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The Elizabethan Dumb Show

The History of a Dramatic
Convention

Dieter Mehl



The Elizabethan Dumb Show

First published in English in 1965, this book discusses the roots and development of the dumb show as a device in Elizabethan drama. The work provides not only a useful manual for those who wish to check the occurrence of dumb shows and the uses to which they are put; it also makes a real contribution to a better understanding of the progress of Elizabethan drama, and sheds new light on some of the lesser known plays of the period.

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First published 1964 under the title
'Die Pantomime im Drama der Shakspearezeit'

This translation first published in 1965
by Methuen & Co. Ltd

This edition first published in 2011 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Translation © 1965 Dieter Mehl

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A Library of Congress record exists under ISBN: 0416339808

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-61078-0 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-203-83186-1 (ebk)

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METHUEN
LONDON AND NEW YORK

*First published in 1964 under the title
'Die Pantomime im Drama der Shakespearezeit'
© 1964 Quelle & Meyer, Heidelberg
This translation first published in 1965
and reprinted in 1982 by
Methuen & Co. Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Published in the USA by
Methuen & Co.
in association with Methuen, Inc.
733 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017
© Dieter Mehl 1965*

*Printed in Great Britain
by J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd., Bristol*

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Mehl, Dieter
The Elizabethan dumb show.—
(Methuen library reprints)
1. English drama—Early modern and
Elizabethan, 1500–1600
2. Mime
I. Title II. *Die Pantomime im Drama der*
Shakespearezeit. English
822'.3 PR658.M/
ISBN 0-416-33980-8

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Preface

This book has gone through several stages. Its subject was first suggested to me in a seminar on *Hamlet* held by Professor Wolfgang Clemen. Under his supervision I wrote a doctoral dissertation on dumb shows which was accepted by the Faculty of Arts in the University of Munich in 1960. It was then thoroughly revised and expanded, and published by the German Shakespeare Society. The present version is a rather free translation, and I am very grateful to the President of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft-West and his committee for permission to reprint my material in this new form. I have again made a considerable number of changes and additions; my chief aim has been to provide a useful work of reference rather than an exercise in academic criticism.

I have been fortunate in having had Professor W. Clemen as teacher and adviser for many years, and it gives me great pleasure to record my gratitude for all the encouragement and help I have had from him. To his outstanding scholarship and his stimulating criticism this book owes more than can be acknowledged here. I have also benefited greatly from the expert advice and criticism of several scholars, to all of whom I am deeply grateful, especially to Professor Helmut Bonheim, Dr Werner Habicht, Professor Hermann Heuer, Professor Hugo Kuhn, Professor Clifford Leech, Dr Ernest Schanzer, and the late Professor Levin L. Schücking. I hope their friendly interest in my work has not been entirely wasted. Professor Lloyd G. Gibbs (South Carolina), who was writing a dissertation on dumb shows at the same time as I, very generously placed a copy of his unpublished thesis at my disposal. My debt to him and to all previous investigators in the same field is acknowledged in the footnotes.

My greatest thanks are due to my wife, who has borne the lion's share in the arduous work of translation and adaptation

Preface

and who has saved me from many blunders. Those that still remain are entirely my own.

München

D. M.

Since this study first appeared, in 1965, there has been a steadily growing interest in the various kinds of interaction between the visual and the verbal appeals of Elizabethan dramatic productions, in pantomimic, emblematic and iconographic devices and their contribution to the total meaning of the plays in performance. To review my rather limited investigations in the light of all the material collected during the last sixteen years, would have meant rewriting the whole book and I am not sure whether I should still be satisfied with describing the dumb shows without including all the related forms of visual imagery. As this is a reprint (with very minor corrections), not a new edition, I can only draw attention to the large context of relevant research, listed, for instance, in John Doebler's "Bibliography for the Study of Iconography in Renaissance English Literature", *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, XXII (1979), 45-55, and to some attempts of my own to explore other areas of the fascinating field in which the dumb show occupies only a small, though very characteristic corner.¹ My attention has also been drawn to a few minor omissions in my list of dumb shows; most of them, however, are border-line cases, such as processions or elaborate stage directions which, in any case, could hardly be listed with any claim to completeness. I can only hope that my brief survey may still be useful as a starting-point for further explorations.

Bonn 1981

D. M.

¹ "Emblems in English Renaissance Drama", *Renaissance Drama*, NS 2 (1969), 39-57; "Visual and Rhetorical Imagery in Shakespeare's Plays", *Essays and Studies*, NS 25 (1972), 83-100; "Emblematic Theatre", *Anglia*, 95 (1977), 130-38.

