



4:1 2018

## **Transitions – For Alessandro Serpieri**

**Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi**

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI – *Preface*

The Editors

GUIDO AVEZZÙ – *Collaborating with Euripides: Actors and Scholars  
Improve the Drama Text*

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI – *Onstage/Offstage (Mis)Recognitions in The Winter's  
Tale*

Miscellany

ANGELA LOCATELLI – *Hamlet and the Android: Reading Emotions  
in Literature*

ROBERTA MULLINI – *A Momaria and a Baptism: A Note on Beginning  
and Ending in the Globe Merchant of Venice (2015)*

CLARA MUCCI – *The Duchess of Malfi: When a Woman-Pince Can Talk*

LILLA MARIA CRISAFULLI – *Felicia Hemans's History in Drama: Gender  
Subjectivities Revisited in The Vespers of Palermo*

MARIA DEL SAPIO GARBERO – *Shakespeare in One Act. Looking  
for Ophelia in the Italian War Time Context*

**Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

FERNANDO CIONI – *Italian Alternative Shakespeare. Carmelo Bene's Appropriation of Hamlet*

CARLA LOCATELLI – “*The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes*”:  
*Reading Beckett's Not I as the (non)End of Tragedy*

### Special Section

VALERIO VIVIANI – *Nashe's (Self-)Portrait of a Town*

GUIDO PADUANO – *Is Hamlet's Madness True or Faked?*

ROSY COLOMBO – *Hamlet: Origin Displaced*

CLAUDIA CORTI – *À propos of King Lear in the New Italian Translation and Edition by Alessandro Serpieri (Venezia, Marsilio, 2018)*

ERIC NICHOLSON – *A Double Dove/Diletto: Using Alessandro Serpieri's Translation for Bilingual Productions of Shakespeare's Plays*

ALESSANDRO SERPIERI AND KEIR ELAM – *Eros in Shakespeare*

ALESSANDRO SERPIERI AND PINO COLIZZI – *Intervista a Prospero - Interview with Prospero*

ALESSANDRO SERPIERI – *Ouverture*

TOMASO KEMENY – *Qualche parola per Sandro - A Few Words for Sandro*

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## Preface

It must have been in 2007, at the Casa della Poesia in Milan, where Alessandro Serpieri and I had been invited by colleague and poet Tomaso Kemeny to talk about our recent translation of John Donne's poems for Rizzoli, when I saw Serpieri's perhaps most gratified reaction ever to a comment on his work as a critic. That comment had been made by Kemeny who had introduced him to the audience. 'Transitions' was the word he had used. After the talk, Serpieri told me why he was so pleased with it: because that word had beautifully caught the sense of movement, transformation, translation, interpretation, discovery that was at the basis of what he liked to call 'adventures' of the mind, a synonym for critical enquiry.

Adventures: he often enjoyed to repeat that all critical *élan* originates in one's need to recover a lost sense of wonder, and that interpreting and letting the text speak to us was a way, perhaps the best way, to recover that wonder, while responding to a deep existential tension towards always new trajectories and possibilities of sense. Only by feeling that urge could criticism be 'adventurous' – and wondrous. This is perhaps one of the first teachings he imparted to many of us, passing down to the younger generations the idea that our critical job was not a 'job' at all; it was a continuous response to that original need. Establishing a dialogue with great literary works and letting different voices and imaginations talk to each other through time was our privilege. He was extraordinarily and painfully aware of the passing of time, and to it he devoted seminal studies: to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and, before then, to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to name but a few. But he was also amazingly capable of neutralizing time imaginatively – himself remaining forever young, as he was to write in his novel *Mare Scritto* (2007b).

Transitions: the title of this Special Issue is meant to suggest ideas of movement and exploration of texts, languages, modes and genres and the investigation of their connections across time. It also wants to keep a dialogue alive with Alessandro Serpieri on some of the main fields of his research in drama and theatre studies: transitions from sources to texts and genres, from page to stage, from one language to another, from poetry to

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drama, or drama in poetry, from deep to surface structures, finally, from criticism to creative writing. This special Issue collects articles from colleagues and friends who in different ways have collaborated with the Journal and the *Skenè* research group. From the editorial board and staff and from the contributors to this Issue, our gratitude for his unstinting intellectual generosity towards us all.

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In 2015 Alessandro Serpieri published his most recent collection of studies, *Avventure dell'interpretazione*. In many ways, it synthesizes the critical approach he developed in the course of his career, spanning poetry and drama as well as critical theory. This Preface does not wish to talk *about* Serpieri's work but to continue to talk *with* him on some of the issues that, as that book shows, stand behind his critical approach, investing the problem itself of criticism as interpretation. On 9 and 10 May 2018 a Conference was held in his honour in Florence and was entitled *Avventure dell'interpretazione*, recalling the title of that book which I had the honour of including in the *Anglica Series* (ETS) I am co-editor of. This Preface will offer only a few notes on the same topic, which I happened to discuss with Alessandro Serpieri in 2015 on the occasion of my presentation of the book at Gabinetto Vieusseux in Florence.

My starting point are two quotations from two essays on Shakespeare:

Editing means also interpreting, and interpretation is the first job of any reader, and most of all of the translator who has to cope with the variant readings transmitted by the early texts, to distinguish misreadings, to consider emendations, and finally to choose or to establish one's text. At least on a theoretical basis, the translator should have an adequate grounding in textual criticism. (Serpieri 2014a: 167)

It is an *imagination in action* in that it does not follow a linear progression of meaning, but rather develops according to a serpentine, dynamic movement that produces sense both expanding the previous one and contracting it in order to release new unexpected sense. The dramatic discourse unfolds itself according to the circumstantial standpoints of characters who, at the same time, think, feel and act. (Serpieri 2007a: 165)

When in his essay on the Shakespearean translator as editor (2014a) Serpieri connected the act of reading with interpretation, he was not voicing a truism, nor was he entirely uncontroversial. With the advent of deconstructionism, cultural studies, and performance studies, to name but a few critical approaches in various ways contesting the idea of text, the very concept of interpretation has become debatable. If writing is the locus of



the absence of the author-god and of original meaning, all textual interpretation is a 'theological' concept contrary to the infinite possibilities of *différance* and of free play within a context where centres may be substituted and meaning made endless (Derrida 2005: 278). Derrida picked play texts, and their theatrical mounting, as a paradigm of what he stigmatized, and condemned, as false representations. For him a 'theology of the stage' defined a series of surrogate representatives of the absent author, emblematic of all signifying processes activated by the written word as well as by a text-oriented theatre. Theatre (and the world-as-theatre) was thus criticized for being dependent upon

an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps a watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly, represent the thought of the 'creator'. Interpretative slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the 'master'. (2005: 296)

As is well known, this critique, which in fact subsumed a precise hostility towards an ideology of power inscribed within the logos, was not limited to theatre but invested the whole universe of texts and signs, discovering the existence of a chain of signifiers devoid of stable signifieds, a series of shifting meaning(s) inhabited by *différence*. From such a resistance to all deferred interpretation and representation of the absent author, and consequent suspicion about the authority of texts, a new emphasis originated on the 'democratization' of critical, performative, as well as translational practices. At the same time, a reconfiguration of culture as performance was ready to embrace ideas of cultural variables and collaborative activity within both special contexts and our everyday life, making for a (claimed) horizontal, 'democratic' relation between interacting people, in place of a 'vertical', hierarchical textualized culture. As Schechner wrote in his 2002 introductory volume to performance studies, all this took place "during the last third of the twentieth century" when the world changed its configuration and "no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in" because of new types of knowledge and the "new means of distributing [it] via the internet" (21). Thus understood as an integrating and collaborative form of meaning-making, the word 'performance' has come to be applied to our way of inhabiting the world precisely in the same way as it has been used in the context of theatre, where it has implied the dissolution of the subject/object opposition and emphasised

“the bodily co-presence of actors and audience” creating “a relationship between co-subjects” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32).

These cursory references to a much more complex picture than I can draw here,<sup>1</sup> testify to why pairing reading and interpretation, in the first quotation above, is not wholly indisputable. They suggest that the use of the word interpretation itself requires that one takes a stand with regard to its meaning in relation to an idea of text.

In that 2015 volume on ‘adventures of interpretation’ Alessandro Serpieri did so, starting precisely from the Platonic episode from *Phaedrus* on which Derrida (1982) too relied to uphold the ingrained ambivalence of writing as *pharmakon*, or the locus where antinomies undecidably co-exist.<sup>2</sup> Although discussing the same Platonic passage, their paths radically diverged. Contrary to Derrida, Serpieri contended that it is precisely the written text that triggers its dialogue with the reader, as it is the origin and the foundation of the hermeneutic process it elicits; a process based upon an idea of presence, rather than absence, as guarantor of meaning, and of a centred structure allowing for an interpretative play within the boundaries of textual centredness. It is in this perspective that ‘editing’ in the quotation above means interpreting, and interpreting, in its turn, translating, as traditionally in Latin, where *interpretes* literally meant (intralingual) translator. That is why translators, Serpieri claims, should be textual critics too. This means possessing (with regard to Shakespeare) “a profound knowledge of the early modern period and the dramaturgical and theatrical structures and conventions”; command of early modern English and of Shakespeare’s canon, but also “a theoretical competence in the peculiarities of dramatic discourse in order to render the virtual theatricality of speeches for delivery of stage” (2014a: 167-8). And here the second quote above becomes relevant.

In that essay (2007a), significantly entitled “Poetry in Action”, Serpieri commented on Coleridge’s definition of Shakespeare’s imagination as based on transitions and creations out of created images that translate in-

<sup>1</sup> Including cognate debate on suspicion of theory alongside a still ongoing confrontation between continental and analytical positions within a context of opposing cultural stances, New Formalism, and the free co-creative subjectivism of performance studies. For a recent reassessment of this critical panorama, see Serpieri (2014b), Bigliazzi and Gregori (eds. 2014), Bigliazzi (2014).

<sup>2</sup> This is the episode when Socrates tells about the Egyptian god Theuth’s proposal of writing to king Thamus as a “remedy to help memory” and the king’s subsequent rejection because he only considered it as an instrument of passive imitation, thus unable to guarantee knowledge.

to a serpentine style, “for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength”.<sup>3</sup> “Such a mobile, restless, and inventive, imagination”, he remarked, “often forces language to new modes of expression, in terms both of neologisms and of original syntactical constructs, and thus provides an endless hermeneutic challenge for critics and translators”. Thus, rhetoric becomes central to literary studies, and especially to drama studies, for the performative energy it inflates into speech acts.

All this is key for an understanding of Serpieri’s own interpretative theory. In the 2015 volume, interpreting entails a dialogue with the literary work in terms of the performance of its “implications and overdeterminations” (2015: 8).<sup>4</sup> These require from the reader (and spectator) “active and problematic comprehension . . . destined never to pacify itself in definitive knowledge” (ibid.). The text as a signifying system awaits to be activated along trajectories encoded within the textual fabric. This suggests that all interpretation is geared to the inexhaustible resources of the text, and yet it is not endlessly open. It is limited by the dialogue with what Umberto Eco called *intentio operis* (see 1979, 1992), and Jonathan Culler “the legible and the illegible”, “the role of gaps and silence, opacity” (2008: 304), and Serpieri considered as the internal cohesion of the text in its continuous exchange with the cultural codes and other texts (2015: 51). In this regard Serpieri writes in this book:

The artist devises beyond a programme or rational design, beyond what he already knows, in order to grasp his own real-symbolic-imaginary world, transposing and reconfiguring it in textual worlds. The reader, or the professional critic, is called to go all the way back: from the manifest linguistic structures, whose configuration is not erasable, to the identification of the imaginative-imaginary *energy* that deeply holds together the expressive articulation of the work. This articulation is the energy that presides over the literary texture and is re-activated by each reading – past, contemporary or future. There are many ways to respect the revelations and secrets of a text: many, yet not infinite. (2015: 10-11)

<sup>3</sup> “In Shakespeare one sentence begets the next naturally; the meaning is all interwoven. He goes on kindling *like a meteor* through the dark atmosphere . . . Shakespeare’s intellectual action is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher. The latter see the totality of a sentence or passage, and then project it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B. out of A., and C. out of B., and so on, just *as a serpent moves*, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength”: from *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London 1836), 7 April 1833 and 5 March 1834, qtd in Serpieri (2007: 165).

<sup>4</sup> All translations of the excerpts from Serpieri (2015) are mine.

The assumption is that literary meaning offers itself through a cyphered language which turns the text into “a sort of oracle – yet a very peculiar one, since, at the same time, it allows interrogation and interrogates on its own meaning” (10). Within this ‘oracular’ context, literary interpretation shapes itself as a form of intellectual adventure, involving the pleasure of discovering possible secret meanings in a continuous dialogue with the ‘other’, that is, the author-text. It is a dynamic process consisting in the performance of a signifying subtext or intratext that awaits to be disclosed: a ‘music score’ whose aesthetic and informative import resides in the precarious balance between the norm and its subversion, the known and the unexpected, order and disorder (52).

Thus, Serpieri refuses the idea of the death of the author, while rejecting critical biographism as a hermeneutical prop. In such cases as Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which constitutes a sort of palimpsest risking drastic reduction when limited to only one of its witnesses, Serpieri interrogates the radical inconclusiveness of the process of composition and assimilates to it his own experience as reader, himself in his turn author of a critical palimpsest:

If, therefore, in its various redactions the narration strives to achieve the objectivity of the past but discovers *varied representations of the self*, why should the reader concentrate on *one* version only, and would it not become inevitable to offer a comparative reading of all the redactions of the poem? On the other hand, my own critical reading, belonging to various periods in the course of more than twenty years, constitutes in some way a palimpsest, because, like autobiographic writing, which variously focuses on the past, interpretation shows adjustments depending on the autobiographical perspective of the same interpreter. However, this does not mean that the text has lost centre stage; in fact, it is perhaps even more central since it revolves around its inventive variants. (95)

The same applies to the playtext, and to the particular case of unstable non-authorially transmitted ones. In this regard (reference is to Shakespeare’s plays),

[i]f we puristically choose one redaction without accepting any plausible or functional variant from any other redaction, there will always remain a *squinty* effect of interference of one or more other discarded versions. If instead we collate one or more redactions, according to a declared philological and critical criterion, we will create a conjectural stereoscopic effect. (99)

However, “may we be sure that by collating two redactions on the basis of a philologically argued selective criterion we may not get closer to the *fluidity* of the text itself, and possibly to one of its redactions that has not

been transmitted to us, standing *between* the quarto and the Folio version?” (99). From a theoretical point of view, these few examples confirm the centrality of the text in the interpretative process, even when its intentionality is fluid and mutable in time (as in the case of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*), or when the text appears unstable.

To return to where we started from: in the third part of that 2015 volume, Serpieri discusses a particular type of interpretation: translation. The emphasis is on the textual signifying devices rather than on the verbal material, which inevitably gets lost in the process (140). If “poetry lies in the body of words, in the rhythmical scansion”, Serpieri argues, it “also lies in the nexuses and disjunctions, in the argumentative and rhetorical articulation, in the ‘figures’ of speech and in the ‘figures’ of thought, and so on” (ibid.). This texture, involving both semantics and syntax (Serpieri 2013), is more or less reproducible in a different language, at least more reproducible than the rhythmical sequences and sound patterns. Therefore,

a regular metre, such as the Italian hendecasyllable, where to locate – who knows how – the English iambic pentameter (an entirely different metrical-rhythmical and sound material), in my opinion is a bad bet from the start, unless we aim at a version rather than a translation. Whoever presumes to rewrite in a different language a sonnet by Shakespeare as if Shakespeare were to rewrite it now in that language is a victim of an illusion that aims at exercising its own poetic taste. (145)

That is why it is necessary to let the energy of the text migrate into the new text as a continuous passage, and tension, between the known and the unknown. That original energy should be recreated in the target text within the target culture, hybridising it, while not recreating it, in ways that risk “homologating the original text to the poetic models and to the horizon of expectations of the target culture” (145). Thus, the drama text should be interpreted in its scenic virtuality, both proxemic and deictic, by exploring a precise performative subtext. After all,

The translation of drama may always get lost, being caught between the ambition for high decontextualized literature and the need for the theatrical functionality of the language of drama – which, conceived for the stage, hosts all its performative energy in connection with the extralingual codes, and does so *by subtraction* of the lingual-literary ‘fullness’, that is, of that semantic autonomy which can be found in the other literary genres. (155)

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This Issue is divided into three main sections. The first one includes two articles by the editors who originally embarked on the *Skenè* ‘adventure’ with

Alessandro Serpieri. Their two essays, on Euripides' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, share memories of collaboration and exchange of ideas with him on interdisciplinary approaches to textual and philological studies of playtexts and in relation to stagecraft and issues of performance. These two articles are meant to be a tribute to that memory.

The essays collected in the second section tackle questions of literary theory and cognitive studies through a comparative approach to transitions between Shakespeare and Philip H. Dick's posthumanity (Angela Locatelli); an uncanny construction of femininity in *The Duchess of Malfi* and related cultural transitions from stage to Court (Clara Mucci); the reshaping of gender subjectivities in Felicia Hemans's *The Vespers of Salerno* within national and transnational contexts (Lilla Maria Crisafulli); the survival of the figure of Ophelia in Italian male-chauvinist Fascist culture as an "erased or grotesque figure" and Alba De Cespedes' subsequent treatment of the Ophelia-subtext (Maria Del Sapio Garbero); Carmelo Bene's rewritings and adaptations of *Hamlet* (Fernando Cioni); a contemporary 'dark' reinterpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* in the 2015 Globe production, with a focus on its added performative paratexts (Roberta Mullini); and, finally, Beckett's challenging revision of the idea itself of tragedy – and the tragic – in *Not I*, and his raising radical questions for a rethinking of the Aristotelian precepts (Carla Locatelli).

The Special Section opens with three contributions devoted to various aspects of generic, textual, rhetorical and philological transitions: the first one discusses Thomas Nashe's move from drama to pamphlet writing on the occasion of the composition of *Lenten Stuff* (Valerio Viviani), while the following two deal with *Hamlet*, offering some reflections on the Prince's textual encoding of a pretence of madness (Guido Paduano) and on the category of 'origin' from both a philological/textual perspective and an authorial one (Rosy Colombo). The next two articles shift the attention to Alessandro Serpieri's work on Shakespeare as both editor and translator, focusing on his latest parallel edition of *Re Lear* (Claudia Corti) and on the performative potential of his translations of *The Tempest* and *Richard II* once brought on stage (Eric Nicholson). The final three pieces are translations of a critical chapter on Shakespeare and Eros co-authored by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam, an imaginary 'Interview with Prospero' co-authored by Alessandro Serpieri and Pino Colizzi, and, to conclude, the translation of the closing page of Serpieri's *Mare Scritto* novel: *Ouverture*. A last tribute of deep friendship and gratitude is Tomaso Kemeny's final "Words for Sandro". We would all like to join Tomaso in that address, with the same friendship and gratitude.

Our deepest thanks go to Alessandro Serpieri's family. To Chiara Serpieri, who supported us in this 'adventure' with constant advice and precious

suggestions, goes our warmest gratefulness. It is thanks to Chiara if this Issue closes with Sandro's extraordinary *Ouverture*: his invaluable testimony that after all we can only start again.

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GUIDO AVEZZÙ\*

## Collaborating with Euripides: Actors and Scholars Improve the Drama Text <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines a passage from Euripides' *Electra* which has been suspected of being textually interpolated. It is a fairly long passage, covering twenty-six lines out of overall forty-four, between 357 and 400. Through an analysis of the contextual and contextual consistency of the suspect portions, the article wishes to demonstrate that the scene under scrutiny, which shows no trace of incongruous additions, is coherent with the overall play text *Electra* as it has been passed down to us under Euripides' name.

KEYWORDS: actors' interpolations; Euripides; Euripides' *Electra*.

Whoever teaches that hermeneutics and  
scholarship are to be kept distinct seriously errs.  
Heinrich Hirzel

In my opinion, Euripides needs interpretation rather than correction.  
Gilbert Murray

When an editor labels something an actor's interpolation he is doing no  
more than declaring that he does not like it. Such declarations  
naturally tell us more about the editor than the text.  
Gary Taylor<sup>2</sup>

On 27 February 1998, in the Hall of the 'Archivio Antico' of Padua University, only a few months after the publication of the two *Hamlet* edited by

<sup>1</sup> I owe many precious suggestions to Silvia Bigliazzi, who has discussed with me some of the distinctive proxemic and gestural traits of Euripides' *Electra*.

<sup>2</sup> The quotations are from Hirzel (1862: 97; "Egregie errant qui hermeneuticam et criticam separatim tractandas esse praecipunt"), Murray (1902: xi; "Plus interpretation-is eget, me iudice, Euripides quam emendationis"), and Taylor (2009: 407). Although this last statement may sound dogmatic, as we will see with regard to the few examples discussed in the following pages, subjectivity is sovereign in this field. All translations from Latin, Italian, French and German are mine.

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Alessandro Serpieri for Marsilio (Serpieri 1997a, Serpieri 1997b), Paolo Carrara,<sup>3</sup> Paul Mertens<sup>4</sup> and Serpieri himself contributed to a seminar on the ‘instability of the play text’, chaired by Oddone Longo. Mertens and Carrara offered first-hand papyrological documents of drama texts testifying to their circulation in Hellenized Egypt, and discussed traces of theatrical practice in Euripides’ papyri. Serpieri talked about authorship and the performative impact of plural editions of the same drama text in early modern English theatrical life, which, for its richness, has often been compared with that of fifth-century BCE Athens. That occasion brought together classical scholarship and Shakespearean studies to focus on the relation between text and performance, eluding aprioristic stances, often dictated by subjective tastes, on distinctions between authenticity and falsity. On the basis of updated documentary evidence and in a fertile interdisciplinary dialogue, those classical scholars and the audience of philologists present at the seminar showed the same curiosity for Elizabethan theatre that had characterized Raffaele Cantarella’s opening pages of his seminal study on the influence of actors on the tradition of Athenian tragic texts.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I wish to revive the memory of that day, but from a different angle. Against the backdrop of that day’s discussion on the instability of play texts, I would like to confirm its assumptions by paradoxically defending the Euripidean text against suspicion of both erudite and actorial interpolations with regard to *Electra* 357-400. I will argue that it is not necessary to imagine that the assumed original needs restoration by subtraction of a certain number of lines. Hamilton (1974), Goldhill (1986) and Basta Donzelli (1991) have already adopted this stance by working on the tragedy’s syntactic and argumentative structures, especially. Here, I will try to achieve the same result by resorting to interpretative criteria based on the co-textual and contextual coherence of the textual portions suspected of interpolation within the play text *Electra* as we have it.

<sup>3</sup> University of Siena at Arezzo; more recently author of the exhaustive *Il testo di Euripide nell’antichità* (Carrara 2009).

<sup>4</sup> (†2011) University of Liège; founder and, until 1990, Director of the Centre de Documentation de Papyrologie Littéraire (CEDOPAL); we owe to him the Mertens-Pack<sup>3</sup> repertory of the Greek and Latin literary papyri (MP<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> I prefer to talk generically, in this case, of curiosity rather than of a comparative approach, since Cantarella (1970: 137n4) only alluded to the “huge amount of the Shakespearean philology” and surprisingly referred the reader, “for concise information”, exclusively to Croce 1920 (78-80), which dealt with the Bard’s biography only. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Cantarella’s study predates by four years Denys L. Page’s *Actors’ Interpolations*, which ignored it. For an appropriate evaluation of Cantarella’s contribution see Hamilton (1974: 390-1).

### 1. *Litteratores and histriones*

Also because of the suggestions related to the finding of new theatrical papyri, starting with Page (1934) the hypothesis of the actorial origin of interpolations, with particular reference to Euripides, has prevailed upon that of scholarly and/or scribal origins. It is reasonable to imagine that the ‘canonisation’ of the three greatest tragic playwrights rendered actors’ interpolations especially likely wherever ancient dramas were mounted, and, because of Theodotos’ decree (387/6 BCE), also in the Athenian ‘Great Dionysia’ – in this case with more substantial and lasting effects upon the drama texts.<sup>6</sup> The number of Euripides’ Hellenistic manuscripts witnesses the broader circulation of his plays than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles.<sup>7</sup> However, this indisputable fact does not authorize us to assume that Euripides’ plays were more liable to manipulation due to their being more read and, as normally assumed, more frequently performed.<sup>8</sup>

It is well known that the Euripidean ‘papyri’ from Graeco-Roman Egypt (actually papyrus rolls and *codices*, parchment *codices* and other stuff, as *ostraca*) present plus- and minus lines in respect to the Byzantine manuscripts. Suspicions of interpolation, however, were put forward much earlier than when the literary papyri began to be massively published from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, gradually increasing our knowledge of their circulation in Hellenized Egypt. The claim that Euripides’ plays are more affected by *interpolationes* than those of the other two great tragedians was already made in 1755 by Lodewijk Caspar Valckenaer: “[my critics will have to remember] that I have branded as spurious more lines in this Euripides’ play only [i.e. *The Phoenician Women*] than those I could brand in all of Sophocles’ seven tragedies”.<sup>9</sup> Valckenaer attributed these interpolations to some ignorant grammarians or school-masters (“lit[t]eratores”; 1755: 14). Therefore, they were to be considered as bookish manipulations akin to those that for Valckenaer corrupted Euripidean sayings on ethical subjects contained in various Hellenistic anthologies.<sup>10</sup> This is not

<sup>6</sup> This is not the place for a thorough re-examination of the vast literature on the wide-ranging discussion of both the decree of 387/6 (on which see, for example, Nervegna 2007: 15), and the vigilance upon tragic play texts inaugurated in Athens by Lycurgos around the mid-fourth century BCE.

<sup>7</sup> Approximately, 169 ‘numbers’ in MP<sup>3</sup>, against 33 for Aeschylus and 37 for Sophocles.

<sup>8</sup> On the reperformances of plays in the classical and Hellenistic periods see Nervegna (2007: 15–21).

<sup>9</sup> “[D]einde meminerint . . . plures in hoc uno dramate versus me notasse spurios, quam e septem Sophoclis tragoediis vellem proscriptos” (1755: 14).

<sup>10</sup> Valckenaer 1767: 1–2. On his *Diatribes* see Lupi (2018).

the place to draw a history of the notion of interpolation, or an exhaustive phenomenology of the hypothesized interpolations; yet it should be noticed that suspicion normally invests the spoken parts rather than the sung or chanted ones, and the assertive rather than the narrative sections. Gottfried Hermann's second thoughts about the interpolations he had not questioned in his own edition of Euripides' *Iphigenia Aulidensis* are especially interesting: "[i]ndeed, mistakes of this kind are quite easy, considering that neither Euripides loved brevity, nor the interpolator shows himself so unaware of language and metre that his additions, where he often imitated Euripides, may be easily distinguished from a genuine text".<sup>11</sup> Hermann's allusion to Euripides' lack of *brevitas* clarifies that he was considering mainly, and perhaps exclusively, interpolations in the spoken parts. As shown by Hermann in his edition of Aeschylus (1814), where – as Medda points out – he "[had concentrated] on the presumed interpolations of bookish origin", "the dimension of the interpolations . . . linked to the theatrical life of the texts remains outside his horizon, as was almost inevitable at the time".<sup>12</sup> Hermann had not taken into account the possibility that "whole dramatic declamations" by one or more authors "were put together" owing to their content.<sup>13</sup> This anthological practice, which was criticized by Plato, ultimately ended out in 'demonstrative' performances (ἐπιδείξεις) similar to those practiced by sophists and orators, and therefore, because of their performative and actorial component, they were also subject to this kind of manipulation.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of bookish interpolations was to be upheld for long, well beyond the moment when the "inexperienced hands"<sup>15</sup> responsible for the interpolations began to be suspected as being those of *histriones*. As regards Euripides, I found this thesis first mentioned by Heinrich Steinberg: "Then, after a tragic poetry devoid of both the divine spirit and the sublime style admitted the common and easy speech, Euripides especially flaunted in his tragedies just that excited rhetoric that every actor arbitrarily was to adopt on

<sup>11</sup> "Et sane proclive est errare in hoc genere, quum neque Euripides brevitatis valde studiosus fuerit, neque interpolator se ita aut linguae aut metri ignarum praebuerit, ut ubique additamenta eius, quorum in multis ille ipsum imitatus Euripidem est, facile possint a genuinis distingui". Hermann (1847: 218), with regard to Hermann (1831).

<sup>12</sup> Medda (2006: 49). Medda's extensive study considers the methodological perspectives gradually elaborated by Hermann, and how he applied them to Aeschylus' text.

<sup>13</sup> *Laws* 7.811a (τινας ὅλας ῥήσεις εἰς ταῦτόν συν[άγειν]). See Gentili (1979: 18).

<sup>14</sup> Also with reference to this "culture . . . fundamentally 'anthological' even with regard to . . . playwrights like Euripides", Gentili talks about "anthological selections for teaching" and "specific performances (*epideixeis* or *akroaseis*), such as those in use in 'salvation' festivals (*Soteria*) at Delphi", (1979: 21-2). On the rhetorical "*epideixeis* before large audiences (εἰς τοὺς ὄχλους)", see Alcidamas *On Sophists* 29-31.

<sup>15</sup> The formula "ungeschickte Hände" is Nauck's (1859: 1).

*the stage*. For this reason nowadays Euripides suffers from many more corruptions and interpolations than Aeschylus and Sophocles” (my emphasis).<sup>16</sup> In other words: the easy, uncontrolled rhetoric of an “*expeditus sermo*”, typical of Euripides’ poetics, would have been the primary factor of the subsequent unbridled tampering with his play texts on the part of actors who felt very comfortable with his unrestrained diction. The ultimate aim of such massive interventions remains obscure: if not due to the need of clarifying implicit passages risking misunderstanding in new social contexts, these interpolations were assumedly aimed at prompting the emotional response of the unlearned, that is, of that part of the audience stigmatised in Plato’s *Laws* as “base theatrocracy” (3.701a: *θεατροκρατία τις πονηρά*). But if that was their purpose, one wonders how the slowing down of the pace of the action due to extra sententiousness ‘added’ to the original could please an audience “composed of hand-workers”, who, as Aristotle writes, expected the playwrights to compete in offering “relaxation”.<sup>17</sup> It also remains to be explained in what way selected *pièces de résistance*, possibly performed with a musical accompaniment emphasising their pathos, could eventually achieve a lasting effect on the manuscripts of the Euripidean *corpora*. Quite different is the case of changes affecting the spectacle, which may have been necessary for scenic reasons, as in the case of Euripides’ *Orestes* 1366-8, where the *scholium* posits an actorial interpolation.<sup>18</sup> But it should be noticed that Page himself, followed more recently by other scholars, has questioned the validity of the scholiast’s view, an issue that deserves a more detailed study than space would allow here.

<sup>16</sup> “Denique postquam tragica poesis divini spiritus sublimisque dicendi generis expers vulgarem et expeditum sermonem ascivit, inprimis Euripides concitatam illam rhetoricam in tragoediis obtulit quam histriones suo quisque arbitrato in scenicam artem licenter invexerunt. Inde factum est ut hodie Euripides maiorem quam Aeschylus et Sophocles labem et interpolationem expertus sit” (1864: 1-2).

<sup>17</sup> *Politics* 8, 1342a18-22. “Since the audience is of two classes, one freemen and educated people, and the other the vulgar class composed of mechanics and laborers and other such persons, the latter sort also must be assigned competitions and shows for relaxation.” (ἐπεὶ δ’ ὁ θεατῆς διττός, ὁ μὲν ἐλεύθερος καὶ πεπαιδευμένος, ὁ δὲ φορτικός ἐκ βαναύσων καὶ θητῶν καὶ ἄλλων τοιούτων συγκείμενος, ἀποδοτέον ἀγῶνας καὶ θεωρίας καὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις πρὸς ἀνάπαυσιν) (text and trans. follow Rackham 1944).

<sup>18</sup> Schwartz 1887: 217 (τούτους δὲ τοὺς τρεῖς στίχους οὐκ ἂν τις ἐξ ἐτοίμου συγχαρήσειεν Εὐριπίδου εἶναι, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τῶν ὑποκριτῶν κτλ.: “no one could concede that these three lines were written by Euripides, but rather by actors, etc.”). On these lines see Cantarella 1970: 165-6; Page 1934: 42.

## 2. Euripides' *Electra* 357-400: How Did 18 Lines Become 44?

One may receive the impression that both ancient actors and modern scholars wish to improve on Euripides' text, each in their own way, the former by adding, omitting or replacing lines, the latter by trying to restore its assumed textual *facies* before the postulated alteration. As regards the former, the interventions appear to have been made "in order to adjust [the play text] to the needs and tastes of audiences after the author's lifetime" (Dover 1977: 137). As regards the latter, it must be remarked that in the great deal of work carried out by classical scholars this "aspir[ation] to the holy grail of textual 'authenticity'" (Hall 2006: 51) is perhaps the most exemplary violation of the healthy principle that the philologist may at best succeed in reconstructing the earliest phase of the textual tradition, and that the original remains unattainable. With regard to fifth-century BCE play texts we should rather stick to Kenneth Dover's position, as he does not talk about 'the original', while conclusively proposing that the philologist's duty should be to "make implicit predictions . . . [about texts and books circulating] at the beginning of the Hellenistic age".<sup>19</sup> To put it differently: to contest a play text which has been passed down to us by the Byzantine Middle Ages because hypothetically tampered with by actors who may have performed it from the fifth century BCE onwards, is no more reasonable than to say that it is 'authentic' only because it has been handed down to us. Awaiting further evidence, what remains for us to do is presumably to verify the coherence of the suspected sequences with their immediate co-text and with the rest of the play, with no intention of certifying their authenticity beyond all reasonable doubt, but for the only purpose of arguing the compatibility of the different parts of that play text.

