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THE POLITICS OF PERSONIFICATION IN THE JACOBEAN LORD MAYORS' SHOWS.

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Prosopopeia, or personification, was the principal representational strategy of the London Lord Mayor's Shows of the early seventeenth century. Staged annually to mark the accession of the new Lord Mayor, the Shows were elaborate processions that made their way through the busiest streets of the heart of early modern London, pausing at various points for the performance of dramatic vignettes. These vignettes were complex pageants that typically featured allegorical figures representing abstract qualities, places, art forms, and acts. These figures were both embodied by living actors and depicted in iconographic decoration. The virulent anti-Catholicism of post-Reformation London means that the Show's relationship to its pre-Reformation predecessors is somewhat vexed. Nevertheless, the Shows recuperate the allegorical modes familiar from religious iconography and processional forms, such as saints' days celebrations, and mix them with comparable types such as exotic beasts and 'savage' men, recognisable from other earlier forms of street theatre and popular drama. These prior forms are reworked to articulate newer priorities, a transformation that reveals much about both the early seventeenth century context, and the mechanisms of prosopopeia itself.

The early history of the London Lord Mayors' Shows is rather obscure, but notwithstanding the assertions found in the Shows themselves of their great antiquity and long tradition, it seems that it was only during the 1540s that the inauguration of the Lord Mayor began to be marked in more elaborate ways.¹ Near the end of the sixteenth century, the pageants started to be recorded in commemorative texts produced by the poet(s) who had been commissioned to devise the themes

¹ Speculation on why this might be can be found in Paster G.K., "The Idea of London in Masque and Pageant", in Bergeron D.M. (ed.), *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater* (Athens: 1985), 48-64; Wickham G., *Early English Stages, 1300-1600, III: Plays and their Makers to 1576* (London: 1981), 56; Laroque F., *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. Lloyd J. (Cambridge: 1991). Tracey Hill's definitive account of the Shows also engages with this issue (*Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayors' Show, 1585-1639* (Manchester: 2010)).

and speeches for the year's celebrations, though this only became regular practice in the seventeenth century. The texts that survive offer us a partial glimpse of a total form of theatre that synthesised a wide range of aesthetic and sensory possibilities, and encompassed quotidian space within its mythologizing scope. Unlike commercial theatre or courtly spectacle, the Shows took place publicly and were free and open to the entire community. They were available to a wider range of spectators and participants than any other early modern genre in English. Thus, they offer evidence for the kinds of representation that were most widely experienced and understood in early modern English culture. Their use of personification gives us a powerful insight into the ways that representation could be put to work in public spectacle.

The writer of the Show was responsible for more than just the text of the speeches and songs, as they also had to co-ordinate the design and building of the pageant cars, the making of costumes, and the hiring of actors, as well as procuring the printing of between 200-500 copies of a description of the event. There are records for 20 Shows between 1602 and 1626, showing that 9 were written by Anthony Munday, and 6 by Thomas Middleton, with one further Show shared between them. It is perhaps because of the extensive contacts and experience that would have been required to co-ordinate such a complex event that only a small number of writers were engaged for the task in the period under consideration.² But the repeated commissioning of these writers also implies a sanctioning of their rhetorical practices by the sponsors of the Shows, the London livery companies. This essay focuses on the representational strategies used in a selection of Shows by these two writers. It will argue that Middleton and Munday utilise the techniques of personification (and allegory more generally) to meet the conflicting demands of the genre by creating a purposefully opaque sense of esoteric meaning. Although critics in the past have tended to dismiss

² The writer favoured most often by the guilds in the latter part of the sixteenth century appears to have been George Peele, two of whose Show texts survive. Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, John Squire and John Webster were employed to write the Lord Mayors' Shows for 1604, 1612, 1620 and 1624 respectively. Anthony Munday may also have contributed to the 1604 Show. For a discussion of the identity of the writers of the Shows, see Robertson J. – Gordon D.J. (eds.), *A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London, 1485-1640*, Malone Society Collections, III (Oxford: 1954), hereafter referred to as *MSC*, III.

the genre because of its incoherence, this essay argues that, rather than a mistake, structured incoherence is in fact a deliberate element of the Shows' representational mode.

