



**BRAVE SPIRITS THEATRE
ARCHIVE**

DRAMATURGY: ON DUMB SHOWS
The Bloody Banquet
2015

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On Dumb Shows

C. Kimball

HISTORY AND ROOTS

In antiquity, pantomime shows were accompanied by music, especially the flute. Cunliffe thinks dumb shows came from Italian masques; Mehl thinks early modern shows are too individual and employed too differently to be a direct copy. He thinks they draw from pageant processions. Corpus Christi pageants and Lord Mayor Shows included silent tableaux or brief scenes, especially vignettes about current politics. Later dumb shows drifted from the pageant-laden roots into their own manifestations, increasingly more like scenes without words and more integral to the plot.

The first dumb shows of Elizabethan drama appear to draw heavily from pantomime pageant features and include “presenter” figures to explain what is happening. During pageants, not everyone would be able to hear the speech, so the visuals were an important component. These were also accompanied by music.

“The figure of the presenter reflects the tendency ... to make everything as clear and impressive as possible. Everything had to be said more than once, using different artistic means, in order to impress it on every single member of the audience” (Mehl)

PRESENTATION

Gurr asserts that by c. 1600, the dumb-show had become “laughably archaic” until it came back into fashion after *Pericles* (1607) and especially in the King’s Men rep. Shows would typically enter or begin at the discovery space. Chorus figures would likely enter from there as well unless there’s a reason they cannot.

Dumb shows, particularly those with large processions or the presentment of many important figures, would include many more props than the rest of the play and display the finest costumes.

CHORUS FIGURES

Mehl notes that old “mummings” and disguises often had orations running subsequent or simultaneous to the action, but he also considers the idea that the chorus ‘arguments’ were handed separately to the more “important people” in the audience to help them follow along with the action (as in the pageants, only the Queen and her entourage would have received information about the show’s meaning).

In early cases, “presenters” appeared as mythological or historical figures vaguely connected with the theme of the play. Some depictions drew from moral emblems which demonstrated lessons or personified abstract ideas. They would carry crests, mottoes, or identifiable costumes (see *Iconologia* and *Collection of Emblems* for examples of these images)

INTERPRETATIONS

Dumb shows speak through pictures rather than words (which are subject to the time of physical speech and the actor’s presence). Without dialogue, they can focus solely on the desired pictures and gestures and pacing (Homan)