Disguise, Deception, and Dramaturgical Psychology in *Richard III* and *As You Like It*

William Shakespeare’s influence has permeated almost every aspect of Western culture. From the 1,700 words he is believed to have added to the English language, to the impact his characters and stories have had even on modern media, there can be no doubt that Shakespeare has attained literary immortality. His understanding of human nature is astute enough that even the field of psychology owes a debt to him. In the romantic comedy *As You Like It*, perpetually melancholy Jacques makes the famed observation:

> All the world’s a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players:
> They have their exits and entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts. (2.7.139-143)

Just as *Hamlet* is often analyzed through a Freudian lens and considered by some to be a prime example of the Oedipus Complex, this oft-quoted speech inspired a sociological school of thought: dramaturgical analysis. Social psychologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) hypothesized that social interactions are much like being onstage. Any social setting can be understood as a “performed event, highly dependent on the various components of theater” (Kivisto 6). According to Goffman, all people play various roles, which he defines as the “particular image that a single actor wants to convey…the contrived sense of self that the individual wants to project to the world” (4). A person’s role may change depending on the environment—for
instance, assuming a different persona at work from the role of parent or spouse at home—but the self is not an entity of its own. One’s identity only “arises in the very process of the performance,” which means that an individual is defined by the roles he or she chooses (or is forced) to take up (3).

Through the lens of this Shakespearian-inspired social psychology, one can gain a fuller understanding of one of Shakespeare’s most calculating villains: the titular character of Richard III. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the hunchbacked youngest brother to the king, is a pretender, a flatterer, a villain suspected by few. He is a power-hungry Machiavellian antihero who, through the course of the play, climbs his way to power through murder and deception, and finally faces retribution from the vengeful spirits of his victims. Most of the characters are, at least at first, taken in by his false shows of piety and harmlessness. His ability to deceive is so great that he even fools Lady Anne, recently widowed by Richard’s own hand, into believing that he is remorseful for killing her husband and father-in-law, and coerces her to accept his hand in marriage. The Stratford Festival’s 2011 production of Richard III broke with tradition in casting a woman, Seana McKenna, in the lead role, an artistic choice meant to emphasize the character’s many layers of deceptions. Clearly, Richard is a skilled actor, putting on various roles to get what he wants—and the audience, who is privy to his true nature from the very first moment of the play, is witness to the “backstage” moments in Richard’s life, in which he removes his disguise.

However, this surface-level disguise of Richard’s is not the only role-playing he does. According to Goffman, every aspect of oneself is filling some kind of role, and Richard’s internal self is no exception. Shakespeare implies that Richard’s villainy is a matter of predestination, symbolized by his distorted appearance—the Elizabethan mindset dictated that physical
characteristics and disabilities were indicative of the inner character as well. Since Richard was
denied by nature the role of romantic hero, he instead takes up the role of the villain.

This is not to say that he finds no pleasure in his dastardly scheming—to the contrary, as
he reveals his plans to the audience, his tone is gleeful. But Richard describes himself as
“deformed, unfinished, sent before [his] time/…scarce half made up,” a reference to his
premature birth (1.1.20-21). Thus, he views his disfigurement as a sign of being incomplete,
“cheated of feature by dissembling nature,” as though nature has denied him something
necessary for being accepted (1.1.19). He recognizes that he is set apart from greater society, not
just in the outward physical sign, but internally as well. As his family celebrates the momentary
peace at the end of the War of the Roses, he resents their joy because he is incapable of taking
part in it. Because Fate has chosen to exclude him from human activities that normally bring
happiness, making him ill-equipped to be the hero of the story, he takes up the only other role
available to him, saying outright, “I am determined to prove a villain” (1.1.30). Thus, Richard
has an external role and an internal one—the former, a self-constructed disguise; the latter, a role
predetermined by his own outcast status and lack of compassion.

However, near the end of the play, even Richard’s villainous role is beginning to unravel.
The night before a great battle with Richmond’s rebel forces, come to take back England from
the tyrant, Richard is tormented by dreams of the people he has killed, including his wife Anne,
his brother Clarence, and his two young nephews, the “princes in the tower,” all cursing him to
“despair and die.” His speech upon waking is uncharacteristically flustered, disturbed, and
stream-of-consciousness, forming almost a back-and-forth dialogue with himself. One part of
him is fearful of retribution and admits, “I rather hate myself / for hateful deeds committed by
myself” (5.3.189-190). Another part of him scoffs at this “coward conscience,” and struggles to maintain the cold, villainous role (5.3.179). However, it is clear that Richard is not a sociopath, and is feeling some horror at what he has done—he is lamenting the murderous role he has been confined to, and feels the loneliness of this role, for “there is no creature [that] loves [him]” (5.3.200). This is not the same as complete repentance, for he is nonetheless resigned to follow the course that he is on, though his enthusiasm for mayhem has vanished. He goes down fighting, slain by the righteous Richmond.

