



## **'Edgar I Nothing Am': Disguise and Psychological Identity in Filmic Adaptations of *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night***

**Sinead Larkin  
Queen's University Belfast**

This paper will posit that the disguises used in Richard Eyre's *King Lear* (1998) and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996) visually manifest Edgar and Viola's psychological identities. Many critics have argued for the symbolic power of costume in Shakespearean film: Jack J. Jorgens, for example, states that costume 'communicates not only sex, age, social class, occupation, nationality...but subjective qualities – moods, tastes, values. Costumes speak to an audience through line, shape, colour and texture' (31). Within the films which this paper will examine, the employment of disguise involves a clear change in costume; thus, disguise might be seen to symbolise the identity of a character. I have chosen to focus on the significance of disguise within filmic performance because film, more so than theatre, can convincingly visually depict disguise: larger budgets allow for sophisticated costume and special effects. These combine to help create the illusion of a credible visual masquerade. As such, a connection can be made between the performed disguise and the fictionalised psychological identity of the disguised character, because onscreen disguise is so much more realistic than that performed onstage.

The psychological trauma which Edgar (Paul Rhys) and Viola (Imogen Stubbs) experience within the films changes their identities, as they have been initially established by the director onscreen. Disguise therefore functions as a useful visual signifier for the viewer, allowing the audience to understand a particular director's construction of character. Carl Jung argued that '[i]f the ego is damaged by traumatic events...then the unconscious will compensate and provide positive energies...psychic health means forming ever-closer bonds with the unconscious as the superior and better guide' (Rowland 30). Ultimately, the wearing of disguise by Viola and Edgar, and their performance of an alternate identity whilst disguised, allows psychological loss to be played out therapeutically, leading to psychological 'completeness': a sense of self which is no longer fractured by traumatic experience. Jung, for example, believed that therapy involved self-realisation and catharsis: indeed, in the context of this paper, 'therapy' involves expression of negativity, thereby expelling trauma. He argued that '[t]o round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness; and for this the "thorn in the flesh" is needed, the suffering of defects without which there is no progress and no ascent' (Jung, *Dreams* 233).

In Eyre's film, Edgar is initially established as a shy nobleman. Rhys's character possesses a very smart, but physically repressed appearance in his first two scenes. His hair is neatly groomed, and he wears a starched, stiff white shirt which is

fully buttoned. This physically continent and restrained appearance is reinforced by the nervous physical actions which Rhys displays as Edgar: he frequently wrings his hands, and stammers. This provides a sharp contrast to Edmund (Finbar Lynch), who is cloaked all in black. On a basic level, this symbolises Edmund's Machiavellian status within the film. His body language is very bold – he is clearly the more dominant brother – and he carries a dagger, which conveys confident masculinity. Indeed, references to Edmund's affairs with Goneril and Regan in the original playtext are made explicit by Eyre and Lynch onscreen.

In the feigned duel between the brothers, Edgar displays an evident lack of skill in wielding a sword. This again suggests a reserved nature, and a weakness of masculine spirit. He flees, and – in the only scene within Eyre's production to be filmed outside a television studio – is depicted, via longshot, running through a forest. The fact that this scene takes place outside indicates the extent of what is constructed as the character's psychological loss: Edgar's position as the dearly loved son of Gloucester has been shattered, and his lone status in the cold and bleak wilderness, which Eyre visually creates onscreen, symbolises his fragmented psyche. When Edgar falls, the camera zooms in on his white shirt, which is besmirched with mud and blood. He then declares 'Edgar I nothing am' (2.3.21). A series of close-up shots subsequently depict Edgar gathering mud from the ground and smearing it, almost ritualistically, over his face, before he gets to his feet and stumbles out of shot.

Edgar's declared status as 'nothing' is a reflection of the character's loss of identity onscreen. This psychological anguish visually manifests itself through Edgar's facial and bodily concealment with mud, and also through his subsequent camouflaging in a hovel, which has been covered with leaves, mud, and a ragged piece of cloth. Stylistically, this prop is a form of disguise, physically hiding Edgar from the disjointed and disruptive world outside. The name which he adopts, along with the guise of a rogue ('Poor Tom') further enforces a shattered sense of self, conveying that the character views himself as 'poor', low, and as nothing. Indeed, William C. Carroll remarks that the figure of Poor Tom is an embodiment 'of negation and self-alienation' (184).

