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'What els do Maskes, but Maskers Show': Masked Ladies in Shakespeare's Comedies

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ABSTRACT

Black vizard masks, worn as a fashion accessory in the early modern period, were a source of mixed anxieties: while they were worn by many women, they were associated with sex workers. Vizards preserved pale beauty but also could conceal the lack thereof. This essay proposes that William Shakespeare's comedies tap into these tensions, first by proposing that fashionable vizard masks were indeed worn onstage. Using *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing* as key case studies, I then argue that these costume masks, weighted with the baggage of both offstage prostitution and the stage history of cloth racial prosthetics, carried specific semiotic meaning, allowing playwrights a shorthand for reflecting on contemporary fears regarding women's whiteness, sexual availability, and the impossibility of ever knowing a woman's heart by looking at her face.

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In the final scene of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, heroines Hero and Beatrice are directed to leave the stage and return wearing masks (5.4.12).[1] In the American Shakespeare Center's 2017 production, performed during the Blackfriars Conference at which an early version of this paper was given, the actors entered wearing veils instead. This is perhaps because veils are more redolent of weddings in the contemporary English-speaking vernacular; a mask, in contrast, reads to a modern viewer as artificial and obviously theatrical (our recent acclimatisation to daily use of medical masks notwithstanding). However, this was not the case in Shakespeare's period, when upper-class women habitually wore masks when venturing outside. Though Claudio acknowledges that Hero is masked when he asks to see her face, the masks are not treated as otherwise worthy of comment, and certainly not as unexpected or strange. This suggests characters and viewers alike are being

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[1]In-text citations from William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Claire McEachern (London: Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare, 2005).

invited to understand the masks not entirely as theatrical devices, but also as ordinary fashion objects being put to their everyday use. But it is a moment that also gestures deliberately at the specifically theatrical history attached to these everyday masks.[2]

These masks, made of black velvet, also carried a distinct racial history onstage. By entering in such a mask, Hero, who has already been described as 'too brown' (1.1.164), seems to fulfil Claudio's promise moments before that he would marry her 'were she an Ethiope' (5.4.38) – an apparently deliberate allusion to the object's theatrical history as a racial prosthetic, prior to the habitual use of paint to indicate blackness. Other associations resonate more directly with the plot: masks' connections to sex workers and sexual promiscuity are ironically fitting for a character who is accused of licentiousness. This passing moment is thus deeply complex, and Hero's barely acknowledged mask gestures at now-lost semiotics of onstage masking that are difficult for the modern audience member or reader to intuitively understand. It raises questions about the practicalities of onstage masking, the implications for the actor's performance, and the legibility of the layers of cultural associations that masks potentially carried. The social and cultural position of masks offstage and their racialised history onstage are both invoked by the use of a vizard mask in this moment, resonances I will explore in order to demonstrate that Shakespeare deliberately activates these cultural associations, knowing they would be recognised and understood by his audiences. But ultimately, the questions the moment raises about the use of masks in performance are better answered by turning to another play, one that deals with the problem of onstage masking at greater length: *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Through stage directions embedded throughout *Love's Labour's Lost,* Shakespeare clearly indicates the onstage presence of fashionable ladies' masks, worn by his four central female characters. *Love's Labour's Lost* provides a case study for the habitual use of vizard masks on the early modern stage, and for the specific semiotics of their use in Shakespeare's works. This play and *Much Ado About Nothing* both exemplify how the plays' textual concerns with sex, race, and women's legibility are echoed and amplified by the use of ladies' masks onstage.

The Masked Lady Offstage

In a series of satirical poems printed in 1598, London poet Everard Guilpin spends some of his time criticising the women of his

[2]Alan Dessen and Leslie Thompson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) note that in stage directions, 'vizard' (and related spellings) generally refers to disguises whilst 'mask' (and related spellings) refers to masques as performances, and the costumes or disguises worn whilst undertaking them. Writers today use 'vizard' primarily to refer to fashionable masks (see Cassidy, J. 'NARC-151A67 A Post Medieval Mask'.). To echo Shakespeare's language, I will primarily use 'mask' to refer to these fashion objects, and 'vizard mask' when they need to be specifically differentiated from theatrical masks.

acquaintance.[3] He mocks 'Lydia' as 'A plaine brownetta when thou art at best', and notes that she still goes 'mask'd, forsooth / I prethy what's thy reason, / That hauing (God he knows) no faire to loose, / Thou hid'st that piteous *None* so out of season?'. He asks the same question of the troublingly named 'Nigrina', and mentions either her mask or her 'painting' in each of the four poems dedicated to her. While partly a means to critique both women's failure to uphold contemporary standards of beautiful pallor, Guilpin's mockery also betrays an anxiety about the women's motives. Why are they masking when their dark complexions render it unnecessary? What are they trying to hide or reveal?