*Electra* is one of Euripides' dramas more affected by suspicion of interpolation: Steinberg (1864), who did not consider the sequence we are going to deal with, listed more than two hundred lines. Between 357 and 400 suspicion falls on a line of the Peasant (360) and on twenty-five out of the thirty-four pronounced by Orestes from 367 to 400. Proposals of excision also inevitably invest the dynamic of the scene. The peculiarity of this scene, presenting three characters (Electra, Orestes, and the Peasant), the Chorus leader, and the silent presence of at least three extras (Pylades and two servants), consists in the difficult balance between Orestes' verbal expansiveness and his silence about his own identity: in spite of his confidence

<sup>19</sup> "Like other historical approaches, textual criticism too makes implicit predictions. If someone says 'I believe that here the author wrote xyz' he implies 'if we ever regain an exemplar of this text written at the beginning of the Hellenistic age, then xyz will be in it'" (Dover 1997: 57).

in the trustworthiness of Electra, the Chorus and the Peasant, he continues to present himself as the nameless one “who is here” (391: ὁ . . . παρών), as well as the interpreter of “him who is not here, / Agamemnon’s son, in whose name we’ve come” (391-2: ὁ . . . οὐ παρών / Ἀγαμέμνονος παῖς, οὐπὲρ οὐνεχ’ ἤκομεν).<sup>20</sup> This is a feature that must be considered as structural, as it has already characterized his reticence on his own identity from 220 onwards, although, being onstage from 108, he has witnessed his sister’s mourning; it will then characterize his own resistance to being recognised by the Old Man (558-61).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, by decreasing Orestes’ wordiness, this scene is deprived of the substantial clash between his enthusiastic judgement on the Peasant and Electra’s subsequent reproach to her “thoughtless” husband for “getting wrong” in receiving in their poor house “guests who are greater men than [him]” (405-6 and 408: ὦ τλήμων . . . / τί τοῦσδ’ ἐδέξω μείζονας σαντοῦ ξένους; / . . . / . . . ἐξήμαρτες . . .). Lacking this clash, the scene is reduced to a hurried trick in order to summon the Old Man, as it appears in the summary contained in *Pap. Oxyrhynchus* 420 (on which see below, p. 25).

The moment has come to have a closer look at the suspected lines. To facilitate their identification, I have underlined them in both Greek and English:<sup>22</sup>

ΑΥΤΟΥΡΓΟΣ	οὐκουν πάλαι χρῆν τοῖσδ’ ἀνεπτύχθαι πύλας; χωρεῖτ’ ἐς οἴκους· ἀντὶ γὰρ χρηστῶν λόγων ξενίων κυρήσεθ’, οἳ ἐμὸς κεύθει δόμος. <u>αἶρεσθ’, ὅπαδοί, τῶνδ’ ἔσω τεύχη δόμων.</u>	360
ΟΡΕΣΤΗΣ	καὶ μηδὲν ἀντείπητε, παρὰ φίλου φίλοι μολόντες ἀνδρός· καὶ γὰρ εἰ πένης ἔφυν, οὔτοι τό γ’ ἦθος δυσγενὲς παρῆξομαι. πρὸς θεῶν, ὅδ’ ἀνὴρ ὃς συνεκκλέπτει γάμους τοὺς σοῦς, Ὀρέστην οὐ καταισχύνειν θέλων;	365
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΑ	οὔτος κέκληται πόσις ἐμὸς τῆς ἀθλίας.	
ΟΡΕΣΤΗΣ	φεῦ·	

<sup>20</sup> For the text and the translation of *Electra* I follow Cropp (2013). If not otherwise indicated, all other translations from the Greek are mine.

<sup>21</sup> ΟΡ. ἔα· τί μ’ ἐσδέδορκεν ὥσπερ ἀργύρου σκοπῶν / λαμπρὸν χαρακτῆρ’; ἢ προσεικάξει μέ τω; / ΗΛ. ἴσως Ὀρέστου σ’ ἤλιχ’ ἥδεται βλέπων. / ΟΡ. φίλου γε φωτός. τί δὲ κυκλεῖ περίξ πόδα; (OR. Hold on: why is he staring at me, as if inspecting a silver / coin’s shiny marking? Is he comparing me with someone? EL. Perhaps he’s glad to see you, as a comrade of Orestes. / OR. Well, Orestes is certainly dear to me. But why circle round me?).

<sup>22</sup> From 351 to 358 the manuscripts tag the change of speaker with a paragraphos ( – ); therefore they ascribe 358-63 to Electra, but this is not acceptable, at least as regards 362-3, which can only be pronounced by the Peasant.



οὐκ ἔστ' ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν εἰς εὐανδρίαν·  
ἔχουσι γὰρ ταραγμὸν αἱ φύσεις βροτῶν.  
 ἤδη γὰρ εἶδον ἄνδρα γενναίου πατρός  
 τὸ μηδὲν ὄντα, χρηστὰ δ' ἐκ κακῶν τέκνα, 370  
 λιμὸν τ' ἐν ἀνδρὸς πλουσίου φρονήματι,  
 γνώμην δὲ μεγάλην ἐν πένητι σώματι.  
 πῶς οὖν τις αὐτὰ διαλαβὼν ὀρθῶς κρινεῖ;  
 πλούτῳ; πονηρῷ τάρρα χρήσεται κριτῇ.  
 ἢ τοῖς ἔχουσι μηδέν; ἀλλ' ἔχει νόσον 375  
 πενία, διδάσκει δ' ἄνδρα τῇ χρεῖα κακόν.  
 ἀλλ' εἰς ὅπλ' ἔλθω; τίς δὲ πρὸς λόγχην βλέπων  
 μάρτυς γένοιτ' ἂν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἀγαθός;  
 κράτιστον εἰκῇ ταῦτ' ἔαν ἀφεμέναι.  
 οὗτος γὰρ ἀνὴρ οὗτ' ἐν Ἀργείοις μέγας 380  
 οὗτ' αὖ δοκῇσι δωμάτων ὠγκωμένος,  
 ἐν τοῖς δὲ πολλοῖς ὢν, ἄριστος ἠυρέθη.  
 οὐ μὴ ἀφρονήσεθ', οἱ κενῶν δοξασμάτων  
 πλήρεις πλανᾶσθε, τῇ δ' ὁμιλίᾳ βροτῶν  
 κρινεῖτε καὶ τοῖς ἦθεσιν τοὺς εὐγενεῖς; 385  
 οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι τὰς πόλεις οἰκοῦσιν εὖ  
 καὶ δώμαθ'. αἱ δὲ σάρκες αἱ κεναὶ φρενῶν  
 ἀγάλματ' ἀγορᾶς εἰσιν. οὐδὲ γὰρ δόρυ  
 μᾶλλον βραχίον σθεναρὸς ἀσθενοῦς μένει·  
 ἐν τῇ φύσει δὲ τοῦτο κἂν εὐψυχία. 390  
 ἀλλ' ἄξιός γάρ ὃ τε παρῶν ὃ τ' οὐ παρῶν  
 Ἀγαμέμνωνος παῖς, οὐπὲρ οὔνεχ' ἤκομεν,  
 δεξώμεθ' οἴκων καταλύσεις. χωρεῖν χρεῶν,  
 δμῶες, δόμων τῶνδ' ἐντός. ὥς ἐμοὶ πένης  
 εἴη πρόθυμος πλουσίου μᾶλλον ξένος. 395  
 αἰνῶ μὲν οὖν τοῦδ' ἀνδρὸς ἐσδοχὰς δόμων,  
 ἐβουλόμην δ' ἂν εἰ κασίγνητός με σὸς  
 ἐς εὐτυχοῦντας ἦγεν εὐτυχῶν δόμους.  
 ἴσως δ' ἂν ἔλθοι. Λοξίου γὰρ ἔμπεδοι  
 χρησμοί, βροτῶν δὲ μαντικὴν χαίρειν ἔω. 400

PEASANT Then shouldn't our doors have been opened to them long ago? (*To Orestes and Pylades*) Go into the house; in return for your valuable words you shall get such guest-fare as is stored in my house. Lift the baggage, servants, into the house. And don't say a word against it; you're friends coming from a friend. I may be poor, but I'll certainly not show my conduct to be ill-bred.

ORESTES (*To Electra*) By the gods, is this the man who shares with you the pretence of marriage, refusing to shame Orestes?

ELECTRA Yes, this man is called husband to me in my misery.

ORESTES Well, nothing is precise when it comes to virtue! For there's con-



fusion in the natures of men. Before now I've seen a worthless man sprung from a noble father, and estimable children from low-born parents; emptiness I've seen in a rich man's thinking, and a great mind in a poor man's body. How then shall a man distinguish and rate them correctly? By wealth? A faulty guide he'll then be using! Or by lack of possessions? Yet poverty's unhealthy, and trains a man in badness because of his need. Turning, then, to arms? Yet who when facing an enemy's spear can testify which man is the virtuous one? It's best to let these things go and leave them in disorder. For this man, who is not eminent amongst the Argives, not yet puffed up by family reputation, but belongs amongst the many, has been found excellent. Will you not cease your foolishness, you who stray about full of empty opinions, and use men's company and their conduct to distinguish the noble amongst them? It's men of this kind who order cities properly, and homes as well, while fleshbags devoid of brains are nothing but ornaments of the town square. Even in battle a strong arm abides the spear no more than a weak one; that depends on a man's nature and his courage. Well, then, since both of us merit it – he who is here and he who is not here, Agamemnon's son, in whose name we've come – let us accept the lodging of this house. You servants may proceed into the house. (*They obey.*) I'd rather have a poor but willing host than a wealthy one. So I commend this man's receiving us in his house; and yet I could wish your brother, prospering, was taking me into a prospering house. Perhaps he'll come, though; Loxias' decrees are firm, though mortals' seercraft I happily dismiss.

*Deletions.* 360: all editors after Barrett (in Reeve 1973: 153n20); 368-79: Reeve (1973); 369-72: Vitelli (1880); 371-2: Schenkl (1874); 373-9: Wilamowitz (1875), Page (1934), Friis Johansen (1959), Diggle (1981), Kovacs (1998), Distilo (2012); 383-5: suspected by Murray (1902) and Reeve (1973), excised by Distilo (2012); 386-90: Wilamowitz (1875), Vitelli (1880), Page (1934), Friis Johansen (1959), Reeve (1973), Diggle (1981), Kovacs (1998); 396-400: Reeve (1973).

These spoken iambs do not present peculiar linguistic or textual problems. As regards 373-9 and 386-90, Wilamowitz observed that “if we consider [both these passages] *per se*, they are quite worthy of Euripides” (1875: 192). It is therefore no surprise that when suspicion of interpolation has been put forward it has been accounted for on the basis of an assumed incongruence on the level of either proxemics (360) or, more often, argumentation. I will deal with 360, 379 e 386-8, in particular, but the interpretation of these lines inevitably implies that of the entire sequence. They have been explained as either reflecting some posthumous *mises en scenes*, or as being *loci paralleli*, not otherwise recorded, originally written in the margin because showing some affinity with this scene of *Electra*, and eventually moved into the text. They would have been drawn from other Euripidean

plays, of which we only know small portions reliably.<sup>23</sup> Going by the latter hypothesis, the editorial fortune of Euripides in the Hellenistic age would have ultimately proved fatal to the genuine text, whose integrity would have been compromised by the copious *loci paralleli*. However, the more extensive the assumed intrusions, the less probable this hypothesis is.<sup>24</sup>

After their radical pruning by Reeve (1973), the interventions on these lines have been made conservatively almost in all cases, by Hamilton (1974), Goldhill (1986) and Basta Donzelli (1991). However, it is worth adding a few considerations in defence of the received text.

Orestes' long speech is entirely preserved in the L (*Laurentianus plut.* 32.2) and P (*Laurentianus C. S.* 172)<sup>25</sup> Byzantine manuscripts, and because of its ethical content it also enjoys a conspicuous indirect tradition. 367-79 and 388-9 are attributed to Euripides in third-century BCE witnesses.<sup>26</sup> 369-70, 376, 383-90 are comprised in the anthology compiled by Joannes from Stobi ('Stobaeus', fifth century CE), and 367-70 also in that of the almost coeval grammarian Orion from Thebes (Egypt); all of these excerpts are accompanied by the title of the tragedy and/or the author's name.<sup>27</sup> 379 is attributed to Euripides in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (end of the third century CE), and makes a partial appearance, with no indication of the author's name or of the title, in the treatise *On the Sublime* 44.12. These attestations only demonstrate that already before the end of third century BCE 367-79 were attributed to Euripides, and that 367-90 were part of *Electra* in some manuscripts used by the source or sources of Joannes Stobaeus and Orion. The presence of 367-79 in a third-century papyrus rules out the possibility of "marginal adscripts . . . intrude[d] into in the text" (van Emde Boas 2017: 177n25), yet not that of an actors' interpolation (Page 1934: 75).

<sup>23</sup> Wilamowitz, who does not consider the possibility of anthologies of dramatic rheseis (see above, p. 18) suggests that "two passages belonging to other plays [scil. 373-9 and 386-90], written in the margins because of some similarity, entered Orestes' lines" (1875: 191).

<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, according to Friis Johansen (1959: 95-6n140), "Wilamowitz' solution [is] the only possible".

<sup>25</sup> The relation between L and P is a *vexata quaestio*, but in this case it is irrelevant.

<sup>26</sup> 367-79: *Pap. Hibeh* 7, a gnomic anthology, c. 250-210 BCE; only the author ("from Euripides"), without title. No. 1569 MP<sup>3</sup>; Carrara 2009, no. 20: 121-2. 388-9 appear next to Euripides' *Hecuba* 254-6, but with no indication, in the *Ostrakon Berolinense* 12319, a poetic anthology of the third century BCE; no. 1567 MP<sup>3</sup>; Carrara 2009: *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> 367-70: Orion's *Anthology* 8.7 ("from *Electra*"; Schneidewin 1839: 53); 369-70: Joannes Sto. 4.29.37 ("from the same", with ref. to the previous quotation from *Electra* 550-1; Hense 1912: 717); 376: Jo. Sto. 4.32.31 ("from Euripides' *Electra*"; *idem*: 791); 383-90: Jo. Sto. 2.15.13 ("from Euripides"; Wachsmuth 1884: 187) and 4.29.4 ("from Euripides' *Electra*"; Hense 1912: 703-4).

Furthermore, this scene of *Electra* is summarised in the so-called *hypothesis* in *Pap. Oxyrhynchus* 420 (third century CE). The first seventeen lines of this papyrus fragment offer a summary of 357-670 (or, more likely, 693), obviously omitting the first *stasimon* (432-86; Luppe 1981; Meccariello 2014: 192-6). Here I will not cope with the critical-textual problems of this summary and refer to Massimo Magnani's edition about to be published in the *Commentaria et Lexica Graeca in Papyris reperta* (CLGP). It should be noted that at line 3 the summary jumps from the Peasant's last line addressed to Orestes and Pylades (~ *Electra* 363) to his exit when he goes to the Old Man (~ 421) seeking food. Therefore, this synopsis is concerned neither with *Electra's* 364-420 and 422-31, nor with the controversy between *Electra* and the Old Man upon the alleged witnesses about Orestes' arrival (518-44), and only reports his recognition: *hyp.* 9-13 ~ *Electra* 558-79. Yet this lack of reference of what happens in those lines does not authorize us to suspect either 368-400 or 518-44 as interpolated: this Hellenistic summary privileges the propulsive nuclei of the story, and the motif of the Peasant's offered hospitality acquires special relevance not only as it complements the most substantial Euripidean innovation (*Electra's* marriage), but also, and especially, because it indirectly causes the arrival of the Old Man, the only one who can recognize Orestes, thus compelling him to reveal himself. "[H]aste" is a difficult word here (*hyp.* 4-5: τῇ σπουδῇ . . . ἀπῆλθεν) as it is attributed to the Peasant's exit. Therefore we should either assume that in his memorial reconstruction the compiler wrongly assigned to the Peasant the haste the Peasant himself had recommended to his wife (421),<sup>28</sup> or instead that he remembered a particular *mise en scene* characterized by the Peasant's own hasty exit at 423, with the directorial omission of 424-31.

### 3. "Verrete a cena?": *Electra* 358-61 ~ 787-9

Let us begin with 360. Its excision was proposed by William S. Barrett *apud* Reeve (1973: 153n20) who accepted it, and was followed by Bain (1981: 36-7) and all recent editors.<sup>29</sup> The deletion has been justified on the basis of (1) the detail of the Peasant giving orders to the guests' servants, and (2) of his order being preceded and followed by two imperatives addressed to the guests (358-9: "Go into the house etc." – χωρεῖτ' ἐς οἶκους; 361: "And don't say a word against it" – καὶ μὴδὲν ἀντεῖπτε). With regard to the first argument, if giving an order to the servants of distinguished guests – and perceived as such (see 405-6, and above p. 25) – violated a behavioural code,

<sup>28</sup> "But you, go into the house right away" (χώρει δ' ἐς δόμους ὅσον τάχος).

<sup>29</sup> Diggle (1981), Basta Donzelli (1995), Kovacs (1998), Cropp (2013). In his review of Bain (1981), Donald Mastronarde eventually found it "an attractive solution" (1983: 85).

that violation is more likely to reflect Euripides' own intention than that of an epigone, who we might reasonably expect to see intent on smoothing away difficulties. With regard to the second argument, it is essential to clarify preliminarily how the action unfolds, as it is not entirely obvious. Mastronarde suggests that here there is "more stage-action not described in the text (do the attendants, for instance, turn to Orestes for a sign of approval of the order?)" (1979: 106). First of all, in the Peasant's regret voiced to Electra at 357 ("Then shouldn't our doors have been opened to them long ago?"), where "[he] asserts his husbandly authority, but only indirectly" (van Emde Boas 2017: 76), we may already perceive an implicit order. This might have been gleaned by the compiler of the *hypothesis*, where the integrations "[the Peasant] ordered Electra to lead the men into" the house ([ὁ αὐτουργὸς . . . τὴν μὲν Ἡ]λέκ[τρ]αν τοὺς ἄνδρας εἰσάγειν ἐκέλ[ευ]σεν) are quite plausible. Even disregarding the authenticity of 360, his invitation at 358-9 remains unanswered, and his urging them "[not to] say a word against it" at 361-3 at least suggests his interlocutors' hesitation. Then, neither Electra nor her brother, who *exits* at 400, address the Peasant until Electra's apostrophe to her husband followed by their dialogue (404-22). At 364 Orestes pointing at the Peasant by "this man" (ὄδ' ἄνῆρ) confirms that the Peasant has just finished speaking, thus somehow implying his presence. At 380, a line free from suspicion of interpolation, Orestes will again point at him by οὗτος . . . ἄνῆρ, i.e. "this", yet not as if he were near him as at 364, where he had used ὅδε. This is why it has been thought that the Peasant walks away at 363 (Murray 1906: 25-6), perhaps to open the gate of the house (Reeve 1973: 153n20), and returns only at 390 (Murray) or soon afterwards (Reeve; and see Goldhill 1986: 161n16); Murray imagines that 391-5 are addressed precisely to him. However, at 401-3 the Chorus leader does not signal his return, and with the somewhat ironical "the good fate, which has marched forward with pain" (403: μόλις προβαίνουσα . . . τύχη), she gestures to the laboriousness of the scene, which closes with the entrance of the guests in the house only at 400. Therefore, as suggested by Goldhill (1986), from 364 to 400 it is plausible to imagine a focalization upon the two brothers. The fact that only at 391 does Orestes reply to the Peasant's invitation, and at 393-4, with his order to the servants ("You servants may proceed into the house"), he follows up the Peasant's own order at 360 ("Lift the baggage, servants, into the house"), complicates for no apparent motive the sequence left suspended after the Peasant has invited the foreigners not to refuse to step into the house (361-3). In conclusion, there is a hiatus in the communication between the Peasant and his guests very likely accompanied by a gesture foregrounding physical discontinuity rather than contact: perhaps their stepping back or turning away, which rearticulates the actors' position on the stage and, therefore, the overall

proxemics of the scene.

It should be pointed out that this scene anticipates dialogically the Messenger's narrative of Aegisthus' own luncheon invitation to Orestes and his companions, a highly detailed report owing to the combination of narration and dialogue (784-90):

ΑΥΤΟΥΡΓΟΣ	χωρεῖτ' ἐς οἴκους· . . . ... αἶρεσθ', ὅπαδοί, τῶνδ' ἔσω τεύχη δόμων. καὶ μηδὲν ἀντείπητε . . .	360
PEASANT	Go into the house . . . / Lift the baggage, servants, into the house. / And don't say a word against it . . .	
ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ	~ “ . . . ἀλλ' ἴωμεν ἐς δόμους” – καὶ ταῦθ' ἄμ' ἡγόρευε καὶ χερὸς λαβὼν παρῆγεν ἡμᾶς – “οὐδ' ἀπαρνεῖσθαι χρεῶν”. ( <i>Aegisthus is speaking</i> ) “ . . . But come, let's go into the house, – / and as he said this, he took us by the arm / and started to lead us in – you must not refuse”.	787
MESSENGER		

In this play, repetition is frequent and invests different modes and formal registers, leading to the duplication of portions of the action through performative variation, such as enactment vs narration, and song vs speech. The opposition between mimesis and diegesis characterizes the recognition of Orestes by the Old Man first (576, enacted), and then, after Aegisthus' murder, by yet another old man (852-3, narrated by the Messenger), as well as the transformation of the sacrificer into the victim: first Aegisthus (785-843, narrated), then Clytemnestra (1142-6, enacted). The polarity between distinct formal registers features in the duplication of Electra's refusal to adorn herself and take part in the celebrations, as the Chorus invite her to: first in the festivities in honour of Hera (175-89, a lyric dialogue), then in the dance in honour of the victorious brother over Aegisthus (866-72). In this case, she does not let herself be involved in the singing and the dance, and proposes instead a formally elaborate spoken sequence of about the same length as the two choral stanzas by which it is framed.<sup>30</sup> The poetical reason for such repetitions deserves to be considered within the overall context of Euripides' dramaturgy and, more precisely, of his *Electra*. At all events, it comes as no surprise that, by embedding dialogical mimesis within his own narration, the Messenger (who is one of Orestes' servants) makes a pause between Aegisthus' long and detailed invitation (784-7) and his urge not to refuse (361 ~ 789) analogous to that of the Peasant's

<sup>30</sup> On this third epirrhetic *stasimon*, see the exemplary Cerbo (2012).

at 360 (“Lift the baggage, servants, into the house”). In the Messenger’s tale the pause will coincide with Aegisthus’ gesture of welcome in accompanying his guests (788-9), while at 358-61 the absence of physical contact, impeded to the Peasant by their different social status, is replaced by his order addressed at Orestes’ attendants. The analogy between the two scenes, in my view, somehow justifies the choice of retaining 360 as a sort of implicit didascalia.

#### 4. A Pivotal Line: 379

379 requires a specific discussion. Orestes’ argumentation is built on the opposition between his search for a “precise” (368: ἀκριβές) criterion by which to define the virtue of a man (εὐάνδρία), and the, so to say, empirical verification that that criterion does not exist, and, therefore, it is necessary to renounce all search for an order in the unpredictable variety of human characters: 368 and 379 open and close his search for that criterion on the two opposed terms ἀκριβές and εἰκῇ, respectively. This opposition, which was typical of the language of the ‘intellectual professions’ of the fifth and fourth centuries, such as orators,<sup>31</sup> is not referable to the one between “exact” and “at random”,<sup>32</sup> nor to that between “careful” and “careless”.<sup>33</sup> Collard and Cropp translate εἰκῇ as “in confusion” (2008: 262) and Cropp (2013) as “in disorder”. The contrast between *akribes* and *eike* here seems more appropriately to correspond to the difference between, on the one hand, a “certain” and “invariable” criterion (Kurz 1970: 34-5, 156-7), and, on the other, the variety of the situations one may find oneself in, irreducible to a preliminary definition.<sup>34</sup> With reference to εἰκῇ, in particular, it is part of a contrasting pair comparable to the one proposed by Isocrates 5.155 between καιροί (“[appropriateness to the] opportunities”) and ἀκρίβειαι (“[a prescriptive idea of stylistic] subtleties”), as well as to the one in Demosthenes 28.5 between “knowing” (εἰδέναι), whose object is τὸ ἀκριβές (“what can be ascertained”), and “being persuaded” (πιστεύεσθαι) by vague words (εἰκῇ). Orestes does not attain a general criterion, but achieves an

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Alcidas *On Sophists* 25: ἀκριβῶς vs εἰκῇ λέγειν (“speaking ‘accurately’ vs ‘without plan’”; and see 13, 16, 33, 34).

<sup>32</sup> As in Lysias 7.12 (εἰκῇ καὶ ἀλογίστως: “casually and without reflection”); see Carey (1989: 127).

<sup>33</sup> As in Aeschines 3.187 (ἀκριβῶς σκέψαι, “carefully examining”, vs εἰκῇ πράξει “carelessly doing”).

<sup>34</sup> The “things said at random (εἰκῇ λεγόμενα)” which Socrates means to propose to his judges (Plato, *Apology* 17c) are in fact the words he will chance upon (ἐπιτυχόντα ὀνόματα) without premeditation.



awareness that men cannot be classified aprioristically, as they must be evaluated individually, and weighed against the backdrop of the events that befall each one of them: wealth (374), poverty (375-6), war (377). As already explained by Goldhill (1986), 379 (“It’s best to let these things go and leave them as they happen/reveal themselves”)<sup>35</sup> closely follows the overall argumentation and does not do away with the issue of virtue with a cliché – sometimes hastily translated.<sup>36</sup> However, the problem is also textual: 379 was assigned to Euripides’ *Auge* by Henri Estienne in his edition of Diogenes Laertius (Stephanus 1570), and this has guided the attribution of 373-8 too to that lost play (Wilamowitz 1875: 190-3). The quoted line is cited in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2.33, which, in a second-hand report, tells about Socrates’ annoyed reaction to a Euripidean character’s renunciation to inquire on a man’s virtue (*euandria*). If genuine, the reading ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ (“in the same”), present in Diogenes’ most reliable manuscripts, alludes to a feminine name, that is, the title of the tragedy to which this line was said to belong. The anaphoric marker suggests that, in Diogenes’ source, this quotation was preceded by another one, either omitted by Diogenes or missed in his manuscripts, from the same play, and that the former was explicitly introduced by the title.<sup>37</sup> Therefore we should understand that 379 was drawn from a play whose title was a female name. It should be recalled, though, that when gnomic anthologies, such as Stobaeus’, consecutively quoted two or more portions of the same play, they often resorted to the neuter demonstrative ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ (*scil.* δρώματι: “in the same play”). If this were the only way they quoted them, the correction of ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ to ἐν τῇ Αὔγῃ (“in the *Auge*”) would be legitimate. However, this was not the case. Thus, we cannot rule out the genuineness of the feminine demonstrative, suggesting a reference to an anthology where the quotation of 379 immediately followed another one from Euripides’ *Electra*. Estienne’s correction is probably arbitrary.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is not necessary to imagine either that our line belonged to Euripides’ *Auge*, or that in both *Electra* and *Auge*

<sup>35</sup> Here I have slightly modified Cropp’s translation (“and leave them in disorder”).

<sup>36</sup> For instance, by Vermeule (1958): “we can toss our judgements random on the winds”.

<sup>37</sup> Marcovich (1999) and Dorandi (2013) adopt Εὐριπίδου ἐν τῇ Αὔγῃ (“in Euripides’ *Auge*”), following Stephanus (1570); here is the distribution of the readings: τῇ αὐτῇ BP τῇ αὐγῇ Z<sup>3</sup> Frobenius 1533 τῇ αὐτοῦ F Long 1964 (def. Distilo 2012: *ibidem*): ἐν τοῖς Φ. The exchange between the Greek uncial forms of T and Γ is very frequent, and ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ could be at the origin of the reading ἐν τῇ αὐγῇ (that is, Αὔγῃ, “in the *Auge*”), while ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ (“in his [what?]”), is attracted into the genitive by the proximity of Εὐριπίδου or, more likely, is an attempt to adapt anaphoric demonstrative αὐτῇ because of the lack of a feminine noun.

<sup>38</sup> On this see also Distilo (2012: 645-8; but her arguments about the whole sequence 357-400 are neither clear nor consistent: 160-76).

the playwright used the same line,<sup>39</sup> which has sometimes been read as endowed with a proverbial connotation.

Neither Estienne's emendation, nor the attribution of 373-9 to *Auge* are currently shared by recent editors of Euripidean fragments: Collard and Cropp warn that "the case for denying these lines to *Electra* is much debated" (2008: 262); even more concise is the information provided by Kannicht (2004: 335); neither 379, nor the other suspected lines of *Electra* have been assigned to *Auge* by Jouan and van Looy (1998), Kannicht (2004), and Collard and Cropp (2008). Therefore, it is advisable to keep reading 379 in *Electra*, and to do so in light of Orestes' *rhesis*. If we consider the whole episode, we learn that, "on hearing [*Electra* 379]", Socrates "stood up and left the theatre; for he claimed it was ridiculous thinking fit to search after a slave who cannot be found, and letting virtue to perish in this way".<sup>40</sup> The Socratic scenario drawn by Diogenes raises substantial doubts: since neither in *Auge* nor in any other Euripidean play we can find the dramatic situation of a slave being searched for and not being found anywhere, what we have here seems to be the same paradoxical instantiation of the empty intellectualism Euripides was often blamed for, interested in irrelevant questions and indifferent towards more substantial ones, that we can find in his micrologic "investigation" (ζητεῖν) of domestic objects for which he is made fun of by Dionysos in Aristophanes' *Frogs* 980-91.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. The Middle Class Does Not Go the Gym: 386-8

With regard to 367-400, in line of principle it cannot be excluded that a more or less long portion of Orestes' *rhesis* was added on the occasion of some *mise en scene* of the tragedy between the end of the fifth century

<sup>39</sup> As was eventually also suggested by Lefkowitz (2007: 104n19).

<sup>40</sup> Trans. Hicks (1925) (ἀναστὰς ἐξηλθε, φήσας γελοῖον εἶναι ἀνδράποδον μὲν μὴ εὐρισκόμενον ἀξιούην ζητεῖν, ἀρετὴν δ' οὕτως ἔαν ἀπολωλέναι).

<sup>41</sup> Νῆ τοὺς θεούς, νῦν γοῦν Ἀθη-/ναίων ἅπας τις εἰσιῶν / κέκραγε πρὸς τοὺς οἰκέτας / ζητεῖ τε· "ποῦ 'στιν ἡ χύτρα; / τίς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀπεδήδοκεν / τῆς μαινίδος; τὸ τρύβλιον / τὸ περυσινὸν τέθηκέ μοι· / ποῦ τὸ σκόροδον τὸ χθιζινόν; / τίς τῆς ἐλάας παρέτραγεν;" ("I swear by the gods we've reached the point / Where every Athenian enters his house / And shouts at the top of his voice to the slaves / With urgent demands: 'Now where's that pot? / Who's eaten up the head of that fish, / The sprat I mean? That bowl of mine / I bought last year is finished for good. / And where's that garlic from yesterday? / Who's nibbled away at the olives as well?"). For the text I follow Dover (1993), for the translation, Halliwell (2015).



BCE and the first century CE,<sup>42</sup> and especially in the fourth century. That was an age when other variations on the canonical *Oresteia* (such as Theodectes' *Orestes*)<sup>43</sup> could suggest an 'updating' of Euripides' Orestes. But even at first sight the reflections contained in those lines are undeniably Euripidean. If they were additions, they could have only been made to increase their Euripidean quality – in order, as it were, to 'make Euripides (more) Euripidean'. The statement that "it's men of this kind who order cities properly, and homes as well" (386) clearly echoes the Peasant's description given only a few lines before, at 380-2, which have not been suspected of interpolation. It also finds some parallels with the thesis of the 'middle class' as the authentic backbone of the *polis* expressed by Euripides in *The Suppliant Women* (Michellini 1994: esp. 225). Therefore, they are both mutually coherent and consistent with the author's own system of values. It is impossible to agree with Wilamowitz (1875: 192) that by "men of this kind" (οἱ . . . τοιοῦτοι) Euripides alludes to "men devoted to a more refined manner of life . . . , with whose rich wisdom, which the common people label as feeble and luxurious, brute force stands in contrast" (my emphasis).<sup>44</sup> It is neither easy, nor perhaps recommendable, to identify the deep reasons of this 'interpolative' hermeneutics stratifying modern and ancient views. And yet, it is clear that "brute force" ("vis consilii expers") is meant to render σάρκες . . . κενὰ φρενῶν (388: "fleshbags devoid of brains"). The opposition between the bodies as "ornaments of the town square" (we could call them 'statuesque')<sup>45</sup> and the social and political role of a non-aristocratic subject is hard to accept for other scholars too: Denniston was the first to grasp the anti-athletic polemic but only to dismiss it here ("certainly very irrelevant. . . . The outburst against athletes, who are no doubt intended, is quite out of place here"; 1939: 96-7); Reeve is final on this: "386-90, a reflection on the superiority of moral to physical strength, are irrelevant, and no more words need to be wasted on them" (1973: 152). Euripides criticism of athleticism is well known, for example from his *Autolycos* (Kannicht 2004: fr. 282). As regards this satyr-drama, Pritchard rightly noted that

it is doubtful that any considerable number of theatre-goers would have agreed with this fragment's criticisms. Many were no doubt angered by

<sup>42</sup> Evidence for "revived drama" is now collected by Nervegha (2007: 15-31); the author concludes that "tragedies and Menander's comedies were staged at least until the time of Plutarch" (41).

<sup>43</sup> Mentioned in Aristoteles' *Rhetorica* 2, 1401a35.

<sup>44</sup> "Homines elegantiori vitae cultui dediti . . . quorum lautae sapientiae, quam plebs mollem et luxuriosam vocat, vis consilii expers opponitur".

<sup>45</sup> Denniston rightly comments that in ἀγάλματ[α] ("ornaments") "there may well be a reference to the secondary sense 'statue' (cf. ἀνδρίαντα)" (1939: 97).

them, while some others may have laughed at their apparently calculated offensiveness. . . . Thus [this] fragment probably served the same purpose as the criticisms of athletes in Euripides' *Electra*: instead of giving voice to popular sentiments it helped to characterize a protagonist." (2012: 12; see also 14)

The implicit "offensiveness" against the "fleshbags devoid of brains" is yet another piece of evidence against the intervention of an actor or a director inclined to alienate their audiences. However, this is not the only locus in *Electra* where we find an opposition between "idle" (ἄχρεϊα) – however prestigious – physical contests and the only *agon* that deserves approval, that is, the one inspired by ethical and political reasons. This same opposition will also occur at a later stage, soon after the announcement of Orestes' victory over Aegisthus, in the first stanza of the third *stasimon* (862-5). Van Emde Boas rightly observes that "hunting, sacrifice and athletics are the dominant metaphorical motifs in the play" (2017: 56). But his following observation that "[i]t is significant that the athletic imagery, with its triumphant overtones, disappears entirely after Orestes comes on stage with Aegisthus' corpse" (2017: 57) does not take into consideration that these "triumphant overtones" coincide, both in the Chorus' song and in Electra's apostrophe to her brother, with a substantial depreciation of athletic values. Indeed, the many points of contact with the epinician imagery, richly discussed by Swift (2010: 156-69), especially emphasise the main feature of the third *stasimon* (860-79) and of Electra's apostrophe, that is, the refusal of an "idle" athleticism. Here the Chorus themselves depict it as a "glorious victory-song" (καλλίνικο[ς] ᾠδ[ή]) in the style of the celebrations for the Olympian athletes, and Electra welcomes her brother along the same lines (880-5).<sup>46</sup>

ΧΟΡΟΣ	νικᾷ στεφαναφορίαν οὐ τὰν παρ' Ἀλφειοῦ ῥέεθροις τελέσας κασίγνητος σέθεν.	862
CHORUS	Your brother has completed and won a crown-contest – [not that by Alpheus' streams.]	
	...	
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΑ	ὦ καλλίνικε, πατρός ἐκ νικηφόρου γεγώς, Ὀρέστα, τῆς ὑπ' Ἰλίου μάχης, δέξαι κόμης σῆς βοστρύχων ἀνδήματα. ἦκεις γὰρ οὐκ ἀχρεῖον ἔκπλεθρον δραμῶν	880

<sup>46</sup> Here I adopt στεφαναφορίαν (MSS) and οὐ τὰν (Murray 1902; see Denniston 1939: 155), while Diggle (1981) and Cropp (2013) print στεφαναφόρα κρείσσω τῶν (-φορίαν †κρείσσω τῶν† Donzelli 1995 and Kovacs 1998); I have slightly revised Cropp's translation accordingly.