It could be argued that Rhys's Edgar adopts the disguise of a vagabond for duplicitous purposes. As Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz have commented, the early modern rogue possessed a 'pervasive concern with self-invention' (2). Carroll suggests that Edgar's disguise – and the physical suffering which the character endures whilst wearing this disguise – 'is in part a performance of marginality, exclusion and dispossession...a stereotypical beggar's role figuratively performed by an Edgar who far out-tops his brother's histrionic genius' (195). However, I would argue that Edgar's 'self-invention' in Eyre's film is not mere deception, or a form of attention-seeking, as Carroll frequently argues: rather, Rhys's convincing performance of loneliness, despair and self-loathing convincingly suggests an Edgar for whom lowly disguise is a genuine reflection of a hated self. Freud believed that 'anxiety makes repression' (121), and that 'self-alienation in defence is characteristically reflected in an alteration of consciousness' (Fingarette 91). Rhys's Edgar isolates himself from his family and the strongly ordered society of the film – an act of self-preservation – in an attempt to suppress the fear and hatred which he has experienced onscreen thus far.

Disguise for this Edgar involves physical suffering. He is half-naked, his trousers are torn and ragged, his exposed flesh is coated with mud, his hair is unkempt, and his voice – when he speaks the 'gibberish' of Poor Tom – is forcibly deeper. Even when the rain washes some of the mud from his body, Poor Tom is still

visually unrecognisable as Edgar, providing a strong visual contrast to the early scenes of Eyre's film. The nakedness of the body matches that of the psyche. Rhys's Edgar, in the guise of a rogue, frequently refers to 'the foul fiend' that 'follows' him (3.4.45). This could be viewed as part of a ploy to convince the other characters present onscreen that he is mad, and corroborates the idea of Edgar being a vagrant, as early modern rogues 'initiated a cultural logic of social betrayal and cohesion, of tactical deception and threatened honesty' (Dionne and Mentz, 10). Yet as the scene plays out before the television audience, it becomes evident that this 'fiend' is, in fact, Edgar. The character makes a declaration to Ian Holm's Lear, 'this is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet' (3.4.112); however, Eyre's direction has Rhys gesture not to some imaginary creature, but to his own character. Combined with the earlier reference to the fiend which 'follows' Edgar, and his declaration just prior to adopting disguise ('Edgar I nothing am') it could be read that Edgar possesses a severe self-loathing. Consequently, the tattered disguise of a vagabond – a lowly and often socially despised figure – becomes, in Eyre's film, a psychological representation and mirroring of this self-hatred. Carroll argues that 'Shakespeare's Poor Tom is merely the most famous instance of a tradition that spans more than a century' (104) – a tradition which was exemplified in particular by the rogue Nicholas Genings. As Carroll comments, 'Genings chooses marginality as his theater, disease and degradation as his costume; he does this apparently for the sake of a life of modest possession, family and comfort' (86). Like Edgar's performance as a beggar, which leads to an expulsion of negative emotion and a sense of psychological renewal, Genings' masquerade is a means by which he can progress towards both material and psychological gain, achieving fulfilment through physical suffering.

This is reinforced elsewhere: Edgar advises Lear to 'take heed o' the foul fiend; obey thy parents, keep thy word justly, swear not' (3.4.78-80). Such advice is very in keeping with Edgar's character in this film, as the wise and devoted son to Gloucester, whilst also reinforcing his self-referential status as the 'fiend'. However, the close-up shots in this scene suggest that these words contain much sarcasm: it was precisely by obeying his parents (in this case, Gloucester) that Edgar was placed in the position of an outcast rogue, and 'foul fiend'.

Edgar's suffering, half-naked, in a cold and wet storm, is perhaps a masochistic form of self-abuse, and visually matches the character's verbal expression of self-loathing. Ultimately, though, this suffering is therapeutic, because it allows the character to communicate the pain and trauma resulting from his enforced lack of status and identity, thereby enabling a form of dramatically-constructed emotional release. Yet despite this, Edgar continues to remark that 'the foul fiend bites my back' (3.6.15): the hated side is still present, despite attempts to disguise it, and can only be defeated and expelled if Rhys's character confronts his inner demons (the 'fiend').

A dimly-lit, long camera shot shows Edgar, cloaked in shadow, eavesdropping upon a conversation between the blinded Gloucester and a servant, in which Gloucester expresses remorse. Edgar then leads his father to Dover whilst clothed in a white shirt and white slacks, and his body language is more confident: this Edgar stands tall and does not slouch or fidget as he did in his first two scenes onscreen. His filmically-constructed psychological and physical identity is somewhat less fractured now that the close relationship with his father has been restored.