Not surprisingly, dramaturgical analysis is even more applicable to the very play it was inspired by, As You Like It. The spirited young protagonist, Rosalind, disguises herself as a boy, Ganymede, in order to escape the clutches of her cruel, despotic uncle, usurping Duke Frederick. Unlike Richard’s deception, Rosalind’s pretending has a much more benign purpose, and is played to comic effect. Before becoming Ganymede, Rosalind briefly encounters the noble but obtuse Orlando, and the mutual attraction is almost instantaneous. Becoming a young boy—and therefore held to society’s standards for males, rather than females—gives Rosalind the perfect chance to woo him in a roundabout way, for she is no longer restricted by her sex. Orlando writes some crude poetry to Rosalind and pins it to a tree, desperate to declare his love, and she takes this opportunity to test him—she is worried that he is overly sentimental, and hopes to be a grounding influence, so that their relationship can last. As Ganymede, she offers to ‘cure’ him of the sickness he suffers from, by pretending to be Rosalind and behaving in a fickle fashion, hopefully turning his love to disgust. In reality, she means to educate him, to increase his emotional intelligence and make him a more worthy partner for herself—which, being an adroit teacher, she succeeds in doing.
Like Richard’s, this deception involves many layers, often to the point of becoming rather convoluted. In Shakespeare’s day, all women would have been played by young boys—so Rosalind would have been a young boy playing a woman, who has dressed as a boy, who sometimes pretends to be a woman. This seeming fluidity between prepubescent boy and grown woman recalls the Ancient Greek perception of women as simply “incomplete” men—the idea that women are simply lacking something that men have (Freud would, of course, term this penis envy), rather than being a naturally occurring complement to men.

However, just as in Richard’s case, one must consider that Rosalind’s “real” self is something of a role, too, and perhaps a less honest one than Ganymede. In Elizabethan times, there were very specific, very confining expectations of behavior from women. As a heroine, Rosalind repeatedly demonstrates her resourcefulness, wit, and intellectual superiority to every other character in the play. For instance, during her exchange with her best friend Celia in Act I, Scene II, in which they discuss the roles of Fortune and Nature in the shaping of a woman’s life, some of Rosalind’s comments seem to be misunderstood by Celia—she does not grasp Rosalind’s distinction between the two. Gender roles in Shakespeare’s time were rigid, and women were expected to take a subservient role in the household—therefore, one can imagine that, to an independent-minded woman such as Rosalind, becoming a male would be a liberating experience. Despite being a female, the supposedly more sentimental and feeble-minded sex, Rosalind proves herself more sensible than the men in the play: when Orlando claims that he will die without Rosalind’s love, she dryly responds that “men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love” (4.1.107-108). As Ganymede, she is able to actively
pursue the man she loves—quite contrary to the woman’s expected passive role in courtship. By taking on this disguise, she is able to better reveal her true inner self.

However, while one could interpret her disguise of Ganymede to be the role that suits her best, Rosalind does eventually re-embrace her femininity, wearing female clothes and marrying Orlando. When Rosalind takes her disguise a little too far, criticizes women a bit too harshly, and seems to forget her own femaleness, it is Celia who reproaches her for discounting her own physical identity. After Ganymede warns Orlando that women become less pleasant after they are married, Celia chides Rosalind, “You have misused our sex in your love-prate,” and reminds her what she truly is (4.1.205-206). To further confuse Rosalind’s role-playing, in the Epilogue, she breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience as a male actor, expressing the hope that they enjoyed the show and saying, “If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me” (5.5.18-19, emphasis added). However, she later references bidding them farewell with a “curtsy,” which only a lady would do (5.5.23). Rosalind’s adoption of two vastly different roles have managed to blur the line between genders. Although she reverts back to the traditional female role of wife, wearing a lady’s clothes—much to the relief of the Elizabethan audience, who would have been uncomfortable with the cross-dressing theme—it is not a total capitulation of her independence. If, according to Goffman, an individual’s identity is dependent on the role he or she chooses, then Rosalind’s true self is her female role, because that is her choice.

Both King Richard and Rosalind are portrayed as actors. For Rosalind, taking on a new role is a freeing experience, but not a permanent one, and she eventually returns happily to a more socially acceptable role, having attained her goal for which the “Ganymede” role was created. For Richard, his exterior role as simpering flatterer conceals an interior role of fated
treachery, but soon after the surface-level role is stripped away, the interior one unravels too, leaving him bitter and confused about his own identity and purpose.

Works Cited