ἀγῶν' ἐς οἴκους ἀλλὰ πολέμιον κτανὼν  
Αἰγισθον, ὃς σὸν πατέρα κάμὸν ὤλεσεν. 885

ELECTRA

O glorious in victory, Orestes, sprung from a father victorious in the battle under Troy, accept these bindings for the locks of your hair. You come home after racing no idle furlong, but having killed your foe, Aegisthus, who slew your father and mine.

The anti-athletic polemic is glaring, and it assumes centre stage precisely when both the Chorus and Electra focus on Orestes' victory: here we have στεφαναφορία (862; "crown-contest"), καλλίνικος (865 and 880; "glorious in victory"), νικήφορος ("victorious") at 875 and also at 880 (where Orestes shares this epithet with his 'victorious father'), and finally ἀνδήματα ("bindings", 882). The aim is overtly to contrast his victory with those at the Olympian games. Further evidence that this motif is integrated in the play is Euripides' invention that Orestes and Pylades are going "to the Alpheus", that is, to Olympia – as Orestes deceptively says to Aegisthus.<sup>47</sup> It would not be worth lingering on this conceptual isotopy at 387-8 and 862-85 but for a detail: by polemicizing against the similarity, claimed by the Old Man, between the lock laid on Agamemnon's tomb and her own hair (528), Electra argues that Orestes is "a nobleman" (ἀνὴρ εὐγενής) frequenter of "wrestling-grounds",<sup>48</sup> and his hair is therefore not comparable to the one "combed and soft" (κτενισμοῖς θήλυσ, lit.: "softened by combing") of a woman. As pointed out by Denniston, this argument sounds inconsistent on the lips of a tragic heroine whose hair is described by Orestes as "close-cropped" (κεκαρμένῳ κάρῳ) at 108, and who says that her own "head and hair are razor-shorn" (κρᾶτα πλόκαμόν τ' ἐσκυθισμένον ξυρῶ) at 241 (1939: 116). But it is inconsistent also because Electra has mourned the destiny of her brother who, far from frequenting, as a nobleman, the wrestling-grounds, is "roaming in misery to a hireling hearth" (205: μέλεος ἀλαίνων ποτὶ θῆσσαν ἐστίαν). Her prejudice aligns itself with the stereotyped heroic concept often inspiring her stances, producing an embarrassing contradiction between how we know her from the myth and how Euripides created her.<sup>49</sup> The just quoted di-

<sup>47</sup> 781-2: it is once again the Messenger who refers the dialogue between the two: "we are going to the Alpheus, to offer sacrifices to Olympian Zeus" (πρὸς δ' Ἀλφεὸν / θύσοντες ἐρχόμεσθ' Ὀλυμπίῳ Δί).

<sup>48</sup> ὁ μὲν (*scil.* χαίτης πλόκος) παλαίστραις ἀνδρὸς εὐγενοῦς τραφεῖς: "one (lock of hair) is tended in a nobleman's wrestling-grounds".

<sup>49</sup> With regard to the "obsessional views" of Euripides' Electra, see Pucci (2012), especially with reference to "her confidence of being in control of herself and of the reasons she invokes, while in fact she is a captive of the aristocratic prejudices which are ridiculed by the dramatic situation itself" (309).

ologue between Electra and the Old Man strengthens the contrast between the conventional paradigm of a buff aristocrat and the Peasant, the model of the average citizen “who order[s] cities properly, and homes as well” (386-7), as we have just heard in the dialogue between Electra and Orestes. This semantic isotopy constitutive of what I have roughly called ‘anti-athleticism’ is destined to undergo yet another development, following Orestes’ victory over Aegisthus and the changed situation. As we have just seen, an ‘anti-athleticist’ stance will also be taken by the Chorus and Electra. However, for the time being Orestes’ and Electra’s opinions continue to sound subtly dissonant. Therefore, also in this case the play text, as we may read it, is coherent both in its parts and as a whole. Electra stereotypically depicts the aristocratic man as an athlete (an absolute value in classical Greek culture), and then, supported by the Chorus, she favours the ethical-political agon over the athletic one. The positions which will be taken by the Chorus and Electra from 862 to 885 are coherent with those of Orestes, and contribute to suggesting a critique of athleticism consistent with 383-90. If these lines are excised, the strong polemics of the Chorus and Electra against athleticism would come entirely unexpected and would sound groundless after Orestes’ victory over Aegisthus; above all, it would appear to be in blatant contradiction with Electra’s own stance in her dialogue with the Old Man. The expression of the two different viewpoints in the three central episodes of the play marks an evolution of the female protagonist grounded in Orestes’ appreciation of the ‘average citizen’ which Electra has silently heard. Thus, excising those early lines implies changing her character too. Its evolution in the course of the play is so clear as to make all tampering with it unjustifiable.

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## Onstage/Offstage (Mis)Recognitions in *The Winter's Tale*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

How do the offstage and the narrative mode contribute to the construction of knowledge in *The Winter's Tale*, making it perspectival and situated? This article discusses how not two, but three recognition scenes interact, bringing together the play's first and second part, by enhancing the role of the offstage/onstage dialectic, both within each one of these three scenes, and in their mutual dialogue. This reading relies upon an interpretation of the play's overall signifying system, based upon a principle of correspondences tying together the fabric of drama at different levels: lexical, performative, thematic, conceptual. It shows how foregrounded patterns of iteration dependent on the criterion of likeness do not make for stable significance outside of the realm of art (or artifice). Instead, they appear to be a possibly self-deluding response to a troubled awareness of the unreliability of signs and appearances, betraying concern about the (potentially tragic) inevitability of doubt.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; *anagnorisis*; narrative in drama; the offstage

### 1. Epistemological Tensions

Increasing interest in story-telling in drama and the offstage has begun to refocus critical attention upon narrative power in theatre, exploring the ways in which it erodes the stage boundaries and enlarges its scope (Wilson 1989 and 1995; see also Bigliazzi ed. 2016). As Jonathan Walker has recently argued, since Aristotle and the premodern theorists, down to Philip Sidney and other early modern writers, the mode of spectacle has always been that of "put[ting] palpable persons and objects on display, thus favoring (and encouraging its audience to favor) that which is directly perceptible to the eyes and ears as the basis of their knowledge in the theater" (2017: 5). Aristotle recommended that all *pragmata*, or the events and deeds

<sup>1</sup> This article re-elaborates questions long discussed with Alessandro Serpieri. To him it is dedicated.

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shown on stage, should be probable and rational, and those which are not should be voiced by a God at the end. Horace too warned against the representation of incredible scenes (such as Procne's metamorphosis) or inappropriate ones (such as Medea's murder of her own sons and Atreus' cannibalistic meal). He clearly advised that, except in these two cases, the action should unfold in plain sight, because "[t]he things reported to the eares move not the mynd so sone, / As lively set before thyne eyes, in acte for to behold".<sup>2</sup> Visible onstage business was indubitably more spectacular than its translation into words. As Gruber noticed, "[n]ot only does Horace suppose narrative and drama to be incongruous (if not in principle exclusive) but also, therefore, privileges 'showing' for the very reasons that Plato scorned it, namely, its efficacy in causing spectators to credit the artistic illusion with truth" (2010: 11). Such prescriptions were taken up and voiced, among others, by Sidney in his *Defence of Poesie*, where he recalled "Aristotle's precept, and common reason" that "the stage should always represent but one place; and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be . . . but one day" (1909: 107). Not surprisingly, his critique of coeval theatre practices, "where you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other, and so many other under kingdoms, that the player when he comes in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived" (ibid.), singled out contemporary dramatists' preposterous choice of having characters explain and tell where they come from. Such opinions were to become part and parcel of neoclassical poetics, which, in the name of verisimilitude, was to relegate the irrational, improbable, or inappropriate to the offstage.<sup>3</sup>

But when we consider the great bulk of early modern English non-neoclassical drama, we are faced with something radically different. As Walker has underscored, early modern playwrights inherited criteria of credibility and intelligibility from premodern theorists, but rather than absorbing them passively, they significantly revised them, devising an "unofficial counterdiscourse to a traditional understanding of how dramatic form was

<sup>2</sup> Drant (1567: <Fol. 6r and v>); Horace: "Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem / quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus et quae / ipse sibi tradit spectator" (1999: ll. 180-2).

<sup>3</sup> As Gruber noticed, Racine's object in his Preface to *Britannicus* (1669) was "to install the concept of verisimilitude at the basis of a coherent dramaturgical practice" according to which it was necessary to make invisible "certain objects [which] are too unyieldingly 'real' or 'raw' for the stage (a functioning clock on the wall is a famous example)", and "some actions [which] if they are simulated (such as an actor's pretending to die) appear too overtly 'theatrical'" (2010: 4). For a discussion of circumstantial proof with regard to the construction of time and space in drama, as well as to the function of narrative, see Hutson (2015; on Sidney 22-9).

supposed to function" (2017: 16). The primary concern was "the perceptual and cognitive work that playgoers perform" (17). This entailed that for a playwright to be successful it was mandatory to "balance what theatergoers know and when they know it by accelerating and decelerating their understanding as crucial moments in the action" (ibid.). Thus, it became of paramount importance to take "[c]ontrol over the epistemology and, by extension, the intellectual perspective of theater audiences" (ibid.).

When in the late eighteenth century Samuel Johnson criticized Shakespeare's use of the offstage in the first recognition scene in *The Winter's Tale* 5.2, he simply responded to a different poetics. He was disappointed not to see the episode staged, but to hear it narrated by three Gentlemen, and branded Shakespeare slothful.<sup>4</sup> He had not been given what he had been promised, and felt "victimized by what appears to be a strategy of bait-and-switch" (Gruber 2010: 6). In fact, Johnson missed the whole point. He did not ask why at a crucial moment in the action the report proves to be a dramatic pivot; why the action is entrusted to the offstage, and why it is by way of its invisible unfolding behind the scenes that the conceptual design of the story in fact comes full circle. He did not perceive that the offstage here is "foundational to the dramatic mode" (Walker 2017: 17) as it pacifies audiences creating "the possibility for more complex . . . dramatic meaning". In so doing "it helped inaugurate a new protomodern notion that knowledge is situated, perspectival, nonuniversal, and always subject to revision" (16).

In the following pages, I will discuss how the offstage and the narrative mode make our knowledge perspectival and situated in *The Winter's Tale*. I will focus on the relation between storytelling and the recognition scenes within the broader structure of the play and its overall signifying system. My contention is that the dialectic between the offstage and the onstage produces a modal, conceptual and cognitive tension curiously expressed by the title itself, which advertises the play as an old, fabulous tale with more than a tinge of ambiguity. Curren-Aquino has perceptively noticed that while the title alludes to "strange and fanciful oral narratives intended to while away the long, cold hours of the dark nights of winter" (Shakespeare 2007: 5), the first mention of the word "tale" is Mamillius' in the "domestic company of women" (ibid.). Sometimes read as a sign of the young boy's 'effeminacy' and intimacy with his mother, within a context of problem-

<sup>4</sup> "It was, I suppose, only to spare his own labour that the poet put this whole scene into narrative, for though part of the transaction was already known to the audience, and therefore could not properly be shewn again, yet the two kings might have met upon the stage . . . and the young lady might have been recognized in sight of the spectators" (Johnson 1908: 90-1).

atized genderedness (Lamb 1998), this mention is complicated by the sadness of the story Mamillius is referring to (a “sad tale . . . / One of sprites and goblins”, 2.1.25), prefiguring a potential for tragedy. This sense appears to be reinforced by the fact that the episode is “quickly followed by one of the most disturbing moments – the abrupt, violent severing of Mamillius from the comfort of the female domain he has known” (7). But then Time intervenes, providing “a pivotal image, part verbal, part visual” (Ewbank 2012: 205) of its own triumph and power, including his ‘telling’ the play’s story. As an old-fashioned Presenter and authorial voice, Time interrupts the action, replacing it with a narrative. Tales will multiply in the second part of the play, bringing together reports (3.1, 3.3) and ballads (4.4), and once again “old tale[s]” (5.2.25, 53; 5.3.117) in a context of wonderment and amazement, changing “the sad wintry tale of the first part (tragedy)” into “the (overall) joyous spring-like tale of the second part (comedy)” (Shakespeare 2007: 7). And yet, with bitter overtones. As Mowat underlined, the three Gentlemen’s report of the recognition scene also contains a recapitulation of the events. They move “freely through past time”, while their “references to the incredibility of the tales reduces the whole play to a ‘winter’s tale’ and condition our response to the action we have seen, and to that which will come” (2011: 86). To how all this happens I am going to turn now.

## 2. Iterative Patterns: Likeness as Artifice

*The Winter’s Tale* is in many respects a dual play, made up of two major stories, genres, registers and even diverse emotional temperatures.<sup>5</sup> And yet, it is also whole and compact. Some time ago Northrop Frye remarked that “[t]he two parts are related in two ways, by sequence and by contrast. The cycle of nature, turning through the winter and summer of the year and through the age and youth of human generations, is at the center of the play’s imagery” (1968: 184). In this light, “the symbolic reason for the sixteen-year gap is clearly to have the cycle of the year reinforced by the slower cycle of human generations” (185). This cyclic and symmetrical mechanism is based on a contrastive pattern that “in Shakespeare normally includes a superficial *resemblance* in which one element

<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to mention Pafford (Shakespeare 1963: lv): “The Winter’s Tale has hatred in the first part and love, where there was hatred, in the last, but no empty gap between. Not only does the middle part stir the mind and heart of itself, but by the contrast of its beauty, love, youth, confidence, happiness, country life, and venial roguery, it intensifies the dramatic effect of the ugliness, the oppressive adult madness, hatred and murderous crime at court in the first part and the sober serenity of the last”.

is a parody of the other" (ibid). I have emphasised the word 'resemblance' because when recurrences make us grasp a broader design than what may appear at first glance, we are ensured that at bottom there is a centre, although the "play is drawn together by repeated insistence on the ambiguities of appearance" (Siemon 1974:10). Patterns of similarities and antitheses make up a system of correspondences that renders signification stable, coalescing disparate meanings into higher unities. Likeness becomes a foundational principle of meaning-making which ties together signs and safeguards continuance of belief in a meaningful world. However, the more this system of correspondences is emphasized, the more it betrays deep anxiety about its cancellation. Once the ancient system of similarities was lost, as Foucault famously argued, "the written word cease[d] to be included among the signs and forms of truth; language [was] no longer one of the figurations of the world, or a signature stamped upon things since the beginning of time" (2005: 62). This is precisely what this over-tight structures seems to hint at, suggesting that if ambiguities of appearances cannot be cancelled, they can be glossed over through artifice. Studies on wordplay in this drama and of antagonistic discourses of power, authority, and subversion have elucidated the extent to which *The Winter's Tale* is grounded in discursive clashes, disclosing how radical instability of meaning may affect the mind and, consequently, all affective relations, despite all attempt to make the system cohere and stabilize signification.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, rather than the symbolism of cyclic natural processes embedded in the generational and 'seasonal' models belonging to the tragicomic pattern of succession and reversal, it is this idea of resemblances and differences that is of interest when we come to explore the function of the off-stage in producing, or contesting, knowledge. In this sense the episodes of *anagnorisis*, or recognition, are central for an understanding of how epistemological boundaries are crossed and questioned. We are accustomed to thinking that this play has two main recognition scenes in Act 5. I will argue that there is yet another one preceding these, right at the beginning of the play, and that it is strictly linked with the other two in terms of stagecraft and the handling of the onstage/offstage dialectic within a binary sequential/reversal system of signification. These scenes mirroring each other also by way of their stagecraft bring together *peripeteia* and *denouement* within a model of binary correspondences.

<sup>6</sup> Mahood (1968) has fully illustrated the power of punning, especially in Leontes' language, while Matchett (1969) has elucidated Polixenes' unintentional use of an ambiguous language of adultery. On the interaction and competition of different levels of discoursing, see Laird (1994/) and (1996/97), and Hunt (1995/96).

As suggested above, this model based on patterns of “sameness with a difference”,<sup>7</sup> is not coincidental or neutral, but deeply imbued with epistemological preoccupations. At a micro-structural level, it appears to produce audible echo effects, including various figures of repetition and contrast, especially evident in the antanaclasis, or the repetition in a dialogue of the same word with different meanings, often with a provocative or polemical intent. Here are just a few examples: in 1.2 Leontes and Camillo confront each other on the issue of Hermione’s supposed adultery; the word “business” is pivotal in their contrast, polemically splitting reference in the two speakers’ diverse allusion to Hermione’s betrayal and Polixenes’ visit, respectively:

LEONTES . . . Lower messes  
Perchance are to this *business* purblind? Say.  
CAMILLO *Business*, my lord? I think most understand  
Bohemia stays here longer.  
(1.2, 224-7; emphasis mine)<sup>8</sup>

Soon afterwards, during the same exchange, Camillo’s use of the word “satisfy” to convey the idea that Polixenes will remain in Sicily to ‘satisfy the sovereign’s friendship’, is provocatively contrasted by Leontes’ own emphatic use of the same word, meaning that Hermione will ‘satisfy’ her desire:

CAMILLO To satisfy your high-ness and the entreaties  
Of our most gracious mistress.  
LEONTES Satisfy?  
The entreaties of your mistress? Satisfy?  
Let that suffice. . . .  
(1.2.229-32)

Then, in 2.1, responding to Leontes’ accusation of adultery, Hermione incredulously retorts that he is perhaps “sport[ing]”, that is, ‘mocking her’; Leontes’ bounces that word back to her provocatively insinuating her illicit

<sup>7</sup> According to Curren-Aquino, they “encourage the reader/spectator to remain fluidly engaged in remembering, redefining, and reassessing the past as it bears with the present future” (Shakespeare 2017: 22). This model has often received attention. For instance, Siemon (1974) has extensively illustrated that the iterative and serial dimension of the ritual action of the play allows to explore “the possibilities for good and evil in society by balancing against one another variations of a single theme”. In his turn, Proudfoot (1976) has offered a thorough investigation of verbal links, demonstrating that although their force “may be ironic or thematic . . . their pervasive effect is to suggest the unity of the play at a rather deeper level of unconscious association” (69).

<sup>8</sup> All quotations are from Shakespeare (1998).

enjoyment of Polixenes. Loss of co-referentiality is here conducive to dramatic fencing:

HERMIONE                      What is this? Sport?  
 LEONTES              Bear the boy hence; he shall not come about her.  
                             Away with him, and let her sport herself  
                             With that she's big with, for 'tis Polixenes  
                             Has made thee swell thus.  
                             (2.1.58-62)

Such echo effects are triggered on other levels too which do not concern the rhetoric of the exchange, but behavioural, gestural, or lexical and stylistic parallelisms. Only a bunch of examples may suffice here. In 4.4 Polixenes' tyrannical raging against Florizel and Perdita, just discovered to be in love (414ff.; and Camillo on this at 464ff.), duplicates Leontes' tyrannical fury against Hermione and Polixenes in the first three acts. In the same 4.4 scene Camillo alludes to Florizel as to a second Mamillius (ll. 545ff.), and then Paulina does the same in 5.1 ("Had our prince, / Jewel of children, seen this hour, he had paired / Well with this lord", ll. 115-17); soon afterwards Leontes sees in Florizel the image of Polixenes and calls him "brother" (ll.127, 146) in a chain regression of phantasmatic pairs. As father (Polixenes) and son (Florizel) are like each other, guaranteeing for Leontes continuance of affective meaning and memory, Hermione and Perdita too mirror each other.<sup>9</sup> As regards binary patterns investing the language of gesture, in 4.4.414 Polixenes takes off his shepherd's garment and reveals himself as Florizel's father; a few lines later Florizel doffs the clothes he had exchanged with Autolycus and he too discloses his true identity. The context is clearly metatheatrical, with Camillo overtly directing the action (Camillo: ". . . it shall be so my care / To have you royally appointed, as if / The scene you play were mine", ll. 588-90; and at ll. 643-51 he tells Perdita how to disguise herself). Apocalyptic invocations of total destruction, including the spilling of the germs of human life, typical of other Shakespear-

<sup>9</sup> On parental duplications and the instability of appearances see Siemon (1974: 11-12). In respect to the play's source, this resemblance between mother and daughter attenuates here the sense of incestuous attraction Leontes feels for his yet unacknowledged daughter (5.1.222ff.). In Greene's novella, Pandosto's sense of guilt for his "disorderly" and "unlawful lust" for the young Fawnia will eventually contribute to pushing him to commit suicide: "Pandosto calling to mind how first he betrayed his friend Egistus, how his jealousy was the cause of Bellaria's death, that, contrary to the law of nature, he had lusted after his own daughter, moved with these desperate thoughts he fell in a melancholy fit and – to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem – he slew himself": Shakespeare (1998: 274).







risms are not unusual in Shakespeare, starting with the common duplication of plots and subplots. However, in a play whose *peripeteia* is triggered by a radical misinterpretation of signs, the play's attempt to signify at the higher level of its overall structure (itself made up of different planes), and to produce a metadiscourse upon reliable meaning-making by sticking to the principle of likeness, insinuates that that principle is not 'any' device to make the play's parts cohere. It is, in fact, what keeps in check the potential for a seemingly *ante litteram* Derridean free play (2005) within a context with neither centre nor finite meaning. It is a way to give back a centre to the world and allow for another type of free play within a closed system of likenesses and antitheses – that of 'poetic' language (Jakobson 1960; Lotman 1977).

### 3. *Peripeteia* and (Mis)Recognition

As pointed out by Simon Haines, if *gnosis* in Greek referred to "certain knowledge, based on observation, and opposed to mere *doxa* or belief", and "the negative terms were *agnoia* and *agnostos*,<sup>13</sup> 'not-knowing'", *an-agnorisis* means "'not-not-knowing': the recovery of what was formerly known but has been concealed or forgotten", and more precisely "the cleaning away of the film of overlaid ignorance" (2015: 218). It implies a movement towards knowledge, whether in terms of the recovery of something known, unknown and then known again, or of something known that was previously unknown (as in Alessandro Piccolomini's *Annotazioni alla Poetica di Aristotele*, 1575; see Cave 1988: 61). Terence Cave has remarked that this shift away from ignorance is also a "shift *into* the implausible", since what is revealed is "beyond common experience" and shares in the marvelous: "Anagnorisis conjoins the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense, when the trap is sprung, that the commonly accepted co-ordinates of knowledge have gone away" (2). But there is also a case which implies recovery as recreation, involving confrontation with the other in a process of mutual catharsis and regeneration. Haines' words are worth mentioning in full:

In Book 24 of the *Iliad* Achilles finally comes to understand himself as an affliction, as the doomed, untimely one; and that is when he is able to behave, at last, properly, giving Hector's body back and treating Priam with respect. This recognition is reciprocal. Old king and young warrior show themselves completely to each other, each recognizing through the other the reality of

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes with active meaning, albeit more frequently with a passive one ('unknown').

his own condition. In Achilles, Priam looks at the death of all his sons, of his dearest son, and sees himself as desolation; in Priam, Achilles looks at the desolation of his own father and the death of his friend and sees himself as a short-lived calamity visited on the world. He is able to act in this changed recognition of himself, and revise his understanding of the ethic of honour and *aristeia*: to see that he had ceased to act by it. . . . We recognize ourselves and each other in what we do, not just what we feel. . . . two known but blurred perspectives on the self, one's own and another's, one's own actions and even passions as recognized by another, resolve into or come into focus as a single clear image. . . 'know thyself' turns out to be an injunction we can only fulfil for each other. The self doesn't just come into focus: it knows itself differently. (2015: 219)

Considered from these three different yet contiguous perspectives, the recognition scenes in *The Winter's Tale* should not only be increased by one, but should also be regarded as punctuating a tragi-comic progress from *hamartia* to reconciliation. The first one appears to be based upon a process of mutual self-disclosure leading to mis-recognition/mis-recreation; the latter two are scenes of recovery involving a passage from ignorance to knowledge, not originating in self-scrutiny, and yet affecting self-knowledge. I will call the first case of *anagnorisis* a negative discovery, as it consists in a mutual psychological process inverting the traditional 'positive recreation' as presented in the *Iliad* above. This episode produces the initial *peripeteia*, superimposing recognition and the change or reversal of fortune. Aristotle praised this particular case when he observed that "[t]he finest recognition is that which occurs simultaneously with reversal, as with the one in the *Oedipus*" (Aristotle 1987; 1452a32-33: καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἅμα περιπετεῖα γένηται, οἷον ἔχει ἡ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι). But, of course, Shakespeare was not bothering with Aristotelian precepts, which he could not know, at least directly, and moved along those lines because the overall design of the play required it.

The question of knowing and/or unknowing is from the start a primary concern of the play. It affects the characters' relations, bringing man and wife to 'produce a change' in each other, while changing individually because of the knowledge (or misknowledge) they acquire. It is in fact a contrastive and 'parodic' *anagnorisis*, adjusted to the mechanics of tragedy. Typically, Shakespeare transforms the traditional external cause of *peripeteia* into Leontes' 'discovery' of his own distrust of Hermione and Polixenes. This coincides, as Coghill suggested, with the coming to light of Leontes' own latent suspicion of wife and friend: "as in the source-story which Shakespeare was following, [he] has long since been jealous and is angling now (as he admits later) with his sardonic amphibologies to catch Polixenes in the trap of the invitation to prolong his stay, before he can escape to Bohemia and be

safe" (1958: 33). But even if we dismiss this latency, as Matchett does, and believe that we are instead shown "Leontes becoming jealous . . . making his audience suspicious first so that Leontes' jealousy comes less as a surprise than as a confirmation" (1969: 95), what we are presented with here is a 'recognition'. The audience is brought to discover the process itself of how jealousy is destructively born and manifests itself.<sup>14</sup> The play's progress towards the revelation of Hermione's adultery is more a journey towards Leontes' uncritical acquisition of 'self-knowledge' than a discovery of Hermione's assumed infidelity. It coincides with the audience's recognition of Leontes' own 'recovery' of an idea of himself as a cuckold – resident in his mind as a latent feeling or as a potential fear – and of his consequent 'self-recreation' into the 'negative Other', who disowns wife, son, and daughter.

This occupies the first part of the play and unfolds through several steps:<sup>15</sup> Polixenes' mention of his nine-month stay in Sicily (1.2.1-8); Leontes' invitation to remain longer and Polixenes' refusal; Leontes' annoyance with Hermione's silence and his request of intervention (l. 27); her consequent talking Polixenes into accepting her invitation (ll. 45-60); Polixenes' memories of his past friendship with Leontes, before they were corrupted by women, and Hermione's irritated reaction (ll. 79-81). The picture is drawn: two couples face each other, Leontes-Polixenes vs Leontes-Hermione, and both risk being disrupted by devilish female seduction. The tragic plot is ready to be set off:

LEONTES	Is he <i>won</i> yet?
HERMIONE	He will stay, my lord.
LEONTES	At my request he would not.
	Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok'st
	To better purpose.
HERMIONE	Never?
LEONTES	Never but once.

(1.2.85-8; emphasis mine)

The follow-up is on record. What has not been remarked, however, is how at this point the offstage impacts upon the unfolding of the action we

<sup>14</sup> Matchett offered an excellent reading of how Shakespeare in this play involves the audience "in the ongoing dramatic process" (1969: 103). With regard to this scene, he further remarked that "[t]he dramatic surprise should come later, in fact, when we discover that he and we were wrong. As is so often the situation, we are misled in our understanding of the play because we know the story too well and therefore know all along that Hermione is innocent. Whether anyone is guilty should, at the beginning of the play, be an open question" (95).

<sup>15</sup> In addition to Coghill (1958) and Matchett (1969), for a fuller discussion, which space does not allow here, see also Serpieri (2001), Bigliazzi (2005: 117-22) and (2009).

behold. Nor has it been noticed how the narrative that gradually develops out of the visible action and starts moving away from the stage, begins to pry into what stands behind it, and to give shape to possible, alternative stories that might take place offstage while the action occurs in full view. To what extent and how may the gestures we see accompany the exchanges support Leontes' own narrative? Curren-Aquino refers that "Helena Faucit (in Macready's 1837 production) initiated the practice of giving one hand to Leontes on 'husband' (106) and the other to Polixenes on 'friend' (107)" (Shakespeare 2007: 92). But the action might be even more complicated. I will only recall that, right before Leontes' expression of his "*tremor cordis*" (1.2.109-10), Capell felt the need to add a stage direction, absent in the In folio, normally retained by modern editors, suggesting a gesture of affectionate friendliness between Hermione and Polixenes:

HERMIONE                    'Tis grace indeed.  
                                  Why, lo you now, I have spoke to th'purpose twice.  
                                  The one for ever earned a royal husband,  
                                  Th'other, for some while a friend.  
                                  [*She gives her hand to Polixenes*]  
                                  (1.2.104-7)

That gesture proposed by Capell, as Curren-Aquino observes, might have been justified by "reference to 'paddling palms and 'pinching finger' (ll. 114-15)" in Leontes' following aside, so that "the impact of Hermione's joining hands with Polixenes is presumably increased for Leontes by the recollection just before (ll. 102-4) of his and Hermione's joining hands in betrothal" (Shakespeare 2007: 92). This is when the action on stage and its narratization, coupled with what Leontes thinks must have occurred offstage, start to diverge significantly. In the absence of other reliable reports or contrary ocular proofs, he narratizes for himself, and shortly afterwards for Camillo too, a story of adultery occurred in the concealed off-stage space of his own mind: in an invisible locus behind the scenes that suddenly takes on the hallucinatory, troubling reality of infidelity. Leontes' vividly detailed narrative brings us into the recesses of his secretly voyeuristic fears:

                                 Is whispering nothing?  
 Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?  
 Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career  
 Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible  
 Of breaking honesty! Horsing foot on foot?  
 Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?  
 Hours minutes? Noon midnight? And all eyes  
 Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,

That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?  
 Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,  
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings  
 If this be nothing.  
 (1.2.281-93)

The reference to nothing in this passage has sometimes been interpreted as the expression of the philosophical paradox of an ontologically predicable 'not-nothing',<sup>16</sup> or, alternatively, of a pre-cartesian scepticism rooted in a painful awareness of radical unknowing. This is Stanley Cavell's position, who reads Leontes' words literally and finds in them a nihilistic desire leading to destroy all and all meaning. Leontes' incapacity to recognize himself in his son becomes the reason for the unanswerable questions contained in these lines, as well as of his consequent irreducible nihilistic drive. Cavell traces their origin in Leontes' unresolved Oedipal tension with Mamillius, a hypothesis that has been debated on both dramaturgical<sup>17</sup> and rhetorical grounds.<sup>18</sup> For sure, Leontes no longer believes in other people, but only in his own mind's eye. This triggers a play with signifiers according to which "joining hands" becomes 'like' "paddling palms" and "pinching finger" (ll. 114-15), leading Leontes on the dangerous path of a painful imaginary story no longer adherent to facts. Once the principle of

<sup>16</sup> Caygill (2000) interestingly assimilates various ambiguous occurrences of "nothing" in Shakespeare's canon to a monstrous codification of a 'not-nothing' from which there derives "neither unequivocal being nor unequivocal not-being but a series of equivocal events linked by dissension, betrayal, civil war and madness – not being but not nothing" (105). For a longer discussion of this topic see Bigliuzzi (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Cavell argues that an unsolved Oedipal conflict becomes apparent when, in 2.1, Leontes sees Mamillius together with his mother in an assumedly complicit attitude the moment the boy starts telling her the "sad tale's best for winter" (25). Contrary to this position, Vickers (1993: 310) holds that "reference to the text at this point (2.1.32ff) will show that Leontes has come in a great anger to his wife after receiving the news that Polixenes and Camillo have left in haste. He cannot know that Mamillius is telling his mother a tale, appears not even to have noticed it, since he enters impatiently questioning one of his attendants about Polixenes' hasty departure – 'Was he met here? His train? Camillo with him?' (2.1.33). Leontes in fact takes no notice of the child for 24 lines, until he orders him to be carried off lest Hermione corrupt him further. Leontes' jealousy may be manic, but he is in no sense a rival to his son for Hermione's love, so the 'conflict' cannot be Oedipal".

<sup>18</sup> This is again Vickers' position: "Leontes is using the word 'nothing' not in this [metaphysical] sense but as an ellipsis for 'evidence of adultery'. Nor does he 'wish' there to be nothing – in his delusion, indeed, he wishes there to be something, since it would justify his suspicions. Leontes' folly is to take a series of rhetorical questions as if they were evidence admissible in court; Cavell's folly is to treat them as metaphysics" (ibid.). See also Bigliuzzi (2005: 120-2).

likeness has gone astray in his 'tale', all other 'assumed likenesses' are lost: the women say that Mamillius is 'like' him, yet he remains dubitative, and when Paulina insists on saying that the newborn baby is 'like' him too, his disavowal is absolute:

PAULINA     It is yours;  
                  And might we lay th'old proverb to your charge,  
                  So *like* you, 'tis the worse. Behold my lords,  
                  Although the *print* be little, the whole matter  
                  And *copy* of the father – eye, nose, lip.  
                  The trick of's frown, his forehead, nay, the valley,  
                  The pretty dimples of his chin and cheek, his smiles,  
                  The very mould and frame of hand, nail, finger.  
                  And thou good goddess Nature, which hast made it  
                  So *like* to him that got it, if thou hast  
                  The ordering of the mind too, 'mongst all colours,  
                  No yellow in't, lest the suspect, as he does,  
                  Her children not her husband's.  
                  (2.3.95-107; emphasis mine)

Ocular proof is useless: those facts are not incontrovertible but only perceived similarities; the onstage action is no evidence of truth either, as it is ambiguous and lays itself open to 'fanciful' manipulation. The offstage as the locus of possibility has invaded the onstage through Leontes' infected imaginary and his story-telling, making that alternative story 'real' and triggering the tragic *peripeteia*. Leontes may be wrong, and we understand that he is. But what we see is uncertain and ambiguous, and what we hear from Leontes gives it a meaning, albeit the wrong one. The *anagnorisis* of Leontes' jealousy will have lasting consequences upon Hermione. The onstage will retain the effects of the "epistemological disturbances that the offstage activates" (Walker: xv).

