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FILM AND THEATER

Costume and Convention

ANNE HOLLANDER

The epidemic of Elizabethan extravaganzas has now subsided, leaving a cloudy memory of red wigs, stately pacing and endless conversations conducted by people who couldn't move their necks freely. The artistic media have varied, but one thing remains clear: you cannot do Queen Elizabeth, filmed or live, without those clothes. Never have so many ruffs been worn before the public at one time as during the last season or two. The complex reasons for the present excessive popularity of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots, have been discussed in different places; but indeed their popularity has always been a viable theatrical entity, and movies have given them an airing many times over. The present moment, however, has permitted a unique opportunity for enthusiasts of historical costuming to compare the different conventions used for representing the same characters and adapting the same source material in opera, theater, television and film. Their aims appear quite different, while each maintains some clear relationship to the schematic image that everyone recognizes. Dr. Roy Strong, director of the National Portrait Gallery in London, expresses the significance of this image in the title of one of his important books on Elizabethan portraiture, *The English Icon*. He shows how an Elizabethan portrait, of the queen or any of her noble subjects, was a rigidly formalized image made up chiefly of elements of clothing and surmounted by a mask. The completed picture, whatever the variety in the details of face or embroidery according to the individual sitter, was recognizable as a proper portrait because it had the proper formal elements of dress—the beard or the wig, the ruff and the sleeves—that have appeared ever since on the stage and the screen. Costume designers, who may delight in consulting hundreds of these extremely detailed portraits, must yet end up scratching their heads over the problem of transmuting such icons into persons able to move and speak believably while dressed like that. The results are predictable. The details of the clothes may resemble those so excruciatingly clear in the paintings, but the icon will usually have had to be scrapped. The actual living actor who eventually wears the clothes will instead satisfy one of the costume conventions of the current theatrical moment.

Queen Elizabeth was known to care a great deal about clothes and cosmetics and to relish compliments—a lady uncertain of her beauty unless it was very well fortified. She had a strong theatrical sense about her own appearance, and seems to have known that her actual physical looks had less charm than her extraordinary mental force, which she clothed in an abstract splendor as if she were an Idea rather than a woman. Modern actresses never have to resemble Elizabeth physically—all that is required is the forceful manner and the clothes. Glenda Jackson has lately appeared as two quite different Elizabeths, wearing different hair, noses and breasts in the two versions, neither of which resembles the queen's portraits. Bette Davis has been the queen twice, once in the thirties and once in the

ANNE HOLLANDER is a costume designer who is at work on *The Clothed Image*, a book about the nude, drapery and dress in art.

fifties, looking utterly unlike Elizabeth each time, but very satisfyingly providing the characterization the public would naturally expect from the Regina of *The Little Foxes.*

In the movies the public has always accepted historical characters wearing the faces of favorite stars, providing the clothes gave the right idea in at least a few scenes, or perhaps only in a few particulars. Queen Elizabeth is always recognizable because of the familiar image; but for many others less easily schematized, specific costume conventions have long been established (originally for the stage, but lately adapted for the cinema) that now serve to signal the person or period in question without resembling anything actually worn at that date. So we had Norma Shearer as Marie Antoinette, and we knew it was she because she wore a very shiny, wavy white wig in most scenes. This particular kind of wig is a tried and true cinematic (and incidentally operatic) property of long standing, absolutely necessary to all films set in the eighteenth century in any country, although it does not faintly resemble anything worn in the eighteenth century itself. This same shiny wig tells us that Marlene Dietrich is meant to be Catherine the Great in Joseph von Sternberg's film, *The Scarlet Empress,* or that Lucille Ball is Madame Dubarry, because without it we couldn't tell from the other things she wears. This customary and familiar glossy headpiece may from time to time take on the flavor of its wearer's own day, but its silvery sheen and curl on one shoulder remain constant, to remind us of where we are.