Guilpin's verses thus present in concentrated form several of the cultural concerns attached to women's masks in the early modern period. He implies sexual familiarity with all of the women he references in his series of poems, underscoring an enduring association between masks and licentiousness, as when he metonymises a liaison with a sex worker as 'the last mask which thou caperdst in'. The darkness of the women's complexions that renders their masks unnecessary in Guilpin's eyes exemplifies a racialised language of beauty typical of the period, whereby whiteness is associated not only with beauty but also, as Kim Hall writes, with moral purity.[4] Guilpin sarcastically asks his male addressee in one poem why 'the last mask which thou caperdst in' has not 'Taught thee S. *Martins* stuff from true gold lace, / And know a perfect from a painted face: / Why they are Idols, Puppets, Exchange babies, / And yet (thou foole) tak'st them for goodly Ladies'. Through this verse, along with his insistent rhetorical questioning of Lydia and Nigrina, Guilpin casts a light on a subtler but consistent fear regarding women and the fashionable masks they wore: not only that masks indicated vanity or promiscuity, but that they also rendered women unreadable, particularly with regards to their sexual availability.

Though Guilpin hints that a mask is the mark of a sex worker, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, upper-class women wore masks outside and when travelling in order to preserve a fashionably pale complexion. The only extant example of an Elizabethan mask was discovered in 2010 in the wall of a sixteenth century building.[5] Made of black velvet with holes cut out for the eyes and mouth, it matches contemporary descriptions of full-face vizard masks, which were held on with a bead that the wearer clenched in her teeth.[6] Evidence also exists of fashionable half-masks for women; a satirical

[3]Everard Guilpin, *Skialetheia*, ed. Risa S. Bear (University of Oregon, Renascence Editions: 2000), http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/guilpin.html.
[4]See Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).
[5]J. Cassidy, 'NARC-151A67 A Post Medieval Mask', Portable Antiquities Scheme, 2010, http://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/402520.
[6]Virgina Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.

Dutch engraving dated to around 1600 that mocks elaborate fashions seems to show both kinds of mask: a woman in the picture wears a mask that covers her mouth, while the mask-maker wears one that leaves his free (Figure 1). In the engraving, the mask is plainly featured as an object of everyday fashion, not a theatrical item.

Masks did appear onstage as theatrical devices as well. Virginia Mason Vaughn highlights the use of vizard masks in early performance to simulate blackness: 'When actors in public theatres began to impersonate black characters in speaking roles, the "technology" consequently underwent a profound shift', from masks to cosmetics.[7] Ian Smith calls this 'racial prosthetics',[8] and argues against a complete shift to cosmetic prosthesis during the sixteenth century, instead suggesting that 'clothing, black clothing in particular, is fully engaged in an emerging discourse of race and identity', which included the enduring use of and references to the simulation of blackness using cloth.[9] This stage history adds a complex dimension to this argument in favour of the use of vizard masks not as mimetic devices to represent blackness, but as a reflection of their real-life use by women, raising the question – to be discussed below – of how or if playwrights acknowledged this potential dual meaning.

The illusory power of a mask, the mystery of what it concealed, was also charged with erotic threat, as Guilpin's satires demonstrate. In *Pleasant quippes for upstart newfangled gentlewomen,* a pamphlet attributed to Stephen Gosson, the writer complains that it would be one thing if women wore masks 'as Christians did, and Turkes do use' their veils; that is, in order 'To hide the face, from wantons bolde'. But instead, 'on each wight, now they are seene […]/ so might we judge them toys aright / to keepe sweet beautie still in plight'. He concludes:

> What els do maskes, but maskers show,
> and Maskers can both daunce and play:
> Our masking Dames can sport you knowe,
> Sometime by night, sometime by day,
> Can you hit it, is oft their daunce,
> Deuse-ace fals stil to be their chance.[10]

In language that *Love's Labour's Lost* echoes (in Moth's joke about 'deuce-ace' and Rosaline and Boyet's song 'touching the "hit it"' [1.2.46; 4.1.123]),[11] Gosson

[7]Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 10.
[8]Ian Smith, 'White Skin, Black Masks: Racial Cross-Dressing on the Early Modern Stage', *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 34.
[9]Smith, 'White Skin, Black Masks', 47. Andrea Stevens discusses the novelty of the use of paint rather than cloth as late as the performance of Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* in 1605; see 'Mastering Masques of Blackness: Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*, The Windsor text of *The Gypsies Metamorphosed,* and Brome's *The English Moor*', *ELR* 39, no. 2 (2009): 396–426.
[10][Stephen Gosson ?], *Pleasant quippes for upstart newfangled gentlewomen* (London: Richard Johnes, 1596).
[11]In-text citations from William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare, 1998).