Abbreviations

<i>Archiv</i>	<i>Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen</i>
<i>EETS (ES)</i>	<i>Early English Text Society (Extra Series)</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
<i>ESts</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>Malone Soc.</i>	<i>The Malone Society Reprints (General Editor, W. W. Greg)</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>ShJ</i>	<i>Shakespeare-Jahrbuch</i>
<i>ShQ</i>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
<i>ShS</i>	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
<i>TFT</i>	<i>Tudor Facsimile Texts</i> , ed. John S. Farmer

Introduction

This study of the dumb show and its function in a number of Elizabethan plays is intended as a contribution to the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama as a whole. In the past dumb shows have been mainly treated from a purely historical point of view: that is to say, critics inquired into the origins of this convention and looked for models in the English drama of the Middle Ages and in Italian Renaissance drama.¹ However justified this line of approach may be, it does not reveal so very much about the real nature of Elizabethan drama which is better understood not by studying the sources drawn upon by individual dramatists, but by seeing how they made use of them and incorporated them in their plays. Playwrights vary considerably in this respect, and so any attempt to point out general lines of development can only be based on a more exact analysis of individual plays. Such an examination should automatically contribute to an understanding of the whole and not merely treat some aspects out of their context. It should also, by showing the varied use of the pantomime, throw light upon the individual peculiarities of dramatists and their personal technique, as I shall demonstrate with a series of selected examples. It is particularly interesting to see how the pantomime is fitted into the drama in question and what contribution

¹ See especially: John W. Cunliffe, 'Italian Prototypes of the Masque and Dumb Show', *PMLA*, XXII (1907), pp. 140-56, and George R. Kernodle, *From Art to Theatre* (Chicago, 1947). For the purely historical matters I have been able to make use of some valuable studies: Frances A. Foster, 'Dumb Show in Elizabethan Drama before 1620', *Englische Studien*, 44 (1911-12), pp. 8-17, and B. R. Pearn, 'Dumb-show in Elizabethan Drama', *RES*, XI (1935), pp. 385-405. The dissertation by Lloyd Graham Gibbs, *A History of the Development of the Dumb Show as a Dramatic Convention* (University of South Carolina, 1959), is also more historical and descriptive in method. See also the brief account by Robert Y. Turner, 'The Causal Induction in Some Elizabethan Plays', *Studies in Philology*, LX (1963), pp. 183-90.

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it makes to the whole. For, while in some cases it appears to be only a primitive technical device, in others it fulfils some important dramatic function and underlines the theme of the play. The part played by the dumb show also varies according to the type of drama in which it occurs. It does not usually have the same function in tragedy as it has in chronicle plays. It is also worth noting that the dumb shows in England, unlike the *inter-medii* in Italy, are to be found almost exclusively in serious plays. Where they occur in comedies they are mainly in the form of parodies, imitating the manner of great tragedy. The best known example of this is the performance of the craftsmen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its preceding dumb show.¹

Defining the exact meaning and limits of the term 'dumb show' presents some difficulty. Pearn's definition² is certainly rather narrow and does not cover all existing examples. Any piece of silent action where one would normally expect dialogue may be called a dumb show, as for example the pantomime in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However, one can usually apply the term dumb show to all cases where one or more characters advance and retire without having spoken. The brief appearance of De Flores before the third act of Middleton's *The Changeling* is an example.³ Conversely, extensive masque-like performances, when they are accompanied by speeches or introduce dialogue, are not normally termed dumb shows. Thus the beginning of Dekker's *The Honest Whore* with the appearance of the funeral procession is not a dumb show in the exact sense of the word; while the beginning of the second act of Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, where Piero enters with the funeral procession and remains alone on the stage, is. I shall pay little attention to the detailed stage directions, suggestive of pantomimes, which are frequently to be found in the moralities and interludes. These have little to do with the tradition of the dumb show and can only in some few cases be considered as early forms of it.⁴ The same is true of dances, songs and brawls in dramas. There are, however, many different transitional forms which can tell us a

¹ See Chapter 7.

² 'A part of a play which presents by means of action without speech an element of plot which would more naturally be accompanied by speech.' (Op. cit., p. 385.)

³ 'In the act time (i.e. between the two acts) *De Flores hides a naked rapier behind a door.*' (III, 1.) ⁴ See below, Chapter 6.

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lot about the development of the dumb show, but make a precise classification difficult. The list of dramas containing dumb shows, which appears at the end of this book, includes a number of such doubtful cases where it is often difficult to decide whether they really assumed the character of dumb shows in performance.

The absence of dialogue distinguishes the dumb show from the device of the play within a play so popular in Elizabethan drama.¹ Here also we find something like a second stage set up on the real stage, where scenes are enacted which are often quite different in character and style from the rest of the play. In the case of the dumb show, however, we rarely come across that interplay between the two planes of dramatic action which constitutes the particular appeal of the play within a play. This intentional confusion of the two levels of the real and the make-believe the majority of dumb shows lack, but we shall see that dumb shows are most effective where their use resembles most nearly the technique of the play within a play. *Hamlet* is of course the most famous example of a simultaneous use of both devices, but there are also some other plays where a clear distinction is hardly possible.