Authenticity, even on the serious legitimate stage, is an elusive and tricky matter, partly because of purely theatrical conventions that the public has long come to think of as correct—like the flourishing, hat-sweeping bow, which was never executed except on a stage, but which has come to seem an acceptable, courteous obeisance appropriate anywhere from 1500 to 1800. Stage habits in historical costuming have long clouded any public judgment of authenticity, since they are better known than the facts. A fitted dress cut on a modern pattern, with a square neckline and a frill, has passed muster for decades as an authentic eighteenth-century costume, even in Williamsburg. The same dress will also do perfectly for the whole seventeenth century, and even for the sixteenth, if it doesn't have the frill. Curls and a cap (any style) go with it, but omit them too, please, for the sixteenth century. It all looks quite right and satisfactory, but like nothing except itself. Of course, careful research may yield to a designer a wealth of information that simply cannot be acceptably presented on the stage. For example, eighteenth-century men's clothes had absolutely no shoulder shaping, and with their long vests and coats their torsos came to resemble wrinkled string beans, and no such shape could be worn by a modern actor without some modifications. It would *be* right but *look* wrong, unless it were stylized out of its correct appearance and into something acceptable to prevailing taste, not only in clothes but in art and design. When crisp outlines, smooth surfaces, and sharp color contrasts are fashionable, costumes from those periods in history when clothing was dim, subtle, frothy or murky-looking must be smoothed and sharpened up before they will seem acceptably elegant.

The four kinds of Queen Elizabeth that the New York public has lately seen exemplify what the different media require in the way of imaginative adaptation for an authentic look. They were all meant to be realistic, without any exaggerated stylization. *Roberto Devereux,* Donizetti's opera at the State Theater, had Beverly Sills as a larger-than-life queen in harsh, strong colors, including a magenta never used in clothes before 1860. Her dresses were meant to be read from the last row of the fifth ring, and so the pearls were as large as grapes and the rows of trimming were thickly edged in black. Elizabeth's tiny, straight, flat-chested torso was translated into a bosomy, statuesque and massive shape, her pallid, bony face into a fierce mask with deeply shadowed cheeks and pouchy eyes. The red wig was ferocious, further exaggerated by a line of pearls

along the edge against the face, a detail entirely invented for operatic emphasis. Most noticeable was the prime necessity in opera for enough costume to balance the voice. A singer's body may very well be tall and substantial, but even if it is quite small, it will need to be clothed suitably for a strenuous stage existence, visually speaking. The requirements of operatic dress, quite apart from any historical or specifically operatic tradition, begin with a kind of massiveness and substance, even if the costume is meant to be rags or a nightgown. This substantial quality, besides being necessary for the beating the clothes take, provides an appropriate visual counterpart to the sustained musical utterance and broad acting demanded of the performer. The operatic stage is usually large, and when one or two singers occupy it alone, they must wear compelling garments upon which the eye can rest with a satisfied sense of their harmony with the strength and size of what is heard. Along with a great deal of yardage, strong ornamentation or arresting color and texture usually seem necessary to help fill the eyes while the voice fills the ears. These effects are often at variance with history, but so much in accordance with opera habits of long standing that they seem quite accurate to an opera audience: that wig, for instance, is indispensable for the Marschallin in the last act, and an enormous, flowing robe unlike anything worn to bed by girls in the seventeenth century is nevertheless acceptable dress for Lucia's mad scene. Norma and Adalgisa wear more yards of fabric than could possibly be natural to their circumstances, but we seem to need those yards for our proper appreciation of their feelings.

In the production of *Roberto Devereux*, characters other than the queen, and the chorus en masse, managed to look exactly like nineteenth-century historical paintings —actually a style quite appropriate to opera, since such paintings often had an operatic flavor, with gestures and groupings drawn from stage tradition.