Figure 1. Maerten de Vos (attrib.), *The Vanity of Women: Masks and Bustles* (c.1600). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum, New York. 2001.341.1.

hints at the supposed licentiousness of masked women, reflecting a link between masks and sex work also expressed by Guilpin that would endure until masks fell out of fashion after the Restoration.[12] Gosson is predominantly afraid of masks making respectable women look like sex workers, while Guilpin jokes about masks and other accessories making sex workers look like respectable ladies. As Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass write, speaking of fashion accessories more broadly, 'that is precisely their danger and their value: they are bearers of identity, ritual, and social memory, even as they confuse social categories'.[13] Gosson asks 'What els do maskes, but maskers show' as if a clear and constant line could be drawn between an article of clothing and the nature of the person wearing it, even as the irony of his poem reveals that he knows that is not really the case. For Gosson, the association of masks with women means that anxiety about clothing and its ability to obscure identity bleeds immediately into concerns about unruly female sexuality. Is the woman wearing a mask a sex worker or not? Is she sexually available or not? The lords of *Love's Labour's Lost* are plagued with the same questions, not about prostitution, but about the romantic and sexual interest of the women they are attempting to woo. Presented with nothing but blank, masked faces

[12]Restoration dramas often draw deliberate attention to fashionable masks and when they are worn by characters, but the presence of professional actresses, and their own cultural associations with sex work, renders these plays beyond the scope of this article.

[13]Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothes and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

until almost the end of the play, the men take these masks – like those of the licentious dames in Gosson's poem – as an invitation.

The Masked Lady Onstage

As I will demonstrate below, *Love's Labour's Lost* provides a particularly detailed and explicit example of the presence of fashionable ladies' masks onstage. However, they are not a device limited to that play and *Much Ado About Nothing,* or to Shakespeare. In Thomas Heywood's *1 Edward IV,* two stage directions specifically call out the presence of vizard masks: in Act 3, Scene 1, the Queen and the Duchess of York enter 'unpinning their masks'.[14] In Act 5, Scene 4, after she has become King Edward's mistress, Jane Shore does the same. This fascinatingly specific direction, used twice, suggests an awareness of the practical difficulty relating to cosmetics, to be discussed further below: Heywood plainly did not want the actors to actually wear the masks, which they do not have to do if they enter in the act of removing them, potentially because it would disturb the make-up they are already wearing. However, this stage direction makes it all the more obvious that, in spite of the possible practical difficulties, Heywood specifically desired the masks to be present. This clearly suggests that the masks carried power as a visual signifier, even while carried rather than worn.

In the case of Heywood's play, it seems relevant that Jane only acquires a mask after she is elevated (or, in the play's moral framework, debased) to the status of King Edward's mistress. The image of the mask also links Jane and the two noblewomen in shared rank, a physical indicator that Jane has acquired a new status – and the audience's first visual confirmation of what has, to that point, only been asserted in rumour. Because the Queen and the elderly Duchess of York also go masked, it seems unlikely that associations with sex work are the dominant overtone here, but the fact that Jane acquires a mask, with all its attendant cultural baggage, immediately upon surrendering to King Edward's sexual entreaties does not seem wholly unintentional. Indeed, it highlights precisely the instability that causes Gosson such anxiety: there is no clear visual different between two masked aristocrats, the wife and the mother of the King, and the King's masked mistress. As Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter suggest in their study of medieval and early Tudor masking, the line between a theatrical mask and a cosmetic one was not necessarily stark:

> Assuming a mask, for whatever reason, consequently involves the wearer in a public statement about identity which is hard to separate from performance. The different

[14]Thomas Heywood, *1 Edward IV*, ed. Richard Rowland (Manchester: The Revels Plays, Manchester University Press, 2005).

> traditions of medieval masking all seem to share this common central core. The gold-faced God on a pageant waggon, the soot-faced mummer on the street, the fashionably pale velvet masked woman, and the rabbit-stealer with painted visor are all to varying degrees involved in the relation of performance to public identity.[15]

Jane's new mask is an important symbol, bringing her private liaison into a publicly visible form, representing her new rank and identity – while leaving ambiguous whether that new identity is as aristocrat or whore. Thus, while visually distinct and different in their superficial purpose from theatrical masks, fashionable masks could raise similar artistic questions about concealment and identity when deployed onstage. The deliberate inclusion of the masks in Heywood's stage direction suggests that these symbols not only carried clear meaning to audiences of the time, but that they also may have been used much more frequently than surviving play texts specifically indicate.

Images of masked ladies recur across Shakespeare's works as well and are repeatedly invoked in ways that echo Gosson and Guilpin's nervous configuration of the tension between concealment and availability that a woman's masked face presents. Angelo of *Measure for Measure* describes how 'wisdom wishes to appear most bright / When it doth tax itself, as these black masks / Proclaim an enshield beauty ten times louder / Than beauty could, displayed' (2.4.78).[16] Romeo, pining for his own Rosaline, sighs that, 'These happy masks that kiss fair ladies' brows, / Being black, puts us in mind they hide the fair' (1.1.228).[17] Their primary metaphorical function for Shakespeare is to suggest an effort that undermines itself: a gesture towards modesty and concealment that invites attraction and speculation. This symbol for a contradiction between image and intent becomes an essential engine of the plot in *Love's Labour's Lost,* the onstage masks providing a key thematic strand that only acknowledgement and investigation of their literal, physical presence in the scenes can reveal.