The sceptical question 'may Hermione be, or ever be, an adulteress' constitutes an inevitable latency in a universe where signs are discovered to be unmotivated and likenesses arbitrary. Leontes disowns his friend's and wife's signs of loyalty and love; he enters the game of free play with signifiers, rooted in his diseased and decentred imaginary, and probes the abyss of the possible, losing all – himself included. In order for this shaken universe to recompose itself, not one but two more recognition scenes are required, echoing the diptych-like structure of the play (Frye 1968); the offstage as the origin of alternative dangerous narratives needs neutralization.

#### 4. Offstage/Onstage Recognitions

Not surprisingly within a play pivoting on patterns of iteration, the final *climax* leads up to two recognition scenes, significantly in the alternative modes of narration and enactment. Surprisingly, instead, it is the onstage one that is the less probable and credible of the two. Let us start from the first recognition, which Johnson was to criticize harshly, as we have seen. Frye related its convention back to Roman drama, noticing that "Shakespeare here combined two traditions which descended from Menander, pastoral romance and New Comedy, and has consequently come very close to Menandrine formulas as we have them in such a play as *Epitrepontes*" (1968: 187). However, he also noticed that Shakespeare must have been "less interested in [the first one] than in the statue scene, which is all his own" (*ibid.*), because he decided to have it reported. Like Johnson, Frye missed the point. Why then conceal it from view?

It presents itself in the form of a narrative distributed among three Gentlemen, whose language, as Hunt recalls, has often been considered "precious, artificial", "Arcadian and Euphuistic" (1995/96: 86). At this point of the action the motif of the "tale" suggests incredibility and 'trumpery', as in the case of Autolycus' ballads (Frye 1968: 192). But apart from such motivic overtones, the narratives which are functionally related to this one are two reports of events actually occurred: that of the two messengers sent to Delphos in 3.1, and the clown's tale of the mariners' shipwreck and Antigonus' death (3.3.80ff.). As Garber has pointed out with regard to 3.1, "[t]he unimaginable splendor of the temple and its occupants and the transcendent religious experience undergone by the messengers are here magnified, rather than diminished, by their indirect presentation" (1984: 47). This suggests that the storytelling of an experience removed from sight to the offstage, as the visit to Delphos, is not a synonym of unimportant or impossible things to show; rather, it corresponds to a precise dramatic choice impacting upon both the course of the action and the way this is meant to be perceived by the playgoers.

The courtiers' report falls within this category of the "unscene", that is, a removed-from-sight action whose ineffability or ambiguity is strategically enhanced through a narrative (Garber 1984). Mowat noticed that its relevance lies in its narrative quality: the courtiers "are not characterized, there is no conflict among them, no sense of action moving forward" (2011: 86). I will add that its function is also dramatic and conceptual as it links back to another narrative from which it comparatively derives its meaning: to Leontes' story of Hermione's adultery. It is not literally an unscene, but it may be considered as one in so far as it draws on Leontes' disturbed inwardness – itself an 'offstage' – before materializing itself onstage, finally becoming the pivot of the tragic *peripeteia*. It is with this distant narrative especially that the Gentlemen's final account is contrastively and conceptually connected.



From the point of view of stagecraft, two recognition scenes in series are not a good choice. This explains why variation was needed here, and adds to the fact that the fabulous transformation of the statue into a woman required preparation. As Garber justly observed:

The moment of “wonder” experienced by the hushed spectators in the chapel has been prepared for not only by Paulina’s skill in staging, but also by the previous scene, in which the playwright uses all the resources at his command to describe an ineffable moment: the inexpressibility topos, the deflected scene or unscene, and the actual silence of characters gripped by string and conflicting or transcendent emotions. (1984: 48)

But there is something more to it, and, as suggested above, it is connected with Leontes’ imaginary tale.

The report of the first Gentleman first establishes his testimonial reliability based on ocular and auricular proof (“*I was by* at the opening of the fardel, *heard* the old shepherd deliver the manner how he found it; whereupon, after a little *amazedness*, we were all commanded out of the chamber. Only this, methought *I heard* the shepherd say he found the child”, 5.1.3-7; emphasis mine). Then he talks about the reaction of the King and Camillo as he “perceived” their “admiration” and their silent, visual language, speaking of their wonder in dumbness. He continues noticing that the “wisest beholder” was unable to “say if th’importance were joy or sorrow – but in the extremity of the one it must needs be” (5.1.16-19). Insistence on verbs of perception (“seemed”, 11; “appeared”, 16) reinforces the sense of epistemological instability in the face of the Gentleman’s own claimed reliability, which testifies to both the reality of the event and the difficulty in discerning the actual reaction of the bystanders. What emerges is once again the ambiguity of signs, obscure even to the “wisest beholder”. This remark enhances the sense of the ineffability of this experience and, at the same time, underscores the inevitable mutability of interpretation. Doubts are thus cast on the idea itself of recognition. But signs are not all the same. As we know from Aristotle (*Poetics* 1454b19-55a21), *anagnorisis* may be based on external signs or events or things that belong to or anyway concern the people involved in the recognition (as in the case of Iphigenia’s letter in *Iphigenia in Tauris* or Orestes’ cloth in *Coephori*), or on natural signs (such as Orestes’ curl or his footprint in *Coephori*). Interpretation is also crucial and it should be based upon a deductive process (*sylogismos*).<sup>19</sup> The signs the first Gentleman alludes to with regard to the people’s reaction are not of these kinds. They are symptoms of passion. Although they may vary, in Shake-

<sup>19</sup> Boitani (1991) expatiates on this topic by discussing, on the one hand, the treatment of the story of Electra and Orestes in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and, on the other, Hamlet’s interpretation of signs. On Aristotle’s *anagnorisis* see MacFarlane (2000).



speare's time it was believed that their meaning could be discerned once the codified language of passions was known. Famously, Thomas Wright dedicated the whole fourth chapter of his *The Passions of the Minde in General* (1604) to their "discovery" from behaviour and "external actions", such as in "play", "feasting", "drinking", "gesture", "voice", "hands and bodies" etc. Wright's treatise contained in fact a detailed grammar of all signs of passion. Thus, the inability of the "wisest beholder" to discern the spectators' emotional response to the scene is both indication of the exceptionality of the event and an oblique distant comment on Leontes' own misinterpretation of Hermione's ambiguous signs in 1.2. Those were both verbal and gestural, and involved courteous discouraging with Polixenes as well as body language. Leontes' destructive 'narrative mania' sparked off by those signs which he interpreted as betraying passion was not the response of a "wise beholder"; but what the Gentleman's comment tacitly implies is that no-one can be a hundred percent sure, a remark that retrospectively affects our understanding of that early scene too.

The second Gentleman adds fresh news and shifts the focus onto the ineffability of his own narrative: bonfires have been lit and the oracle's prediction has been fulfilled; the King's daughter has been found and the wonder of it cannot be expressed even by ballad-makers. Words fail the real and even fantastical narratives come short of it. Then a third Gentleman arrives, Paulina's steward, and the second Gentleman asks him whether the King has really "found his heir", since "[t]his news which *is called true*, is so like *an old tale* that the *verity* of it is in strong suspicion" (27-29; my emphasis). There follows the report of the evidence of the tale's truth:

Most true, if ever truth were pregnant by *circumstance*. That which you *hear* you'll *swear you see*, there is such *unity in the proofs*. The mantle of Queen Hermione's; her jewel about the neck of it; the letters of Antigonus found with it, which they know to be his character; (30-5; emphasis mine)

Not all proofs mentioned here are 'things belonging to the person involved', as the mantle, the jewel and the letter, and what follows opens to subjective interpretation based upon appearances, not deductive thinking, enhancing family resemblance and noble breeding, whatever the latter expression may mean:

the majesty of the creature in resemblance of the mother; the affection of nobleness which nature shows above her breeding; and many other evidences proclaim her with all certainty to be the King's daughter. (35-39)

As we have seen in the early scenes, likeness is by itself no guarantee of identity recognition. Perdita has been disowned despite her assumed physical likeness to Leontes. But Leontes had a "weak-hinged fancy", it will be said. And yet, what value may 'likeness' have here? One needs more than

one reporter to confirm the verity of the story for it to be believed. Has the broken system of correspondences really been mended?

It is then the turn of the two Kings' reunion. The third Gentleman literally rehearses the scene for the second Gentleman, who had not seen it:

Then have *you lost a sight which was to be seen, cannot be spoken of*. There might you have beheld one joy crown another so and in such manner that it seemed sorrow wept to take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears. There was casting up of eyes, holding up of hands, with countenance of such distraction that they were to be known by garment, not by favour. Our King, being ready to leap out of himself for joy of his found daughter, as if that joy were now become a loss cries, "O, thy mother, thy mother!"; then asks Bohemia forgiveness, then embraces his son-in-law; then again worries he his daughter with clipping her. Now he thanks the old shepherd, which stands by like a weather-beaten conduit of many king's reigns. *I never heard of such another encounter, which lames report to follow it, and undoes description to do it.* (ll. 42-57; emphasis mine)

This performance relies for vividness on shifting tenses and on the Gentleman's ventriloquist doing the King's own voice in a mixed narrative, as Plato would have it (Bigliazzi 2016: 11-13). Like the second Gentleman, the audience have not seen that encounter, but this voco-visual performance vicariously brings on stage fragments of the unseen scene, gestures, looks, and voices, dramatizing the action for us to behold it. Then details of Antigonus' death follow, a story that is once again "*Like an old tale still*, which will have matter to rehearse though credit be asleep and not an ear open – he was torn to pieces with a bear" (60-2; emphasis mine). It too concerns a recognition and involves the production of factual proofs: "a handkerchief and rings of his that Paulina know" (64-5). Sorrow and joy invade everybody, Paulina especially, who, "had one eye declined for the loss of her husband, another elevated that the oracle was fulfilled" (73-4). Finally, when Perdita is informed of the death of her mother, the spectacle of her grief is said to have been so painful that it made even those who were "as most marble there" change colour – a passing metaphorical mention that indirectly prepares the amazing scene of the metamorphosis of the statue (Garber 1984: 48).

The following exchanges shift the attention to Hermione's simulacrum and Giulio Romano's art in ways that suggest the re-establishment of the principle of likeness as guarantor of 'truth'. However, this is the truth of art, not of life: it concerns the hyperrealistic verity and the signifying processes of the copy, not of the original, and this deflects meaning from verity to verisimilitude as the deceiving power of a work of art (Romano is said to "beguile" even nature, "so perfectly he is her ape", ll. 97-8). Hermione is so near to Hermione, Paulina remarks, "that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer" (99-100). Likeness has been restored as the ruling principle of identity, yet within the realm of art, not of nature.

## 5. The Evidence of Signs

The Gentlemen's report of the offstage recognition not only avoids the redundancy of two contiguous scenes onstage, preserving the amazing effect of the second one, but it also, and especially, lays the basis for a discussion of signs and their evidential nature that would have hardly been possible if carried out on stage. It suggests that some signs resist interpretation and that likeness is subjective. At the same time, this narrative re-establishes the link between words and things broken by Leontes' 'unhinged' narrative: their report is true to the events, showing that the offstage is not only the locus where 'untrue' or falsifiable things happen. It also hosts true events, amazing though they may be, requiring the narrative ingenuity and mutual confirmation of more than one witness (three in fact) to be believed. The context has been aptly fictionalized, and what follows in the 'statue scene' is the demonstration that in real life identity can hardly be proved by likeness only, which, after all, is a very subjective criterion. Only in an "old tale" may 'likeness' guarantee 'being', turning the simulacrum into the original.

All this occurs on stage as a mirror process of the first (negative) *anagnorisis*: the narrative othering Hermione into Hermione-the-adulteress is conclusively reversed into the visible transformation of Hermione-the-statue into Hermione-the-woman – from the original to the simulacrum and back. Yet we are warned that our senses will be "mocked" – precisely as Leontes' own mind and senses had been sixteen years earlier. The word "mock" had first been employed in 2.1.14 when the First Lady had 'mocked' Mamillius by saying that her eyebrows were blue. Then in the clown's tale in 3.3 nature's violent preying on the mariners and Antigonus had grotesquely mocked them ("but first, how the poor souls roared, and the sea *mocked* them; and how the poor gentleman roared, and the bear *mocked* him; both roaming louder than the sea or weather", 95-8; emphasis mine). The five more occurrences of this word are, not surprisingly, in 5.3, where the amazing recognition of the 'living statue' is conjoined with perceptive beguilement.<sup>20</sup>

What follows is well known, and hardly plausible. Existence is recovered through the impossible change of 'being like' into 'being': of the simulacrum into the original, and similarity into sameness. Signification is replaced by the evidence of tautology (the sign is the thing, the thing is the sign). "Were it but told you", Paulina says, it "should be hooted at / Like an old tale" (5.3.116-17): one more proof that oracular evidence in this play is no assurance

<sup>20</sup> Compare *King Lear*, 4.7.59-63 (Lear: "Pray, do not mock me: / I am a very foolish, fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less; / And to deal plainly, / I fear I am not in my perfect mind"), and *Pericles* 5.1.133-5, 152-3 (Pericles: "Oh, I am mocked, / And thou by some incensed god sent hither / To make the world to laugh at. . . . This is the rarest dream / That e'er dull sleep did mock sad fools withal").

of truth as what we see is in fact worth an “old tale”; it is indeed one. A seen scene is no more true than an unseen one – except that telling what occurs in the offstage appears to be less reliable because invisible, and therefore shaking our epistemological certainties, which does not mean less true.

As the *peripeteia* had been sparked off by the deformed view of Leontes’ infected mind’s eye, renarratizing the onstage action starting from his wife’s and friend’s “paddling palms and pinching fingers” (1.2.114), now, symmetrically, the Gentlemen’s tale prepares the re-composition of the broken system of relations soon to occur in the following onstage scene of the metamorphosed statue: all this takes place in ways that openly challenge criteria of reality.

This is a metatheatrical scene and, compared to the previous reported recognition scene, defines itself as belonging to the realm of fiction. An ontological gap divides it from Leontes’s (negative) *anagnorisis*, where he was both spectator and author of an utterly plausible story. Therefore, this last recognition is incompatible with it and cannot restore full meaning nor make up for the past mistakes more than the discovery of Perdita. Although assumedly restored to life, Hermione does not re-establish order at the level of ‘reality’. This remains tainted with the effects of tragedy. As often pointed out, she speaks little and never to Leontes. Alcestis, before her, as a possibly distant model,<sup>21</sup> does not speak at all, remaining a veiled silent figure to the end. Instead, Hermione does speak, but to the gods and Perdita, for whom only she says she “preserved” herself (5.3.127).<sup>22</sup>

The onstage/offstage dialectic is here finally dismissed; epistemological uncertainty and perspectival mobility forgotten. And yet, the glaring evi-

<sup>21</sup> See Gollancz’s “Preface” in Shakespeare (1909: viii-ix), and, more recently, Ketterer (1990) and Dewar-Watson (2009).

<sup>22</sup> My reading here diverges from Matchett’s, for whom “[s]ilence . . . becomes the final language, the language of love and forgiveness which all can understand, the wordless communion in which the exchange is most complete” (1969: 14). In this light, Hermione’s response to Leontes’ accusation with “You speak a language that I understand not” (2.1.78) would suggest submissive acceptance. Holderness offers a different interpretation, pointing out that “[w]hen Hermione does speak, she speaks only to her daughter; her silence towards Leontes is remarkable, and she defines the purpose of her preservation as a desire to see ‘the issue’ of her daughter’s loss and recovery. The text continually turns back on its own romance materials, criticizing their implausible *dénouements* as the creaking machinery of ‘an old tale’ (V.iii.117); and Leontes’ arbitrary assigning of Paulina to Camillo in marriage as machinery of an almost grotesque implausibility” (1990: 234-5). See also Traub (1992: 45): “[Hermione’s] silence toward Leontes bespeaks a submissiveness, or perhaps an emotional distancing, most unlike her previous animation. Rather than a victory for the wronged heroine, the final scene works as a wish-fulfilment for Leontes, who not only regains his virtuous wife and loses his burden of guilt, but also re-assumes his kingly command of all social relations, represented by his deft matchmaking and integration of the two remaining isolated figures, Paulina and Camillo”.

dence of 'the impossible' occurring before our eyes does not belong to us; it cannot erase, nor does it pretend to, the potential for alternative narratives in real life and for the latency of doubt.

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## Hamlet and the Android: Reading Emotions in Literature

### Abstract

In her self-defined 'neo-Stoic' view of emotions, philosopher Martha Nussbaum adopts a classic eudemonistic perspective and defends the thesis that emotions are not blind forces, but cognitive responses to different situations, as well as forms of evaluative thought. Some of Nussbaum's points in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) will be part of the theoretical premises of my argument. In particular, I wish to propose that literature has always and variously focused on the singularity of emotions and their cultural situatedness, that literature has often also meta-commented on the emotional experience, and that this is part of its own aesthetic and ethical value. My thesis will be developed with close reference to an early modern tragedy, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and a postmodern novel, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I have chosen to deal with these two texts because my aim is to illustrate elements of continuity and difference in the view of emotions in a humanist and in a posthuman(ist) cultural context, and to highlight the anthropological and cultural shift from the one to the other.

KEYWORDS: Emotions; cognitive and emotional effects of literature; aesthetic implications of emotions in literature; theories of emotion in post-emotional societies; *Hamlet*; Philip Dick

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her?  
*Hamlet* 2.2.36-7

. . . an android bounced helplessly about  
when confronted by an empathy-measuring test.  
(Dick 1996: 30-1)

### 1. A Theoretical Premise: Emotions as Cognitive and Evaluative Experiences

In her self-defined 'neo-Stoic' view of emotions, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001: 31) adopts a classical eudemonistic perspective and defends the thesis that

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emotions are not blind forces, but cognitive responses to different situations, as well as of evaluative thought: "If we think of emotions as essential elements of human intelligence . . . without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing" (3). Nussbaum suggests that emotions are intelligent and that they are concerned with a person's flourishing, not simply in an immediate utilitarian sense, but in terms of the realization of a complete, meaningful, fulfilled, 'good life'. In other words, emotions sustain various evaluative processes in relation to the subject's important goals and projects.

Her general thesis in *Upheavals of Thought* is richly articulated in a number of points, the most salient of which seem to me to be the following:

1. emotions are singular, i.e. highly individualized and situated;
2. emotions are culturally specific;
3. emotions are related to childhood patterns of attachment;
4. emotions play a significant role in both ethics and aesthetics.

I propose that literature has always and variously dealt with these issues, and I shall in particular try to show this by focusing on the singularity of emotions, their cultural situatedness, their aesthetic and ethical value. My point will be developed with close reference to an early modern tragedy, i.e. *Hamlet*, and a postmodern novel, Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The differences between views of emotions and their individual and collective significance in an emblematic humanist context, such as Shakespeare's and, in a post-human(ist) context, the one critically anticipated by the American novelist, will also be highlighted with reference to the works of contemporary philosophers, cultural critics, and writers of literature. Before my own reading of *Hamlet* in the terms proposed above, I will briefly discuss Patrick Colm Hogan's reading of the tragedy (2008: 339-55) as an interesting literary instance of the fact that emotions are related to childhood patterns of attachment (*sensu* Nussbaum, point 3 above).

By looking at *Hamlet* and at *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, I also wish to demonstrate that literature deals with emotions in terms that are exquisitely 'literary', i.e. distinctively different from the approaches we may call 'analytic', 'diagnostic' or 'scientific'. In this sense, literature provides a unique and highly specialized knowledge of emotions.

Nussbaum insists that literature is a royal road to empathy and ethically desirable emotions. Unfortunately, the issue of the concrete possibility of eliciting negative emotions (hate, disgust towards different others, disrespect, violence) is not sufficiently addressed in her argument. However, in agreement with her on the prevalently beneficial effect of the emotions elicited by the reading of literary texts, I believe that literature is highly educational, and socially valuable, not only because it increases the

reader's awareness of the characters' and of his/her own emotions, but also because by appealing to the emotions as/and judgments, literature provides, corroborates, debates or questions the beliefs, opinions, and values expressed in any literary text (Locatelli 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2015). I have also proposed that, with and beyond all of this, the practice of literary interpretation is endowed with an important meta-ethical dimension (Locatelli 2009, 2017). I believe we can easily find in literature as such (and not exclusively, as one would expect, in the comic genre, in the *Bildungsroman*, and in the works we call 'realistic'), ample evidence of how societal norms are either conducive to or repressive of specific emotions and behaviours, and how social mores imply specific collective evaluations of emotions.

The fact that emotions are culturally specific seems particularly important, not least because it reverses a traditional mainstream and 'romantic' view of emotions as originating and essentially ending in the individual. Emotions in this commonsensical perspective are seen as a very intimate affair, as a purely self-directed and self-motivated symbolic action. However, Nussbaum valuably reminds us that: "if emotions are evaluative appraisals, then *cultural views* about what is valuable can be expected to *affect them very directly*" (2001: 157; emphasis mine). She adds: "societies impart different views about appropriate objects for an emotion, views that, again, shape experience as well as behavior" (162). With reference to 'anger', for example, she points out that: "Romans approved a far larger menu of objects for extreme, even murderous, anger than do modern Americans" (163). This not only demonstrates that "emotional taxonomies themselves vary across societies" (ibid.), but also that such taxonomies may vary across gender lines, as in the case of aggressivity, which is "subtly encouraged" (ibid.) for American boys while "similar behavior in girls is sharply discouraged" (ibid.).

Patrick Colm Hogan (2008) has similarly suggested that social factors strongly influence the specification of emotion, and that literary narratives give ample evidence of this. His focus is here primarily on romantic love, as a trans-cultural emotion and narrative pattern:

... social ideologies contribute significantly to the idealization of romantic love. Consider a standard plot sequence that involves the chaste damsel being abducted by the villain and saved by her true love – a staple of romantic storytelling from the Ramayana to Hollywood westerns. ... Such plots almost invariably co-opt the idealized union of the couple into a stable social order – specifically, a heteronormative order, as queer theorists would rightly emphasize. I take it that none of this is determined by the neurobiology of emotion. To the contrary, in fact, such narratives work against the instabilities of emotion – for example, in identifying romantic union with marriage, which in practice restricts the possibilities for the dissolution of that

union. Indeed, more generally, we might expect dominant ideology to focus with some frequency on unstable junctures in human motivational systems. (345)

Nussbaum's and Hogan's observations suggest, like the important earlier studies of James R. Averill (1980) and Rom Harré (1986), that diverse social norms contribute to society's emotional repertory, and that shared norms and ideologies determine the desirability of specific emotions in different social contexts. Some emotions are prescribed in certain cultures, while others are deemed inappropriate. The case of the Balinese girl laughing and being playful before and after her fiancé's funeral is a striking example (Nussbaum 2001: 162) of radically different cultural attitudes and practices, and of the different evaluations of what an appropriate emotion (grief, in this case) may be in given circumstances. In this sense one can speak of a social construction of emotions, as far as societal norms and attitudes impact on the emotional experience and related behaviour. I will show that *Hamlet* debates from different angles the appropriateness of grief, as well as its social orchestration and implications.

## 2. The Singularity and Situatedness of Emotions

Nussbaum suggests that emotions are singular, highly individualized and situated: "The object of the emotion is seen as important for some role it plays in the person's own life . . . the emotions are in this sense localized" (2001: 31). I will now elucidate some implications of this idea in relation to *Hamlet*. I will also, and perhaps more importantly, propose that this tragedy is one of the most complex and articulate definitions of the nature of emotion, of its modes of expression, and of the emotions' individual and social effects, not only in early modern times, but in a long wave and emblematic humanist perspective that extends from antiquity to the first half of the twentieth century, and reaches the threshold of postmodernity and of the post-human. In this humanist perspective emotions are intrinsic and not negotiable elements of human subjectivity.

However, before I do this, let me recall Patrick Colm Hogan's (2008) reading of this tragedy because he interprets *Hamlet* in terms that are compatible with Nussbaum's observations on emotions and early childhood attachments. The issue of early attachments is for Patrick Colm Hogan central to the tragedy and to the emotional life of most of its protagonists. He specifically focuses on the early infantile experience of attachment and its impact in adult life, and interprets the emotional dynamics of *Hamlet* as "a story of grief and attachment, including romantic love" (348). Hogan writes:

When Hamlet seeks Ophelia in the grave, he is seeking the same sense of secure attachment that he felt with Yorick and with his father, and that has been lost as one became a skull, another became an impalpable ghost, and the third became a fleshy but inanimate corpse. . . . Hamlet quarrels with Ophelia. But his eventual descent into her grave indicates that his attachment to her was never broken. Her patience with his mistreatment strongly suggests her enduring attachment as well. (350-2)

In his reading, Hogan notes that Hamlet, differently from Horatio and the sentinels, does not fear the Ghost, and suggests that this is due to the Prince's early attachment to his father. Likewise, since attachment dispels disgust, Hamlet is only partly disgusted with Yorick's skull and is not at all disgusted by Ophelia's corpse in the grave. In Hogan's opinion, this indicates a deep attachment to Ophelia on his part, despite the fact of their bitter confrontations, including his cruel or vulgar remarks to her. Hogan suggests that this attachment to her is never broken and that it is reciprocated by Ophelia (given the kindness with which she takes his abuse).

Attachment was crucial also in the relationship between Old Hamlet and Claudius and the brother's murder is "foul" because it broke such bond. Old Hamlet's order to revenge would then stem from his insecurity as to Hamlet's filial attachment and his loyalty.

Hamlet displays attachment to his father, but he feels betrayed by Gertrude and thus expresses an open disgust for her, particularly in the 'closet scene'. He feels that their bond of attachment is severed. Disgust towards her and the female body follows precisely upon this emotional pre-condition, and I would add that it eventually backfires on Hamlet's own disgust about his own "sullied/solid flesh".

Hogan concludes that:

Shakespeare has altered the standard idealization primarily in sharpening a conflict that is always present in prototypical romantic narratives – the conflict between parental attachment and romantic attachment. More exactly, Hamlet's loss of his father in effect drives him to seek a substitute attachment figure. At the same time, he feels that he should remain loyal to his father. (352)

But let me now come to my reading of the tragedy, starting from Nussbaum's notion of the ineliminable reference to oneself in the emotional experience:

Emotions contain an ineliminable reference to me, to the fact that it is my scheme of goals and projects. They see the world from my point of view . . . In short the evaluations associated with emotions are evaluations from my

perspective, not from some impartial perspective; they contain an ineliminable reference to myself. (2001: 52)

When the itinerant actors come to the Danish Court, Hamlet asks one of them to insert a few lines in a speech in the play that alludes to “Priam’s slaughter” (2.2.429). The play that the actors will stage is the means through which the Prince activates his meta-dramatic scheme of “catching the conscience” of the King, through an accusatory play, instead of avenging his old father by literally killing Claudius. Not (fully) suspecting the prince’s purpose, the actor complies with Hamlet’s invitation, and gives a demonstration of his performative skills with a “passionate speech” (ll. 432-46). What the actor does not realise is the effect of his heightened performance on Hamlet’s own ‘conscience’, an effect soon conveyed to the audience, when the prince begins his soliloquy (ll. 527-83). In this speech, not only does the Prince typically lament his own state, and reproach himself of cowardice, but he offers brilliant and thought-provoking considerations on the singularity of the emotions, as well as on the complex interconnectedness of truth and the expression of emotion in a humanist perspective. Hamlet’s musings also foreground the multifarious intersections of emotions (both felt or feigned) with the multiple ways in which they can be communicated:

HAMLET        (*Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN*)  
 Now I am alone.  
 O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage wann’d,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing.  
 For Hecuba!  
 What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do,  
 Had he *the motive and the cue for passion*  
*That I have?* He would drown the stage with tears,  
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.  
 (2.2.527-44; emphasis mine)

Hamlet’s words clearly confirm that the cause and object of emotion is either relevant, or irrelevant, only in relation to a singular subject. The ur-

gency of Hamlet's emotions is bound to a very personal perspective: he claims that "the motive and the cue for passion" he has is entirely and exclusively his own. My opening quotation: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" foregrounds what I would like to call the intransitive quality of the emotional experience, the intensely personal relevance of what is felt, the singular emotional "motive" alluded to in the Prince's words.

I wish to show that an important reflection on the phenomenology of emotions lies at the core of Hamlet's argument, an argument which begins, as we have seen, by confirming Nussbaum's aforementioned notion that "emotions contain an ineliminable reference to me" and that "they see the world from my point of view"; Hamlet's argument is then further developed in a philosophical and aesthetic direction.

### 3. Experiencing and Expressing Emotion: *Hamlet* as an Emblematic Humanist View of Emotions and the Subject

The multifarious nature of the emotions and the possibilities as well as the difficulties and the impossibilities of their representation are central to artistic mimesis and hence to aesthetics. The relationship between *emotions felt* and *emotions expressed* is far from linear, and *Hamlet* sheds light on the complexity of such relationship in both ordinary life and art. Being the subtle rhetorician and meta-dramatist that the Prince is, he cannot but forcefully interrogate the adequacy of dramatic representation and its emotional effects in the very moment in which he plans, intervenes, and directs the play-within-the play.

Hamlet invites speculation on the adequacy of emotional expression, both at a psychological and at an aesthetic level. In fact, his soliloquy in 2.2 articulates aspects of the emotional experience that have challenged philosophers and theorists of aesthetics since Aristotle. His sophisticated musings highlight the power that fiction has to trigger emotion, and the power of the actor's art to produce the visible, physiological response of emotion even *in absentia* of a genuine involvement and of a proper cause. The emotional "workings" of the actor are in this sense "for nothing"; his emotion is masterfully feigned, and yet it is moving, because in turn it produces emotion in others. Hamlet is fully a humanist in his love of language and in his trusts that art (the play-within-the-play) will bring forth the most deeply buried or hidden emotions. He is convinced that the play will elicit guilt in Claudius, lead him to externalize his emotion, and to confess the murder. The "conscience" he wants to catch is the seat of emotions, as well as of moral sense, in a classic humanist view.



The actor's "passionate speech" in Act 2 chimes in Hamlet's mind with an issue that is ever-present in this tragedy, i.e. the question of the possibility of differentiating between truth and falsehood, and, more specifically, between feigned and sincere emotions. Hamlet compares and contrasts the power of sincere external 'gestures' *versus* mere emotional postures, and yet he has to acknowledge that there may be a physiological effect in the professional 'acting' of any emotion.

Since his very first appearance in the play, in 1.2, authenticity is indeed a problem the prince of Denmark is obsessed with. It powerfully surfaces in the context of the official courtly 'management' of the mourning for old King Hamlet. Grief is a crucial emotion in the play, first and foremost for the young Prince, and grief and melancholy are the first emotions upon which the distinction between false and true emotions are tested and illustrated. Hamlet's "inky cloak" (l. 75) is the unequivocal signifier of his sadness, and the icon of the Prince's dominant emotional state. It is – he claims – the expression of his genuine emotion, but it is also an object of public display. Not so, i.e. not genuine, are the public rituals and the conventional propositions of grief uttered by both Claudius and the Queen. When made public, Hamlet's personal grief inevitably acquires political implications and, as such, it may become a dangerous political weapon. In this tragedy, the emotions of grief, mourning, and melancholia have both a private and a public dimension, and the expression of grief is both a personal and a social matter. As a public reminder of the old King's assassination and usurpation, Hamlet's black cloak is a sign of an emotion which is, in turn, supposed to produce emotions in those who see it: it invites sadness and indignation on the part of all Danish subjects, and may thus even incite their rebellious solidarity. This is, of course, what Claudius cannot tolerate in Hamlet's public mourning, the true reason behind his pressing invitation to suppress such emotion. Claudius knows that grief in Denmark is a weapon that may become a road to subversion. His falsely benevolent, but imperative injunction to Hamlet to abandon his 'cloudy' mood is a necessary political manoeuvre for the promotion of the general acceptance of his own illegitimate authority.

KING	<p>Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death          The memory be green, and that it us befitted          To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom          To be contracted in one brow of woe,          Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature          That we with wisest sorrow think on him,          Together with remembrance of ourselves.          Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,          Th'imperial jointress of this warlike state,          Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,</p>
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With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
 Taken to wife.

(1.2.1-14)

Claudius's opening sentence is a manifest self-justification and a defence of his own, now royal, interests (his "wisest sorrow" ultimately leads to "remembrance of ourselves", rather than to remembrance of the dead). Claudius's ambivalent "sorrow" seems to promote a philosophically balanced and wise view of emotions against an otherwise excessive grief ("In equal scale weighing delight and dole"). The usurper, clearly aiming at co-opting the Court's consensus, represents himself as a composed even 'stoic', and therefore trustworthy leader, and depicts Hamlet as a young man unduly overruled by emotion. But the king's false conscience is exposed by the crafty oxymorons decorating his speech ("a defeated joy"; "an auspicious and a dropping eye"; "mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage"). The oxymoron connotes Claudius's discourse as a contradiction in terms, and above all as a speech in which genuine emotions and the words expressing them are clearly split asunder. On the contrary, through the icon of his black cloak and his repeatedly resentful remarks, Hamlet displays his authentic and relentlessly provocative emotions. The black cloak is the very first image we have of him, the object that will forever define him as a sad and embittered youth, one who is not ready to comply and to relinquish powerful emotions (grief, rage, sadness). He polemically rejects Claudius's self-righteous posture, and reacts with what will be his habitual wit and punning against the crafty and calculated rhetoric of the Court (e.g. KING "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son..." / HAMLET "A little more than kin, and less than kind", 1.2.64-5; KING "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" / HAMLET "Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun", ll. 66-7). The Queen tries then to mediate between them by voicing a mainstream proverbial attitude towards grief in early modern culture (see Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson: 2004); however, her proposal sounds shallow and trite *vis à vis* Hamlet's discomfort:

QUEEN GERTRUDE	Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off, And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. Do not for ever with thy vailed lids Seek for thy noble father in the dust. Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET	Ay, madam, it is common. (1.2.68-74)

In fact, Hamlet replies “Ay, madam, it is common”, thus deliberately punning on the word “common” and activating one of its negative meanings, i.e. ‘vulgar’. He rejects her conventional words with contempt (contempt being another powerful emotion in young Hamlet, particularly evident, for instance, in his exchanges with the obtuse, obsequious and pompous Polonius). Hamlet defends the elevated moral dimension and authenticity of his grief as opposed to the self-interested postures of the vulgar, and he upholds the singularity, even the unique quality, of his emotional condition as opposed to the general fraudulent display of emotion at Court. When the Queen reproaches him for being “so particular” (l. 75), and not aligned with the majority, as well as for being stubbornly ‘emotional’, Hamlet returns to a central question: that of emotional authenticity, a crucial issue in a play that relentlessly debates the gaps between reality and appearance. In his reply to the Queen, Hamlet exploits all the semantic innuendos of the word “seem” in order to claim for himself a sincere emotional grief which is antithetical to the hypocritical outer forms of Court rituals:

QUEEN GERTRUDE	If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?
HAMLET	Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not seems. 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, Nor customary suits of solemn black, Nor windy suspiration of forced breath, No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, Nor the dejected havior of the visage, Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, That can denote me truly. These indeed seem, For they are actions that a man might play; But I have that within which passeth show These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (ll. 74-86)

The Court's grief is a simulation, a mere “show”, but Hamlet's grief is true and “deep within”, and his cloak does therefore “denote him truly”. As such, he is entitled to the boundless and inconsolable sadness that Claudius and the Queen reproach him for. In this context one may profitably recall what Martha Nussbaum writes on the appropriateness of an emotion. Taking grief as a specific example and Chrysippus as a philosophical antecedent, she writes:

Chrysippus plausibly said that grief (along with other emotions) contains not only the judgment that an important part of my life has gone, but that it is right to be upset about that: it makes a truth-claim about its own evaluations. It asserts the real value of the object, it says that getting upset is a response to something really important, not just a whim. (Nussbaum 2001: 47)

Hamlet is (self)justified in his bitterness and sadness: his loss is irreparable, and his emotion is 'appropriate', given the circumstances.