The livery company of the new Lord Mayor would start inviting proposals from the writers several months before the event, and sometimes in competition with each other. The Shows were thus collaboratively produced expressions of the culture and power of the city elites, embodied by the livery companies. Their symbolic strategies are therefore deeply implicated in the political situation of early modern London at a time when global trade and proto-colonial practices were being instigated.

This essay begins with an examination of the way that trade and political structures are figured in the Shows, drawing a distinction between the political underpinnings of representation in the two writers' work, before exploring how they both blur early modern categorisations of rhetorical figures. It then discusses ways in which the texts intervene in the processes of meaning and the construction of their own relations to the events they represent, before showing that, ultimately, the texts themselves model the kinds of reading that they try to persuade the reader to engage in.

The clearest manifestation of the political ideologies underlying Munday's approach to the genre were apparent in his Monument to Drapery in *Himatia-Poleos* (1614), which recalls the hierarchical organisation of tableaux from court masques such as the House of Fame in Jonson's *The Masque of Queens*. Munday's description of the tableau shows how hierarchical thinking permeated the arrangement:

In the supreme and most eminent seate, sitteth *Himatia*, or Cloathing, as Mother, Lady and commaundresse of all the rest, who by their distinct emblemes and properties, (apted for the easiest apprehension) doe expresse their dutie and attendance on so gracious a person, in their severall places and offices to them belonging; as in Carding, Spinning, Weaving,

Rowing, Fulling, Shearing, Dressing, Dying, Tentering and performing all other services to woollen Cloathes (128-135).³

Himatia, or clothing, is a supreme, royal head of a hierarchy wherein each individual has a role to play along a chain of productivity in which there is no superfluity or waste. The figure at the top of the tableau is the final purpose of the activities of those below her,⁴ and without her their roles would be meaningless. The chariot is guarded by Peace, Plentie, Liberalitie and Discreet Zeale, who 'supporte the flourishing condition of *Himatiaes* Common-wealth and strive to prevent all occasions which may seem sinister or hurtfull thereto' (137-9). This model of the commonwealth is one in which common gain can only be achieved by submitting to the figure at the top, whose benefit is thus understood to represent the benefit of all.

The symbolic link between the spatial arrangement of the tableau and the hierarchical nature of power is an example of the repeated use of visual symbols as analogies for abstract ideas in the Shows. Their practice of habitual metaphor is so pervasive that it is no overstatement to suggest that everything in the Shows is recruited to stand in for something else. In the same Show, for example Munday includes Henry Fitz-Alwin, the first Lord Mayor, as a character. He describes the previous methods of governing London that were attempted before Richard I instituted the office of Lord Mayor. These included the appointment of two bailiffs, an arrangement which not only did not work but 'could not please the king' because 'in two mens rule grew varying' (286-7). Plurality is not only impractical, he says, it is also against God's plan:

Therefore as God had given him place,
Solely to rule, and judge each case,
So he would plant a deputie
To figure his authoritie,

³ References to Munday's Shows are all taken from Bergeron D. (ed.), *The Pageants and Entertainments of Anthony Munday: A Critical Edition* (New York: 1985), and are given as line numbers after quotations in the text.

⁴ Gendering of figures is given as it is in the source text.

In the true forme of Monarchie,
Then which, no better soveraigntie (292-7)

The office of Lord Mayor is both successful in practice and morally acceptable because it follows the model of royal authority, which in turn is predicated on a paternalistic paradigm of the authority of God. The Lord Mayor has a position of power that follows the same pattern as the King's relationship to the kingdom, God's relationship to creation, and Himatia's relationship to the domain of clothing manufacture.

