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ENGL575

October 11, 2021

A dramaturgical essay of

What the Butler Saw

Abstract

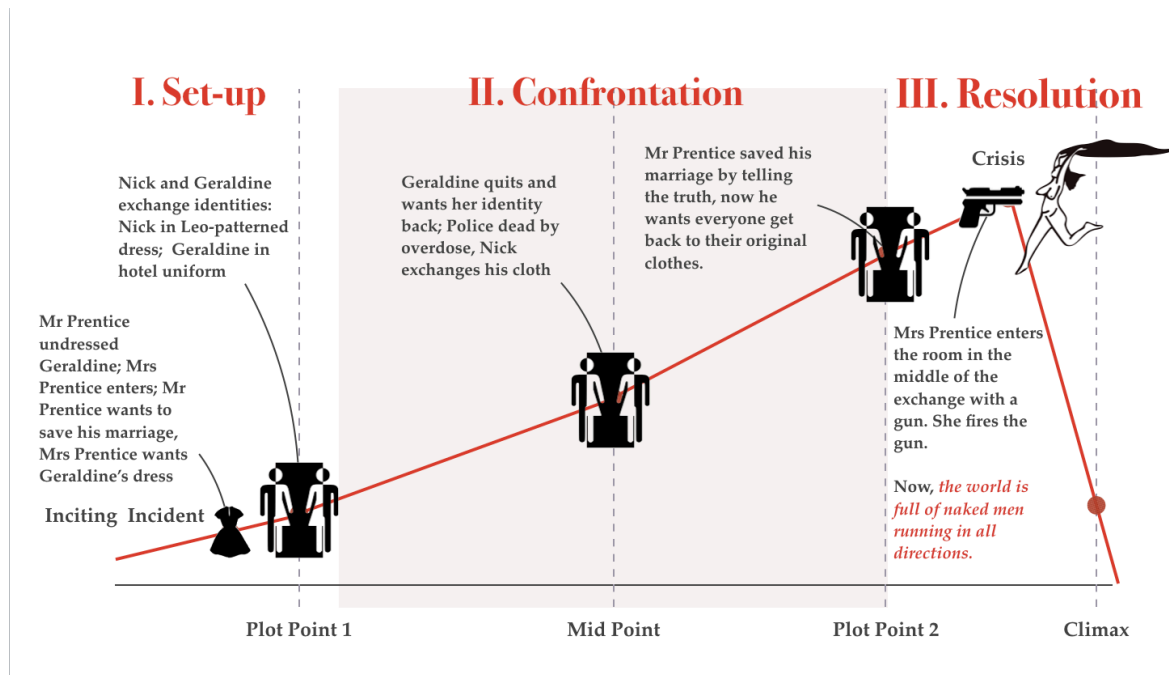
What the butler saw is a rollicking farce, which presents wild scenes of mistaken identity, hermaphroditic cross-dressing, misdiagnose, homosexuality, incest and violence (Gothard 50). One of the most important actions in this play has been the undressing and exchanging of clothes, as well as the cross-dressing of clothes. It is also a reason why the story will make audiences laugh and react in other ways. However, behind these dramatic performances and the complex storylines, the serious discussion and ridicule of sexuality and homosexualities are placed by Orton, undercover by the laughs.

This dramaturgical analysis examines Joe Orton's final play, *What the Butler Saw*, from the perspective of theatrical costume production. The focus of this analysis is on the narrative structure of the play and how repetition of action, undressing and cross-dressing, contributes to its effective development. That is, sexuality (in the play) as being unverifiable, in turns, reveals sexuality, rather than being located biologically, it remains itself a form of dress-up that can be altered freely.

The narrative structure: “clothing flying while the sound of door slamming”

Throughout the play, Orton bullied-up the chaos and madness scenarios on the ridiculous excuses that the characters made to cover their lies. Among the most significant motifs, clothing has been the main trigger for plots. Exchanging clothes represents a blurring of sexual boundaries between men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, sane and insane. As a result of this repetitive action, the plot becomes more tensile and dramatic. To better

identify the progression of the play, I will use Syd Field's three-act structure model to interpret how the narrative structure that is driven by plot events is triggered by the repetitive actions of undressing or cross-dressing clothes. Field's three-act structure model includes three main parts: setup, confrontation and resolution ().