"Elizabeth R," the BBC-TV series with Glenda Jackson, showed a view of historical dress exactly opposite to the operatic one. The six episodes were meant to be nontheatrical, extremely naturalistic representations of events in the period, and particularly of the character and views of specific personages. No "spectacle" was relevant to them, and settings were minimal in scope, although complete in detail. But at the same time the actual dress of the individuals in question was known to have been extremely rich and elaborate. Because of the closely focused, rather archaeological method of presentation, no broad generalizations of costume elements were permissible to convey this sumptuousness. All the clothes were copied from actual portraits, with no liberties taken or details glossed over. The exact patterns of lace, embroidery, and even fabric were reproduced to perfection. Television cameras, resting intimately on a character speaking, thus permitted a viewer to appreciate his clothes just as he could have done in actual life. One could imagine an Elizabethan courtier following the interlacings of sleeve embroidery while politely enduring a lengthy utterance, or counting the number of ribbon knots around an armhole in order not to lose his temper.

Wearing such garments appeared, at such close range, more difficult than designing them. Glenda Jackson did better than most of her court in managing to look not only at home in them but happy there, particularly since the bizarre, awkward and abstract quality of the Elizabethan costume was wonderfully transferred from the paintings into action—vitalized icons, all of them. Apart from the thousand details, the odd shapes and quirky proportions that appear in the portraits were also adhered to in spite of modern concepts of grace. This attention to the possible true flavor of the Elizabethan style in dress was one of the best aspects of this excellent series. Hair and beards were as carefully copied as the clothes and jewelry, and Mary, Queen of Scots, wore the frizzy wig that appears in her portraits, even though it looked strange, unromantic and a little ridiculous to modern eyes.

Costume design for the proscenium stage,

in contrast to the demands of the camera, has the opportunity to fill a frame with a picture that will always be in the same focus, safely guarded by footlights from the most minutely attentive gaze. Historical drama, which similarly puts a frame around events, seems best served by clothes and sets that form a picture very like the real ones from the period—at least with some of the same unified visual tone, which helps to authenticate the action of the play. When stylized inventions form the contents of the stage picture, there is as much room for ludicrous mistake as there is for dramatic power—Greek helmets looking just too much like diving gear, for example, or furniture like pretzels. Designers in any historical mode, abstract or literal, often tend to get carried away by their talent, so that the characters look as if they couldn't understand how they came to be dressed like that. Ideally, an actor should wear his costume as if he had put it on in the morning when he got up, even if it is plastic snakes sprayed gold or fifty yards of purple burlap. Good designers can make an actor look that way, even if he doesn't feel it himself. The insufficiently praised costumes for Peter Brook's famous *Midsummer Night's Dream,* for example, had just that natural, accustomed look, with all their strangeness.

The importance of what actors actually wear is singularly unrecognized by critics or audience. Costumes are so thoroughly identified with bodies that the messages they send are received without acknowledgment, even though an extraordinary emotional power can be generated by the use of very specific, noticeable things—the right use of a black cape, a white scarf, or a pair of bare feet. Audiences and critics will remember general sumptuousness and general bizarrerie, like nudity or rehearsal clothes for Shakespeare, but rarely anything specific, good or bad. Mistakes are not chastised any more than strokes of genius are praised. For example, in Robert Bolt's *Vivat, Vivat Regina!,* the past season's stage version of Queen Elizabeth's problems with Mary of Scotland, the designer dressed all those familiar people in simplified, well-shaped Elizabethan costumes taken from all the same paintings—but he chose to put Eileen Atkins, as Elizabeth, into a glittering black ruff for her last scene. This instantly turned a reasonable, simple set of stage clothes into the stuff of musical comedy. Black frills around the face are attractive and expressive, but they have no place in serious, realistic stylizations of Elizabethan dress, however dramatic, although one contemporary document mentions them. Without visual evidence one must invent, but to fly in the face of evidence is ridiculous, unless that is the point, which it wasn't in these costumes. They were broadly generalized, with little ornamentation—a good theatrical method and well suited to this particular play, which collapsed events in similar fashion. Nevertheless, what decoration there was had the flavor of modern trimming, stylish and elegant at best but unrelated to Renaissance modes of embellishment.