Munday's Show implies that the Lord Mayor, as the deputy of the King, owes his position to divine right. Consequently he is presented as self-evidently deserving of the pageant's praise. By contrast, Middleton's Shows conceptualise the entitlement of the Lord Mayor to praise rather differently. The very name of *The Triumphs of Honour and Industry* (1617) gives an indication of the way that this Show asserts an interdependence between the titular categories – both of which appear as personified figures who speak in the Show. Industry proclaims herself to be 'the life-blood of praise' (72),⁵ emphasising that Fame depends upon the worthy behaviour of the individual, and that action is required to merit it. Rather than praise being something that those of high birth are simply entitled to, based upon invocations of ancestry, we are told that 'Fame waits their age whom Industry their youth' (76).

In terms of the pageant's scheme, honour-gaining activity is specifically economic. A figure representing Traffic holds a globe that symbolises how she, with Industry, 'knits love and peace amongst all nations' (61). Mercantile wealth-gathering is specifically portrayed as a socially beneficial act. The implication of this pageant is clearly that the achievement of aldermanic and mayoral status is an indication of having spent one's youth participating in the industrious activity that the pageant commends.

⁵ References to Middleton's Shows are all taken from Taylor G. – Lavagnino J. (eds.), *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford: 2007), and are given as line numbers in the text.

Despite this sense of the self-evidence of the Lord Mayor's entitlement to praise, the contingency of honour is emphasised in a slight but significant dramatic scene staged at the end of the Show. At the 'Castle of Fame or Honour' a character called Reward jumped up as soon as she saw the Lord Mayor and invited him to take the seat reserved for him 'to do thy virtues grace' at 'Fame's bright Castle' (193). Justice, however, stepped in, declaring that Reward had been too forward because the Lord Mayor must first prove himself before he can receive praise:

A whole year's reverend care in righting wrongs
And guarding innocence from malicious tongues,
Must be employ'd in virtue's sacred right
[...]
There must be merit, or our work's not right' (199-201; 214).

In finding a triumphal rhetoric to suit his patrons, Middleton converts a discourse founded on aristocratic birthright to one in which the values of capitalist economic productivity are privileged, recruiting older kinds of symbolism to support the particular economic conditions of his own time and place. Figures such as Honour, Virtue and Fame retain their places in Middleton's pantheon, but are redirected to articulate the praise of industriousness and the accumulation of wealth through mercantilism and financial services.

Both Middleton and Munday complicate categories of representation in their Shows, blurring distinctions between the historical/real/literal and the metaphorical/performed/temporary. Etymologically, prosopopeia suggests giving an abstract thing a *face*. This is emphasised by early modern rhetoricians, such as Richard Bernard, who describes it as 'the feigning of a person: when wee bring in dead men speaking, or our selues doe take their person vpon vs, or giue voice vnto senselesse things'. Bernard emphasises the emotional affect of the figure, asserting that it is 'very pathetical and moueth much if it be rightly handled'.⁶

⁶ Bernard, Richard, *The Faithfull Shepheard* (London: 1609), K4r.

Puttenham, on the other hand, divides the figure into separate categories, using the label prosopographia (the representation of persons who did exist at some point, or could have done).

Prosopopoeia takes counterfeiting to a further level of feigning 'because it is by way of fiction' to

feign any person with such features, qualities, and conditions, or if ye will attribute any human quality, as reason or speech, to dumb creatures or other insensible things, and do study (as one may say) to give them a human person.⁷

Both Middleton and Munday, however, use these different figures interchangeably. The blurring of categorical distinctions is, I will argue, not an accidental incoherence, but instead a deliberate feature of the Shows' negotiation of their generic obligations.

The central conceit of Munday's 1605 Show *The Triumphs of Re-United Britannia*, is, as demonstrated by its title, clearly one of unification and combination. The antiquity of a unified Britain was a popular myth drawn on by Jacobean pageant writers seeking to redefine nationhood in the light of the unification of the crowns of England and Scotland on King James's accession to the English throne. Despite the unpopularity of the of the King's attempts to establish a union of the kingdoms (and, ultimately, their comprehensive failure),⁸ its rhetoric remained embedded in pageantry, which continued to eulogise his role in bringing the kingdoms together in his person. Munday therefore had to tread a fine line between pushing for the unification of the three nations into a single state and maintaining an acknowledgement of their separate distinctiveness.