Against this backdrop, the play offers further important considerations on the difference between sentimentalism and true emotion. If it is true that Hamlet is not immune from the former (in parts of his soliloquies he sounds more self-pitying than sad), we must acknowledge that his emotion is never feigned. Hamlet's early meditation on the difference between 'being' and 'seeming' is a motif traversing the tragedy, a tragedy in which, not surprisingly, detection and spying plots orchestrate much of the action.

Hamlet's acute perception of emotional insincerity links the court scene in Act 1 to the 'Hecuba speech' in Act 2, an important connection for a reading of the tragedy in the light of various theories of the emotions in daily life and art. The actor's 'real' bodily effects of a feigned emotion fuel and re-fuel Hamlet's obsession with emotional sincerity. Reading Nussbaum after *Hamlet* (and vice versa) gives a new depth to her thesis on emotional 'falsity'. She makes a relevant distinction between false and fraudulent emotion when she attributes the possibility of mistaken emotion mostly to an emotion rising from a wrong belief, but she also acknowledges the possibility of "fraudulent" or "feigned" emotions, which are, as I have argued, the most relevant aspect of the tragedy's treatment of in/sincerity.

Nussbaum writes:

The fact of having an emotion depends on what the person's beliefs are, not on whether they are true or false. So if I believe my mother to be dead and grieve, and she is not really dead, my emotion is in that sense false. We are not likely to speak of it as "false grief", since the term "false" means both "not accurate" and "fraudulent", and in this context we standardly use it to mean "fraudulent" or "feigned". We do not want to confuse the important issue of sincerity with the issue of true or false content, and so we will call the grief "mistaken" or "inappropriate", rather than false. But the propositional content is nonetheless false. (2001: 45-6)

In this sense the Court's emotions are "fraudulent", and antithetical to Hamlet's.

Hamlet's manifest awareness of the absolute singularity of emotions foregrounds the question of the relevance of any emotional experience in relation to the subject's aims, to his/her existential position and his/her relationships. This question, as I have suggested, lies at the core of Martha Nussbaum's observations on "the intelligence of emotions" and their eudemonistic significance.

The singularity of emotion, specifically of what Hamlet (in the exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 2.2) calls his "disposition" plays a central role in his sense of self and in his perception of

the world. The euphoric humanist view of man expressed in Pico's oration *De Dignitate Hominis* and echoed in Hamlet's own famous words "What a piece of work is a man!" (2.2.302) is immediately tinged with the dysphoric overtones of his pervasive melancholy. The noble subjectivity predicated and taught by a philosophical tradition is here colliding with an equally strong (and perhaps even stronger) dejected subjectivity articulated by the felt emotions. A powerful sense of the subject informs this and most of Hamlet's musings, orchestrated as they are on the oscillation between emotion and intellect, an oscillation that consistently lends support to the narrative of a strong humanist subjectivity. By addressing a traditional philosophical perspective and simultaneously probing his own emotions, Hamlet is indeed a character of 'modernity'. He can also continue to conceive of himself as irreducibly 'other' from the conventional identities of the characters at Court (who define the subject almost exclusively in terms of social roles). This integral and inalienable sense of self is the central element of the humanist world, and it is precisely what will be challenged with the rise of a post-human(ist) episteme. Fear of the dismantling of this traditional subject, with his/her rootedness in a singular emotional life lies at the core of Philip Dick's 1968 novel.

The singularity of Hamlet's emotions suggests that they are the most 'personal' and irreducible element in human subjectivity, an idea that gains salience in the context of the great cultural movement from a humanist to a post-human(ist) cultural perspective and that invites a 'dialogic' reading of Shakespeare's tragedy and Dick's novel as a useful tool for cultural criticism. The evolving relationship between humans, machines and prosthetic extensions (see Callus, Herbrechter, and Rossini 2014) prompts us to tease out and interpret in the landscape of postmodernity traces of a significant cultural metamorphosis. This seems to be one of the decisive factors in the relatively recent and strong resurgence of interest in the emotions. This interest can be interpreted as the need to provide a response to the (real or imagined) threat of extinction of the emotions themselves in the post-human context.

#### 4. A Pervasive Resurgence of Interest in the Emotions:<sup>1</sup> Why Now?

The emotions have been under philosophical scrutiny since Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. The disciplines of rhetoric, philosophy, and literature have

<sup>1</sup> A bibliography on the recent developments in the study of the emotions in various fields would be far too vast to be satisfactorily listed here. For a comprehensive and critical overview, I refer readers to the recent volume: Jandl, Knaller, Schönfellner, and Tockner 2017.

enjoyed a generally unquestioned primacy in the Western understanding of the emotions for centuries, and they still remain viable and very valuable approaches to the issue. However, new disciplines are now dealing with the nature and purpose of the emotions in such diverse fields as literary theory (see Hogan 2003, 2008, and 2011; Holland 2009; Keen 2007; Klein, Markham, and Suhr 2009; Jandl, Knaller, Schönfellner, and Tockner 2017), semiotics,<sup>2</sup> philosophy (see Goldie 2000) and the cognitive sciences (see Damasio 1995, 1999, and 2003; Vincent 1994).

With the advent of psychoanalysis and phenomenology in the early decades of the twentieth century, emotions and the unconscious have challenged the dominance of reason in the definition of human subjectivity. Moreover, Freud's conceptualization of aspects of the uncanny as a blurring of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, acquires a timely significance in an age in which "[t]he cloning, engineering and marketing of life" (see Kimbrell 1997, and Locatelli 2007a) is a growing social practice. Since then culture seems in various degrees to have been concerned with the attempt of redressing the balance of the traditional philosophical position which opposed the superiority of rationality to the inferiority of the emotions, and the supposedly greater epistemic value of systematic philosophy over the emotional knowledge of poetry and fiction.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary interest in the emotions is also related to shifts in science, specifically in the neurosciences, and finds a strong incentive in the current disciplinary specialisation enhanced by the latest advances in global technology.

In other words, we witness a new perception and cultural assessment of emotional realities in relation to the radical anthropological shift from a humanist to a post-human(ist) understanding of subjectivity. Emotions have become an object of ambivalence. On the one hand, they are still generally deemed highly self-specific and endowed with cognitive and ethical power (as I have argued so far with reference to Nussbaum). In this sense, emotions seem the most tangible 'proof' of an irreducibly individual existence, and one of its most significant core elements. They have come to be seen as the strongest guarantee and protection against the loss of a singular human character. On the other hand, emotions are still suspicious, no longer in traditional philosophical terms, but as problematic cognitive states that in their fuzziness resist the massive channelling of human thinking into ultra-rapid problem-solving and functional dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> See Rutelli 2003. Section 20 of her volume is devoted to a "Semiotics of the Passions" and fruitfully develops the theories of Herman Parret, Jacques Fontanille, and Algirdas Julien Greimas.

<sup>3</sup> The rapprochement between contemporary philosophy and literature on the part of Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou is clearly central to this process.

Emotions are still demonised, not so much in epistemic terms (as was the case in classical philosophical debates), but insofar as they challenge patterns of predictability and the imperatives of social governance required in a late capitalist consumer society (see Jameson 1991 and 1998). They are seen as extravagant, prodigal, uneconomical states in the context of what Don DeLillo, in his well-known novel *Cosmopolis*, has called “cybercapital”. In this context, emotions express the willed affirmation of individuality *vis à vis* the homologation of thought along purely rational and functional lines. As such they are threatened by the imperatives and practices of late-capitalist technologies that have a direct impact, not only on them, but more in general, on modes of social communication and thinking. The question then becomes: can emotions survive the shift to the post-human? There are no easy answers to this question, which obviously transcends the scope of this paper, but one can certainly find in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences abundant traces of this pervasive kind of questioning and multiple articulations of what it implies.

In fact, several writers of fiction in recent decades (from William Burroughs to James Graham Ballard, from David Cronenberg to Don DeLillo, from Philip Dick to Jonathan Franzen, from Fay Weldon to Ian McEwan, from Kazuo Ishiguro to Julian Barnes) demonstrate that the question of emotions in the post-human context remains a crucial one. Writers of fiction have been grappling with the emotions of subjects that have been alternatively defined as: fetishes (Pasolini 1975), commodities (Bauman 2007), simulacra (Baudrillard 1981), terminal and virtual identities (Bukatman 1991).

## 5. Androids, Terminal Subjects, and Prosthetic Emotions

Given the above framework, I will now (re)turn to a literary text in order to tackle this issue more specifically. As I have suggested, we can register in the cultural landscape of postmodern fiction traces of a significant metamorphosis of the subject and a concomitant change in the nature and function of emotions. Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is one of the early and most eloquent narratives of this cultural and anthropological mutation.

The setting of this 1968 dystopic and ‘prophetic’ novel is what is presumably left of planet Earth in 2021, a polluted surreal space in which man-made androids are supposedly banned, but ever more present and indistinguishable from the remaining humans. Richard Deckard, the protagonist, is an official bounty hunter whose job is to find androids and ‘retire’ them.

This novel, made very famous for being the cue of the film *Blade Runner*<sup>4</sup> is a meditation on the uncanny cultural dismantling of the human/non-human distinction. As such, it is also an archetypal text on the liminal crossing from humanist to post-human(ist) views of emotions.<sup>5</sup>

Empathy is undoubtedly the central emotion in the novel: in particular, it is both asserted as the hallmark of the human, but also as something undergoing deep and irreversible change, due to the onset of cyber/cyborg technology. The scattered and mostly bereaved humans still roaming the earth after the global catastrophe that had led most to move to Mars, have at their disposal psychotropic and prosthetic machines (including an empathy box) that technologically orchestrate different daily moods; the remaining humans also 'passionately' cultivate ownership of any living creature left on the decaying planet (but more often than not they have to settle down with electric replicas of sheep, horses, spiders, etc.). They are increasingly interacting with sophisticated androids returning from Mars (where the man-produced androids had been sent as labour). Androids are perfect replicas of humans, hardly distinguishable from them, except for their inability to experience empathy. This is the basis of the test to which bounty hunters submit suspect intelligent creatures when trying to assess their android identity.

Another feature of the humans left on earth is that they have a sort of religion: it is called "Mercerism". Given the features of this religion, we can think of the name as a distortion of "mercy&consumerism". With its emphasis on the experience of fusion, Mercerism maintains a sense of empathy in the cyber world. This sort of 'pseudo' religion of compassion prompts humans to cultivate a (putatively original) sense of community, and this is unquestionably perceived as the relevant social significance of this emotion, while empathy is deemed utterly useless, it is contested and obstructed by the intelligent androids roaming the Earth.

Two short passages incorporate salient elements of the novel and spell emotion as a uniquely human phenomenon linked to a "group instinct" and to a sense of community:

He had wondered, as most people at one time or another, precisely why *an android bounced helplessly about when confronted by an empathy-measuring*

<sup>4</sup> *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott; script by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples; starring Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, etc.; it has become a cult movie in the realm of science fiction and noir.

<sup>5</sup> The recent (2017) sequel to *Blade Runner*, i.e. *Blade Runner 2049* (directed by Denis Villeneuve; screenplay by Hampton Fancher and Michael Gree; starring Ryan Gosling, Harrison Ford, Ana de Armas, etc.) demonstrates that interest in this issue is far from waning. Similarly to its earlier prototype, the film rehearses the challenges of replicant and human interaction (in particular at the 'new' level of sex and procreation).



*test.* Empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order including the arachnida. *For one thing the empathic faculty probably required an unimpaired group instinct;* a solitary organism, such as a spider, would have no use for it; in fact it would tend to abort the spider's ability to survive. It would make him conscious of the desire to live on the part of his prey . . . ultimately the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated . . . Oddly, it resembled a sort of biological insurance, but double-edged. As long as some creature experienced joy, then the condition for all other creatures included a fragment of joy. However, if any living being suffered, then for all the rest the shadow could not be entirely cast off. *A herd animal such as man would acquire a higher survival factor through this;* an owl or a cobra would be destroyed. Evidently the humanoid robot constituted a solitary predator. (Dick 1996: 30-1; emphasis mine)

The difference between human and android is predicated precisely on the divide between "herd animals" and "solitary organisms", a putatively 'original' difference explaining why empathy is the central and uniquely human emotion. But is the original instinct destined to be impaired with the advent of intelligent androids superseding humans on the planet? Is the supposedly human instinct for empathy destined to last, or eventually to being altered in the new context, when either androids will predictably get the upper hand on earth and 'retire' humans, or when humans will identify with an android identity, when they will desire and try to be like androids? In either case, the end of empathy, of emotion in general, and the end of 'the human' are posited as synonymous. The prerogative of androids, i.e. their emotionless intelligence, is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

The girl eyed him. "I don't see any relation."

"That's what Mercerism is all about." Again he found himself puzzled.

"Don't you participate in fusion? Don't you own *an empathy box*?"

After a pause the girl said carefully: I didn't bring mine with me. I assumed I'd find one here."

"But an empathy box," he said, stammering in his excitement, "*is the most personal possession you have! It's an extension of your body; it's the way you touch other humans, it's the way you stop being alone.* But you know that. Everybody knows that. Mercer even lets people like me –" He broke off. But too late; he had already told her, and he could see by her face, by the flicker of sudden aversion, that she knew. "I almost passed the IQ test," he said in a low shaky voice. "I'm not very special, only moderately; not like some you see. But that's what Mercer doesn't care about."

"As far as I am concerned," the girl said, "you can count that as a major objection to Mercerism." *Her voice was clean and neutral;* she intended only to

state a fact, he realized. The fact of her attitude toward chickenheads. (66-7; emphasis mine)

“Her voice was clean and neutral” depicts the psychological attitude of the android girl who clearly has no desire for the experience of compassion. She actually despises this emotion, and her aversion suggests that she would have little use for any other. In this novel, emotions (of the kind known in the previous centuries) do not seem to survive the post-human.

## 6. A Postemotional Society?

What literature has expressed on emotions and the post-human has also been the focus of philosophers and theorists of culture in recent times. The current scenario interpreted by novelists and artists bears interesting affinities with that of contemporary social critics. In the Sixties and Seventies, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s scathing critique of modernity as the new “desecrating religion” of consumerism (1975) anticipated Zygmunt Bauman’s critique of a “liquid modernity” (2000) and a consumerist post-modernity: “In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity” (Bauman 2007: 12). Pasolini had already spoken of the consumer as a “stupid fetish” of the human. In Bauman’s words, the emotions (joy, satisfaction) induced and felt by eager consumers are intrinsically fraudulent emotions (in the sense given above):

Fully fledged consumers are not finicky about consigning things to waste; ils (et elles, bien sûr) ne regrettent rien. As a rule, they accept the *short lifespan* of things and their preordained demise with *equanimity*, often with only thinly disguised *relish*, and sometimes with unalloyed *joy* and the celebration of victory. The most capable and quick-witted adepts of the consumerist art know that getting rid of things that have passed their use-by (read: enjoy-by) date is an event to be rejoiced in. (2007: 86; emphasis mine)

If we return to Nussbaum’s neo-Stoic view that emotions are ethically valuable because inscribed into the long-term mechanism of *eudaimonia*, their precariousness and undesirability in times dominated by the logic of the ephemeral becomes more intelligible. Consumerism prescribes the pragmatic, empirical and even philosophical logic of acceleration, of short-term goals, and of a concomitant continuous production of waste. Consumerism needs and promotes short-term goals, and thus makes long-term eudemonistic aims quaint at best, or downright obsolete. In this scheme, the pressures of mass consumerism entail a ‘modern’ homogenisation and/or fracturing of individual emotional lives, in a process that has also been called “The McDonaldization of Society” (Ritzer 2004). Social theorists, including George

Ritzel (ibid.), David Riesman (see Denny, Glazar, and Riesman 2001), Scott Bukatman (1991), and Stjepan Meštrović (1997) have variously interpreted the post-human as post-emotional. Their conclusions do not greatly diverge from those of Philip Dick's novel.

Riesman's well-known distinction of three cultural types, i.e. the tradition-directed, inner-directed, and outer-directed individual, explains the rapid shifts from tradition to postmodernity. The latest subject is no longer attuned to the behavioural rules of preceding generations, which would actually hamper his social success. However, the outer-directed individual is less autonomous and capable of leadership than the former inner-directed subject, while his behaviour is simply functional to the evolving social organisation. This is the subject in "the lonely crowd", whose dominant emotion is a pervasive anxiety to 'fit in' and 'be like the rest'. One of its relevant consequences is a complete and uncritical loss of the singularity of the emotions. Stjepan Meštrović *Postemotional Society* is, not surprisingly, predicated as a development of the social situation outlined in Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. It is written in the context of the trials on the war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and of the abuses perpetrated at Abu Grahیب. The emotional estrangement involved in these situations seems to redefine basic traditional emotional concepts and, more broadly, to signal an unprecedented sceptical and even averse cultural attitude towards traditional emotions. Hence the adjective "postemotional" applied in the title of Meštrović's book to contemporary Western society.

Ritzel's subjects move in a similar direction: they have already introjected the imperatives of efficiency, quantification, manageability and control, at the cost of emotional singularity, thus further subscribing to the rules of global financial techno-bureaucracy. Only a few decades earlier the dominant emotions of McDonaldisized subjects would have been defined as states of "alienation" in the sociological discourse of the Frankfurt School. In fact, the pervasive falsity of feeling generated by and experienced in the new globalised professional contexts, and in the "fatal strategies" of Baudrillard's eponymous 1983 text, threatens the former humanist strong bond between emotion and identity in unprecedented terms. In the postemotional condition, subjects are intent on becoming efficient, predictable, outer-directed, manageable, in other words they seem intent on imitating the androids of Philip Dick's novel. A blurring and eventual erasure of the boundaries between the private and public sphere is part and parcel of the "postemotional" and post-human(ist) anthropological and cultural shift that I have been dealing with. In the postmodern age emotions, far from being the hallmark of singularity, tend to become 'impersonal', i.e. fungible. On the other hand, the desire to relinquish emotions as a painful condition could be interpreted as a defensive mechanism of the post-human(ist) subject, who may be un-

dergoing a paradoxical identification with the trauma of emotional loss experienced in the machine-directed world of incipient cyber-capitalism and postmodern techno-networking. Novels such as Fay Weldon's *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) are valuable tools in making sense of this evolving scenario.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, literature has undoubtedly contributed to the knowledge of emotions by providing an immense repertoire of 'case studies', and it has uniquely illustrated the historical and social variations of emotions in relation to changing definitions of human subjectivity, while, at the same time, providing a special assessment of emotions as cognitive human realities.

Literature displays both the ability to represent and to provoke emotions, and it achieves these goals according to its changing poetics, and with a specific awareness of the historical conjunctures in which literary works are produced and received, as well as of the times and places represented in novels, poems and plays.

Literature exponentially multiplies the meaning of what goes under the general labels and abstract terms of 'sadness', 'joy', 'love', 'hate', 'grief', 'anxiety', 'rage', 'melancholy', 'envy', 'resentment', 'gratitude', 'compassion', etc. In fact, the unique character of a novel, poem, or play and the highly individual emotions of each literary character and narrator enrich the notion of each of these emotional terms, whose meaning cannot be restricted to the one given in any dictionary or disciplinary glossary.

When sufficiently complex, literature can capture the individual emotional experience of a plurality of greatly different subjects, in widely different time and space contexts. Literature thus provides a unique vantage point for the observation of emotions, while avoiding the abstract generalisations of either an essentialist or a reductive paradigm. Because of this, it can support a subjective but not relativistic ethics, and promote reparative strategies against the experience of the loss of emotions.

Literature's irreducible attention to emotions in their 'partial' perspective, confirms that literature is not a science, and it is not a normative program, nor does it need to be, insofar as it is concerned with the truth of the particular and with the illustration and critique of specific cultural strategies. It is in the field of both the representation and the evocation of emotion that its resistance to the loss of the 'human' in the 'post-human' is most visible. In this sense, literature displays an interesting resilience against the impersonal homology of emotional lives and the pressures of cyber/cyborg space. The

complexity of artistic literature is uniquely capable of accounting for the non-linear phenomenology of the emotions in their specific historical and cultural unfolding.

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## ***A Momaria and a Baptism: A Note on Beginning and Ending in the Globe Merchant of Venice (2015)***

### Abstract

The New Globe 2015 performance of *The Merchant of Venice* made a very dark comedy of a so-called 'romantic' one. Not only is Shylock shown as a victim of Venetian anti-Semitism from the very beginning, but he also turns out as a pitiful – and deeply pitied – character because of the addition to the end of the play created by the director Jonathan Munby. The article, after summarizing the role of the initial and final phases of dramatic texts, discusses the beginning and ending added by Munby, also through some reviewers' responses to the production both in London and in the USA. Historical information about Venetian Jews' conversion to Christianity is given as well. It then articulates its own standpoint claiming that the additions made by the director to the original text, while legitimate as artistic objects and directorial choices, diminish the play's complexity and constitute a sort of performative paratext to the play. (The research is based on the "Globe on Screen" DVD version of the play).

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; beginning; ending; New Globe; Jonathan Munby; Marin Sanudo; Martin Luther

### **1. Introduction**

Beginning and ending are always crucial moments in any literary text. In drama, moreover, the beginning of the onstage action has to be particularly appealing to the audience who is introduced into an unknown fictional world at that very moment, hopefully by relevant words and events. The ending, on the other hand, should be plausible after the staged facts, acceptable as verisimilar according to the preceding incidents, and – unless in the case of open-ended texts – such as to conclude the story shown during the performance.

The dramatic failure in starting a play is comically ridiculed in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779), where the play-within-the-play entitled *The Spanish Armada* (written by the protagonist Mr Puff) starts with

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two characters telling each other things they already know, so much so that Mr Dangle – one of the onstage spectators – asks: “Mr. Puff, as he [one of the speakers] *knows* all this, why does Sir Walter go on telling him?”, to whom the author retorts: “But the audience are not supposed to know anything of the matter, are they?” (2.2, Sheridan 1781: 57), thus underlying the audience’s need to be informed, but also the necessity of verisimilitude in the dramatic opening. Sheridan, in this beginning, shows the necessity for a dramatist to inform the audience by making the characters introduce facts either unknown to one of them at least, or so relevant that their possibly existing shared knowledge is set aside in order to foreground the event itself, ‘tellable’ because of its cultural or social value (see Dodd 1983: 44-8).<sup>1</sup> All Shakespearean plays, on the other hand, adopt clever and bright strategies to show their audiences into the plot, so that the spectators are alerted to what is going to follow and, indeed, do not react as Mr Dangle. Even the *incipit* of *King Lear*, which is so often omitted in modern performances, is important for the plot since it introduces information – through Kent’s and Gloucester’s doubts about Lear’s recent wavering behaviour – concerning the king’s likely feeble mind as a symptom of his looming madness, thus setting the tone for further events (see Mullini 1983).

Endings are relevant in order to round off events and smooth the spectators’ way back to their own real life after the theatre’s ‘suspension of disbelief’. And this also obtains in such an open-ended play as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where the final words “Let’s go” are immediately contradicted by the stage direction “*They do not move*” (Beckett 1977: 94): in the almost immutable world of the play Vladimir and Estragon cannot (must not) do anything but wait for Godot. And this is what the static sequence of the ending tells the audience. How will the spectators react? Will they accept the absurdity of the situation as a comic or as an existentially tragic ending? Much, of course, depends on how the director and the actors of a specific performance have ‘read’ the play. For example, in their international tour some years ago Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart relied much on comedy and the laughs from the audience, while the 1980s performance of the University of Maryland College Park Visual Press (which announced its version as “Beckett directs Beckett” and claimed that the director Walter D. Asmus had worked after Beckett’s own *mise-en-scène*) sounds and looks much more sober and pessimistic.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dodd’s article still offers a productive synthesis of the tools useful to investigate dramatic discourse, mainly derived from discourse analysis, pragmatics and from the semiotics of drama. The concept of ‘tellability’ is based on Harvey Sacks’ conversational analysis theory (see Sacks 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See the Beckett (1985?) *Waiting for Godot* video and the “Beckett Directs Beckett” (BDB) website.

## 2. Beginning and Ending in the Globe *Merchant*

The two examples presented so far show, notwithstanding their diversity, how the beginning and the ending phases of a play are extremely significant for the whole dramatic texture and meaning. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the textual *incipit* consists in Antonio's dialogue with his friends about his own melancholy ("In sooth, I know not why I am so sad", 1.1.1; Shakespeare 1985) and the ending, apart from the very last lines spoken by Gratiano and full of sexual innuendoes, is left to Portia, who invites indoors all characters present in Belmont, where "we will answer all things faithfully" (5.1.299), i.e. she and Nerissa will explain to their baffled husbands the whole truth about the trick of the rings. Initial sadness is then contrasted with final mirth, even if we know that Antonio will be excluded from the heterosexual wedding feasts. So far, then, for the textual beginning and ending. But the 2015 Globe production of *The Merchant* resulted particularly interesting because it offered – beside the actors' skill and brilliance – an adaptation consisting mostly in something added at the very beginning of the play and at its ending. The choice of this production for the present research is due to the specificity of these additions and their impact on the general reception of the performance, an aspect that all reviewers highlighted when the play was performed at the Globe in 2015 and in the USA the following year. In particular, they dwelt on the ending of the play (whether praising or disavowing it; see section 5 below), which is certainly the most striking feature of this performance.

What follows, an analysis of the additions to the Globe performance or, rather, of these new beginning and new ending of the play, is based on the DVD version of the 2015 production of *The Merchant* (Globe on Screen 2016), featuring – among the others – Dominic Mafham as Antonio, Jonathan Pryce as Shylock, Rachel Pickup as Portia, Daniel Lapaine as Bassanio, Phoebe Pryce as Jessica; director Jonathan Munby.

The production starts with a showy spectacle of music, dances and a song in Italian about the power of love and fidelity in a love relation: all performers wear typical masks of the Venetian carnival, and their costumes, excluded those of a Cupid in white and gold, are mainly dark and red. White and yellow, if not gold, are also the costumes of two dancers, a man and a woman, celebrating a sort of marriage whose 'priest' is Cupid himself. The ending is nothing but Shylock's forced conversion through baptism, with actors wearing long white robes bar the celebrant, who wears a violet chasuble. All chant in Latin and the priest

speaks verses from the Catholic Credo also in Latin.<sup>3</sup> After being baptized (holy water is poured on Shylock's head and face), a dejected Shylock leaves the stage through the groundlings. There is no jig, in spite of the year-long Globe tradition to end a play with this routine combining "song, dance and game [which] was often performed at the end of the play in Shakespeare's time as a way of bringing together the players and audience".<sup>4</sup> The curtain call is performed very quietly by the actors coming on, and going off stage and being clapped very warmly. The abolition of the jig is also a signal of the difference of this *Merchant* from other Globe plays, if one thinks that a final jig ended not only comedies but also *Richard II* in 2003, for example, and such a tragedy as *Titus Andronicus* in 2006 as well as *Doctor Faustus* in 2011, after all in line with the Globe 'original practices' productions aiming at performing early modern plays as they were in the Elizabethan-Jacobean era.<sup>5</sup> The audience in the theatre and the DVD spectators, therefore, were/are left with the 'tragedy' of Shylock as their last and bitterest taste of the play, in comparison to which Antonio's final isolation appears almost irrelevant, not to say anything of the comedic endings among the married couples, which nearly risk being forgotten given the prevalence of Shylock in the limelight.

Jonathan Munby's radical choice to have Shylock's baptism performed is certainly the most striking of his directorial decisions. Furthermore, just before this staging Jessica/Phoebe Pryce kneels and starts singing a sorrowful song in Hebrew as to mark her father Shylock/Jonathan Pryce's doleful imminent destiny. There are not only "two godfathers" at this chris-

<sup>3</sup> The directorial choice to have the priest wear violet for a baptism looks rather strange, this liturgical garment being linked rather to penitence and moments of suffering than to christening, unless it was chosen exactly to highlight the sacrament of penitence. But who should repent in this event, and of what? Shylock because he is a Jew, or the religious authority for forcing Shylock to conversion?

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is drawn from the Globe website definition of 'jig' (Globe Jig). Contrary to what the DVD shows, the PDF *Visual Story* brochure of the *Merchant* – downloadable from the Globe website – mentions a final jig ("The company dance a jig at the end of the play", 2016: 16). To be sure about the presence or not of this sequence during performances, I mailed the Globe info staff, who quite promptly answered that "It appears the *Visual Story* was mistaken as there was no jig at the end of the 2015 production of *Merchant of Venice*" (personal communication, 4 October 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The fundamental document attesting the performance of jigs also after tragedies is Thomas Platter's journal entry for 21 September 1599, when he attended a performance of *Julius Caesar* "in the house with the straw-thatched roof", at the end of which "they [the actors] danced wonderfully with each other, extremely gracefully after their fashion, always two dressed in men's clothes with two in women's clothes" (qtd in Katritzky 2012: 132).

tening as Gratiano says (4.1.394), but all the characters are there, witnessing the conversion and joining the priest and his deacons in their chant (Jessica included, this time).

The sympathy with which Shylock is portrayed is actually nothing new, since – beside the many theatrical productions which have tried either to foreground or to hedge the play’s alleged anti-Semitism – the general public certainly remembers Michael Radford’s fairly recent cinematic version of the play (2004) with Al Pacino playing Shylock, Jeremy Irons Antonio, and Joseph Fiennes Bassanio. In the film the beginning coincides with a procession of gondolas aboard which some priests are preaching against the Jews, whereas the ending shows Shylock locked out of the Ghetto, i.e. rejected by his own community, and Jessica alone, while contemplating her ring (her mother’s ring that she has stolen from her father when eloping, but which Radford still shows at her finger), thus signalling her second thoughts about her marriage with the Christian Lorenzo. Radford’s film, therefore, appears to play the role of an analogue for the ending of the 2015 *Globe Merchant*.

### 3. The Director’s Additions

In their reviews most critics on both sides of the Atlantic (after the 2015 London season *The Merchant* toured in New York and Chicago in 2016) highlight the ending rather than the beginning. And, of course, not without a reason, since the final addition rounds off the character of Shylock as a “more sinned against than sinning” (3.2.60, Shakespeare 1997) figure, in Munby’s attempt at presenting a direction for twenty-first-century post-holocaust audiences. Before analysing the ending of the play, although it is certainly the most controversial part of the performance, it is worth spending a few words on the *incipit*.

#### 3.1 *The Beginning*

The play, as mentioned above, starts with masked people dancing and singing, accompanied by two drummers, a wind instrumentalist and a man with castanets, on a torch-lighted stage. Two of the players are on a dais, hinting perhaps at the Venetian stages of Commedia dell’Arte actors or of medical vendors as portrayed in Giacomo Franco’s engravings, especially the “entertainment which quacks offer daily in St Mark’s Square to the people of all nations . . .” (“Intartenimento che dano ogni giorno li Ciarlatani in

Piazza di S. Marco al Populo d'ogni natione . . .", 1610; see Zorzi 1990).<sup>6</sup> Two brief flashes of white light sparkling from the floor of the dais accompany the arrival of Cupid. What Munby presents certainly wants to reproduce a moment during a Venetian carnival, but the type of spectacle performed onstage resembles a *momaria* more specifically, i.e. one of the performances by the various "Compagnie della Calza" which were made up of amateurs so called because of a recognizable device on their stockings when performing their textless shows along the streets of Venice or in a patrician house (see Muraro 1981 and Mullini 1993). Theatre reviewers simply talk of 'carnival', or – as to the type of spectacle – of a 'masque', but a *momaria* had nothing to do with (English) masques, in spite of Shakespeare himself describing as such the street revels during which Jessica leaves Shylock's house (2.5 and 2.6), when "Christian fools with varnish'd faces" (2.5.33) move around the town, according to Shylock's words.<sup>7</sup> As witnessed by the Venetian diarist Marin Sanudo, *momarie* were performed in Venice as early as 1502 (Sanudo 2008: 70). The editors of the just mentioned selection of passages from Sanudo's journals define a *momaria* as "a performance, often accompanying a banquet, wedding feast, state reception, or other festa, involving music, dance, mime, and frequently acrobatics" (545). Molmenti (1880: 350) underlines that *momarie* were a form of spectacle "onninamente veneziana" (typically and exclusively Venetian).

This beginning, then, creates a joyous atmosphere and, taking the cue from the text itself, exhibits what Shakespeare only mentions through Shylock's speech:

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica:  
 Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
 And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,  
 Clamber not you up to casements then,  
 Nor thrust your head into the public street  
 To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces;  
 (2.5.28-33)

While the music and dance are going on, a character arrives onstage, takes off his mask and hat and looks neutrally around, clearly not taking part in the general euphoria. Then two red-capped and unmasked men, in long robes that have a yellow circular ribbon attached on the chest, enter the stage through the right door (facing the audience) appearing extraneous to the general feast. Their apparel, especially the yellow ribbon

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated all translations are mine.

<sup>7</sup> The English spectacle nearer the Venetian *momaria* is the mumming (see Wickham 1974: 136; Westfall 1990: 33).

and the red cap, reminds the audience of the early modern discriminatory sumptuary laws applying to Venetian Jews, but also of the badges prisoners had to wear in twentieth-century Nazi concentration camps. Centre stage they are attacked, spit at by two of the maskers and one of them is also thrown to the ground. At this point, with a choral and joyous cry the revellers leave the stage, while the two abused people get down from it through the groundlings. Alone remains the man who had unmasked himself with two others; then the “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad” speech begins.