Race, Gender, and the Mask in *Love's Labour's Lost*

As with *Much Ado About Nothing, Love's Labour's Lost* depicts its female characters' masks as ordinary pieces of clothing, the play's casual treatment of their presence clearly suggesting they are objects of everyday use. Though the masks are generally only acknowledged by critics when the ladies deliberately put

[15]Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

[16]William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. A. R. Braumuller and Robert Watson (London: Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare, 2020).

[17]William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (London: Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare, 2012). This line could be taken to suggest that Isabella is wearing a mask, though, as a novice, this is unlikely. In addition, the line from *Romeo and Juliet* echoes the line from *Measure for Measure* in referring to 'these masks' even though, in that scene, there are no women present. I believe that Angelo, like Romeo, uses 'these masks' to refer to the idea of masks in general and not to one Isabella wears. Could they have referred to female audience members wearing masks?

them in on Act 5, in fact they appear sooner. Masks, and the fact that the ladies are indeed wearing them, are first brought up in 2.1. They are mentioned not because they are in themselves remarkable, but because of the word's usefulness as a rhyme:

> BEROWNE. What time o'day?
> ROSALINE. The hour that fools should ask.
> BEROWNE. Now fair befall your mask!
> ROSALINE. Fair fall the face it covers.
> BEROWNE. And send you many lovers (2.1.121ff)

Without masks onstage, this couplet flies by as a mostly nonsensical bit of wordplay. With masks onstage, it draws attention to Rosaline's physical presence, her face and body, and transforms Berowne's final well-wishes from a sexual non sequitur into a fitting conclusion, given the previously discussed cultural associations between masks and sex work. The use of Rosaline to explicitly highlight the presence of vizard masks also underlines their racialised (and racist) dramatic history. Berowne echoes Guilpin's particular blend of white masculine anxieties in a later scene, when he complains in soliloquy about the agony and embarrassment not only of falling in love, but falling for Rosaline:

> the worst of all […] a whitely wanton with a velvet brow / With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes. / Ay, by heaven, and one that will do the deed / Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard. (3.1.194)

As in Guilpin's poems, his critique of Rosalind's complexion blurs into assumptions about her sexual availability, a moral darkness to match her physical darkness. Later, all four lords riff on Rosaline's dark complexion, comparing her to ebony, a shoe, chimney-sweeps, and inevitably, an 'Ethiope' (4.3.264).[18]

Berowne's description of Rosaline's 'velvet brow' is particularly telling as both a joking reference to the mask she wore when they met, and a reinforcement of the connection between her natural looks and prosthetic blackness, reiterating the vizard mask's association with the performance of blackness on the early modern stage. Joyce Green MacDonald notes that '[a]llusion and displacement […] mark a fundamental descriptive axis of the representational practices surrounding race in the early modern period'.[19] Andrea Stevens agrees that 'stage blackness is so often accompanied by self-reflexive reference to the paint that creates it'.[20] Shakespeare's references to the vizard mask's racialised stage history – what Andrew Sofer describes as theatrical props' ability to 'accrue intertexual resonance as they absorb the theatrical past'[21] – reflects the tendency

[18]For a discussion of the relationship between Rosaline's darkness and her cosmetics, see Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 143–8.
[19]Joyce Green MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.
[20]Stevens, 'Mastering Masques', 411.
[21]Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 2.

MacDonald and Stevens suggest, an urge to both redefine and remind the hearer of the potential for prosthetic blackness that the masks introduce.

When the ladies don their masks in 5.2, the stage directions indicate that it is alongside other likely blackened characters: the false Russians enter with 'Blackamoors with music' (5.2.157sd), who never speak and go entirely unreferenced in the scene. Dympna Callaghan notes that while it is possible that black musicians were hired from an aristocratic household for the purpose, she believes the stage direction 'undoubtedly signals the entrance not of actual Africans, but of English minstrels in blackface'.[22] Both the lords' and ladies' performances of courtship in disguise are thus supported by the presence of blackened faces. The pairing of multiple, contradictory forms of prosthetic blackness recalls Smith's analysis of Hamlet's black mourning clothes:

> Hamlet […] has a dual status. Dramatically, he is a white character dressed in black, a mourner; theatrically he is both white and black. The actor impersonating an African wears the outward forms as 'trappings and the suits of' *blackness* itself, a radically material identity that is insistently visible, knowable, and external. Hamlet's 'white' self, by contrast, is denoted 'truly' in the privacy of his feelings and mind.[23]

Love's Labour's Lost's two separate sets of blackened faces, nominally signifying two different things, likewise reflect on one another, calling attention to the Princess and her ladies as 'both white and black', apparently themselves and yet not what they seem. Unlike the 'visible, knowable, and external' legibility of Hamlet's mourning weeds, the ladies' black masks render them *un*knowable to their suitors, their dual identities fluid and illegible, thus requiring an outside force – love tokens – to render them fixed and (mis)interpretable by the gentlemen.