Unsurprisingly, Britannia is personified in the Show. Alongside her, however, are also the three constituent nations, Albania, Cambria, and Loegria who represent Scotland, Wales, and England respectively, suggestion a vision of separate entities blended together in a way that does not compromise their essentially distinct identities. All four are represented as female figures on the

⁷ Puttenham, George, *Art of English Poesy*, ed. F. Whigham and W.A. Rebhorn (Ithaca – New York: 2007) 324.

⁸ According to Pauline Croft, the 1607 Parliament comprehensively destroyed the Union scheme (*King James* (Basingstoke: 2003) 65-6.

same principle as abstract qualities such as Fame, for example. However, each nation is also represented by a male pseudo-historical figure (Brute and his sons Albanact, Camber, and Lochrine). Each of these men is presented as the spouse of the relevant kingdom and the root of that kingdom's name. These male figures seem to be more 'real', active people (prosopographia, in Puttenham's terms), whereas the female figures are prosopopeia, because they represent places. Thus, the relationship between these male figures and the territories they represent is more akin to the manner of the King himself. This mode can also be observed in the habit of referring to kingly or aristocratic characters in drama by their territories (e.g. 'our noble uncle, Lancaster' in Shakespeare's *Richard II*). Identity itself in this Show is masculine, in that all names are patronymics and the female figures all derive their names from men, not the other way around. This is clear from Munday's account of Brute's 'conquest' of Britannia's 'virgine honour' (159).⁹

This use of marriage to express the relationship between patriarch and territory is a stock metaphor of Renaissance political theory and rhetoric. It also surfaces repeatedly in the Shows, with London often being figured as the spouse of the Lord Mayor (most prominently in Munday's 1616 Show *Chrysanaleia* because of the pun on the surname of Lord Mayor John Leman). The marriage metaphor aptly gestures towards the Shows' simultaneous yet contradictory impulses to join discrete categories together, whilst insisting on their distinctness. The obvious gender dynamics at play here demonstrate that the Shows use their symbolic resources to imagine the dominance of the individuated masculine elite over the abstracted, feminised multitude of the city or nation.

A similar pattern of differentiated levels of representativeness can be seen in Middleton's *Triumphs of Honour and Virtue* (1622). In this pageant both Indian and English bodies are represented, but there is a key distinction between the way in which these representations are described in terms of clothing. One set of actors are described in metaphor as 'Indians in antique

⁹ The same pattern of naming, gendering and type of representation is repeated with the three rivers also personified in the Show.

habits' (45-6). Another set are enumerated and described literally: 'three habited like merchants' (46-7). This subtly closes off the possibility of subjectivity and reality for types of people, identified by clothing (and, implicitly, complexion) as foreign and/or alien.

The three actors who represent the merchants are densely representative on several further levels. As Middleton's text explains, the Lord Mayor and both Sheriffs of the city were all members of the Grocers' Company that year. To signify this, the three men who held these positions the previous time that this coincidence had occurred are, according to the text, also represented by these three actors, 'matched and paralleled with these three [...] as worthy successors' (106-7). On one level, then, the individuated English bodies, prosopographically representing people actually present at the Show, are set against a vague and undefined 'Indian' anonymity. But, on another level, the text seems to suggest that they also represent Commerce, Adventure and Traffic, abstractions personified as a holy trinity of mercantile virtues.¹⁰ The distinctions here are clearly meant to collapse, associating these qualities with the men whose achievements were being celebrated.

As Gordon Teskey notes, allegory oscillates between 'negative and positive others', and establishes a hierarchy whereby 'the former, positive sense of the 'other' as a higher, abstract meaning reflects back on a literal narrative that is 'other' in a negative sense'. Indeed, Teskey suggests that the hierarchy between these two values is the point, because it postulates a 'transcendental otherness that we situate above the world in order to make that world, as the macrocosm, coincide with the self'.¹¹ The Shows, however, whilst maintaining this interplay, confuse its directionality. It is not always clear what the positive, primary, or 'literal' element of the figure is.