This character, then, when the textual play starts, reveals to be Antonio, whereas neither of the two Jews, as the audience will realize later, corresponds to Shylock. Of course, those spectators who can recognize Jonathan Pryce’s face soon see that this actor is not involved in the present non-verbal event. Therefore, the two abused Jews are there as metonymic figures for both what Shylock will later say when accusing Antonio of “spet[ting] upon my Jewish gabardine” (1.3.107), and for the destiny of all Venetian Jews. This introduction, therefore, carries out Shakespeare’s words concerning not only the Venetian carnivalesque atmosphere, but also the religious and professional tensions between Christians and Jews. In other words, this beginning translates words into visual images which the audience will very probably recollect later, when the lines connected to these situations and gestures will be pronounced by the performers.<sup>8</sup> It also anticipates the love theme of the play (in the words of the song), and Antonio’s melancholy, since he does not join the merry atmosphere of the dancers. In this way, the beginning – even without dialogues as often happened during a *momaria* – leads the spectators towards the story helping them create hypotheses for the advancement of the plot (or, for those already in the know, trigger an attitude of comparison with previous performances).

### 3.2 The Ending

The ending is also an enactment of a part of a speech spoken during the text, exactly just before the trial is over in 4.1. The Duke has pronounced his sentence which is not a death sentence as Gratiano would like it to be,

<sup>8</sup> In the text this situation is present in 1.3.101-7: “SHYLOCK. Signior Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances: / Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, / (For suff’rance is the badge of all our tribe) / You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gabardine”.



but condemns Shylock to the confiscation of everything he owns.<sup>9</sup> To this Antonio adds, with the tone of a merciful concession, that half of Shylock's properties (which the Duke destines to Antonio) be only administered by him and, in the end, constitute a legacy for Jessica and Lorenzo. But the "quality" of Antonio's "mercy" is "strained", to use Portia/Balthasar's words in her famous speech at the beginning of the trial (4.1.182): he asks (or, better, requires) that the Duke's pardon be executive only provided Shylock "presently become a Christian" (383), thus conveying his strong anti-Jewish standpoint. Antonio's request originates from Christian theology and must not be confused with nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitism, since it does not show any racist prejudice. According to the Church's tenets and – of course – within a Christ-centred discourse, if Jews convert to Christianity they are saved. Somehow and interpreted in line with early modern theology, Antonio's words really proclaim his mercy, so much so that a contemporary critic observes, rather polemically, that:

Antonio's stipulation that Shylock convert to Christianity stands as the greatest act of kindness and mercy that he could have possibly rendered his tormentor. Antonio saves Shylock from eternal damnation. At least in the Globe, in the 1590s. (Beauchamp 2011: 55)

Further allusions to the Jew's conversion come from Gratiano, who comments soon later, just before Shylock leaves the stage (where, as far as Shakespeare wrote, he will never appear again),

In christe'ning thou shalt have two godfathers, -  
Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more,  
To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font.  
(4.1.394-6)

In these three lines there are three keywords connected to the (forced) conversion: godfathers, christening and (baptismal) font, three words which Jonathan Munby must have kept in his directorial mind when envisaging the ending of the Globe *Merchant*. The word 'conversion' never occurs in the text, although the verb 'to convert' is used twice: once after the casket scene when Portia declares that, Bassanio having won the 'lottery' allowing him to marry her, herself with all her wealth "to you and yours is now converted" (3.2.166-7). The other occurrence is in 3.5, where it acquires its full religious meaning when Jessica jocularly 'translates' to Lorenzo

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Gratiano's words clearly display their speaker's violent attitude: "Beg that thou may'st have leave to hank thyself, / And yet thy wealth being forfeit to the state, / Thou hast not left the value of a cord, / Therefore thou must be hang'd at the state's charge" (4.1.360-3).

Launcelot Gobbo's words about the economic risks of too many Jews becoming Christians:

He tells me flatly there's no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter: and he says you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of pork.  
(3.5.29-33)

#### 4. About the "Conversion of the Jews": Theology and History

Even though used scantily, the verb 'to convert' and the derivative noun ring a bell in one's ears because of the Catholic prayer "for the conversion of the Jews", removed from the Good Friday liturgy only in the twentieth century and substituted by a more general one mentioning Jews' and Christians' common God.<sup>10</sup> In the old "Oratio pro Judeis" the Jews were called *perfidi Iudaei*, a definition which may have been one of the causes of popular anti-Judaism along centuries. The adjective *perfidus*, though, especially after twentieth-century philological research, has revealed to have no morally negative meaning, it preserving nevertheless the implication of 'infidels' attributed to the Jews (see Nicolotti 2012: 481).

On its side, the Reformist world, after Martin Luther's initial sympathy towards the Jews (in his essay "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew", 1523; see Luther 1962), had turned – in Germany at least – to their cruel and violent persecutions, when Luther published his booklet *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543 (Luther 1971). However, the latter was never translated into English in early modern times (a first translation appeared only in 1948), therefore it can hardly be counted among the 'sources' which might have influenced the play's anti-Jewish discourse.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, there is an interdiscursive link between Luther's sentence "wherever you see a genuine Jew, you may with a good conscience cross yourself and bluntly say: 'There goes a devil incarnate'" (Luther 1971, Part 6),<sup>12</sup> and Launcelot's definition of Shylock first as "a kind of devil" and then as "the very devil incarnation" (2.2.23, 26). The *OED*, however, shows evidence of the existence of the phrase as early as 1395 and not necessarily connected to Jews. In the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) there also existed a collect to be recited on Good Friday and parallel to the Catholic "Oratio pro Judeis": the text

<sup>10</sup> See Nicolotti 2012 on the century-long presence of this prayer in the Catholic Church and its twentieth-century transformations.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael 2006 for a comprehensive history of the relationship between Christianity and anti-Semitism.

<sup>12</sup> For convenience, the quotation is taken from the *On the Jews and their Lies* website (Luther JTL).

of this prayer, though, did not contain any negative adjective, but nevertheless invoked God to “haue mercy upon all Jues, Turkes, Infidels, and here-tikes, and take from them all ignoraunce, hardnes of harte, and contempt of thy worde” (Fol. lii<sup>r</sup>).<sup>13</sup>

Historical evidence of conversions of Venetian Jews is included in Sanudo’s journals, where an entry for August 1522 tells that:

[fu batizato] David, fiol di uno fiol di Cervo di Verona, qual, hessendo a certa festa da sier Bernardo Marcelo podestà di Verona, fo invidado . . . a farsi cristian, et cussi fo contento farsi. (Sanuto 1891: 291)

[David, the son of a son of Cervo of Verona, was christened; he, being at a certain feast at Bernardo Marcello’s, the podestà of Verona, was invited . . . to become a Christian, and so he agreed.]

Another case is recorded on 19 December 1528, when in Vicenza,

In chiesa di Frari Menori hessendo stà quella conzata benissimo . . . uno hebreo di anni 17 nominato Vivian . . . ha voluto farsi christian. . . essendo persuaso da alcuni frati, . . . lui constante di voler essere christian. . . El ditto Zudio vene benissimo vestido di negro (Sanuto 1897: 501-2)

[In the church of the Friars Minor, which had been beautifully decorated . . . a seventeen-year old Jew named Vivian was solemnly baptized. . . persuaded by several friars . . . , he decided to become a Christian. . . The Jew came very well dressed in black (Sanuto 2008: 341)]

According to Sanudo’s testimony, at least in pre-Counter Reformation Venice, Venetian Jews who abandoned their faith were not absolutely compelled to do so; on the contrary they were either ‘invited’ or ‘persuaded’ to become Christians. In any case, no violence emerges from Sanudo’s stories. The diarist, furthermore, remarks that both occasions were festive ones and, for the second case, he writes that the conversion ceremony was a civic spectacle accompanied by merry music of “trumpets and pipes” (“trombe et pifari”, 1897: 502]. It is true that after the Counter Reformation the traditionally tolerant Venice embittered its laws, nevertheless even in such a treatise as the *De iudaeis et aliis infidelibus* by the jurist Marquardus De Susannis (1558), forced and immediate baptism is not counselled. This is the author’s advice:

Si quis tamen Iudæus, vel alius infidelis velit baptizari, & postulet baptismum non debet incontinenti baptizari, sed expectari debet donec voluntas

<sup>13</sup> This collect was also present in the British subsequent editions and removed only after 1962, but it still represents a moot problem: for the current situation in Canada (where the “prayer for the conversion of the Jews” is still part of the official liturgy), for example, see Anglican Church of Canada 2016.

eius fuerit patefacta, . . . & debet persistere apud Christianos per dies quadraginta antequam baptizetur. (1558: 131v)

[If a Jew or any other infidel wants to be baptized, and asks for baptism, he must not be christened at once, but he has to wait in order for his will to be clearly manifest . . . and he must live with Christians for forty days before being baptized]

On the same page De Susannis also adds that “nobody must be compelled to [accept the Christian] faith if unwilling, nor forced, but accepted only if voluntary” (“*invitus ad fidem nullus debet compelli, nec aliquo modo cogi, sed voluntarius tantum admittitur*”, *ibid.*). In spite of these ‘enlightened’ words, De Susannis repeats the usual list of anti-Jewish accusations, and history shows how violently Jews were dealt with all over Europe. But, perhaps, it is not a case that the quoted phrases are from a lawyer from the Venetian region, where Jews were, in the end, tolerated as such, even though discriminated against and relegated inside the Ghetto.

That Shakespeare might have known Sanudo’s (manuscript) diaries is absolutely impossible; it is similarly improbable that he had access to De Susannis’s treatise. He, then, seems to rely on common (Catholic and Anglican) stereotypes about anti-Jewish behaviour, while locating his story in a city famous for its toleration; the abusive language against the Jews present in the play also sounds ‘traditional’, especially if one considers that, as is generally known, officially there were no Jews in England after their expulsion by King Edward I in 1290. The playwright apparently works through a syncretic approach to the Jewish issues, thus making the *Merchant* palatable to and acceptable by his own late 1590s London audience, while also introducing words and situations which look ahead and can justify future audiences’ more compassionate readings of, and reactions to, Shylock’s destiny.

## 5. The Reviewers’ Reactions

The first reviewers of the Globe performances in May 2015 focus on the ending of the performance, beside stressing Jonathan Pryce’s overall passionate acting of a role which remains considerably complex, and the efficacious casting: Dominic Cavendish, for *The Telegraph*, claims that Pryce “provides the most sympathetic Shylock I’ve seen” (Cavendish 2015); Kate Kellaway, for *The Guardian*, states that “Pryce’s naturalism is wonderful” (Kellaway 2015); Stephen Collins, for *British Theatre*, declares that the actor “makes Shylock that most frightening of villains: the ordinary, everyday, utterly wronged man” (Collins 2015).

Holly Williams, for *The Independent*, writes of “Munby’s clever final move”, i.e. “to stage with solemn and dismaying pomp, Shylock’s baptism” (Williams 2015); Lucy Brooks, for the *Culture Whisper* site, declares that “his [Munby’s] addition at the end of the show gives a clear sense of the weight of tragedy” (Brooks 2015); Dominic Cavendish lists the final sequence – “the vile ceremony of Shylock’s enforced baptism” (Cavendish 2015) – among the factors which contribute to the “harrowing” treatment of the Jew. Michael Billington, for *The Guardian*, pinpoints Shylock’s forced conversion as “a closing directorial coup that will . . . define this production in years to come” (Billington 2015).

Charles Isherwood, the *New York Times* critic of the performance at the Lincoln Center in New York in 2016, also comments on the “harrowing note” of the final sequence (Isherwood 2016); Lawrence Bommer, in his review of the production in Chicago for the *Stage and Cinema* website, writes that, because the play is “a creature of its time . . . it teems with Christian arrogance”. However, this latter critic introduces a dissonant note in an otherwise unanimous chorus of approval when he adds that the baptism stages “an improbably martyred Shylock” (Bommer 2016).

In her turn Emma Brockes, reviewing the event in New York for *The Guardian* (Brockes 2016), finds that in the performance, which “has truths to impart about modern hatred, violence and prejudice” and is “a barometer for the anxieties of the times”, “the end of the play felt overblown . . . The effect of the play was as of a punch to the gut and the smell of fire from the torches lingered long after the end” (a smell of fire, in my opinion, that one might also attribute to Shylock’s burning at the stake, were it not that the Jew is not condemned to be burnt, even though Pryce’s face when baptism water dribbles down frowns with inner suffering as if scorched).

That showing the forced conversion is a bit too much is also the opinion of Alexander Gilmour, the *Financial Times* critic. In his review of the London spectacle in 2015 he observes that Shakespeare “did not write this coda”, adding sarcastically that “he missed a trick for this is the miserable highlight of the night”, thus revealing his disapproval of the final addition, which he further on defines “seductive”, albeit “superficial (and basically preposterous)” (Gilmour 2015).

## 6. Conclusion

Gilmour’s, then, is not a lonely discordant voice when he blames the Globe ending. Marilyn Stasio, reviewing *The Merchant* in New York for *Variety*, also considers “this one last piece of stagecraft” to be “totally over the top” (2016). Personally, I think that these reviewers’ standpoint is fairly justifi-

ble. In a production which claims to be – at least on the cover of the Globe DVD – “**Shakespeare’s** *The Merchant of Venice*” (my emphasis), the staging of Shylock’s forced conversion indeed creates a *Merchant* “for 21<sup>st</sup> century [sic] audiences” because of its insistence on the process of our recognition “of contemporary circumstances and the current significance of words such as ‘alien’” (as Christopher Henley writes for the *Chicago Tribune*, 2016). Nevertheless by adding visual and performative glosses to the Shakespearean text this version produces a definitive interpretation of the text that, had Shakespeare done it, would have lost great part of its ambiguity and of its multifarious value.

At the end of the play the “merry” but fierce bond between Antonio and Shylock retorts heavily against the Jew, who is compelled to accept it (“I am content”, he answers Portia’s questions “Art thou contented Jew? what dost thou say?”, 4.1.389-90). The dispossession of his own goods and, especially, of his own identity as a Jew, is inscribed in the Venetian law, in a “contract that would like to be considered as due to Christian love, but that clearly ends as a violent contract implying the coercion of the Other. It is in itself a deathly bond, arising out of the European ethnocentric false consciousness, and out of its many forms of tragic intolerance”, as Alessandro Serpieri writes in the “Preface” to his translation of the play (1987: L).<sup>14</sup>

As such, in the text the final end of Shylock is inscribed in the ending of Act 4, but omitted from the stage and left to that vast area of Shakespearean offstage unsaid which often enriches the plays and prompts audiences to continuously create possible interpretations.

In the DVD Globe production of *The Merchant of Venice*, instead, Jonathan Munby has ‘glossed’ and interpreted this unsaid for us by engrafting fragments of (possible) history into Shakespeare’s story, both in the beginning and in the ending of his *Merchant*, bracketing the text within two pieces of performative (and interpretative) paratext. This, in the end, is not ‘Shakespeare’s’ *Merchant*: it is – in all its legitimacy and artistic validity, of course – Jonathan Munby’s one.

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CLARA MUCCI\*

## ***The Duchess of Malfi:* When a Woman-Prince Can Talk<sup>1</sup>**

### Abstract

*The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) by John Webster presents the case of a woman-prince, an anomaly in the symbolic and political structure of early seventeenth-century England, who is endowed with powerful language and therefore directs the action of the play and her consequent persecution. Her ambivalent position bears resemblance to the case of Elizabeth I and her threatening symbolic position, since her body politic is male and her body natural is female, with all the contradictions of the construction of the feminine in early modern Europe. What is most threatening in Webster's representation is the Duchess's ability with language (see the wooing scene among the others) so that she is viewed as a dangerous subject to be kept under strict control by the males of the family, another element of similarity with Elizabeth. As an heiress, she detains a power which is in contrast with a sex that should be weak, dominated and subservient. The play constructs masculinity as rationality and order and femininity as passion and disorder or corruption. In this way the Duchess's behaviour becomes in turn a clear metaphor of a Court and a State viewed as in decay and increasingly corrupted and ill. The metaphorical pattern created around the body-language of the Duchess is that of a femininity that is diseased, corrupted, immoral and decayed, retaining a witch-like status and a devilish body position. The corruption of the court is equated with the corruption of the woman-prince whose power is exceeding and dangerous. In a matter of years, in the real scene of England the disruption of order will be total, with the assassination of the King and the following Civil War. The theatres themselves will be closed and the threat posited by 'woman' culturally represented, as the cause of all evils in the patriarchal restoration in search of definite identity will see the final act of the persecution of women as witches and whores.

KEYWORDS: woman-prince; power; early modern England; corruption; witchcraft; body; devil

<sup>1</sup> A study of Webster's plays (1966) was Alessandro Serpieri's first critical work, which was also the book that introduced me to his critical method. I dedicate this paper to him and to his generous mind, with gratitude.

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### 1. Act 1: "A Fearful Madness", or of the Contradictions of Being a Prince, a Woman, and a Speaking Subject

Performed in 1614 at Blackfriars and published in 1623, *The Duchess of Malfi* situates itself within the profoundly hierarchical ideology of Jacobean England, which both contains and subverts in its practices the powerful political and social tensions at its core.

I here follow the implications highlighted mainly by Stephen Greenblatt (1988), Catherine Belsey (1985), Dymphna Callaghan (1989), and by myself (2001; 2009), maintaining that theatrical praxes and play-texts can be viewed as a depository of the "circulation of the social energy", inscribed in and imbued with the binarisms of the time, where man vs woman, order vs disorder, master vs servant were predominant. As Callaghan reminds us, not only are gender categories inscribed within the structure of order, but they may also be viewed as the representatives of order itself, in so far as, if woman rebels, or starts to speak, or is defiant and does not obey, the entire order collapses or is threatened. We should also keep in mind that this very structure had been struck at its symbolic core by Elizabeth herself, who, both a king and a woman, had represented the paradox at the heart of that structure, with her subversive body, her speeches and her social representations of power. As Leonard Tenenhouse states, describing Elizabeth's powers: "those [patriarchal] powers . . . were no less patriarchal for being embodied as a female, and the female was no less female for possessing patriarchal powers" (1986: 103). And yet, both Elizabeth and the Duchess with their subversive bodies and speech practices are emblems of a construction of femininity which remains deeply uncanny as the subversion of the very rule they are supposed to exemplify. Femininity therefore remains the sign of "real otherness . . . uncanny in that it is not the opposite of masculinity but *that which subverts the very opposition of masculinity and femininity*" (Felman 1981: 42).

In addition to this, I would like to underline how the cultural and symbolic frame within which *The Duchess of Malfi* is cast resonates with macrometaphors deeply at play in the imaginary of the time. The King himself in fact had used gendered metaphors in his official speech at the House of Commons in 1604: "I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is My lawful Wife: I am the Head and it is my Body". But womanhood is always dangerous or potentially 'unruly'; even when at the symbolic and political centre (like Elizabeth), femininity is constructed as impure because of its orifices (see Douglas 1966 and Mucci 2009), and therefore is corrupted or demonic: "Murderous or demonic, whores or saints, women were placed at the margins of the social body, while at the same time, in the new model of marriage they were uneasily, silently at the heart of the private realm which

was its microcosm and its centre (Belsey 1985: 150). In Belsey's words, Act 1 opens with the description of an ideal Court, that of France, from which Antonio has just returned. The French Court is placed in opposition to the Court which is the setting of the work. This is the first contrast or opposition on which the drama is structured. The Court which the play deals with is the inverse or negative of the Court of France. In re-establishing order, says Antonio, the French King got rid "of flattering sycophants, of dissolute, / and infamous persons" (1.1.8-9).<sup>2</sup> The ideal Court then is "a common fountain whence should *flow / pure silver drops* in general" (ll. 12-13; emphasis mine). This ideal Court is placed in opposition to the real possibility that "if't chance / Some curs'd example poison't near the head / *Death and diseases* through the whole land *spread*" (ll. 13-15; emphasis mine). "The corruption of the times", illustrated through the opposite image of an ideal Court and prince which exemplify what is missing since the first scene, is in the foreground in Webster's second play. From the beginning the malcontent Bosola incarnates the conflictuality with the Court which constitutes the backdrop of the tragedy: "Here comes Bosola: The only court-gall" (ll. 22-3). His first words are addressed to the Cardinal with whom he has been in service and they express an unwavering resentment which seems to return in circles ("I do haunt him still: I have done you better service than to be slighted thus", ll. 31-2). Bosola's resentment translates into a generalized invective against the corruption of the times: "Miserable age, where only the reward of doing well, is the doing of it" (ll. 32-3). The character of the malcontent, cast as a contrast against a landscape which without him would present a false order and tranquillity and whose role has received a much greater role than it had in the sources, highlights, through irony and chiaroscuro effects, the schism between the real and the ideal that characterizes the peculiar incipit of the play.

The lack of 'courtly reward', which was central in *The White Devil*, returns uncannily in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, however, the malcontent is more complex and more highly defined than Flamineo. In scene 1 it is Bosola himself who furnishes us with the details of the levels of degradation he has passed through while at the service of the Cardinal, including imprisonment and poverty.

The work proceeds by developing the themes of the devouring orality, corruption, decadence and bestiality of princes and courts; it is Bosola himself who describes the two brothers from Aragon:

like *plum trees*, that grow crooked over standing pools, they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from Webster (1986).

Could I be one of their *flattering panders*, I would hang on their ears like a *horseleech*, till I were full, and then drop off. I pray leave me. Who would rely upon these *miserable dependences*, *expectation to be advanc'd tomorrow*? What creature ever *fed* worse, than that he that hop'd for a pardon? There are *rewards for hawks*, and *dogs*, when they have done us *service*; but for a soldier, that hazards his *limbs* in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation. (ll. 49-61; emphasis mine)

His words contain images of nature which suggest wealth and fertility but also deformity, bestiality, parasites and stagnant water. In the morally anomalous world, turned upside down, of the court, "reward" is in opposition with "service" (1.1.31ff.). The chosen perspective seems to be that of the typically pessimistic and sinister malcontent who has been "slighted thus", but the irony on which the drama is constructed will demonstrate, as the work develops, that Bosola's point of view is not simply the oblique perspective of a person who is socially marginalized. Rather, it opens the anamorphic vision of the world which nonetheless allows the reconstruction of the correct perspective through its margins. The trajectory may be crooked but the view is revealing in its disclosing the deformities of the grotesque, the ironic and of tragedy tottering on the brink of destruction, in a world where princes and cardinals are madmen and criminals.

Even if it would be inappropriate to apply the term 'tragicomedy' to *The Duchess of Malfi* since the fragmentation of tragedy that we find in Middleton's work is not apparent here yet, it is important nonetheless to note that the heroine dies in Act 4, while the play continues into a fifth act which is essentially a satiric protest, in which the tragic tension diminishes, after the climax has been reached with the 'masque of madmen', which represents the high mark in the rending apart of the traditional model of tragedy. The tragedy of the Duchess is 'decomposing' into a satire or tragicomedy, meaning that after 1610 representation of the tragic becomes increasingly difficult.

Melancholy is the existential condition all characters have to undergo sooner or later: Ferdinand ends up going mad, a victim of lycanthropy; Antonio defines the Cardinal as a "melancholy churchman" and describes his own melancholy to the Duchess during the 'wooing scene'; while in prison, the Duchess, according to Ferdinand, shows signs of melancholy. But melancholy leaves its deepest scars on Bosola, the 'other' protagonist of the play. From the beginning Bosola is described as suffering from a "foul melancholy" which, according to Antonio, "Will poison all his goodness" (1.1.76), since "*want of action / Breeds all black malcontents and their close rearing / like moths in a cloth, do hurt for want of wearing*" (ll. 79-81; emphasis mine).

In the first lines of the drama, therefore, it is already possible to perceive a relationship between the melancholy of the characters and the theme of



*feeding/nurturing*, mentioned by Bosola when speaking of the two brothers, to characterize their perverse and corrupt nature. Besides being directly connected with parasitism, “feed” links “melancholy” with the bad nurturing that comes from the court by using a word which alludes directly to a feminine activity *par excellence*. *Feeding* (another word for *breastfeeding*), *raising*, *rearing*, and *breeding* are activities which are culturally assigned to the female. From this point on, it is interesting to begin tracing a thread which links melancholy with a femininity that, rather than nurturing with good food, poisons. This operation allows us to get at the roots of melancholy which are embedded in the concept of a Nature-Femininity which is perceived as destructive and life-threatening. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, which clearly connects melancholy with bad nurturing or mothering, unlike *The White Devil*, melancholy is a state which comes to affect almost all of the principal characters. It is so ever-present that it seems to engulf the entire drama in the grotesque and macabre view of the malcontent: a view of reality which reaches its maximum intensity in the disquieting dance of the madmen, which, paradoxically, turns out to be revealing if, at the end of it, the Duchess in 4.2 declares herself to be “Duchess of Malfi still”.

In the next scene the “great Calabrian Duke” (1.2.5), Ferdinand, makes his entrance. His first remarks are sexual innuendos and we are told that he has “a most perverse and turbulent nature” (l. 94). It is evident that his tranquil exterior amounts to a mere facade, and that internally he is plagued by profound conflict: “What appears in him mirth, is merely outside” (l. 95). Even the Duke, then, is presented immediately as one who suffers from a hidden melancholy which is never given vent to (if not in his obsessive control and persecution of his sister, as we shall see). The Cardinal and the Duke can be defined as devils (Antonio remarks: “the devil speaks in them”, l. 111) or as “twins” since they share an identically corrupt and melancholic nature. The representation of the Duchess also begins with the representation of an ideal figure who is gradually defined by oppositions as in a game of reversals, of almost photographic black-and-white pairs, with dark and light effects. The first picture we receive of the Duchess is given by Antonio who comments ecstatically about the power of seduction in her words and her gaze:

But for their sister, the right noble Duchess,  
 You never fix'd your eye on *three fair medals*,  
 Cast in *one figure*, of so *different temper*.  
 For her *discourse*, it is so full of *rapture*,  
 You only will begin, then to be sorry  
 When she doth end *her speech*: and *wish, in wonder*,  
 She held it less vainglory to *talk much*  
 Than your penance, to *hear her whilst she speaks*,



She throws upon a man *so sweet a look*,  
 That it *were able to raise* one to a galliard  
 That lay in a *dead palsy*, and to dote  
 On that *sweet countenance*: but in that *look*  
 There *speaketh so divine a continence*,  
 As *cuts off all lascivious*, and *vain hope*.  
 Her days are practis'd in such *noble virtue*,  
 That, sure *her nights*, nay more, *her very sleeps*,  
 Are more *in heaven*, than other ladies' shrifts.  
 Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses,  
 And dress themselves in her.  
 (ll. 112-29; emphasis mine)

A few lines below it is once again Antonio who gives a lapidary definition of the Duchess in terms of light and the opposition between *light/shadow* and *future/past*: “She *stains the time past: lights the time to come*” (l. 134; emphasis mine).

The seduction the Duchess exerts on us is a verbal charm that arises from words and gaze (*discourse – rapture – speech – talk – she speaks – she throws upon a man so sweet a look – sweet countenance – in that look speaketh so divine a continence*).

The idealized image of the Duchess is set against her brothers' diabolical nature as heaven (“noble virtue”, “so divine a continence”, “heaven”) is set against hell (the word “devil” is used several times to refer to both the Duke and the Cardinal). The description of the Duchess passes from the sweetness of her gaze to the light she generates and then to her power to seduce with words and, finally, to her virtue. In the idealized description of the Duchess that her steward gives, the feminine word is not treated as synonymous with falsification and corruption, but rather as leading to virtue, according to a traditional line of thought which views woman as a guide towards heaven and all that is good. The opposite pole of this view is that of woman as witch, whore, and creator of life and death, which is rooted in the misogynist thought of the Scriptures as well as in Plato and Aristotle, in Western culture.

At this point of the play Ferdinand orders Bosola to spy on the Duchess, explaining his decision with the terse remark “she's a young widow / I would not have her marry again” (ll. 178-9). Bosola marvels at Ferdinand's reasoning and asks what motivation lies behind it, but Ferdinand answers curtly: “Do not ask the reason: but be satisfied, / I say I would not (ll. 181-2).

The motivation for the control the brother exerts over his sister is traditionally regarded by critics as incestuous. It is also important to consider that if the Duchess were to marry again the property which she inherited

from her first husband would not go to her family. Moreover, Ferdinand's control over his sister is part of a Mediterranean culture which assigns the male of a family the duty of watching over the female because she is repository of family honour. Following this, there is an exchange of words between him and the Duchess: the first words refer to the fact that she is a "widow", a woman who has already known man ("You are a widow: / You know already what man is", ll. 217-18).

Only the most dissolute of women marry again, the Duke says, ("Marry? They are most luxurious, / Will wed twice", ll. 221-2) and for this reason the sexual desire of the young widowed sister is threatening because it is momentarily liberated from direct male control, making it dangerously similar to the unrestrained sexuality of a whore. In 1.3 Ferdinand will call her "lusty widow" and his only reason for considering her as such are his projections and his belonging to a patriarchal culture which does not admit of any other categories of women but those of virgin and chaste wife, or of dangerous and sinful being, the whore, whose sexuality is unrestrained.

After the first scene has established a symbolically feminine cause for all the evils of society, it is not surprising that the next part of the tragedy deals with the persecution of a woman over whom sexual control must be established and who is found guilty of corruption and lust even before these crimes have been committed.

As the widowed head of state of a dukedom, the Duchess finds herself in a complex position not only because of the economic power she exerts, but also due to the fact that she is neither a 'maiden' nor a 'wife' (the female statuses which are most reassuring to males). As a woman who "already know[s] what man is", the Duchess is positioned outside of the usual societal norms. At the same time, the very fact that the "Duchess" has no name seems to indicate that she is the incarnation of a category rather than a female subject. She is a "female prince" who reigns over Amalfi, representing a political question much debated since the time of Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor. The writings of John Knox, particularly *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* (1558), are indicative. This work posits the theory that since God meant women to be weaker than men it is "repugnant to nature" (1880: 11 and ff.) that women rule over men. Christy Desmet notes that in the controversy over woman's nature that raged in England towards the end of the sixteenth century (reaching a climax in the decade in which Webster published his major works), the Duchess may be associated with Bosola in that both are liminal creatures in the ambivalent anthropological sense described by Victor Turner, definable through their presence-absence in the social structure. Since she is woman and prince at the same time, she is an anomaly, a disrupting hole in the structure, "an empty category" (Desmet 1991: 85).

The duality of the Duchess as *persona mixta*, woman, with her duties of obedience and submission, but at the same time ruler of a dukedom (and of the men in that dukedom) is made even more threatening by the economic power that her status of widow confers on her. Widowhood was the only situation in which a woman's rights to property were legally recognized.

Webster places in evidence the rhetorical skill of the Duchess, which up to now has only been described by others, from the very first lines which he assigns her. We are immediately struck by her capacity with metaphors, which are suffused with the underlying sexual meanings of the day, in which feminine sexuality is equated with jewels and precious metals: "Diamonds are of most value / They say, that have pass'd through most jewelers' hands" (ll. 223-4). Feminine value is made an equivalent of sexual value (or use) in implied meanings which Ferdinand is quick to pick up on and reply to, using the same pattern of *woman/value/use/price/commerce in flesh/whore*: "Whores, by that rule, are precious" (l. 225).

To the false declaration of the Duchess, ("Will you hear me? I'll never marry", l. 226) the Cardinal reacts with scepticism and misogyny: "So most widows say: / But commonly that motion lasts no longer / than the turning of an hourglass; the funeral sermon / And it end both together" (ll. 227-30). Webster, however, emphasizes the irony of this scene by placing it in juxtaposition with the wooing scene in which the Duchess declares her love and marries in secret.

In so doing she commits a triple crime: she disregards her brother's order not to marry, she marries a social inferior and she marries in secret. The link between the Court and woman which interests us here is even more clearly illustrated by the following words of Ferdinand which connect the corruptible nature of the feminine (sexually corruptible) and the dangerous life of the Court by foregrounding the 'natural' elements which the two have in common:

You live in a *rank pasture* here, *i'th' court*,  
 There is a kind of *honey-dew* that's *deadly*.  
 'Twill *poison* your fame; look to't; be not cunning:  
 For they whose *faces* do *belie* their hearts  
 Are *witches*, ere they arrive at twenty years,  
 Ay: and *give the devil suck*.  
 (ll. 230-5; emphasis mine)

Once again we find the same deep associative logic present in *The White Devil* regarding the theme of woman-Nature-Court-corruption-falsity, but here it is carried to its negative extreme: the witch and the devil.

In the imagination of the melancholic *falsity/sweetness/trickery/fluidity/Court/Nature/nurturing/poisonous destructive nature/poison* belong to

the same semantic field characterized as feminine and projected outside as an exasperated fear of diabolical women, witches and devils who personify the threatening side of Nature as creator and nurturer. The association of the Court with femininity is made possible because of the links which both have to Nature and to a potential fertility: in 1.3 the Court is a “rank pasture”, a “honey dew” which reveals itself to be lethal just as woman is a nurturer who has the potential to cause death. This associative pattern serves to strengthen the connection already made between “feeding” and the Court. It is worth noting here that it was precisely woman’s connection with Nature that made it possible for John Knox to associate woman with the weak. Knox equates women with the blind and the mad (“For their sight in ciuile regiment, is but blindnes: their strength, weaknes: their counsel, foolishenes: and iudgement, phrenesie, if it be rightlie considered”: 1880: 12) and also says she is a “tendre creature, flexible, soft and pitiful” (1880: 25) who is better suited to raising children than to ruling over a State. How can woman, whom God has created as an inferior, rule over man, her ‘natural’ superior? Ferdinand believes that the logic of his speech to his sister is obvious: the Court, itself a place characterized by falsity, finds in woman’s fickle and mutable nature the natural element for corruption. From here there is only a short step to an inversion of the natural-feminine into the demonic as the unnatural. This includes the witches who, as the texts on melancholy explained, are the true nurturers of the devil (“and they give devil suck”), and so even worse than the devil. The woman witch or devil is a perversion of that natural element which should nurture but which, on the contrary, may lead to destruction and disaster. The Court is woman’s social correlative; it shares with her the same excesses of corrupt production, reproduction, and parasitical and destructive nurturing. In comparison to *The White Devil* the semantic network of a nurturing that can be harmful or even deadly (*feed/poison*) is much clearer and more generalized. We pass from the opening lines in 1.1 that give an idealized vision of the prince’s court as a *fountain* that ought to lavish “pure silver-drops” (note the feminine element of *fluidity*) of life and wealth on the nation, to the image of the reigning brothers who, rather than being providers of nourishment to their subjects, are like “plum-trees” that grow “crooked over a *standing pool*” and which have an abundance of fruit that is, however, full of disgusting parasites (“crows, pies, and caterpillars”) that “*feed on them*” (emphasis mine). At this point, we are in 1.2, Delio delivers his monstrous presentation of Ferdinand as a spider that devours whoever is caught in his web: “the law to him / Is like a foul black cobweb to a spider. / He makes it his dwelling, and a prison / To entangle those shall feed him”. The elements of the corrupted-natural-feminine association are all present: fertility-production (trees abounding in fruit), reproduction (filthy,

parasitical, and beastly as it is) and a nourishment which is a lethal deceit and imprisonment.