Criticism and popular commentary make much of the four lords' abysmal failure to recognise their objects of affection the instant the ladies put on masks and swap love tokens. But accepting the presence of masks in the play's first scene casts this encounter in a different light. When Boyet warns the ladies that the lords are coming, he describes how 'every one his love-feat will advance / Unto his several mistress, which they'll know / By favours several which they did bestow' (5.2.124ff). According to what Boyet has overheard, the lords already know that they will not be able to recognise their chosen lady and are counting on the favours to guide them – a fact that makes perfect sense if the lords have yet to ever see the ladies' faces. H. R. Woudhuysen writes in the introduction to his Arden edition that 'the King and his lords believe that what people wear constructs their identity',[24] but in

[22]Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1. Matthieu Chapman has argued in favour of the use of actual black actors in these roles; see 'The Appearance of Blacks on the Early Modern Stage: *Love's Labour's Lost's* African Connections to Court', *Early Theatre* 17.2 (2014): 77–94.

[23]Smith, 'White Skin, Black Masks', 56. See also Patricia Parker, 'Black Hamlet: Battening on the Moor', *Shakespeare Studies* 31 (2003): 127–64.

[24]Woudhuysen, 'Introduction' in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 23.

fact the lords accept the masks as impersonal and illegible, rendering the women interchangeable and in need of further identification through favours. These love tokens counteract the blank availability that the mask implies, and instead identify the women, through the objects of the men who love them, as objects loved by men. Unlike the vows the lords so cheerfully twist out of shape, an object like a favour has a fixed meaning and identity that can then be assigned to each man's 'several mistress' – or so the lords believe.

Just as the ease of changing favours undermines more than a game of courtship, the donning and removal of the masks proves not to be just a simple trick of concealing and revealing the self. The ladies' intentionally illegible masks of blackness conceal not just their true identities, but also their whiteness. After the lords exit 5.2 in their Russian disguises, the New Oxford Shakespeare offers a stage direction for the ladies to remove their masks (5.2.264sd).[25] This seems to make sense: the ladies carry on a fairly lengthy discussion of the four suitors, and an audience would surely like to see their faces while they do so. But in fact, the text makes it clear that their unmasking happens much later, and probably offstage. As Farah Karim-Cooper argues, boys playing women would have been wearing full faces of makeup.[26] Though she notes that twenty-first century practitioners at Shakespeare's Globe have found the recipes for cosmetics to be remarkably durable in performance, holding up even to kissing,[27] I argue that this deliberate removal of the ladies from the stage suggests that the act of putting on and then removing a mask onstage is too complex to be managed in view of the audience, perhaps due to the damage it causes the underlying cosmetics. This is also suggested by Heywood's stage direction, discussed above, instructing the women to enter in the process of removing their masks rather than wearing them. Boyet draws attention to the actual moment of unmasking, about thirty lines after the Oxford stage direction, as he directs the ladies to exit:

> BOYET: Therefore change favours, and when they repair,
> Blow like sweet roses in the summer air.
> PRINCESS: How 'blow'? How 'blow'? Speak to be understood.
> BOYET: Fair ladies masked are roses in their bud;
> Dismasked, their damask sweet commixture shown,
> Are angels veiling clouds, or roses blown (5.2.292ff)

If the ladies had already removed their masks, Boyet would have no reason to suggest that they go 'dismask' – an embedded stage direction that Shakespeare draws pointed attention to by couching it in a metaphor so obscure, even the other characters demand an explanation. Boyet remains onstage for just long

[25]William Shakespeare, *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Gary Taylor et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[26]Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics*, 136.
[27]Farah Karim-Cooper, 'This alters not thy beauty: Face-paint, Gender, and Race in Richard Brome's "The English Moor"', *Early Theatre* 10, no. 2 (2007): 146.

enough to greet the entering lords before being ordered to follow the ladies offstage. The Princess, so fond of explaining her mocking motives, offers no reason why the lords should be made to wait, nor does she see any reason to make their supposed Russian visitors do so earlier in the scene. I argue this is because her reasons are not narrative. With the ladies and Boyet gone, Berowne launches into a linguistically virtuosic but dramatically pointless monologue of abuse against Boyet. But it is not pointless if it is providing cover for offstage cosmetic maintenance. The exit and monologue offer twenty-seven otherwise unnecessary lines during which the boys playing the ladies could remove their masks and repair the makeup beneath.[28] Interestingly, this is roughly the same number of lines Karim-Cooper finds a character in Richard Brome's *The English Moor* is allotted for exiting, removing blackface make-up, and re-entering with a whitened face.[29] The speed and skill required for removing or repairing make-up in the midst of a performance introduces 'the possibility for theatrical failure', and thus the failure of the multiple layers of racial and gender illusion.[30]