¹⁰ The text is somewhat ambiguous here, and could be read to mean that Commerce, Adventure and Traffic are a further three figures in the pageant. I interpret the passage to mean that they are embodied by the same actors.

¹¹ Teskey G., *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca – London: 1996) 6-7.

So in terms of the three figures from *The Triumphs of Honour and Virtue*, whether the merchants (real, historical, and fictional) are 'like' abstractions or the other way around is undetermined.

A further example can be found in Middleton's *The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity* (1619), which included a 'Parliament of Honour' that featured representations of 24 royal or aristocratic members of the Skinners' Company, described as a kind of 'ornament' to the Show. Their ornamental quality is explicitly stated as acting in both directions: they are 'adorning their adorners' (276).

The impossible vision presented of the simultaneous presence of historical figures from different time periods turns them from people into figures of meaning. Thus, objects can be people, but people are also objects, adorning the Show. Middleton insists on their historical veracity in the printed text, listing (seemingly rather random) facts about them, ranging from endowments made and military victories won, to hunting and dining habits. The inconsistent approach (some figures get several lines of text; others only get one or two) generates a sense that such figures are more like mythological or fictional characters who represent one thing, too impressionistically sketched to seem like real people.

In one sense, the meaning of these figures is subordinated to the cause of elevating the status of the real people present at the event that the figures are being recruited to celebrate. The Mayor and Aldermen are being paid an extravagant compliment by their presence. But at the same time, the assertion of 'presence' made by these figures simply emphasises their absence. Only their avatars are available, and even these need copious explanation and glossing, both in the speeches on the day and in the commemorative text. The effect generated is that in fact the signified behind these signifiers is even farther away than it might first appear. As these texts seek to close down this distance, more gaps become possible.

This explains why the danger of misreading is consistently, paranoiacally raised by the printed texts. In the same Show, *The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity*, Middleton imputes such misreading to the fault of 'over curious and inquisitive' readers (296-7), a typical gesture in such texts. Despite this refusal to take responsibility for misinterpretations, we have seen that Middleton nonetheless affixes a list explaining who the figures in his Parliament of Honour were supposed to be. He states that this will ensure that the display 'may arrive at a clear and perfect manifestation' (295-6). Whilst there is clearly a sense here that the textual manifestation of the allegory will be a flawless one, this usage of 'perfect' also reflects the now obsolete meaning of being finished and complete (*OED* sense 3). Thus, the Show is incomplete (and flawed) until it has been recorded and explained by textual description.

In discussing Geoffrey Whitney's 'normative model' of the emblem, Michael Bath identifies a tripartite structure in which the 'emblem presents us with an epigram which resolves the enigmatic relation between motto and picture by appealing to received meanings which its images have in established iconographic systems of Western culture'.¹² Notwithstanding Bath's caution against describing pageant devices as 'emblematic',¹³ the combination of visual symbolism, textual explication, and combined meaning does provide us with an emblematic mode of meaning-making.

An example of this interdependence can be found in instances where pageant texts describe their subjects in ways which cannot have been apparent during the event itself. For example, in *Camp-Bell* (1609), Munday describes the pageant-car of the Insula Beata as floating 'upon the calm Sea of discrete and loyall affections' (63), and in *Sidero-thriambos* (1618) he describes Fear and Modesty as 'both veiled, but so sharp-sighted that they can discern through the darkest obscurities, when any disorder threatneth danger to *Majesty*, or to his carefull Deputie' (181-3). It is difficult to

¹² Bath, M., *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (London: 1994) 74.