At the beginning of the play, Mr Prentice attempts to seduce Geraldine Barclay by using the excuse of medical purpose to examine her fitness as his typist during Geraldine's interview of being Mr. Prentice's secretary. Mrs Prentice, whom Prentice describes as a nymphomaniac wife, interrupts their conversation when he finally completely undresses Geraldine with his convincing rhetoric. In order to avoid Geraldine noticing that Mr. Prentice has cheated, he hides Geraldine's undressed clothes. Despite the failure of his attempt, and the discovery of Geraldine's dress by Mrs Prentice, he claims himself to be a transvestite for justifying the appearance of women's clothes in his office. Fortunately, Mrs Prentice does not have more hesitations about her husband's strange behavior because she is blackmailed by her one-night-stand hotel boy, Nick. Nick is not only taking pictures of her nudity but also stole her clothes. Since Mrs Prentice has only a slip dress under her costly fur coat, she puts

on Geraldine's clothes naturally. Until now, the inciting incident point of the story world has been performed by conflicts related to Geraldine's dress: Mr. Prentice wants it hidden, Mrs. Prentice wants it worn, and Geraldine wants it back.

The set-up parts are continuous when Dr Rance enters the game. This section pushed Mr Prentice into the edge by the chaos and Dr Rance's misjudgments. Dr. Rance, as the representative of "Her Majesty's Government", finds Geraldine naked and gives her a cloth, a hospital nightgown, after Mr. Prentice claims Geraldine is a patient who scammed him with her naked body. Simotaneously, Dr Rance arbitrarily interprets Geraldine as a mad girl who fell in love with her father and was insulted. For treatment, Dr Rance shaves Geraldine's hair without notifying Mr Prentice. By the parallel storyline, Mrs P is looking for Geraldine to get the secretary position for Nick. As Mr Prentice keeps telling bad lies and Mrs Prentice discovers Geraldine's shoe on Mr Prentice's book shelf, Dr Rance convinces Mrs Prentice that Mr Prentice is insane with his "rational judgement." In order to cover Geraldine and justify his insanity, Mr Prentice then tells more lies. The set-up section approaches the closure with the participants of the Police Match stepping into the chaotic mental consulting room. Being afraid of the police due to the crime of assaulting schoolgirls, Nick undressed himself based on Mr Prentice's direction. However, Mrs Prentice interrupts their tricks, and takes Nick's uniform into the hall. Nick's leopard dress and wig are brought up to conceal Mr Prentice's lie about Geraldine's disappearance, thus Nick can impersonate Geraldine.

Furthermore, Mr Prentice convinced Geraldine to keep silent and dressed up in Nick's uniform. This action is appropriate for plot point one, which is an identity exchange between Nick and Geraldine that brings the plot event into a temporary peace: the reappearance of the troublemaker, Nick (Geraldine version); the find of the missing lady, Geraldine (played by Nick). It is finally admitted that the protagonist Mr Prentice's troubles started with "a mis-

guided attempt to seduce" Geraldine. All characters are back on the table except for the fact that Nick and Geraldine have exchanged identities.

The storyline turns into the confrontation sections after everyone in the story world has suffered greatly. Rising action is marked by the point that Geraldine realized she could not pretend to be Nick. She then asks Dr Rance to undress her and examine her, in order to show the truth. Meanwhile, Police Match is also waiting for an examiner to approve his (). The midpoint is gradually appealed when Match is overused by Mr Prentice's negligence in drug use: Nick is dressed in a police uniform. The police are facing down in the garden and dressing in leopard dress and a blonde wig. This is the midpoint that Mr Prentice almost successfully covers his lie by exchanging Geraldine and Nick's identities, but Geraldine's quit and Match's overdose situation stops him/her from achieving it.

Plot point two reveals after police Match's eventuality of death, Mr Prentice finally considers another way to save his marriage by telling the truth. After his confession, Mrs P also tells the fact that she is blackmailed by her cheat, too. Mr Prentice decided to turn things back to normal and escape the chaotic situation. Mr. Prentice undressed Mrs. Prentice to get Geraldine's dress, then asked everyone to put on their own clothes. Luckily, Police Match is not dead. He is just an overdose and being delirious. After convincing Nick and Geraldine, Mr Prentice successfully made everyone agree to change clothes. However, Dr R also convinced Mrs P that Mr Prentice is insane. The crisis comes with the gunshot and scream of Mrs P that "the world is full of naked men running in all directions," she breaks into the room where everyone is naked and exchanges clothing.

The dramatic situation reached its peak when the two psychiatrists Prentice and Rance testified to each other's insanity and started to shoot. People are all running naked around on the stage, bleeding and screaming. Finally, at the climax moment, the old brooch solves the

chaos and reveals Geraldine and Nick's true identities. It turns out that they are the twin sons of Mrs. Prentice and Doctor Prentice. Child rape cases that occurred in the bed sheet cabinet of the station inn before the marriage was interrupted. "After the happy union of the family, the play ends with Rance's last words: 'Let us put our clothes on and face the world' (1971: 92)". The story world turns back to equilibrium and peaceful.