In essence, Woman and the Court, associated by their connections with Nature, are united in the metaphorical chain of *fertility-production-reproduction-death*.

The description of the Woman-Nature pairing would not be complete without a discussion of marriage. Like women and women rulers, marriage was the object of a great deal of critical attention on the part of scholars and clerics of the day. Their discussion constitutes a cultural macro-text which gives us a great deal of insight into the "social energy", to use Greenblatt's term (1988), that was at play in this period. Sexuality becomes an essential element of matrimony, even in the religious texts dealing with the subject. For the Church it is an integral part of the 'intimacy' necessary for the 'companionate marriage', which, in so far as it is a 'chaste marriage', has as its sole objective reproduction and is, consequently, preferable to celibacy. Plays as well as religious and secular treatises of the day express such deep rooted preconceptions with regard to femininity and sexuality that it is not surprising that any attempt to make woman and female sexuality one step closer to man and his sexuality must provoke a male reaction similar to Ferdinand's stance towards the Duchess – femininity must be kept under control because of its relations with nature and because of the threats it poses on male sexuality. It seems that Ferdinand's role in the play is to exert control over what masculine identity perceives as the 'excessiveness' of female desire, i.e. over her passion and irrationality ('lust' here is perceived as the opposite of 'duty'). This places him in a position of control over a sphere of language which is 'feminine', a sphere which overruns its borders, overwhelmed by excess, which can lead to ruptures, to verbal and symbolic disintegration and destruction: notice, for example, how frequently the signifier "undone" is used. It is a well calculated irony that it is Ferdinand himself who ends up being a victim of this excess of passion, irrationality, limitless and misunderstood desire, in a word of madness, although it was his intention to drive the Duchess mad with the masque of madmen.

It is significant that the Cardinal intervenes in the dialogue between the Duchess and Ferdinand with a remark about marriage: "The marriage night / Is the entrance to some prison" (1.3.246-7).

The allusion to sexual pleasures, now made legal by marriage, is quite clear in the words of Ferdinand:

... And those joys,  
Those *lustful pleasures*, are like heavy sleeps  
Which do forerun *man's mischief*.  
(1.3.247-9; emphasis mine)

The horror which the possible marriage of his sister provokes in the Duke is a horror of sexuality in general as well as of femininity, which he feels even stronger in himself because of his strong psychological bond with his sister; critic Nadia Setti notes that there is a problem of identity between the Duke and his sister: the Duke perceives his (culturally defined as) feminine parts, emotionality and irrationality, in opposition to rationality and control over passionality, and sees those qualities emphasized in his sister, whom therefore he has to keep under control and eventually destroy (Setti 1983). To introduce the notion of sexuality as an important unifying force for couples regardless of procreation (as some contemporary religious writers had done) is for Ferdinand an intolerable contamination by the Feminine-Natural which could easily lead to 'man's mischief'. Traditional Biblical stories linking woman (as well as feminine language) with the downfall of man were still a strong influence in the culture of the day notwithstanding the new forms of author-text relationships that had been introduced by the Reformation. Only a few decades earlier Joseph Swetnam had written such strong invectives against woman in his famous *Arraignment of Lewd, Froward and Unconstant Women*:

a woman will pick thy pocket, and empty thy purse, laugh in thy face and cut your throat: they are ungrateful, perjured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, inconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud, discourteous and cruel. (1807: 165)

The specific problem posited by the existence of a 'female prince' is how a woman can govern if she has a sexuality that is essentially 'on the (dangerous) side of nature' and, therefore, on the side of disorder, chaos and lack of reason. By prohibiting his sister to marry again Ferdinand really intends to try to stem feminine sexuality and its dark fluidity.

## 2. The Seduction of Words: Desire and the Constitution of Language

When Ferdinand leaves, we are made witness to the Duchess's seduction of Antonio. From her words it is clear that she has been hatching her plans for some time and that Cariola is a part of it. At the end of the seduction scene the Duchess says:

The misery of us, that are born great.  
We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us:  
And as a *tyrant doubles* with his *words*,  
And fearfully *equivocates*: so we  
Are forc'd to *express our violent passions*  
In *riddles*, and in *dreams*, and leave the path

Of simple *virtue*, which was never made  
 To seem the thing it is not.  
 (1.2.360-7; emphasis mine)

Here the Duchess gives us what seems to be a summary of the aesthetics of the day according to the dictates of Puttenham on art vs nature and on 'decorum' as a natural artifice. In her words the language of desire is placed in opposition not so much to reason as it is to virtue. The language of passion, as obscure and complex as that of riddles or dreams, is similar to that of art, particularly poetry, in which rhetorical figures – or what Francesco Orlando (1973) would call "tasso di figuralità" [figurality rate] – violate the ordinary rules of language and replace nature with artifice, a hypothetical total 'transparency' between signifier and signified with figurative 'opacity'.

According to the Duchess, the language of desire is double-faced, equivocal, ambivalent and able to be expressed only in riddles and dreams, whose obscure, enigmatic, ambiguous and unconscious nature is obvious. What is relevant, though, is that this duplicity is intimately linked with immorality, since it is placed in direct opposition not to reason but to virtue. Virtue admits of no deceit. It is something "which was never made / To seem the thing it is not", as Ferdinand will shortly observe in 1.3. The obscure word that could express a surplus of desire is accused of immorality and it is this immorality that facilitates the association of lascivious woman with ambivalent and polysemic language and with the mechanisms of punning (Mucci 2004). Terry Eagleton has observed that political instability corresponds to linguistic instability (1996). We could add that, in the imaginary cultural construction of the period, linguistic instability also corresponds to (a projected) corruption of the feminine and as a consequence requires the repression of women's language as well as their bodies. Ferdinand's words make this correspondence evident. Masculinity (as rationality) and feminine (as passion), similarly to the opposition virtue/corruption, are represented as different types of language. On the side of the unconscious are situated woman and corruption as what is opposed to virtue. If the playwright can be defined as the one who is involved with a slippery, polysemic and ambiguous poetic language, clearly this places him in the same zone where imagination, woman, and corruption are to be found. As Shakespeare had already argued in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, "the lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact" (Shakespeare 1997: 5.1.7-8). The theoretical status of drama is such that as a practice drama can be associated to riddles and dreams, in the same way the playwright can be associated (for his poetic, transgressive practice) to the fool, to women, and to madness. This clarifies why Puritans attacked the theatre and its 'corruption': woman/sexuality/ambiguity of language (as a sign of politi-



cal instability) and theatre all belong to the same zone of subversion of limits, therefore to be marginalized and repressed (see Mucci 1995; 2001; 2009).

### 3. The Problem of the Body and the Danger of Greatness in Women

The problem of language as an instrument whose rational rules are insufficient to give voice to violent passions, and so must resort to riddles and dreams to express excess, finds a correlative in the Duchess's link with nature through her body: it is her feminine body which is by definition in contrast with rule, rationality and virtue. Her words at this point of the play are telling:

This is *flesh*, and *blood*, sir,  
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man,  
I do here put off all vain ceremony,  
And only do appear to you, a *young widow*  
That claims you for her husband, and *like a widow*,  
I use but *half a blush in't*.  
(1.2.372-8; emphasis mine)

This is certainly a daring presentation of the character of female-prince who not only openly woos the man she has chosen as her husband (in violation of her promise to her brother), but also offends decorum (Antonio is her social inferior) as well as decency by expressing sexual desire in a way that would possibly be acceptable for a male character such as Richard III. In any case, this is a far cry from the proto-feminism which has sometimes been attributed to Webster. As our analysis has shown, the grouping together of the language of desire, the female body and immorality is a foregone conclusion on the part of the author and Webster certainly does not go beyond this easy, culturally sanctioned, equivalence. The necessary correlative of the passage woman/use of irrational language/lack of virtue is the body (source of corruption and death). In 1.3 the Duchess says that she is, above all, "flesh and blood", not a statue carved in alabaster. Once again it is nature which imbues the female body with its cyclic rhythms and returns that escape masculine control.

Act 1 ends with the comment of a marginal character, the female servant Cariola:

Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman  
Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows  
A *fearful madness*: I owe her much of pity.  
(1.3.420-2; emphasis mine)

Her words synthesize the core of the conflict: it is in the opposition between greatness and woman that the tragic root of the Duchess's "fearful madness" resides.

#### 4. "A Shop of Witchcraft": The Cave of Witches, the Body of the Duchess, and Punning

The central problems in Act 1, as we have illustrated, revolve around the relationship *Nature-Court-feminine corruption* and the tragic counterpositioning of the greatness of a female prince against the ruinous sexuality of her female body; in Act 2 this picture is enlarged into a general reflection in the apparently marginal dialogue between the malcontent Bosola and Castuchio. From a first reference to the Court and to the characteristics of the perfect courtesan we go on to Bosola's dialogue with the old midwife.

The old woman has evidently mentioned "painting" and this allusion immediately evokes witchcraft. The progression is from *painted faces-hidden corruption-destruction*, or from corrupted nature to mask and deceit:

BOSOLA        Why, from your *scurvy face physic*: to behold thee not *painted* inclines somewhat near a miracle. These in thy *face* here, were deep ruts and foul sloughs, the last progress. There was a *lady in France*, that having had the *small-pox*, flayed the *skin off her face*, to make it more level; and whereas before she look'd like a nutmeg grater, resembled an abortive hedgehog.

OLD LADY      Do you call this *painting*?

BOSOLA        No, no, but you call it careening of an old morpew'd lady, to make her disemboque again. There's rough-cast phrase to your *plastic*.

OLD LADY      It seems you are well acquainted with my *closet*?

BOSOLA        One would suspect it for a *shop of witchcraft*, to find in it the fat of *serpents*; *spawn of snakes*, *Jews' spittle*, and their young children's ordure, and all these for the face. *I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you fasting.*

...

Observe your meditation now:

What thing is in this outward form of man  
To be belov'd? We account it ominous,  
If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,  
A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling  
A man; and fly from't as a prodigy.  
Man stands amaz'd to see his *deformity*,  
In any other creature but himself.

But in our own *flesh*, though we bear *diseases*  
 Which have their true names only tane from *beasts*,  
 As the most *ulcerous wolf*, and *swinish measles*,  
 Though we are eaten up of *lice*, and *worms*,  
 And though continually we bear about us  
 A rotten and dead body, we delight  
 To hide it in rich tissue: all our fears  
 Nay, all our terror, is lest our-physician  
 Should put us in the *ground*, to be made *sweet*.  
 (2.1.39-64; emphasis mine)

Human deformity is more evident when human parts are grafted onto other animals. These lines anticipate the process of 'estrangement' which is the principal element of the 'masque of madmen' in Act 4: excess, with its deformed and grotesque forms, renders a clearer vision of reality that, paradoxically, goes beyond deceit and simulation. The unnatural mingling, the violation of decorum and the break with order and natural harmony reveal, with even greater clarity, the horrors that lurk beneath an apparent normality. The grotesque and estrangement afford a different gaze on truth, as the malcontent with his awry vision shows; the same gaze is celebrated in the 'masque of madmen'. In these words of Bosola's the step from the corruption of woman to the corruption of the body and death is a short one; the old woman's closet, which is as unnatural and diabolical as a witch's cave (and in Bosola's words the association of witchcraft with serpents and Jews is 'culturally' coherent, since Jews are heretics and the serpent is but another form of Satan), becomes a metaphor for a frightening nature which gives both life and death and is marked by deformity and disease. Her words in 2.1 are a powerful invective against woman and the *corruption/decomposition/pestilence* that woman represents: "I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, then kiss one of you fasting".

The play goes on, once Castruchio and the old woman have gone off stage, with an apparent detour on the Duchess and the 'suspicious' swelling of her body; in the 'cultural poetics' that we are reconstructing the detour is not surprising, since it is just a way of continuing the discourse on naturality and/as deformity: the Duchess's suspected pregnancy signals an evasion of masculine/fraternal control and is therefore the sign of her corruption.

If the Duchess is pregnant, she has committed a monstrous infraction of the law as established by her brother; at a deeper level, her monstrous infraction is caused by the all too evident difference between the 'body politic' of a prince and the 'body natural' of a woman, in what is the fundamental theorization of regal power since Medieval times and which James

tries painstakingly to emphasize with his *Basilikon Doron* and in the conflicts with the Parliament. If the body natural makes any king or prince “a thing of nothing”, to echo Hamlet, the body natural of a woman-prince discloses, through its all too obvious link with nature and its negative connotations, unbearable connections with corruptibility, transformation, change, degeneration and therefore death.<sup>3</sup> In 2.1, the theme of the body is again introduced by some puns which link the Duchess to Bosola: “I am / So troubled with the mother”, she says alluding to hysteria. Later on Bosola says: “’Tis a pretty art / This grafting” (2.1.148-9), alluding to the act of conception. Afterwards the subject of the ‘swelling’ of the female body once again becomes the focus of attention:

DUCHESS     This *green fruit* and my *stomach* are not friends  
                  How they *swell me*!

BOSOLA     (*aside*) Nay, you are too much *swell’d* already.  
                  (2.1.157-9; emphasis mine)

In the next scene two servants launch into a series of puns based on “pistol” “in his great cod-piece” (the pronunciation of which can be similar to that of “pizzle”, penis) and illicit visits made to the Duchess’s bedroom.

This bit of punning (in a tragedy which makes little use of this eversive linguistic practice) is completed by the misogynist remarks of Ferdinand in his dialogue with his sister: “And women like that part, which, like the lam-prey, / Hath nev’r a bone in’t” (1.2.258-9), where the ambiguous reference equates loose and lustful women with women who talk too much or too well. Woman’s connection with language also includes her susceptibility to the language of flattery: “I mean the tongue: variety of courtship; / What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?” (ll. 260-2).

## 5. Towards the Masque

In the third scene of Act 2 Bosola finds the horoscope which has been drawn up for the Duchess’s baby. The last few words of his discourse are interesting for their allusion to “masque” and “strange disguise” as well as for their obvious connotation that ‘lust’ is feminine:

Though lust do masque in ne’er so *strange disguise*  
 She’s oft found *witty* but is never *wise*.  
 (2.3.75-6; emphasis mine)

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough elaboration of the influence of this Medieval vision carried on into English Renaissance culture and into Shakespeare’s drama, see Mucci (2009).

The implication, which is revealed by the rhyme (since the unconscious, as is well known, perceives words that sound the same as having similar meanings), is that there may be wisdom in the “strange disguise”. This foreshadows the masque that will appear further ahead and is a preparation for the theme of the masque and the celebration of madness that it entails.

Rather than the usual celebration of the rhetoric of power, the masque expresses, in all of its madness and brutality, the reality of the revenge tragedy.

The theme of madness is extended in scene 5:

FERDINAND I have this night digg'd up a mandrake.  
 CARDINAL Say you?  
 FERDINAND And I have *grown* mad with't.  
 CARDINAL What's the prodigy?  
 FERDINAND Read there, *a sister damn'd*, she's loose *i'th' hilt*:  
 Grown a notorious strumpet.  
 (2.5.1-4; emphasis mine)

The imagery of sickness, corruption, the plague and cholera is extended. Ferdinand says: “Rhubarb. O for rhubarb / To purge this choler! Here's the cursed day / To prompt my memory, and here't shall stick / Till of her bleeding heart I make sponge / To wipe it out” (ll. 12-16).

Ferdinand's obsession with his sister's active sexuality is developed further in this scene. He wants to treat his sister's sexuality as if it were an illness, a case of plague to be purged with extreme remedies that will purify the “infected blood” which is the foremost sign of the impurity of woman: “Apply desperate physic; / We must not now use balsamum, but fire, / The smarting cupping-glass, for that's the mean / To *purge infected blood, such blood as hers*.” (ll. 23-6; emphasis mine).

The referent “blood” connects lust to lineage and violence to incest. With the diseased imagination of a melancholic, the brother imagines his sister in the act of sin with the same intensity with which Othello imagines the entire army having intercourse with *Desdemona*:

FERDINAND Methinks I see her laughing,  
 Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat, quickly,  
 Or my imagination will carry me  
 To see her in the shameful act of sin.  
 (2.5.38-41; emphasis mine)

When in the same scene the Cardinal tells him not to act like a man who has been swept up in the fury of witches, Ferdinand replies: “I will study to seem / The thing I am not”. If the split between representation and reality becomes a praxis in the words of the ruler (who should guar-

antee order and stability in language as in the symbolic order *tout court*), then it is a coherent conclusion that the masque, which is in this case closer to a subversive and chaotic antimasque, should represent the real state of things: the upside down world of the madmen represents the correct vision and ‘tells the truth’.

3.4, which directors often leave out of the theatre production, has two pilgrims as protagonists. There is a representation of the ceremony in which the Cardinal renounces the hat which is a sign of his power and the Duchess fulfills her vow to become a pilgrim, and she, Antonio and the children go into exile in a sort of pantomime. This is an important scene because once again Webster chooses two marginal characters to express a metatheatrical comment on the events on stage. They comment on the Duchess’s secret marriage to a social inferior, expressing political worries (“Here’s a strange turn of state”, l. 23), since she is “a so great lady” (l. 24). They also express the cruelty of the Cardinal and the State in taking the dukedom away from the Duchess and in banishing her:

FIRST PILGRIM            But I would ask what power hath this state  
                                     Of Ancona to determine of a free prince?  
                                     (3.5.27-28)

It was, according to the second pilgrim, the Duchess’s loose morality that determined the decision.

## 6. The Masque, ‘A Spectacle of Strangeness’

In Act 4 the Duchess is in prison; silence and melancholy are the only external signs that mar her extremely noble behaviour:

FERDINAND    Her melancholy seems to be fortifi’d  
                         With a strange disdain.  
                         (4.1.12-13)

The torturing of the Duchess begins here. Ferdinand has the severed hand of a corpse brought to her and pretends that it is the hand of Antonio. After this, wax statues of Antonio and the children are brought to her as if they were corpses. This provokes in her a series of reflections on life: it is best to have done with it as soon as possible; it is a “tedious theatre” in which we are forced to recite a role against our will; the universe is indifferent to the fate of mankind:

DUCHESS       . . . I could curse the stars.  
BOSOLA       . . . Look you, the stars shine still.  
                         (4.1.94-9)

Interestingly, Ferdinand's intention to torture the Duchess psychologically through the intervention of "a masque of common courtesans" takes its start from an allusion to the Duchess's body:

FERDINAND    Damn her! *That body of hers,*  
                   While that my *blood ran pure in 't*, was more worth  
                   Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call'd a soul.  
                   I will send her *masques of common courtesans*,  
                   Have her meat serv'd up by bawds and ruffians,  
                   And, 'cause she'll needs be mad, I am resolv'd  
                   To remove forth the common hospital  
                   All the mad folk, and place them near her lodging:  
                   There let them practice together, sing and dance,  
                   An act their gambods to the full o'th'moon:  
                   If she can sleep the better for it, let her.  
                   Your work is almost ended.  
                   (4.1.119-29; emphasis mine)

The madmen make their entrance with a song, full of rhymes and alliterations, created especially through the repetition of occlusive and fricative consonants. Then they go on with irrational discourses which seem to express that 'surplus', the inner chaos at the core of language, that the Duchess in 1.3 had defined as what could only be expressed "in riddles and in dreams":

FIRST MADMAN    Doomsday not come yet? I'll draw it nearer by a perspective, or make a glass, that shall set all the world on fire upon an instant. I cannot sleep, my pillow is stuff'd with a litter of porcupines.

SECOND MADMAN    Hell is a mere glass-house, where the devils are continually blowing up women's souls on hollow irons, and the fire never goes out,

THIRD MADMAN    I will lie with every woman in my parish the tenth night: I will tithe them over like haycocks.

FOURTH MADMAN    Shall my pothecary outgo me, because I am a cuckold? I have found out his roguery: he makes alum of his wife's urine, and sells it to Puritans, that have sore throats with over-straining.

FIRST MADMAN    I have skill in heraldry.

SECOND MADMAN    Hast?

FIRST MADMAN    You do give for your crest a woodcock's head, with the brains pick't out on't. You are a very ancient gentleman.

THIRD GENTLEMAN    Greek is turn'd Turk; we are only to be sav'd by the Helvetian translation.



- FIRST MADMAN      Come on sir, I will lay the law to you.  
 SECOND MADMAN    O, rather lay corrosive, the law will eat to the bone.  
 THIRD MADMAN      He that drinks but to satisfy nature is damn'd.  
 FOURTH MADMAN    If I had my glass here, I would show a sight should  
                                  make all the women her call me mad doctor.  
 FIRST MADMAN      What's he, a rope-maker? Second madman: No, no, no,  
                                  a snuffling knave, that while he shows the tombs, will  
                                  have his hand in a wench's placket.  
 THIRD MADMAN      Woe to the caroché that brought home my wife from  
                                  the masque, at three o'clock in the morning; it had a  
                                  large feather bed in it.  
                                  (5.2. 73-107)

This masque has been considered by some critics dismal nonsense or in any case an incongruity with Webster's realism. Recent criticism has nonetheless proved better equipped to uncover the fundamental function of this masque which on the contrary serves the important purpose of "dramatis[ing] the self-contradictions inherent in the notion of a female ruler" (Desmet 1991: 118).

More similar to an anti-masque (with its break of decorum) than to a masque, or even similar to a *charivari*, as has been noticed, this peculiar masque of madmen expresses the decomposition of the aristocratic order through its grotesque, uncanny, and awry distortions. Rather than reinforcing order and decorum within the State (the traditional functions of the court masque), this meta-theatrical moment disrupts with its 'spectacle of strangeness' any possible recomposition of order and stability in language as in action. Sarah Sutherland, author of an important study on various forms of masque at the time, echoes Stephen Orgel's similar questioning when she summarizes the political problem posited by such a disquieting and disrupting masque mingling the representation of crime and madness in a metatheatrical action:

Why in this quarter of the seventeenth century, and not before or in quite the same way since, do the best dramatists present their audiences with spectacular scenes that throw violently together the orderly decorum inherent in celebratory court entertainment with the disordered indecorum of madness and murder? (Sutherland 1983: 117).

Webster seems to imply that the very trust in representation is destroyed and therefore the connection between theatre (through one of the most frequently used metatheatrical instruments, the masque) and an ordered and positive reality. With words resembling Gloucester's pessimistic view in *King Lear*, Bosola comments on Antonio's death:

We are merely the stars tennis-balls, struck and banded  
Which may pleases them  
(5.5.53-4)

His last words on the stage are the vision of a totally alienated world:

BOSOLA . . . O this gloomy world  
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness  
Doth, *womanish and fearful*, mankind live.  
(5.5.119-21; emphasis mine)

In a matter of years, the disruption of order in England will be total, with the assassination of the king and the civil war; the theaters will be closed and the threat posited by 'woman', culturally represented as the cause of all evils for the patriarchal English nation in search of a clearer national identity, will see the final act of the persecution of women (and marginal subjects) as witches.

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## Felicia Hemans's History in Drama: Gender Subjectivities Revisited in *The Vespers of Palermo*

### Abstract

Within the framework of a transnational discourse and a new vision of Europe, that focused on the attention of Great Britain towards the South and towards Mediterranean countries, Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) fashioned a historical discourse that addressed some of the fundamental issues of the time. These issues include the new role played by women in the public sphere; the relationship, no longer just between mothers and daughters, but also between fathers and sons; the long European wars and Colonial expansion; the feminization of heroism and citizenship and the problematic presence of women warriors. All these issues, which are at the same time global and transnational, are engaged with and staged in Felicia Hemans's plays, such as *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823). In the latter play, central to the investigation of this essay, Hemans also discusses the question of Italian freedom that Lady Morgan had already publically addressed in her volume *Italy*. This essay will attempt to demonstrate how Hemans reshapes gender subjectivities, in the context of national and transnational history.

KEYWORDS: Felicia Hemans; *The Vespers of Palermo*; gender subjectivity

In this essay I will not go into the intricacy of Felicia Hemans's voluminous output, but I will try to throw some light on one among Hemans's more intriguing, and less examined, works, namely the tragedy in five acts *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823).

It might be helpful to begin with a quotation from Stuart Curran's groundbreaking essay "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered". Curran, focusing in particular on the work of Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-38), claims:

Hemans and Landon, to be sure, paid a price for their celebrity . . . For the bourgeois public of the 1820s and 1830s, their names were synonymous with the notion of a poetess, celebrating hearth and home, God and country in mellifluous verse that relished the sentimental and seldom teased anyone into thought. There are other and darker strains in their voluminous pro-

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duction – a focus on exile and failure, a celebration of female genius frustrated, a haunting omnipresence of death – that seem to subvert the role they claimed and invite a sophisticated reconsideration of their work. (Curran 1988: 189)

This quotation helps explain why memory is so necessary in order to reconstruct a female genealogy, and to celebrate women's genius over time, a question that has been ignored for too long.

It was certainly daring for a woman not only to write a play but also to conceive the ambitious plan to have it performed in the early nineteenth century. It is not by chance that, more than a century later, Virginia Woolf was still complaining about the empty shelf for women playwrights. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Woolf lamented not so much the absence of women playwrights in dramatic history, but the strategic way in which they have been silenced and removed by histories of drama. I do not intend to examine this past collective amnesia, since brilliant revisionist work has successfully restored women playwrights' voices over the past two decades. Stephen C. Behrendt reminds us that it was only "toward the end of her brief career Hemans had become an 'ultra representative' of the heavily gendered values for which women's writing was celebrated in the critical press and in the general culture," since "Hemans's earlier works frequently earned praise, paradoxically, for not being like those of her female contemporaries" (2001: 95). In the light of this consideration, I wish to start this essay by surveying a few quotations that provided the ground for the discrimination that Hemans and other women writers have experienced as a consequence of their intellectual commitment.

The first quotation is by Francis Jeffrey. In 1829, in the *Edinburgh Review*, in reviewing Hemans's *Records of Woman* (1828) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825), Jeffrey, while complimenting the collected poems as "infinitely sweet, elegant and tender – touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering . . ." (1829-30: 34), cannot avoid adding further and more explicit general considerations. To Jeffrey, women had to stay as far as possible away from the arenas frequented by the male imagination (in terms of topics and of literary and dramatic genres), and cultivate instead their own feminine imagination, (related to their private and domestic spheres). Jeffrey explains that such a separation of spheres was due to the self-evident inability of women to represent credibly the 'affairs of the world':

[Women] cannot, we think, represent naturally the fierce and sullen passions of men – nor their coarser vices – nor even scenes of actual business or contention – and the mixed motives, and strong and faulty characters, by which affairs of moment are usually conducted on the great theatre of the

world. For much of this they are disqualified by the delicacy of their training and habits . . . and from much they are excluded by their actual inexperience of the realities they might wish to describe. (32)

It seems odd that Francis Jeffrey should be unable or unwilling to think of Felicia Hemans as an author capable of dealing with topics and genres that can hardly be dismissed as merely feminine, especially with reference to dramatic works such as *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Vespers of Palermo*, where social, political and gender conflicts are acutely displayed, and blood and violence copiously exhibited. But Jeffrey was not the only man to underestimate Hemans's talent on the account of her sex. Another leading figure of contemporary criticism was John Taylor Coleridge who in his essay on Hemans, published in the *Quarterly Review* in October 1820, just two years before the publications of her two verse tragedies, wrote:

Mrs Hemans is a woman in whom talent and learning have not produced the ill effects so often attributed to them [women]; her faculties seem to seat meekly on her, at least we can trace no ill humour or affectation, no misanthropic gloom, no querulous discontent; she is always pure in thought and expression, cheerful, affectionate, and pious. It is something at least to know, that whether the emotions she excites be always those of powerful delight or not, they will be at least harmless, and leave no sting behind: if our fancies are not always transported, our hearts at least will never be corrupted: we have not found a line which a delicate woman might blush to have written. (Coleridge 1820: 130-1)<sup>1</sup>

So far, according to these well-known critics, no clouds seemed to have contaminated the 'meek, pious, affectionate' mind of Hemans, deprived as it was, according to Coleridge, of "ill humour or affection, of misanthropic gloom, and querulous discontent", although much could be said about the "dark and subversive strains" (131) that run through it, as Curran's pioneer-

<sup>1</sup> Until not long ago, this review was attributed to William Gifford, editor of the *Quarterly Review*. Only recently it has been attributed to one of his contributors, John Taylor Coleridge. Nanora Sweet, editing with Barbara Taylor Hemans's pamphlet poem, *The Sceptic*, for the website *Romantic Circle*, provides us with some interesting insights. She reconstructs the complex story of the composition of the poem, its implicit reference to Byron and the critical response that followed its publication in which Coleridge's review has to be placed. Sweet writes: "In her 1820 pamphlet poem, *The Sceptic*, twenty-six-year-old Felicia Hemans attacked Lord Byron's scepticism about the afterlife on the grounds that as a posture, it was dishonest, and as a program, it added darkness to a world already sufficiently dark. For her pains, she was welcomed by John Taylor Coleridge in the *Quarterly Review* as an alternative to 'the most dangerous writer of the present day,' while herself remaining 'always pure in thought and expression, cheerful, affectionate, and pious'" (2004).

ing essay pointed out. Moving onwards, at least chronologically, we next come across William M. Rossetti's "Prefatory Notice" to *The Poetical Works of Mrs Hemans*, edited in 1873, in which he remarks:

One might sum up the weak points in Mrs. Hemans's poetry by saying that it is not only "feminine" poetry (which under the circumstances can be no imputation, rather an encomium) but also "female" poetry: besides exhibiting the fineness and charm of womanhood, it has the monotone of mere sex. Mrs. Hemans has that love of good and horror of evil which characterize a scrupulous female mind; and which we may most rightly praise without concluding that they favour poetical robustness, or even perfection in literary form. (1873: 24)

Rossetti was even more trenchant in his desultory judgement on Hemans's literary production, when it came to deal precisely with her drama. Having to introduce *The Vespers of Palermo*, he confirms his impression of her poetry as weak and excessively feminine. These faults, he believes, had determined the failure of its performances of some decades earlier:

Mrs Hemans's talent was not of the dramatic kind. Perhaps there never yet was a good five-act tragedy written by a woman; and certainly the peculiar tone and tint of Mrs. Hemans's faculty were not such as to supply the deficiency which she, merely as a woman, was almost certain to evince. Even as a narrative poet, not to speak of the drama, she shows to no sort of advantage: her personages not having anything of a full-bodied character, but wavering between the romantically criminal and the longwindedly virtuous – poor supposititious creatures, inflated and diluted. (16)

But was Felicia Hemans's sex really shaping (and limiting) her imaginative powers, as these male nineteenth-century critics asserted, or, rather, was it these critics who failed to recognize that it was her gender perspective to destabilize traditional expectations, challenging the heteronormative notions of femininity of her time? One way to answer these questions is by investigating Hemans's use of history, in particular in her drama. Gary Kelly's argument provides us with a good starting point:

Hemans clearly represents history as a masculinist project that is destructive of the subjectivity and domesticity central to post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic bourgeois ideology and culture. . . . In these works she critiques both masculinist history and male-authored historiography, and does so both thematically and formally. Thematically, she represents masculine history's destructive impact on women and the feminine in a wide range of times, places, societies, and cultures. Formally, she resists masculine history and historiography by using pathetic romance or verse narrative in which a prominent narrator explicitly sympathizes with the victims of masculine history. (2010: 87)



In Kelly's perceptive critical analysis, Hemans dissociates her feminine subjectivity from history, seen mainly as a "masculinist project", to the point that her drama expresses a Romantic feminist liberalism. She offers the reader a diverse and transgressive critical perspective to male-authored historiography.

In her drama, however, Hemans seems committed to a more complex and conflictual representation of history that vehicles what, elsewhere, has been defined as a severe revision of history, a fresh concern for "global literature or, else, cosmopolitan aesthetics" (Singer and Sweet 2014: 3). Such vision creates the image of a new, and rather "unfamiliar" (1) Hemans. Sweet and Melnyk, in their introduction to a volume of collected essays dedicated to Hemans, underline the close nexus that Hemans's work establishes with history, and argue: "'Why Hemans now?' is alike a matter of history, gender, and critical method. We could not understand what is at stake in Hemans without a sense that history itself is at stake. A reader of Robertson, Gibbon, and Sismondi, Hemans was a student of historical process in ways we have only just begun to understand. . . . Like the millennium itself, Hemans's work poses questions about history's 'ends'" (Sweet and Melnyk 2001: 2).

