their origins in ancient folk ceremonies known as disguising or mumming but were inspired by the elaborate staging and costumes of medieval drama. In *Costume on the Stage* Diana De Marly states that, 'Real gold and silver lace were used with velvet, brocade and ermine. Where a company could not afford real gold then copper was used, while rock crystal would do if they could not afford diamonds.'[16]

The court masque performances were used to celebrate important occasions such as weddings, as well as being used as a propaganda tool, promoting the virtues of the people in power and illustrating wealth and authority in visual and theatrical terms. During this time decorative motifs contained many symbolic meanings which would have been easily read by illiterate members of the audience or by those who did not understand the language at a period when 'allegory and illusion were literary and artistic conventions'.[17]

The role of costume became part of the governing powers' message, representing 'visual political currency' heavy on symbolism, promoting the current monarch (who often played a god or hero) as the personification of a deity come to earth, just as costume had helped to promote the church's message of morality in earlier times through the depiction of personified virtues and vices (Figure 8).[18]

Figure 8
Allegory of Cornelis Tromp as Neptune, Jan van Vianen, 1691, engraving, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, United States, 1963.30.10763.

Louis XIV of France is still referred to as the Sun King – his performances as the Sun god Apollo reinforcing the link between the monarch and his chosen emblem. His golden costume became a symbol of his power, wealth and status as ruler; a golden and radiant king reminiscent of the representation of God with a golden face in the earlier mystery plays. This iconic image, heavy on decoration and symbolism, epitomised France's seventeenth century golden age of art, literature, music and fashion (Figure 9).

In Britain the Stuart kings, James I and Charles I, promoted peace and prosperity through characters who, at first, represented chaos and despair and then transformed to represent the harmony of a Stuart rule. In this scenario colour could be used as a unifying tool, cancelling out any political differences between aristocratic performers and highlighting the power of their royal leader.[19]

In *Four Centuries of Ballet,* Lincoln Kirstein discusses how characters were weighed down with figurative decoration including musicians whose costumes would be adorned with instruments and the character of Folly being covered in tinkling bells (Figures 10 and 11).[20] Although few of these costumes have survived, the ones that have often show a high concentration of embroidered decoration and it is known that the court masques provided employment for many professional embroiderers as can be seen in the following quote,

> It is important to realise that any decoration was not simply for its own sake, but guided by allegorical and metaphysical consideration. By the middle of the seventeenth century dress had become overtly opulent, vast sums of money spent on extravagant silks, satins and embroidered fabrics and considerable use of real gold and precious stones as an integral part of decoration.[21]

Colour coding was still important in the masque costumes as it had been in the earlier religious dramas. Audiences were expected to recognise particular characters and these simple character types were represented all over Europe. For example, Diana would be represented in green with silver moon motifs, Fancy would have multicoloured garments and Night would be seen in dark blue.[22]

Figure 9
Louis XIV as Apollo,
Henri Gissy, 1653,
costume design,
Chateau de Versailles, Paris, France.

Figure 10
Jacqueline the Knowing One,
Daniel Rabel, circa 1625, costume designs, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England,
S.367–1988.

Figure 11
The Entry of Music,
Daniel Rabel, circa 1625, costume designs, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England,
S.1163–1986.

Pere Menestrier's 1682 treatise on ballet discusses the 'rules' of costuming a performance and the difficulties of costuming allegorical characters. Within it can clearly be seen the emphasis on symbolism and stylisation prevalent at the time. He said that,

> Costumes must express, as well as they can, the nature and properties of the subject. Winds must be dressed in feathers because of their extraordinary lightness, Fortune should have a costume of changing colours, embroidered on her costume are sceptres, crowns, arms etc., Destiny should be clad in blue strewn with stars and bits of crystal because it is in the stars and crystal ball that man seeks to know his future. Cupid should be dressed in rose hued fabric embroidered with flaming hearts, Hate should wear a fiery robe, Faith ought to appear in white as a symbol of her sincerity and Poverty is recognised by her torn dress and motley rags.[23]

Henri Gissey's designs from the seventeenth century clearly demonstrate the penchant for obvious character representation prevalent in the emblematic costume designs of this period (Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12
The Magician from
The Nights of Peleus & Thetis,
Henri Gissey, seventeenth century,
costume design, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France.

Figure 13
Monsieur, Le Duc D'Orleans
dressed as a Coral Fisherman,
Henri Gissey, seventeenth century, costume design,
available from http://www.artnet.com/artists/henri-de-gissey/past-auction-results.

Figure 14
Dancing Ladies, Bernado Buontalenti, 1589, costume designs, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, Italy.

Figure 15
Apollo, Bernado Buontalenti, 1589, costume designs, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, Italy.