As a result of the play's conclusion, I think the clear statement that the cross-dressing costumes constitute an important repetitive pattern which leads the whole narrative structure has been accomplished. Regarding the classic tradition of farce, transvestism is rampant, as if the costumes themselves were the only sure guide to the sexual identities of the characters. In this play, Orton maintains tradition but blurs its sexual boundaries. He mixes the conventional gender sign of masculine and feminine by characters' costumes changing. Characters' costumes are exchanged in order to break the conventional gender sign. Furthermore, behind the undressed clothes and running nudities, Orton generated jokes about sexuality as part of his subverted statement of gender construction. During the performance, audiences will explore the madness and raise a discussion of whether the unverifiable sexualities are madness (Orton).

The costumes

Costumes are everything in this play. In obtaining traditional theatrical ideology of costume characterisation, "what the butler saw" preserves the theater as a space where transvestites flourish as sources of entertainment, thus maintaining the conservative social construction of sexism(). The identical and stereotypical dressing of each character is the key to this play. The play begins with Nicholas Beckett's undressing, and ends with a muscular policeman dressed in a leopard print tight dress. Each dressing, undressing and exchanging of costumes means a transfer of sexual identification from one character to another. There are only two

characters who have never changed their costumes, Dr. Rance and Prentice. At the same time, other characters, Geraldine Barclay, Mrs. Prentice, Nicholas Beckett and Sergeant Match, all involved in the undressing or cross-gender dressing under the extreme circumstances.

<u>Characters</u>	Original	Inciting Incident		Plot Point 1	Mid-point	Plot point2	Crisis	Climax
<u>Geraldine Barclay</u>	Dress	Naked (Undressed by Mr. Prentice)	Hospital nightgown (Dressed by Dr Rance)	Hotel uniform	-	-	Undressing hotel uniform	Naked
<u>Mrs. Prentice</u>	Fur coat and a slip dress	Geraldine's dress	-	-	-	Takes off Geraldine's Dress back to her original dress	-	Slip dress
<u>Nicholas Beckett</u>	Hotel uniform	-	-	A wig and leopard dress	Police uniform	-	Undressing Police uniform	Naked
<u>Sergeant Match</u>	Police uniform	-	-	-	Leopard dress	-	-	Leopard dress

Note: “-” represents no changes. The coloring of each cells is aid for viewers easier tracking the costume changes between characters. Geraldine's dress is light-pink, Nick's hotel uniform is light-green, Match's police uniform is light-blue, and the leopard dress is light-yellow.

As the clothing was exchanged, the verification of madness kept occurring. During the play, the action pattern of undressing and nudities represents the sign of insanity, and the exchanging of clothing represents the shift in confirming individuals' sexual identities or social position. Social characters' identities and sexualities are also exchanged during the costume exchange. They lose their credibility as a source of convincing others to believe their insanity and identity. Hence, for better illustrating and deconstructing the different meanings of each costume, I created a costume exchanging matrix figure 1.2, which highlighted four significant costumes that were included in the costume exchanging processes: Geraldine's dress, Nick's Station Hotel uniform, Leopard dress and police uniforms and nudities as the result of undressing.

The dress of Geraldine initially reveals the discussion on the sex value of transvestism in this play. Audience attention is thus drawn to the costume of Geraldine. When Mrs Prentice discovers Geraldine's dress that Mr Prentice attempts to hide, she asks, "Have you taken up transvestism? I'd no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion" (Orton). Dr. Prentice responds with a vague answer, "Our marriage is like the peace of God – it passeth all understanding"(Orton). As a result of this tricky answer, Mrs Prentice is given a chance to imagine that he requires female clothing without explicitly admitting it. It is a shame and distasteful actions for a man to desire cross-dressing in the 1960s. Throughout the entire play, he has not directly acknowledged his interest in transvestism. A discussion of transvestism follows with Mr Prentice consenting to silence. Meanwhile, Dr Rance attempts to prove his belief in Prentice's insanity by wanting on women's clothing. Mr Rance uses his knowledge to make up a completely ridiculous story to explain the chaotic situations in the consulting room, which actually makes it more insane.

Dr Rance: ...It's a human interest story. ...The doctor has a charming but mentally unstable patient...An act of transference, common to the experience of any psychiatrist, allows her to identify the doctor as her parent. The demands of a nymphomaniac wife and patient...He turns, in his anguish, to assaulting young boys. Retaining, however, some vestiges of normal feelings, he persuades his minions to dress in women's clothes. This explains his desire for female garments...