A mask simultaneously creates and destroys the theatrical illusion of the cross-dressed actors. As Kimberly Poitevin writes, the dramatic whiteness of women's cosmetics both onstage and off in this period became an essential tool for establishing not merely feminine beauty, but the racial identity of white Britons.[31] The ladies' forced exit therefore literalises the broader threat of the mask: that the false black exterior will erode and replace the true white interior, rendering a woman indistinguishable from the mask she wears in terms of both sexuality and race. While the mask, like a dress or veil or the favours the lords deliver, clearly indicates that the wearer is female, it signals this even as its use destroys the theatrical feminine makeup beneath, leaving only the face of a boy behind the mask – or only masked blackness without the possibility of a 'true' white female face beneath. The mask itself becomes the only sign of Rosaline or Maria or Catherine's face, the only form in which that female character exists – at least until the boy actor can get to the tiring house to repair it. But until he can, to be both unmasked and still a white woman becomes temporarily impossible.

The playful deployment of the masks rebounds on the women just as the exchange of identifying love tokens does for the men. They misread the

[28]Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* does reference instances of masks being removed onstage, but the plays from which they derive date to much later than either *Edward IV* or *Love's Labour's Lost* (140–1). While Stevens specifically references techniques for blackening actors, her findings suggest that innovations in stage cosmetics were being made during this time and may have enabled masks to be more readily worn and removed onstage. Delving into this question is beyond the scope of this article; the point remains that the Princess and her ladies are deliberately sent offstage to remove their masks.

[29]Karim-Cooper, 'This alters', 146.

[30]Stevens, 'Mastering Masques', 405.

[31]Kimberly Poitevin, 'Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Early Modern England', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 70–2.

seriousness of the lords' feelings, and the King misreads the depth of the Princess's interest. A prevailing critical theme seems to be that the women expect better from the men than the inept courtship with which they are presented, but Shakespeare's dialogue itself suggests that the ladies' dominant feeling is surprise that the courtship was, in fact, meant to be taken seriously in the first place. Though Kiernan Ryan pinpoints the lords' major failing as an inability to recognise the individuality of the ladies, the ladies never attempt to impress this individuality upon them.[32] They reject the men's favours, but provide no alternate self-identification. They are delighted, not offended, by their success at convincing the men to woo awry (5.2.265ff). When learning that the men are to return to try again, the Princess initially panics, and only then does Rosaline propose that they 'mock them still, as well known as disguised', greet the men, and reveal the trick (5.2.301ff). Shaming the men with their misdirected wooing is an improvised element of the game, not its goal. When the King finally proposes, the Princess makes her position plain:

> We have received your letters full of love,
> Your favours the ambassadors of love;
> And in our maiden council rated them
> At courtship, pleasant jest and courtesy,
> As bombast and as lining to the time.
> But more devout than this in our respects
> Have we not been, and therefore met your loves
> In their own fashion, like a merriment (5.2.769ff)

The phrase 'In their own fashion' links poetry and masks as matching means of playful self-definition, and presents the ladies' choice to greet verses with masks as a meeting in the same language.[33]

The potential for a serious courtship between the King and Princess has been present in the play from a very early stage: Boyet raises the idea of marriage immediately after the Princess's first appearance. That the complicated matter of Aquitaine could be resolved by just giving the territory to Ferdinand as a dowry is explicitly on the table, and Boyet is sure that it is the main reason the Princess, rather than a male ambassador, was sent (2.1.2ff). But even with the idea of marriage so plainly introduced, the Princess still interprets the King's overtures 'as bombast and as lining to the time', so certain is she that their ostentatious gestures could not possibly be construed as a serious prelude to betrothal. Only when the ladies learn that the men intended it to be so do they decide to provide moral corrective to their wayward suitors. The realisation that takes place in the wake of the news of the King of France's death is not merely that the lords are shallow and overeager, but

[32]Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 62.
[33]Frances E. Dolan argues that women's cosmetics were likewise equated to poetry in the popular imagination; see 'Taking the Pencil out of God's Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England', *PMLA* 108, no. 2 (1993): 224–39.

that fashionable dress on one side and fanciful language on the other have caused each party to completely misread the other's intentions.