In the first section of this book I shall try to outline the various sources and models of the earliest dumb shows, and then continue with a brief account of their different forms in Elizabethan drama. In the second part I shall show, by examining a series of selected examples, how the individual dramatists used dumb shows in their plays and what a variety of functions those dumb shows could perform.

I have thought it necessary to give a fair number of quotations, as many of the plays discussed are not of the kind every reader will be thoroughly familiar with, and some are not easily accessible. I have on the whole preferred old-spelling editions, but I have corrected obvious errors, modernized the titles of plays, and, for the sake of consistency, used italics throughout for all stage directions and dumb shows. Speech headings are given in full.

¹ See Joachim Voigt, *Das Spiel im Spiel* (Diss., Göttingen, 1954); Arthur Brown, 'The Play within a Play: An Elizabethan Dramatic Device', *Essays and Studies* (1960), pp. 36-48, and my article 'Zur Entwicklung des "Play within a Play" im elisabethanischen Drama', *ShJ*, 97 (1961), pp. 134-52.

PART I

Origin and Beginnings

Speech and action have been the two basic elements of drama in every age; their mutual interplay is one of the most complex and interesting problems in the history of drama. Thus in tracing the development of early Elizabethan drama we shall see how various attempts were made to strike a balance between the two extremes, action without speech and speech without action, until with the emergence of Shakespeare's major plays a perfect, if temporary, fusion of the two seems to have been achieved.¹ In this process the dumb show which was deliberately employed even in the first English classical tragedies undoubtedly played an important part.

Very early in the history of the English stage one finds examples of attempts to illustrate the spoken word by simultaneous silent action, or, conversely, of a pantomime explained to the audience by a commentary. Some poems by John Lydgate are among the oldest examples of such attempts and, as Wickham has shown,² are to be understood as a commentary on a mime performed simultaneously or subsequently. These are the so called 'mummings' or 'disguisings', festive parades, usually in allegorical guise, which were frequently presented on special occasions, such as after a solemn banquet. Some of these poems expressly announce a mime, others give a running commentary on it and call to mind the later figure of the 'presenter'.³ In his

¹ Cf. Ingeborg Glier, *Struktur und Gestaltungsprinzipien in den Dramen John Websters* (Diss., München, 1957), p. 61.

² See Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300-1660*, Vol. I (London, 1959), pp. 191 ff., and *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Part II, ed. Henry MacCracken, *EETS*, 192 (1934), pp. 668 ff. *Mumming at Windsor* (pp. 691 ff.), for instance, contains an account of how the fleur-de-lis became the emblem of the French Kings. At the end the speaker announces a visual presentation of what he has described, presumably a kind of dumb show.

³ Thus we find in *Mumming at London* (pp. 682 ff.) an explicit introduction of allegorical characters while the poet gives his account: 'Loo, first

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Troy Book Lydgate himself describes more exactly how such a performance is to be imagined, even though the scene is set in a Trojan theatre and not in Lydgate's London:

Al þis was tolde and rad of þe poete.
And whil þat he in þe pulpit stood,
With dedly face al devoide of blood,
Singinge his dities, with muses al to-rent,
Amydde þe theatre schrowdid in a tent,
þer cam out men gastful of her cheris,
Disfigurid her facis with viseris,
Pleying by signes in þe peples sigt,
þat þe poete songon hath on higt;¹

This is not so different from the way in which some pantomimes are commented on by a figure appearing as a presenter in Elizabethan drama more than a century later. In Lydgate's 'mummings', which for the most part were intended for the court of the king himself or for presentation before the Lord Mayor of London, a deliberate attempt was made to exploit different artistic means for the same purpose to bring home the meaning as clearly and forcefully as possible. Such experiments are of great importance in the history of English drama. They provide the background not only for the dramatic efforts of the guilds, universities and Inns of Court, but also for the numerous semi-dramatic spectacles, the 'mummings' and Lord Mayor's Shows which are so typical of the period and whose importance in the history of English drama has been increasingly recognized of late. This common habit of employing various artistic means simultaneously also explains why rhetorical tragedies in the Senecan tradition were never really at home in England as they

comeþe in Dame Fortune.' He then goes on to describe Fortuna's appearance, mentioning a few examples of her power. In another *Mumming* we read that it was 'brought and presented vn to þe Mayre by an heraude, cleped Fortune', i.e. Fortuna is here acting as a 'presenter'. It is worth noting in this connection that Fortuna appears several times in later drama as well as in dumb shows (e.g. *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*, and *Jocasta*, V).

¹ *EETS ES*, 97 (1906), II, ll. 896-904. Wickham and Gibbs also quote this passage. In the Middle English poem *Sir Degrevant*, we find a brief description of a 'disguising' in which the douzepers of France perform a dance. See *EETS*, 221 (1949), ll. 1869-72.