The Queen Elizabeth whose clothes were seen by most people during the last season was naturally Glenda Jackson's, in *Mary, Queen of Scots.* This film had little history to tell, but a good deal of sensational gossip to illuminate—chiefly by means of spectacle at all costs, or rather at great cost. Vanessa Redgrave, starring as Mary the passionate and doomed, could be dressed in a whole range of doomed-and-passionate outfits, very becoming but all invented out of whole cloth, as it were—because the necessary historical signals were helpfully conveyed by the tights on the gentlemen and, once again, the red wig and ruff on Glenda. This film follows the long traditions of cinematic period costume, which require: (1) that history take place in many changes of clothes, preferably in luxurious surroundings with plenty of eating done; (2) that armies be clearly distinguishable (as Ours and Theirs) by some very visible difference in their gear or its color; and (3) that the stars look sexy and terrific by modern standards. The last stipulation is, of course, the key to all historic costume in the movies, except for certain British films, Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films, and Visconti. In French and American movies, erotic and

fashionable taste can require, for example, that a blond, washed-out Eva Marie Saint, dusty and exhausted from years in the desert as an enforced Indian squaw (in *The Stalking Moon*), appear before Gregory Peck in complete and perfect eye makeup—shadow, liner and black mascara. Even in David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the grubby native girls had uplift bras under their tunics—a mistake fortunately now obsolete. These two examples were the more striking because the clothes in those films otherwise reeked of sweaty efforts at grim realism. On the other hand, Edwige Feuillere in *L'Aigle a Deux Têtes* wore elegant 1870s dresses copied from those of Empress Elizabeth of Austria—except that they all had to have great big shoulder pads because the movie appeared in 1947. The French are bad about makeup, too.

Glenda Jackson in *Mary, Queen of Scots* has the ruff and big sleeves, but her hair has been becomingly teased and smoothed, and indeed all the clothes in the movie have a slick, synthetic look. They also look incorrectly physically comfortable in the modern way. High Renaissance court dress, without the resources of modern technology, was precariously maintained in a state of elegant perfection by pounds of stuffing, starch, wood and steel. It undoubtedly weighed heavily and chafed considerably, but it was psychically rather than physically comfortable. Those who wore it believed in the importance of such dress as a necessary sign of rank and a reinforcement of personal power. They knew how it looked and what it meant; how one's clothes felt was irrelevant to an exalted position and was only the proper concern of laborers. Movie costumes are supported by nylon, aluminum, foam rubber and styrofoam, and they are cut to suit the modern idea about the action of bodies. When the camera can focus very minutely at the clothes worn in close-ups, it shows the plastic-looking nylon ruff that can never crush, or the bodice of unbelievable flexibility, molded and stiffened by elastic and aluminum springs instead of a rigid wooden busk.

The prevailing mode dictates the style in which movie costumes will depart from fact, so whereas the real Queen Elizabeth apparently had no eyebrows, or shaved them, Bette Davis wore penciled ones from the thirties in *Elizabeth and Essex*, and Glenda Jackson kept her own, dyed red, in *Mary, Queen of Scots*. Besides the female face, the female torso has always been the field for exercising the greatest distortion through fashion. American cinematic convention demands that all movie actresses wear the face and torso of the current moment, whatever the century in which the film is set, presumably so that they are believable as real women to a contemporary audience. When big, firm breasts, a tiny waist, and a straight back are fashionable, all historical characters have them, whatever style of clothing is worn, including otherwise archaeologically correct flapper dresses. When slouching shoulders, no waist, and low, soft breasts are the thing, everybody wears those even with Elizabethan ruffs or Civil War hoopskirts. This often makes it easier, when flicking on the TV, to tell when a film was made than when it was supposed to take place, unless of course we have a few unmistakable signals, like a shiny white wig.