Woudhuysen highlights Berowne's use of textile metaphors in his renunciation of grandiose language as an example of the relationship between clothes and poetry throughout the play.[34] This relationship is embedded throughout the dialogue, not least in the double meanings, one romantic and one fashionable, of the word 'suit'. It recurs, too, in the characters' descriptions of love as a form of dressing and accessorising: 'are they all in love, / That everyone her own hath garnished / With such bedecking ornaments of praise?' the Princess asks in her first scene (2.1.77ff). In the last, Berowne begs the ladies to excuse the 'particoated presence of loose love / Put on by us' (5.2.758–9). Clothes, love, and language combine to create a mire of fashionable modes of courtship and self-presentation in which the characters become enmeshed. The ladies' masks emblematise their participation in this state of insincerity and misunderstanding. Maria, who appears uniquely confident that Longueville will prove trustworthy, still suggests an incompatibility between socially mandated forms of dress and the possibility of a loving marriage when she promises, 'At the twelvemonth's end / I'll change my black gown for a faithful friend' (5.2.819–20). Her gown – like her mask, another form of concealing blackness – must be given in exchange for this 'faithful friend', just as the men must exchange their shallow poetry for firm promises if they want to marry.

The failing of the King and his lords, then, is not only that they lack understanding of the opposite sex, but also that they mistake artifice – both the ladies' and their own – for reality. Their belief in the endless flexibility of language contrasts with their certainty that physical markers carry fixed meanings; the ladies demand that they switch these perspectives by revealing the instability of the masks and favours upon which the lords attempted to inscribe true love, and presenting instead verbal contracts whose language cannot be manipulated if the men wish to be rewarded with matrimony. It is, as critics and audiences for centuries have noted, a deeply ambivalent ending. The promise of future happiness rests on the hope of the stability of language and the binding nature of promises – the very ideas the play has challenged since its opening moments. We are left where we began, in a world in which men's language undermines their meaning and women's clothing – now, as Maria highlights, black dresses instead of black masks – disguises their intents. It is a world, in short, in which the opposing sexes can be neither seen nor heard accurately, in which true communication seems to be impossible.

Conclusion

To return to the scene discussed at the beginning of this article, what would it mean if Hero not only wore a mask, but retained it during the final scene of

[34]Woudhuysen, 'Introduction', 24.

Much Ado About Nothing? Entertaining the possibility that Hero and Beatrice are in fact masked until the play's end would place the scene in startling defiance of modern performance expectations, but the thematic similarities between the masking of the ladies in *Love's Labour's Lost* and in *Much Ado About Nothing* are compelling and reinforce the theory that masks may have held a particular and potent visual power on the early modern stage. I argue that Shakespeare, as with Heywood's glancing reference in *1 Edward IV*, specifically wished to evoke the associations between masks, race, sexuality, and legibility discussed thus far through their explicit inclusion in *Love's Labour's Lost.* By introducing masks into the climactic scene of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare interrogates once again the supposed illegibility of a masked and blackened female face, a process that forces both the audience and Claudio to surrender to the unique redemptive power of theatricality.

Many modern editions editorialise an unmasking for Hero when she speaks and reveals her identity, prompting Claudio's amazed recognition.[35] There is a clear logic to this choice. The play as a whole hinges around Claudio's inability to recognise Hero for who and what she really is. For Hero to reveal her face to him at the second wedding is thus a twofold revelation: of her identity (not dead, not the mysterious cousin he thought he was marrying) and of her purity, which he previously insisted should be legible in her face (4.1.32–40). It is a face that, like Rosaline's, has already been described as dark, encoding similar implicit fears of painted promiscuity (1.1.164). This reading sets Hero and Rosaline on parallel narrative trajectories: from deception (perpetuated, in Hero's case, by Don John rather than by Hero herself) to truth; from masked blackness to true whiteness. Failure to remove her mask would disrupt this journey, depriving Claudio of his discovery, Hero of her moment of openness and justice, and the audience of the satisfaction of seeing the actor's face in the play's final scene.

But Shakespeare's recurring ambivalence about the concealing and revealing power of masks troubles this tidy progression, and in fact, the presence of a mask could clarify, not obscure, both Hero and Claudio's revelations. Twycross and Carpenter propose that even a temporarily masked Hero evokes the tradition of 'amorous masking', a stylised form of masked courtly flirtation that

> invades the language and ideas of the whole play [… and] lends some credence to Claudio's problematic psychology of mistrust. [… H]is need to learn to recognise inner rather than outer truth, all relate closely to the complex play between mask and face implicit in amorous masking.[36]

[35]For example, see stage directions in the Arden Shakespeare Complete Works, ed. Claire McEachern (2021); Folger Shakespeare, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (2018); the New Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Gary Taylor et al (2016); the RSC Shakespeare, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (2009); or the Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, ed. John Jowett et al (2005). The New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. F. H. Mares (2018) does not include a stage direction to unmask.

[36]Twycross and Carpenter, *Masks and Masking*, 187.