¹³ Bath, *Speaking Pictures* 24.

imagine how this veiled sharp-sightedness might have been conveyed to the crowds visually, or how the metaphor of the sea of loyalty could possibly have been conveyed by a moving pageant car.¹⁴

The texts of the Shows operate in the same way as emblem inscriptions therefore, explaining the visual figures and the relation between them to indicate the moral message of the presentation as a whole. Middleton's most obviously emblematic Show is *The Triumphs of Truth*, as can be seen in the costume descriptions given in the printed account. Error, for example, sits with 'his head rolled in a cloud, over which stands an owl, a mole on one shoulder, a bat on the other, all symbols of blind ignorance and darkness, mists hanging at his eyes' (246-9). Next to him, his champion, Envy, rides a rhinoceros whilst 'eating of a human heart' (250). She is dressed all in red 'suitable to the bloodiness of her manners' (251-2) and the gory picture is completed with a snake suckling her left breast and a bloody dart in her right hand. These symbols, and others in the same Show, are standard modes of representation, lifted straight from the emblem books of Ripa and Valeriano.¹⁵ Their meaning is confirmed by the text's allusions.

The explanatory gloss of the Shows is not solely contained within the descriptive text. For instance, Munday's pageant characters often self-consciously introduce themselves and their purposes. Henry Fitz-Alwin in *Metropolis Coronata* (1615), for example, declares that he is speaking 'on behalf of the honourable company of Drapers, who made no spare of their bounty, for full performance of this dayes solemne Honor' (279-81). Munday's descriptions also seem very conscious of the artifice of pageant devices, for example describing the character presented in *Himatia-Poleos* as 'the supposed shadow' of Sir John Norman (154). In performance the character himself also drew attention to his fictionality, instructing the Lord Mayor to 'imagine me to be the true resemblance of olde Sir *John Norman*' (160-1). A similar effect occurs in *Metropolis Coronata*,

¹⁴ Additionally, the printed accounts of the Shows may have portrayed the performances as more successful than they were in the event; they are an idealised version of the event, rather than an accurate representation. For example, with regard to *Camp-Bell*, the Ironmongers' Company complained that Munday 'performed not his speeches on land, nor the rest of his contracted service' (*MSC*, III, 77).

¹⁵ *MSC*, III, xxxix.

when Henry Fitz-Alwin announces ‘the borrowed shape I beare | Of olde Fitz-Alwine’ (74-5). The speeches are an explanatory text for an essentially emblematic display, whether they are heard at the event or read subsequently in the text.

Munday appears to concede a certain amount of leeway in the matter of interpretation in his presentation of the emblems of his 1616 Show *Chrysanaleia*. The inclusion of a crowned dolphin is explained as ‘alluding som way to the Lord Maiors coate of Armes, but more properly to the Companies, and therefore may serve indifferently for both’ (84-6). Though Munday seems here to acknowledge the possibility of multiple interpretations, this is rather part of the text’s overall strategy of placing the origin and guarantee of meaning squarely with the sponsoring livery company. This is supported within the text by Munday’s statement that

our devices for that solemne and Joviall day, were and are accordingly proportioned, by the discreete and well advised judgement of the Gentlemen, thereto chosen and deputed

This is also borne out by the note in the Fishmongers’ Company records that suggests that Munday was obliged to employ nominees of the company in the business of preparing the Show, and to incorporate their ideas into his plans.¹⁶ Munday’s emphasis on his own acquiescence to his sponsor’s requests maintains a sense of an externally-fixed meaning that the text does not create, but grants access to.

Similarly, in *Sidero-thriambos* (1618), Munday appeals explicitly to common knowledge. He declares that all of the personages portrayed ‘have all Emblemes and Properties in their hands’ so that even those of the ‘weakest capacity’ will understand ‘the true morality of this devise’ (189-91). Paradoxically, however, later in the Show, the character of the ‘Brittish Barde’ declines to ‘expresse’ the meaning of ‘Thaese Shewes and Emblems’ for fear of ‘tediousnes’, and instead directs the Lord

¹⁶ *MSC*, III, 90.

Mayor to wait 'Until thilke Buke, whilke speaks them aw' (257-61). The actual details of the Show's meaning, then, hover somewhere elsewhere, in between the performance and the printed text.