Edgar later confronts Edmund, but is visually disguised in leather armour and a mask. This would suggest that Edgar's identity is still fractured and that he cannot yet face his brother in his original guise of the usurped and shamed sibling. Instead,

he must find safety beneath the anonymity of a blank mask, until he can defeat the character responsible for his destruction of self, and thus regain the identity which was lost. It is only upon Edmund's admission of guilt, and expressed repentance – a defeat, both physical and psychological – that Edgar removes his mask, declaring that 'my name is Edgar' (5.3.285). The character has no further need to wear disguise onscreen, now that the usurper has been replaced. Rhys delivers the final speech in the production in the confident style and manner of a king. Disguise has enabled Edgar to reclaim his original status, but has also inscribed the character with a stronger sense of self and purpose. He has, as many critics have suggested, come full circle on the Wheel of Fortune which 'place[s] the monarch and the beggar on opposite sides of the wheel' (Carroll 14): Rhys's character must suffer in order to proceed to the 'other side' and emerge, renewed. Jung commented that '[m]an cannot walk the rainbow bridge like a god but must go underneath with whatever reflective afterthoughts he may have', before rising as a 'liberated soul', which he likened to 'the Anthropos who was imprisoned in the embrace of Physis' (*Dreams* 276): man must suffer within his surroundings, humanity must experience confinement by nature, before redemption can occur.

Carroll suggests that 'Edgar's passage through *King Lear* is relatively clear in its outlines – from naïve son to outcast beggar to restored son, heir, and finally, perhaps, king' (184), which would connect with the notion that wearing disguise serves a therapeutic purpose for Rhys's psychologically-damaged Edgar. Comparably, Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, although a different genre, contains a very similar trope to Eyre's film. The disguise adopted by Viola onscreen reflects her psychological suffering, which results from the supposed loss of Sebastian.

Nunn initially frames Viola (Stubbs) and Sebastian (Stephen Mackintosh) together onscreen. The twins are providing entertainment for the travellers on a ship, and are both identically disguised in long dark wigs with veils and blue gowns. Already, their close relationship is emphasised, both visually (in terms of their attire), and through their physical closeness in this scene, and when they cling to each other, undisguised, during the storm and under water. When Viola reaches the shore, her long blonde hair – which visually conveys her feminine identity – is matted. Her flowing gown is also ragged. The unkempt manner of her visual identity here could be classed as an outward reflection of grief regarding the believed death of the beloved brother. This would suggest, already, that the character's identity, as the twin sister of the 'drowned' Sebastian, has begun to crumble. This could be viewed as a fracturing of comic expectations. It also provides a point of contact with Eyre's film, in which identity is so unstable. However, although the discord and isolation experienced by Viola is in opposition to the genre of comedy, it befits *Twelfth Night's* textual status as a 'problem play', and unity is restored upon Sebastian's return, and the re-establishment of Viola's identity as a sister.

It could be suggested that Stubbs's Viola adopts disguise for the purposes of achieving employment at Orsino's all-male court, to which no woman may gain admittance. However, the onscreen process of disguising is harsh, involving the cutting of Viola's long, feminine hair, binding of her breasts and adoption of a soldier's uniform. She also places socks in her trousers, which suggests a desired imitation of the phallus: a constructed desire to become male. Yet more importantly, the male clothing which Nunn's Viola adopts as her disguise is exactly like that worn by Sebastian on the ship just prior to the storm, and in the photograph of Sebastian which Viola clutches after appropriating her disguise. Freud believed that '[i]f a boy identifies with his father, he wants to *be like* his father; if he makes him the object of

his choice, he wants to *have* him, to possess him' (95): disguise not only enables this Viola to visually identify with Sebastian, but to replace and 'become' her identical twin. Stephen M. Buhler reanimates this point, stating that 'Imogen Stubbs's Viola assumes her male identity not only so she can join Orsino's service in safety, but also as a living memorial to the brother she believes has drowned' (153). Viola accurately imitates Sebastian's attire and the twins are, consequently, interchangeable. The only visual difference between them is Sebastian's moustache. However, Viola also attaches a fake moustache to her face, affirming that her adoption of disguise is not merely a means of approaching Orsino's court, but that it is a catalyst for the visual recreation of her 'dead' brother.

After joining Orsino's service, the melancholy Duke (Toby Stephens) criticises Olivia's prolonged period of mourning for her brother: 'All this to season/ A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh/ And lasting in her sad remembrance' (1.1.29-31). The camera suddenly jump-cuts to a close-up shot of Viola, who flinches at Orsino's words. Her eyes are damp and her facial expression indicates grief. This would further suggest that Viola's gendered disguise is an intentional means of honouring Sebastian, allowing Viola to season *his* love, visually keeping him and his memory alive through her close physical resemblance to him.