But this lesson is only heightened if Hero never unmasks at all. Claudio's promise to marry the unknown cousin of Hero 'were she an Ethiope' encodes another reminder of the racialised stage history of these accessories into the drama itself, and foreshadows the possibility that she will not unmask at all – he would marry her even if this black mask were her true face, at least in theatrical terms. After misreading Hero's maidenly blushes as the blood of wantonness, misreading Margaret as Hero, and misreading both Don Pedro and Don John's trustworthiness, Claudio must accept Hero's masked face, thus coming to terms with her fundamental illegibility, and with his particularly pronounced inability to read the hearts and intentions of others. Having once refused to believe that she was what she seemed, he demonstrates his reformation by accepting her even without the proof of her seeming modesty writ on her face. And it seems only fitting that Hero – repeatedly silenced and reluctant to speak in mixed company – should at the last, after her death, rebirth, and reclamation of her place, be recognised not by her much-debated face, but by her voice.

Melinda J. Gough notes that when (or if) Claudio reveals Hero's face in the final scene, it is presented as a gesture towards the revelation of the true Hero, a virgin free of slander. But this is

> complicated by the way in which signs of sexual difference are materially produced on a stage where every 'she' masks a 'he' […] Ultimately, the early modern English playhouse […] cannot banish completely the confusions of gender and semiotic idolatry on which its own form depends.[37]

The same holds true in *Love's Labour's Lost,* where the ladies' masks destroy the illusory female face that they cover, and make the promise of fully unmasking as impossible as finding a way to communicate without the distorting medium of words. The fictional world of the hyper-fashionable court of Navarre and the literal world of the playhouse collapse into a single space in which truth without performance is impossible, and in which unmasking can never take place, as what lies beneath would not be authentic versions of the lords and ladies, but just players. Some critics view *Much Ado About Nothing* as a proto-romance, with a heightened ending that provides a theatrical solution where a real-world one would likely be impossible.[38] *Love's Labour's Lost* suggests the opposite: for the problem of inherently untrustworthy modes of communication and self-presentation, the theatre is an especially unsuitable source of answers. Thus, *Love's Labour's Lost* ends with a dismissal, lovers and audience alike released out into the world to determine if the forestalled marriages can ever take place: 'You that way, we this way' (5.2.914).

[37]Melinda J. Gough, '"Her Filthy Feature Open Showne" in Ariosto, Spenser, and *Much Ado About Nothing*', *Studies in English Literature* 39, no. 1 (1999): 60.

[38]For example, Diana E. Henderson, 'Mind the Gaps: The Ear, The Eye, and the Senses of a Woman in *Much Ado About Nothing*', in *Knowing Shakespeare: Senses, Embodiment, and Cognition*, ed. Gallagher et al (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 193–215.

Much Ado About Nothing, in contrast, promises happiness through drawing attention to the fundamental elements of early modern theatre, such as text, in the form of the love letters which bear the truths Beatrice and Benedick will not speak in public, and bodies, used in the dance to which the play's closing lines invite us.[39] There is also artifice: Claudio must accept the contradiction of Hero's true/false resurrection. His exclamation that this is 'another Hero!' is, after all, not greeted with a correction, but with her agreement that 'One Hero died defiled, but I do live' (5.4.63). And finally, the play highlights the true/false, black/white face, the femininity fashioned only through mask and make-up that cannot be uncovered without being destroyed, because only in the embrace of such make-believe can the play's happy ending exist.

If fashionable ladies' masks were used onstage in the early modern period, it is almost certain that there are many theatrical moments in which they were present but, unlike the instances discussed here, have left no textual trace. But reconstructing the purpose of masked presences onstage asks more than simply revisiting individual moments of staging. It demands a willingness to let the anxious illegibility generated for early modern citizens by ladies' masks bleed into our understanding of early modern performance, encoding within these plays urgent discourses of gender and of race. It requires, too, that we accept that perhaps an early modern audience was comfortable with being unable to fully see a player's face, even in moments like the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*, when all of our twenty-first century performance sensibilities and understandings of the role of character and expression in theatrical storytelling cry out it for it as a necessity. Such material reminders of the profound differences between Shakespeare's time and our own highlight that no matter how familiar the texts may seem, no matter how accustomed we grow to seeing them in performance operating under recognisably contemporary dramatic rules, they were created to adhere to a very different theatrical culture. These fashionable masks serve as a reminder of an entire system of visual signs and symbols in which early modern audiences were conversant but which have since been lost – and which may yet be rediscovered.

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[39]The Royal Shakespeare Company produced *Much Ado About Nothing* under the title *Love's Labours Won* in 2014, highlighting the thematic links between the two plays. Woudhuysen suggests this connection in his introduction to *Love's Labours Lost,* but a conclusive connection between the two plays has not been widely accepted. The thematic resonances I propose are not notably altered by imagining a direct connection between the two plays.