In Middleton's Shows, the descriptive texts ascribe to themselves absolute authority, as is strikingly shown in the opening passage of *The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity*. It starts with the stock conceit of establishing the superiority of London's triumphal forms over those of 'foreign nations' (22) – a typical slippage which works to situate London as a nation rather than a city. The text continues:

there is fair hope that things where invention flourishes, clear art and her graceful proprieties should receive favour and encouragement from the content of the spectator, which, next to the service of his honour and honourable Society, is the principal reward it looks for; and not despairing of that common favour— which is often cast upon the undeserver, through the distress and misery of judgement— this takes delight to present itself (25-33).

It is difficult to discern here who the grammatical subject of the sentence is and what the antecedents of the pronouns 'it' and 'this' are. The circuitousness of the tortuous expression in this passage is in itself an indication of the text's concealments and verbal decoys. Ultimately, though, the grammatical subject here is the text itself, presenting itself to the reader. As we saw above, Middleton conceptualises the text as the element that completes the 'perfection' of the Show as a whole. Here, we discover that the text is personified as an agent seeking the approval of the (uncommon) reader, but only if the reader submits to the text's own interpretation of itself. The poor judgement of some is asserted to manipulate the reader into the opposite position, one which coincides with accepting the text's own assertions about its own status and its relationship to the event it describes.

This self-reflexive locution is characteristic of Middleton's Show texts to the extent that it becomes formulaic. For example, *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613) describes itself with the phrasing 'thus the form of it presents itself' (85-6). Similarly, *The Triumphs of Honour and Industry* (1617) uses

‘it begins to present itself’ (39). The phrasing ‘this takes delight to present itself’, cited above from *The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity* (1619), is repeated exactly in *The Triumphs of Honour and Virtue* (1622) and *The Triumphs of Health and Prosperity* (1626).¹⁷ These texts personify themselves as the perfected form of the events they describe. The event is past and irretrievable, now mythologised, whereas the text positions itself in the category of the ‘real’.

Political structures, especially a divinely-sanctioned monarchical hierarchy, constitute objective external fixities that the texts gesture towards but can only name obliquely. This is not only because of the risks involved in naming and committing to particular political configurations within a volatile public sphere, but also because direct naming would undo the power of the symbol being invoked. The referent is always out of reach, and the circuits of representation in the texts work to conceal this by creating a self-referential, self-reinforcing linguistic domain. To generate the impression of a fixed external reality, the text must impressionistically suggest it, but never define it, to allow the reader to fill in the deficiencies with their own understanding.

Here, Teskey’s description of the way that allegory ‘elicits continual interpretation as its primary aesthetic effect’ is a useful formulation to apply to the Lord Mayors’ Shows. Like allegories, they are ‘incoherent on the narrative level, forcing us to unify the work by imposing meaning on it’.¹⁸ The Lord Mayors’ Shows are not allegories per se, but they do use personification to concretise the political interests of the elites that they represent. The texts present us with a set of personifications whose relationships seem like a puzzle for which there must be a solution. Earlier scholars responded to this challenge with spot-the-reference descriptiveness, as well as complaints about how incoherent these texts are.¹⁹ If we recast this incoherence as a feature, not a mistake, we can see more clearly how the kinds of personification used enable the writer to account for the disparate

¹⁷ Self-plagiarism is also a common feature of the Show texts, especially in their formulaic preambles and other elements that might be considered paratextual.

¹⁸ Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 4-5.

¹⁹ This approach is epitomised in Bald, R.C., “Middleton’s Civic Employments”, *Modern Philology* 31 (August 1933) 65-78.

and competing interests spoken for and to, in and by the Shows. The printed textual descriptions of these events are one element of a polysemic genre, whose inconsistencies were well-suited to both represent and instantiate the situation of the city and its inhabitants.

These texts offer us models of the ways in which we can represent the past, a relationship which is paralleled in our own readings of the texts themselves. Though we must acknowledge the impossibility of finding out, in Pierre Nora's phrase, 'what actually happened',²⁰ these texts also offer us another, even more tempting prize – what it 'actually' means. Whilst this category, too, is an imaginary one, its motivations enable us to gain insight into how meaning works, and show how personification was a key strategy in the simultaneously concealing and revealing textual practices of the early modern period.

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