Europe was becoming more secular and archaeological discoveries were being made, leading to a fascination with the ancient world and the classical Renaissance interpretation of the Roman Empire. Its deities and notions of triumph and heroism were revived as the artistic ideal, in both theatrical dress and performance design (Figures 14 and 15). Figures such as Joy, Hope and Fear were carried over from the morality plays but the classical influence eventually prevailed providing the excuse for ever more exotic costumes with Venus and the Graces, Juno, Mars, Amor and Neptune attended by satyrs, tritons and nymphs.[24] This was, however, a contemporary, imaginative interpretation of classical symbols, accessible to the audience and executed through applied embellishment, which was in turn influenced by the decorative baroque style of the interiors of the time.[25] This ornate style of swirling decoration was typified in its motifs of foliage, cherubs, crests and initials and its use of luxurious interior textiles such as velvet and damask, which translated into the decoration of the costumes through 'scalloped hems, tassels, pendants and animals' faces, the simplicity of a classical outline broken up into complicated compartments with a multitude of motifs'.[26]

This classical Roman costuming style, introduced to England from Italy by the designer Inigo Jones (1573–1652) influenced stage costume for the next two hundred years, particularly in operatic and ballet productions where the costumes became more and more spectacular and extravagant; it had become the accepted code of symbolism for characters within theatrical performance (Figures 16 and 17). Jones often used animal faces in his designs; in 1611 Oberon had lion motifs to fasten on his cloak, theatrical shorthand for Hercules, enabling the audience to identify him as a heroic figure (Figure 18).[27]

As evidenced in John Peacock's *The Stage Designs of Inigo Jones*, Jones' designs were often influenced by classical engravings and sculptures depicting personified virtues, for example the design for a Naiad in Tethy's Festival of 1610 is taken from an image of *Temperance* engraved by Marcantonio in the early sixteenth century. He also used the *Allegory of Servitude* as influence for his design for an Indian Torchbearer (Figures 19 and 20).[28]

Jones also influenced the transition of performance moving indoors. As this happened, lighting began to play an important role in the production and the style of the costumes. Candlelight deadened the colours and costumes became an extra source of light,

Figure 16
A Star, Inigo Jones, 1608, costume designs, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, England.

Figure 17
Fiery Spirit, Inigo Jones, 1608, costume designs, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, England.

Figure 18
Oberon, the Fairy Prince, Inigo Jones, 1608, costume designs, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, England.

Figure 19
The Allegory of Servitude, Adamo Scultori, sixteenth century, engraving, British Museum, London, England.

Figure 20
Indian Torchbearer, Inigo Jones, 1613, costume design, Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, England.

> Blue looks black, green darkens to brown, so it was important to use strong, bright colours such as white, yellow, scarlet or orange. Alongside the ideal that the theatre should be richly costumed was the assistance clothes could give as another source of light. Costumes were covered in spangles and sequins to make them shine all over, examples that survive are so thick with copper embroidery, sequins, braid, spangles and loops, the whole costume became an illumination.[29]

This difference in staging from the outdoor pageants of the earlier religious plays to the candle lit indoor performances meant that to be seen and read, costumes had to be visible. Fabrics would be chosen not just for their symbolic colour but for their effect under lighting, the heavier embroidery providing further opportunities for symbolic decoration.

Although the allegorical costume prevailed at this time, as early as 1565 there were calls for a more individual approach to characterisation in terms of performance clothing. Playwright Leone de 'Sommi of Mantua felt that,

> The clothing traditions of the Roman stage with white costumes for old men, colourful garments for young characters, yellow for prostitutes and twisted cloaks for pimps and parasites seemed too restrictive. He thought it important that each character should be different and individual in his costume so that the audience could recognise him without trouble. Where the ancients had stressed character types, Leone stressed individual beings.[30]

This is clearly an important moment in the development of the role of costume in terms of representation of the individual character, however, it was not to be an interpretation based on realism as he also believed that principally, theatre should look magnificent and said that comedies could have rich and sumptuous clothing as long as tragedies were better dressed and more extravagantly decorated.

Masque scenes continued to be seen in operatic performances and allegorical characters were often seen in the Renaissance plays, for example, Rumour in *Henry IV* and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus* who is accompanied by Rape and Murder. Many plays of this time also included a masque scene such as the dance of the satyrs in *Winter's Tale* and the masque during the wedding scene of *The Tempest*.[31] However, by the late eighteenth century, the use of allegory waned as it was subjected to both aesthetic and philosophical critique — the simplified one dimensional stock character of the morality plays and masques eventually gave way to complex characters reflecting varied personality traits.

Examining the development of performance costume at this time gives us a glimpse into the changing values and attitudes from this period of great transformation, providing a visual timeline of the change from the Middle Ages with its emphasis on authority and religion, through the cultural rebirth of the Renaissance, into the Age of Enlightenment which advocated that reason could free humankind from superstition and religious authoritarianism. As Barbara Ravelhofer states in *The Early Stuart Masque*, 'Early modern society was well aware of the cultural memory invested in clothing and the powerful statement garments made about the people who wore them.'[32]

Endnotes

1. Susannah Maurer, 'Master Impresions from the Uama Collections: Allegory', Feb–July 2009, http://artmuseum.arizona.edu/events/event/master-impressions-from-the-uama-collections-allegory, accessed 27 October 2016.
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Biography

Toni Bate joined the University of Huddersfield in 2012 as Costume Construction Lecturer on the Costume with Textiles BA (Hons) degree. Prior to this she worked as the Costume Workroom Supervisor at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. Other further and higher education teaching work includes Specialist Costume Technician at Edge Hill University, Costume Lecturer at Liverpool Community College and Costume Designer and Wardrobe Supervisor at Arden School of Theatre in Manchester. Since graduating from Liverpool Community College's Theatre Wardrobe course in 1994 Toni has also worked as a costume maker, tailor and wardrobe supervisor for theatre, film, and television.

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