Mr Prentice's interpretation of female clothing is an excellent example of conservative ideology sexism on homosexuality and sexuality. Dr Rance accused Mr Prentice's desire for female clothes triggered his disacceptance of the fact he is in love with a young boy. Mr Prentice pretends he is a woman by wearing the dress in order to normalize their taboo relationship. I find it interesting that even Mr Prentice's love for the young man is substituted by

Dr Rance for Mr Prentice's love for a female. This is also an automatic denial that Mr Prentice might be homosexual. Dr Rance has demonstrated his solid belief that the sexualized relationship should and has to endure a relationship between a female and male. It has to be a relationship between two individuals that include two opposite genders. Orton controls the villain character Dr Rance to generate more chaos. The dress of Geraldine, therefore, is one of the most representative motifs through which Orton satirizes social and political authorities' misjudgments of homosexuality in the 1960s.

Geraldine attempts to establish a certain sexual boundary between male and female when she wears the uniform of the Nick's Station Hotel bellhop. This process of re-building the gender construction also brings the discussion on conservative sexism. In other words, when roles dress in clothes that are the opposite of their gender identity, they are automatically assumed to be that gender. This incongruity caused by this rashly sexuality verification has been extremely farcical(). When dressing in a male uniform, Geraldine is incapable of convincing anyone about her physical sexual identity. Hence, she intends applying sexual orientation to identify her gender: "I am a boy, I must like girls"(Orton). Geraldine exploits the social norms of being heterosexual to bolster the credibility of the boy she is pretending to be. Geraldine becomes frustrated in that middle state where the categories of masculine and feminine lose their clearness (Charney 499). She begs Dr Rance to undress and examine her, to implement her biological sexual features to be the evidence of her words. In this section, the failure of this gender verification, based on dressing and sexual orientation is causing a discussion on whether sexual orientation is a convincing identification for declaring gender confusion. In other words, could heterosexuality, according to Dr Rance, as a "natural" sexual orientation, be a universal verification of individuals' sexual identities? Orton selects the negative answer by presenting the hilarious and chaotic stage.

Orton typically makes jokes about every political authority and incompetent characters; for instance, the costume exchange on *Police Match*, from his police uniform to a Leopard dress. This exchange of costumes between the police officer and hotel boy Nick is a subverted position on social position instead of the verification of individuals' sexual identities. It's more like an exchange of power and authority. Nick reverted position from a lower class "weaker" and became a more powerful and authorized policeman, so he could have a chance to declare his innocence. On the other hand, the *Police Match*'s situation is more symbolic and ironic. He is dressed in a leopard dress and running all over the stage with the overdose as a representative of law and order. This clothing exchange represents his shift from a symbol of discipline and order to one of anarchism and disorder().

At the end of the play, there is full nakedness: Nicholas Beckett is naked with blinding eyes, and Mrs Prentice and Geraldine Barclay are bound by Dr Rance with the green patient wrap coat. Nicholas and Geraldine both accepted their new identity that they are Mrs. Prentice's children when they were naked. What the Butler Saw wrapped up by Sergeant Match, a police officer that dressed in the leopard-spotted dress of Mrs. Prentice and the god Hercules, leads all the characters on stage to a ray exit through the skylight: "They pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light" (Orton). These nude bodies and flying clothes will provide audiences a strong virtual aid to transfer them into questions: Who is who? Who is sanity? Orton might have demonstrated this technique to blur the distinct sexual boundary between maleness and femaleness on stage when the characters in play are essentially trying to construct it. Orton hid these deep, dark and defiant themes behind this an unpleased, recidivous and madness farce.

Orton and sexualities: from the stage to the reality

In this play, he demonstrated his influential view and faith of homosexuality toward not only homosexual communities but also the authorities that defined homosexuality as sanity. According to Orton's own claim in his diary on Tuesday, 14 March, 1967:

In the present circumstances, a director and actors recreate a madhouse in a theatre.

Let's look at the mad people. At queer people, they have merely to look in their mirrors. Kenneth H. Said, "In *what the butler saw* you are waiting for madness." "Yes," I said, "but there isn't a lunatic in sight - just the doctors and nurses."

His diary clearly reveals that he was aware of the purpose and reason why people interacted with this play: to witness insanity and homosexuality. "This play was a chance for hebourgeois masses to penetrate the eyes of the marginalized homosexual", Charney indicated (502). This play portrayed the anxiety and dispersing of being homosexual and the dilemma of self-identification. As a homosexual playwright, Orton maintains this serious and cirtical theme under the entertainment farce. Accordingly, the "madness" that can be claimed in this play would endure the existence of rationality amongst sexual minorities, or in other words, whether their identities are sane. As the playwright's sister, Orton's work encouraged other gay men to be more confident in their sexuality. "I think people who really understood the writing know that this was somebody original and unique," Ms Orton Barnett said. "He was so out there with his homosexuality, he was talking about it so frankly, and in such graphic detail, it brought a lot of people out."

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