Viola's masquerade is not only material: she also imitates masculine behaviour. Immediately after the disguising process occurs onscreen, a mid-length camera shot shows Viola walking beside the Captain, and imitating (somewhat unsuccessfully and comically, at first) his masculine stride. Similarly, Stubbs's character frequently adopts a gruff tone of voice when speaking to Orsino. She engages in activities which are, in the film, specifically masculine: she plays cards with Orsino and fences. Laurie Osborne remarks:

Viola's 'training' in Orsino's military court gives her rough equality to her brother that extends beyond dress. This Viola plays cards and billiards as well as or better than a man...This Viola is not only 'as true of heart' as a man; she is also as competent as a man in several pursuits that face her during her adoption of male attire (102).

Viola's behaviour here indicates a desire to fit in with the network of masculinity in the film. Indeed, in one scene, Orsino smokes a cigar and lights one for Viola, who eagerly takes it: cigars are associated only with men in this film. Yet, from a Freudian perspective, her action suggests an absorption of the masculine by literally consuming a representation of the male sexual organ. Judith Butler has paraphrased Freud's arguments, in *The Ego and the Id*, that the loss of a loved one – in this case, the lost sibling – causes an identification with that person, and the intentional gaining of attributes associated with them. Viola's visual attempt to identify with Sebastian, and her imitation of male attributes, can be read as an attempted absorption of his masculine identity. Yet Butler states that this imitation of gender, caused by cross-dressing, is 'effectively displac[ing] the meaning of the original' (176): Viola's masquerade is highly subversive because it involves a direct abandonment of her previously-constructed female identity.

Like Edgar, Viola's performance – her masquerade, whilst disguised – is physically demanding. In a brief scene, filmed in the character's bedchamber at night, she is depicted via a longshot. This camera shot is significant because it is visually suggestive of the paradoxes of the character's whole self, as male and female when disguised. The image of her biological identity is unclear and undefined onscreen, thus matching the hybridised identity with which disguise inscribes her. Here, she

removes her male disguise, and the camera specifically focuses upon her removal of the binding which conceals her breasts. A reverse-angle camera shot indicates that the character massages her female flesh, and audibly sighs, seemingly with relief. It is possible that this type of shot is employed here to give Viola some privacy as a woman undressing, confirming her change back to what she actually is. Nunn's inclusion of this scene would also serve to suggest that, for his Viola, disguise restricts her biologically-feminine body. Indeed, her screened facial expressions during the initial process of binding her breasts indicated physical discomfort. However, although the male disguise which conceals her feminine body is uncomfortable, it is Viola's only living reminder of Sebastian, and thus this charade will continue, as a form of memorial: Barbara Freedman argues that 'Viola deals with loss through near-morbid overidentification' (205) with Sebastian, and that she 'hollows out her personality to keep her lost brother alive' (208). Furthermore, it could be posited that, like the physical and psychological suffering which the disguised Edgar suffers, the physical discomfort associated with Viola's disguise reflects and matches the psychological anguish regarding the loss of her sibling.

Viola's prior identity within the film – as sister to Sebastian – is only restored during the reunion scene. Here, a side-angle camera shot depicts the twins facing each other. This shot clearly resembles an image in a mirror and thus emphasises not only the convincing nature of Viola's male disguise – because both twins look very alike here – but also the motivation behind this disguise: to visually bring Sebastian back to life. Sebastian lovingly and carefully removes Viola's fake moustache, and both actors convey a strong sense of joy: male disguise is unnecessary now that the man whom she imitated so convincingly has returned.

Buhler comments that '*Twelfth Night* was written after the death of [Shakespeare's son] Hamnet, the male twin...the play provides a series of fantasies on the theme of restoring the dead male twin to life' (156). This further reinforces that Viola's motivation (in Nunn's film) for performing an alternate identity, and retaining the disguise used in this performance, is for the purpose of resurrecting and recreating the dead twin. However, it could be argued that disguise jeopardises the integrity of the self, because – as the aforementioned reunion scene clearly depicts – the original self can be copied, or even replaced. Rosalie L. Colie states that '[t]he re-created self...may replace the original...The re-created self is a threat to the self' (356). Viola's disguised self could be read as a threat to her feminine identity, because this female status is suppressed. Nonetheless, disguise is foremost a mirror through which grief is conveyed and reflected. It is a necessary, therapeutic dramatic device: Edgar and Viola's suffering allows an expression of their psychological loss onscreen, thereby suggesting a way in which the characters may be able to come to terms with trauma, and enabling a renewed sense of self to emerge.

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