*The Vespers of Palermo* might be a fitting example of Hemans's conflictual and multifaceted way of dealing with history, and making of the past the site of contemporary national and international concerns, and of the reasons that her work received such a hostile critical response by her contemporary male critics. The play was published in 1823; Hemans's friends and advisors, Henry Hart Milman and Reginald Heber, suggested that she submit the play to Covent Garden. Hemans was very anxious, as her letter to Milman demonstrates :

As I cannot help looking forward to the day of trial with much more of dread than of sanguine expectation, I most willingly acquiesce in your recommendations of delay, and shall rejoice in having the respite as much prolonged as possible. I begin almost to shudder at my own presumption, and, if it were not for the kind encouragement I have received from you and Mr Reginald Heber, should be much more anxiously occupied in searching for any outlet of escape, than in attempting to overcome the difficulties which seem to obstruct my onward path. (Browne Owen 1839: 51-2)

In spite of the author's anxieties, the play was accepted and performed on 12 December 1823, but, as the dramatist had predicted, it was not welcomed by the audience and the critics and was immediately withdrawn. Nevertheless, Hemans's fame as a poet was such that the cast included famous performers, among them Charles Young as Procida, Charles Kemble as Raimond, Sarah Bartley as Vittoria, Frederick Henry Yates as Montalba,

and Frances Harriet Kelly as Constance. Apparently, it was Kelly's acting that caused particular hostility towards the play (Browne Owen 1839: 73). A few months later, on 5 April 1824, thanks to the advice and support of Joanna Baillie and Walter Scott, the play was staged once more, but at the Edinburgh Theatre, again for just one night. The cast included Harriet Siddons, Henry Siddons's widow who also contributed a new epilogue for the play. This time the audience and Scottish reviewers seemed to enjoy the performance. Despite this positive answer, however, Hemans, by then a single mother of five sons – her husband having left the family a few years earlier to sail to Italy for ever – decided that theatre was not the way for her to gain the income she needed to support her children. Still, she does not hide her belief that behind her failure there were the prejudices reserved to her sex that made her enterprise difficult, if not impossible. On December 1823, four days after the first performance of her play, she wrote to Milman:

. . . and I almost wish, as far as relates to my own private feelings, that the attempt may not be made. I shall not, however, interfere in any way on the subject. I have not heard from Mr. Kemble; but I have written both to him and to Mr. Young, to express my grateful sense of their splendid exertions in support of the piece. As a female, I cannot help feeling rather depressed by the extreme severity with which I have been treated in the morning papers. I know not why this should be; for I am sure I should not have attached the slightest value to their praise; but I suppose it is only a proper chastisement for my temerity; for a female who shrinks from such things, has certainly no business to write tragedies. (1839: 72-3)

Then, rather significantly, she adds:

If ever I should try the fortune of the theatre again, I must endeavour to censure the strictest secrecy as to my name till my fate shall be decided: there is a prejudice, I am satisfied, against a female dramatist, which it would be hardly possible to surmount. (1839: 72 and Chorley 1837: 103)

If theatre did not give rise to the desired results, the printing of the play signalled the value of her dramatic works, to the great satisfaction of her publisher John Murray. as pointed out by Paula Feldman: "But drama was to be her big money maker, if not her artistic triumph . . . Anticipating a lucrative, popular success, Murray deviated from his usual practice with Hemans and paid her 210 pounds outright for the copyright" (Feldman 1997: 157).<sup>2</sup>

*The Vespers of Palermo*, like some of her other dramatic poems – to quote only a few: "Cœur de Lion at the Bier of His Father" from the collection *The*

<sup>2</sup> See also Murray Archives, Ledger B, f. 305 and Smiles (1891: 2, 33), qtd in Feldman (1997), Armstrong and Blain (1999: 78).

*Forest Sanctuary: and other poems* (1825) that contains several historical poems, and *De Chantillon, or the Crusaders, a Tragedy*, (1823) – have a medieval setting. According to David Rothstein, it was Hemans's use of medieval history that aroused the interest of readers towards these texts, given the great popularity that the Middle Ages enjoyed at the time. As Rothstein notes, the "medieval revival" well served the nationalistic needs of Great Britain, in search of the reconstruction of a national identity that the long war against France had damaged:

The "medieval revival" of the early nineteenth century provided inspiration for a new strain of nationalist imagery and discourse that would evolve and help to shape British subjects for nearly a century preceding the Great War. (Rothstein 1999: 49)

Rothstein goes on, in the conclusion to his essay, to allege Hemans's political conservatism:

By rewriting chivalric history through the discourse of domestic sentimentalism and patriotic mourning, Hemans's poetry promoted new uses for medievalist representations in early nineteenth-century Britain: she therefore contributed to a new current in the discourse of chivalric nationalism. . . . Hemans's texts foster a conservative cultural nostalgia based on idealized, feminized versions of gendered subjectivity, domestic and social unity, male social governance, and aristocratic tradition. (51)

Rothstein's assumptions, however, are put in question by Hemans's more characteristic disregard of discourses of conservative cultural nostalgia and of "male social governance", precisely when she shapes plots staging women in history. This is the case with other historical works by Hemans, such as *The Abencerrage*, taken from *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819), where she dramatizes the love story between Albin Hamet and Zayda during the conquest of Granada by the Spanish, in 1492. Zayda's involvement in the political scenario displays a stubborn will. Zayda rebels against her destiny and gives voice to an ethics of war and resistance:

Thou that wilt triumph when the hour is come,  
Hasten'd by thee, to seal thy country's doom,  
With *thee* from scenes of death shall Zayda fly  
To peace and safety? – Woman, too, can die!  
And die exulting, though unknown to fame,  
In all the stainless beauty of her name!  
Be mine, unmurmuring, undismay'd, to share,  
The fate my kindred and my sire must bear.  
(Hemans 2008: 75, 2.315-22)

In another poem, *The Wife of Asdrubal*, from the same collection, Hemans goes so far as to stage maternal infanticide. Asdrubal, the governor of Carthage, gives the Romans the city in exchange for his life. Nevertheless, the people of Carthage, together with Asdrubal's wife and children, decide to remain in the city, burning it down and dying in the fire. Asdrubal's wife, before her husband's eyes, stab their two children and jump into the fire with them. Her final tragic act demonstrates her desperate love for her children, whom she does not want to fall into the hands of the Romans, but also by way of an extreme act of revenge and punishment towards her husband's betrayal of Carthage: a "wild courage" that Hemans passionately celebrates:

The flames are gathering round – intensely bright,  
 Full on her features glares their meteor-light;  
 But a wild courage sits triumphant there,  
 The stormy grandeur of a proud despair;  
 A daring spirit, in its woes elate,  
 Mightier than death, untameable by fate.  
 The dark profusion of her locks unbound,  
 Waves like a warrior's floating plumage round;  
 Flushed is her cheek, inspired her haughty mien,  
 She seems the avenging goddess of the scene.  
 Are those her infants, that with suppliant cry  
 Cling round her, shrinking as the flame draws nigh.  
 Clasp with their feeble hands her gorgeous vest,  
 And fain would rush for shelter to her breast?  
 Is that a mother's glance, where stern disdain,  
 And passion, awfully vindictive, reign?  
 Fixed is her eye on Asdrubal, who stands  
 Ignobly safe amidst the conquering bands:  
 On him who left her to that burning tomb,  
 Alone to share her children's martyrdom;  
 Who, when his country perished, fled the strife,  
 And knelt to win the worthless boon of life.  
 (95, 23-44)

In Hemans's plays, women's "wild courage" is performed more than once; likewise, roles played by female warriors, like Asdrubal's wife, are frequently present. In the play *The Siege of Valencia* (1823), for instance, we find two different but equally subversive modes of shaping female and national courage. Two women, Elmina and Ximena, mother and daughter, are ready to sacrifice their own life: for maternal love, on the part of Elmina; for love towards her people, in the case of Ximena. Elmina, in the vain hope of saving the lives of her sons – taken hostage by the Moors besieging

ing Valencia – betrays her people's trust and disobeys her husband's determination, deciding to open the gates of the city to the besiegers. Ximena, instead, dramatically disguises herself as a man in arms and, like a true woman warrior, leads her people to freedom, only to die when the victory is almost at hand. Both women, therefore, offer examples of unconventional and destabilizing behaviour, as far as gender rules are concerned: Elmina disregarding the traditional patriarchal hierarchy within the family and the community, Ximena breaking the gender boundaries prescribed by society for her sex. Their rebellion, however, equally ends tragically: Ximena dies fighting the Moors, Elmina has to bear her husband's and children's death. As Gary Kelly points out, Hemans's use of death and acts of self-sacrifice, massively present in her drama and in her history poems, visibly convey her political protest and personal anxiety in a time of historical turmoil and of social catastrophes. History uprooted people's everyday life, destroying certainties and generating anxiety. According to Kelly "the prolonged global crisis of Revolutionary and Napoleonic disruption and violence, which was perceived at the time as an unprecedented and profoundly transformative world-historical event. Romantic death was figured as meaningful death and set against the meaninglessness of mass death" (2001: 197).

Likewise, *The Vespers of Palermo* displays a deep anxiety although staging a more intricate plot and set of gender roles, and representing interactions between characters that are somewhat more difficult to disambiguate. In the play, Hemans reprises the topic of "The Death of Conradin", a poem included in *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819). In this tale in verse, young Conradin's death on scaffold is narrated in a melancholic and touching strain echoing a passage from Sismonde de Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* [*History of the Italian Republics in the Middle Ages*, 1809-18], a work in several volumes much admired by Hemans, in which Sismondi demonstrates that modern European culture finds its roots in the medieval Italian free cities. Not by chance, Hemans quotes in an epigraph to her poem the very passage by Sismondi that movingly describes Conradin's execution by Charles d'Anjou. Hemans depicts this final scene through a set of images that intersect the public and private spheres, and offer the readers an emotional crescendo. Before his people, Conradin faces death with great dignity and courage, but his last thought is a tender regret for the miseries his death will bestow upon his mother:

Yet 'midst his people, undismayed, he throws  
The gage of vengeance for a thousand woes;  
Vengeance that, like their own volcano's fire,

May sleep suppressed a while – but not expire.  
 One softer image rises o'er his breast,  
 One fond regret, and all shall be at rest!  
 "Alas, for thee, my mother! who shall bear  
 To thy sad heart the tidings of despair,  
 When thy lost child is gone?" That thought can thrill  
 His soul with pangs one moment more shall still.  
 The lifted axe is glittering in the sun –  
 It falls – the race of Conradin is run!  
 Yet, from the blood which flows that shore to stain,  
 A voice shall cry to heaven – and not in vain!  
 Gaze thou, triumphant from thy gorgeous throne,  
 In proud supremacy of guilt alone,  
 Charles of Anjou! – but that dread voice shall be  
 A fearful summoner even yet to thee!  
 (Hemans 2008: 103)

These lines, that versify what legend and history have made together of this tragic event, convey a sense of sentimental domesticity and, at the same time, a threatening political awareness of what Conradin's violent death will mean for the people of Sicily and will provoke as a consequence. As foretold in the closing of the poem, "he throws / The gage of vengeance for a thousand woes". *The Vespers of Palermo* powerfully performs those consequences. The slaughter of Conradin and of his followers that also meant the end of any freedom for Sicily is still vividly re-presented by the Sicilians, whereby the revenge that the verses evoked becomes the main plot of the play. Even though, both in history and in her play, this revenge is accomplished, Hemans seems reluctant to offer an easy way out of the dilemma produced by the intersection between public and private spheres. How can retaliation be considered a success if marred by blood? And is it possible to avoid the use of violence when a just cause necessitates it? Also, can we really avoid to see or hear what takes place outside, if it inevitably finds a resonance at home or has a serious impact on one's own country and life? Such questions deeply troubled Hemans's own time.

In the same year as *The Siege of Valencia*, *The Vespers of Palermo* was published. It is similarly set in the south of Europe, but this time in Italy, and, more precisely, in Sicily. As with *The Siege of Valencia*, *The Vespers of Palermo*, while retelling medieval historical events, foregrounds contemporary concerns about the destiny of Southern Europe. Diego Saglia, highlighting Hemans's deep interest in the political upheavals of the time, suggestively mirrored in her verse drama, points out the intense commotion

that crossed the entire south of Europe, particularly in the 1820s.<sup>3</sup> Saglia also underlines how, in the period, theatre and drama become controversial terrains “where the cultural and political identity of Italy are debated” (2003: 254).

Thus, the two plays resonate with the contemporary political events and show, with the same tragic intensity, individual and collective fears and hopes, unexpected acts of courage and vicious revenge, equally embodied by male and female characters. *The Vespers of Palermo*, set in the thirteenth century, refers to the massacre of the French invaders of the city by the people of Palermo in revolt. The struggle of the people of Palermo aimed to regain long lost freedom, after the young king Conradin of the House of the Swabia had been brutally executed in 1268 by Charles I of the Anjou dynasty, who had then taken over Sicily. According to the legend that spread soon after the victorious rebellion, the revolt was sparked off by the sound of bells announcing the evening vespers. Hemans recalls the historical facts and the legendary story, adding to them a familial and emotional dimension.

The play is divided in five acts. It opens with Procida, one of the leaders of the patriots and the revolt (a real historical figure known as Giovanni da Procida), who comes back from his exile in disguise, in order to secure his life. On hearing some peasants express their hatred towards the French invaders, Procida urges them to rebel and to take revenge for the humiliations they received under French tyranny, thereby regaining their past glory. The second scene is set in a castle where Vittoria, the fictional widow of Conradin, lives and cultivates day by day her thirst for revenge, which Procida, on meeting her, openly admits to sharing. Vittoria in her appearance and behaviour is also an ideal embodiment of Sicily. Moreover, as Nanora Sweet has pointed out with reference to the poem *Dartmoor*, in Hemans the widow is always a sign of dispossession (1994: 171); accordingly, Vittoria, widow of the patriotic leader captured and killed by the invaders, metaphorically stands for a land subjugated to the foreign yoke. Not by chance, Eriberto, the French viceroy of

<sup>3</sup> Saglia (2005: 99) summarizes the political intricacy of the time as follows: “The decade after the ‘pacification’ of Europe decreed by the 1815 Treaty of Vienna, and especially the early to mid-1820s, was a period of intense socio-political agitation both in Britain and on the Continent. Southern Europe, in particular, saw the first stirrings of Risorgimento revolutionary activities in Italy in 1820-21, and, in 1820, the reinstatement of a constitutional monarchy in Spain and the beginning of a *trienio liberal* terminated by the French military intervention of 1823. In 1821 the Greek war of independence broke out with the national revolt started by the *Phili-ki Etairia* secret society, while in Portugal the liberal revolution of 1820 forced King João VI to grant a constitution in 1822, which he withdrew the following year, thus plunging the country back into an absolutist regime”.



Sicily, wants to marry Vittoria, in part because he declares his love for her, but also in order to avow his rights over the island. At first, she refuses since she still cherishes Conradin's memory. In the third scene of the first act, two new characters enter: Constance, the viceroy's sister, and Raimond, the son of the revengeful Procida. As Marjean Puriton has perceptively argued, Hemans's play is filled with Shakespearean resonances that the dramatist uses in order to "[transform] Shakespearean dramaturgy to a consciousness-raising strategy in *The Vespers of Palermo* about the nature of performing bodies on the stage of politics as well as the stage of Covent Garden" (2004: 144).

Hemans, reproducing the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues that caused the death of the two lovers, Romeo and Juliet, in the contrasted love between the French Constance and Raimond, offers her audience the possibility to sympathize with the two lovers' sad destiny, while also providing her spectators with the opportunity to become aware of the political terms that provoke that dispute. Raimond will die, wounded by the French, while Constance will end in a convent bitterly complaining about the reasons of her lover's death.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, Vittoria, represented by Hemans as a strong-willed and relentless woman, decides to accomplish Procida's plan of retaliation making Eriberto believe that she will marry him when the church bells will ring to announce the evening vespers. Procida's scheme is to have the people of Palermo masked as invited to the wedding and ready to kill all the French assembled for the ceremony once the bells of the church toll. Disguise and dissimulation go hand in hand with the plot while, once more, recalling Shakespeare or, using Purinton's own words: "Hemans has intertextually woven a revision of the 'mouse-trap' from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where players stage 'The Murder of Gonzago' to trap Claudius into revealing his guilt" (ibid.).

Finally, the massacre is planned on Montalba's cry 'let them all perish!' (Hemans 2008: 2.4, 252):

Let them all perish! – And if one be found  
Amidst our band, to stay th'avenging steel  
For pity, or remorse, or boyish love,  
Then be his doom as theirs!

<sup>4</sup> In drawing Constance's character and writing the final scenes of her play, Hemans may have thought of Constance, Queen of Aragon (1247-1302). Constance of Aragon was the daughter of Manfredi, the previous king of Sicily, and wife of Peter III of Aragon. She was regent, in the absence of her husband for the War of the Sicilian Vespers. Then she remained a widow and, after the death of her son Alfonso III, dressed as a nun. Unsuccessfully, she attempted a reconciliation between her two sons, James II and Frederick III, sovereigns of Aragon and Sicily, who were fighting each other. Dante remembers her as the "good Constance" (*Purgatory* 3.143). See <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/costanza-regina-d-aragona> (last access 23 March 2018).

Raimond, deemed by Montalba a "fond dreamer" (253), tries to stop the bloodbath, expressing faith in more peaceful means to change the oppressive political situation. But what he really abhors is the mischievous stratagem to defeat the French oppressors. He unsuccessfully tries to contrast his father's and the other schemers' respective decisions:

RAIMOND. (*Rushing forward indignantly.*)  
 Our faith to this !  
 No! I but *dreamt* I heard it! – Can it be?  
 My countrymen, my father! – Is it thus  
 That freedom should be won? – Awake! Awake  
 To loftier thoughts! – Lift up, exultingly,  
 On the crown'd heights, and to the sweeping winds,  
 Your glorious banner! – Let your trumpet's blast  
 Make the tombs thrill with echoes! Call aloud,  
 Proclaim from all your hills, the land shall bear  
 The stranger's yoke no longer! – What is he  
 Who carries on his practised lip a smile,  
 Beneath his vest a dagger, which but waits  
 Till the heart bounds with joy, to still its beatings?  
 That which our nature's instinct doth recoil from,  
 And our blood curdle at – Ay, yours and mine –  
 A murderer! – Heard ye? – Shall that name with ours  
 Go down to after days? – Oh, friends! a cause  
 Like that for which we rise, hath made bright names  
 Of the elder time as rallying-words to men,  
 Sounds full of might and immortality!  
 And shall not ours be such?  
 (2.4, 253)

Raimond's genuine allegiance to the old chivalric codes and values sounds out of place here, destined to end in a tragic fashion. The tragedy reaches its peak when the bells ring: Procida's plan is put into action and the massacre of all the French invitees to the banquet accomplished. While Raimond succeeds in saving Constance's life, finding a refuge for her in a nearby wood, an accusation of disloyalty is launched against him, and he is condemned to death by his own father. The final scene of the tragedy is set in the garden of a convent, where Constance has later found asylum, and where Raimond's body lies wounded to death, after having heroically defended the people of Palermo from the French assault that had taken place sometime after the massacre. Procida arrives and admits his mistake in judging his son's intentions and actions. Beside his son's body, Procida confesses his failure as a father, blinded as he was by his thirst for revenge and his search for fame. In distress, he declares his repentance at not hav-

ing given voice to “[t]he depth, th’intenseness, and the agony, / Of . . . his suppress’d affection”:

The depth, th’intenseness, and the agony,  
 Of my suppress’d affection? – I have learn’d  
 All his high worth in time – to deck his grave!  
 Is there not power in the strong spirit’s woe  
 To force an answer from the viewless world  
 Of the departed? – Raimond! – Speak! forgive!  
 Raimond! my victor, my deliverer, hear!  
 Why, what a world is this! – Truth ever bursts  
 On the dark soul too late: And glory crowns  
 Th’unconscious dead! And an hour comes to break  
 The mightiest hearts! – My son! my son! is this  
 A day of triumph? – Ay, for thee alone!  
 (*He throws himself upon the body of Raimond*)  
 (5.7, 278-9)

Hemans’s tragedy presents two levels of narration: one public and political, based on historiography (the insurrection of the Sicilians against the French), and one private and domestic, the product of pure invention: the love story between Raimond and Constance, the false betrayal of Raimond, Vittoria as Conradin’s widow and her desire of revenge, and the final admissions of Procida’s own faults and lack of trust in his son. Hemans succeeds in skilfully combining strong expressions of individual emotions as well as credible drives for actions. What takes place in *The Vespers of Palermo* is, then, an attempt to give voice to the mixed and turbulent feelings that two European generations must have felt and experienced during the French revolutionary and post-Napoleonic years. Hemans’s plots generate disturbing questions about right and wrong in a time of conflict and within a distressed social world. Interestingly, she petitions for scenarios of peace while giving substance and authority to theatres of war. In addition, in *The Vespers of Palermo* Hemans represents gender roles in a rather unsettling and ambivalent way: while Procida displays his masculine desire to fight and revenge, Raimond instead is the warmest supporter of loyalty and dialogue. His excessive sensibility conveys a feminine inflection that seems ill-suited to the representation of the brave warrior and valiant patriot that he will eventually prove to be. Conversely, Vittoria, Conradin’s faithful widow, fiercely opposes any negotiations and leads the revolt to the point of making of her own female body the very site of war and revenge. Yet, towards the closing of the play, she turns into a sort of Lady Macbeth figure, almost crazed for all the blood she had mercilessly caused:

Was it for me  
 To stay th'avenging sword? – No, tho' it pierced  
 My very soul? – Hark, hark, what thrilling shrieks  
 Ring thro' the air around me! – Can'st thou not  
 Bid them be hush'd? – Oh! look not on me thus!  
 (4.2, 265-6)

Constance, the sweet and fragile female, who throughout the play is on the verge of becoming the scapegoat of the conspiracy, in the end turns out to be the spokesperson of an alternative message. With her last speech the emotional dimension enters into the political dimension and interferes with the political dispute. Accusing Procida of indifference towards Raimond, she cries out her anger:

CONSTANCE. (*starting.*)  
 Art *thou* his father?  
 I know thee now. – Hence! with thy dark stern eye,  
 And thy cold heart! – Thou canst not wake him now!  
 Away! he will not answer but to me,  
 For none like me hath loved him! He is mine!  
 Ye shall not rend him from me.  
 (5.7, 278)

Hence, Constance embodies a feminine subjectivity that plainly addresses Hemans's apprehensions and contrasts the annihilation of the individual life. In Hemans's history plays individual death means and stands for the mass death that her age widely and tragically beheld. Constance's verbal allegation of the failure of the paternal and familial bond, while allowing the emotional dimension to enter into the political dimension and interfere with the political dispute at work, can at the same time also be interpreted as an ironic comment on domestic idealism. Susan J. Wolfson's remarks in regard to Hemans's collected poems, *Records of Women* might be equally applied to *The Vespers of Palermo*: "*Records* looks two ways, at the cultures it constructs and at Hemans's own. Although Hemans does not reflect critically on such displacements, this double orientation has a social force in its common and recurring story: the failure of domestic ideals, in whatever cultural variety, to sustain and fulfill women's life" (Wolfson 1994: 145).

If the play has convinced Peter Trinder that "although the overt issues are national and political – the rising of a conquered and repressed people, the resurgence of an underground liberation movement . . . – the real concerns of the author are essentially domestic and personal: family, affections loyal and love" (1984: 15), Gary Kelly, instead, exploring the use of history in Felicia Hemans and Mary Shelley, affirms that their 'female perspective' in dealing with history from a public and private standpoint offer a more

authentic representation of the past. According to Kelly, they give voice not only to the leading figures whose actions have left their imprint on history, but they also represent the subjective and inner life of the individuals who have taken part in those actions and made that history or, more often, have suffered because of it (1997: 200). In this way, Kelly suggests that women's interest for history may be interpreted as real need: "a feminization of the public political sphere in order to break the cycle of 'masculine history'" (199). While agreeing with Kelly's conclusions regarding Hemans's desire to unsettle macro history, making new places for women's needs and aspirations, and giving her audience the possibility to see what consequences it has on the life of the individuals, on the other hand, one might point out that Hemans is also refusing to provide conclusive and conventional answers. To Diego Saglia, in fact:

Like Italy in Romantic-period tragedies, Hemans's Sicily in *The Vespers of Palermo* is an ideologically relevant heterotopia, to borrow Michel Foucault's term for an ideal geography or space concentrating a tension between different or opposite dimensions. In its heterotopia of thirteenth-century Palermo, the tragedy of the Vespers highlights the difficulties in extricating tolerance from intolerance, righteous from misguided vengeance, legitimate from indiscriminate violence, and a police state from a community that respects and protects individual freedom. (2003: 366)

Undeniably, behind the author's interest in the South and, in this case, in medieval Italian republican history, lay another story that tells of a more contemporary and unfortunate historical narrative. After the conservative partition of Europe in 1815, decreed by the Holy Alliance, the cries for independence and freedom of the Southern European countries were heard strong and loud across Europe, in particular in the 1820s. A series of upheavals broke out in Spain, Italy and Greece. In Italy, Naples and Sicily rebelled, demanding the adoption of something resembling the Spanish constitution of 1812. Other cities followed suit, in Romagna, Piedmont and so on. Unfortunately, the consequences were disastrous and the respective governing regimes became even more repressive and suspicious. Therefore, the question that was posed after having witnessed, even from distance, the end of all the hopes that had inspired those revolts and fired the souls of those patriots ready to die rather than remain slaves of the joke of a foreign power, was what was now to be done. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Beatrice in his tragedy *The Cenci* answered the question with a parricide, his *Pro-metheus* with a more idealistic universal love.

Not long before the 1820s, the outbreak of the French Revolution had split Britain into two factions and animated a heated debate between those who sided for a gradual reform and those who requested an immediate change.

The second Romantic generation, and Hemans among them, was well aware of the devastations that the revolutionary and the post-revolutionary years had produced in Britain and all over Europe. The poet Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825) ended her brilliant publishing career because in her poem *1811* she gave voice to the general anger and dissatisfaction against an establishment that had been deaf to any request for reconciliation. Two generations of people had been on the front line, fighting and dying on the battlefield, or suffering the consequences of the war. The post-revolutionary era was no better, since people had to witness, as Hemans did, the rise of new despotic regimes and the collapse of the ideals of equality and international brotherhood, that had seemed possible after the French declaration of rights. Hemans's *The Vespers of Palermo* embodies all these ambiguities, conflicts and contradictions, split, as it is, between a deep sympathy towards the people who are subject to despotic regimes and need to regain their freedom, and the author's incapacity to distance herself from the turmoil of the recent years of war. The play, therefore, is a unique blend, not only or not primarily of conservative or liberal ideas, but of urgent human concerns. It stages fears and hopes, extreme and altruistic gestures of selfsacrifice, an appeal for freedom as well as arbitrary acts of revenge and violence. The chilling calls of the rebels who shout "kill all" and "spare none" – including in the "all" women, children, old and young people – closely recall the tragedy in three acts, *The Massacre*, written in 1792 by the radical actress and playwright Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821). The play, that was, because its plot, neither performed nor published, stages an enigmatic revolutionary mob that assaults Tricastin's house and finally murders Madame Tricastin and her children, the most vulnerable characters in the play. Inchbald's *The Massacre* creates a claustrophobic and alienating atmosphere that discloses a melancholic warning.

The ambiguity that John-David Lopez discerns in *The Siege of Valencia* may equally be detected in *The Vespers of Palermo* in which Constance and Vittoria, as much as Elmina and Ximena, stand for the two sides of public discourse in a politically impassioned climate. Lopez writes:

This double-thread is perhaps the key to the ambiguity in Hemans's work, and to persistent misreadings of her work. Unsatisfied with notions of female weakness she provides examples of unparalleled feminine strength, of feminine ability to enforce a public ethos. But Hemans sidesteps being drawn into a whole-hearted endorsement of that masculine public ethos by providing also an anguished voice of discontent. . . . If we are to give Hemans her full due, both voices must be heard (2006: 85)

Thus, on the one hand, the episode of the Sicilian Vespers in Hemans's drama acquires a symbolic meaning in view of the Risorgimento, the patriotic movement that will finally make of Italy a unified nation, after centu-

ries of vain struggles. On the other hand, however, Hemans's *Vespers* expresses other and more painful concerns. Aileen Forbes, in her essay on *The Siege of Valencia*, underlines Hemans's ambivalence towards the spectacle of infanticide, quoting Jacques Derrida's provocative question on the Gift of Death regarding the role of woman in an 'economy of sacrifice':

Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double 'gift of death' imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman? A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman? (Qtd in Forbes 2006: 160)

Forbes drops this Biblical question and does not go on to answer it, but it does help us make some sense of the instability of the sign that Hemans's drama consigns to her readers, especially when she asserts:

*The Siege of Valencia* reconceptualizes sacrificial responsibility through a gendered revision of Abraham's ordeal. Refashioning the biblical narrative of near-sacrifice that glorifies the faith of the patriarch, Hemans exhibits a fully executed sacrifice that shifts our ethical perspective from patriarchal duty to maternal passion where passion arises as a feminine mode of responsibility. (161)

I agree with Forbes that the scene Hemans depicts in a *The Siege of Valencia* stages in various ways a theatre of sacrifice. I also believe that very much the same could be said of *The Vespers of Palermo*, where "the feminine mode of responsibility" is perceptible in the invisible voiceover that seems to comment and judge the actions performed in the play, together with the private and public consequences that they cause. Nevertheless, Hemans's plays also give shape to a consistent and dialectical vision of history that, precisely thanks to its dialectics, somehow defeats any definitive interpretation. Reflecting upon her dramatic writing, she unveils an unpredictably confident and positive perspective, when, writing to her editor William Blackwood in 1828, she says:

I am sensible how very great a difference there is, I will not say of merit, but of subject and interest between my earlier and later poetical works; whatever they may contain of character at all peculiar to themselves, began, I think, to develop itself in the volume of the *Siege of Valencia*, and I attribute this greatly to my having gained courage, about that time, and not before, to draw from my own thought and feelings. (Letter dated 27 October 1828. Blackwood Archives, National Library of Scotland, ACC 5307, qtd in Forbes 2006: 159)



Hemans, therefore, admits that something changed while writing her more mature dramatic works, since they gave her a new courage “to draw from . . . [her] own thought and feelings”: maybe not the wild courage of some of her female characters, but the courage to see and perform the opposite drives and conflictual emotions of her contemporary and destabilizing historical age. In Hemans's drama women are placed at the centre of stage as much as at the centre of history shaping a new historical consciousness and reformulating gender historiography. In other words, Hemans's drama opening the way to the ‘regendering’ of the past also rewrites history politics. Yet, I still believe that Hemans's history play should be read not mainly from an essentialist gender perspective – where women are created in order to denounce the sins of the past, so as to be able to overcome them in the present – but, rather, from a more complex and challenging perspective. Using the words of the historian Joan Scott, this challenge “requires analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice” (1996: 155). Scott goes on to conclude, “Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes . . . it is the processes we must continually keep in mind. We must ask more often how things happened in order to find out why they happened” (166-7). This might be a more appropriate critical approach to adopt when reading Hemans's drama.

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## Shakespeare in One Act. Looking for Ophelia in the Italian Wartime Context

### Abstract

*Hamlet* was one of the major Shakespearean plays which featured in the nineteenth-century repertoire of the Italian actors, Gustavo Modena, Ernesto Rossi, Tommaso Salvini, Adelaide Ristori – the *mattatori* (as they were called) who toured with their acclaimed Italian Shakespeare all over Europe, London included (not to mention North and South America), and who, with the *grand* pathos of their acting, contributed to establishing Shakespeare's 'tragic character'. *Hamlet* continued to occupy a first-rate position in the Italian Shakespeare canon in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, well through the violent deconstructive aesthetics prompted by Marinetti's futurist theatre on the one hand, and a nation-based theatrical culture ushered in by the Fascist *régime* on the other. However, life was not easy for the Shakespearean tragic character, and for historical dramatic forms altogether. At the beginning of that century, as part of a poetics aiming to "prostitute all classic art on the stage, performing for example all the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies, condensed and comically mixed up, in a single evening", the futurist avant-garde came to fantasize a concise Shakespeare in one act. "Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act", Marinetti advised ("The Variety Theater", 1913, in Marinetti 1972: 121). But what about Ophelia in this perspective? Drawing on the wartime context of the Fascist *ventennio* dominated by the male-gendered avant-garde poetics of Futurism as well as by an equally masculine ambition to construct a theatre for the masses, I will speculate on the ways in which Ophelia survives as an erased or grotesque figure, before exploring the role played by a thwarted Ophelian subtext in Alba de Céspedes's novel *Dalla parte di lei* (1949).

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Ophelia; war; love; gender; Italian Futurist poetics; Fascist theatrical culture.

### "Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act"

Trying to assess the attractiveness, or conditions of survival, of a tragic, fragile heroine like Ophelia in the cluster of upturning events which revolutionized the context of Italian life in the first half of the twentieth century, in the realm of both politics and aesthetics, raises quite a few issues. One might start by quoting two entries from the outrageous "Futurist Man-

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ifesto" first published by Marinetti in French in *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909 and then reprinted the following month in his Italian journal *Poesia. Revue Internationale*:

9. We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying, and scorn for women.

10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academics of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice. (Marinetti 1972: 42)

What happens to theatre and what about Shakespeare, Hamlet, and Ophelia in the context of this celebration of war and in this totalizing war-like conjunction of art and action, aesthetics and sexual politics, provocatively fostered by Marinetti and his group of artists (poets, painters, playwrights) as a 'futurist' project for the new century?

To answer these questions in the space available for this paper is far from an easy task. However, if not to disentangle them, it can be useful to pose them as a preliminary argument, before dealing with the migration of the Ophelia theme from tragedy into the derisive poetry of variety theatre and then as a poetical and self-empowering, albeit submerged, subplot in Alba de Céspedes' novel *Dalla parte di lei* – "Her side of it", one might translate (Nerenberg 2000: 232) – , a novel in defence of women published in 1949, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and set in Rome in the years of war and Fascism.

In order to understand the status of a character such as that of Ophelia in those years, we must go back in time a little. The life of the theatrical Shakespeare in Italy began with the production of *Hamlet* in 1801. With *Othello* and *Lady Macbeth*, *Hamlet* was one of the three Shakespearean plays which featured in the nineteenth-century repertoire of the Italian actors, Gustavo Modena, Ernesto Rossi, Tommaso Salvini, Adelaide Ristori – the *mattatori* ['limelight stealers'], as they were called – who toured with their acclaimed Italian Shakespeare all over Europe, London included (not to mention North and South America), and who, with the *grand* pathos of their acting, contributed to establishing Shakespeare's 'tragic character'.

*Hamlet* continued to occupy a first-rate position in the Italian Shakespeare canon in the course of the twentieth century and during Fascism. A less sublime *Hamlet* domesticated by Ruggero Ruggeri, one of the outstanding interpreters of the bourgeois, sentimental drama, remained on stage from 1915 until 1933 (Livio 1989: 23), well through the violent, deconstructive aesthetics prompted by Marinetti's futurist theatre on the one hand, and a nation-based theatrical culture ushered in by the fascist *régime* on

the other, during the two decades which started with the 1922 March on Rome and culminated in the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

However, the Shakespearean tragic character, together with the tragic form in general, had paradoxically come to an end in the utterly tragic years which witnessed two worldwide conflicts. Indeed, in Italy, for reasons which I believe must be taken into account for the purpose of depicting my 'wartime Ophelia', the tragic form had been toned down, and not simply by the register of sentimental bourgeois drama. Historical dramatic forms, and Shakespeare with them, eagerly catalogued by the futurists under the label of "passéist theater" ("The Futurist Synthetic Theater" 1915, in Marinetti 1972: 124) were altogether distanced if not contrasted by the joint action of both the aggressive themes of a national epos and the avant-garde corrosive agency of irony and the grotesque. "Our Futurist theater jeers at Shakespeare", the futurists remarked, while conceptualizing their "synthetic deformations" – based on the "vital" and "muscular" energy of synthesis, dynamism, speed, actuality, simultaneity, improvisation, danger, the a-logical, the unreal ("THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF NOVELTY", in 1972: 126-7) – in terms of a compelling patriotic commitment of theatre and their art at the eve of the Great War: "As we await our much-prayed-for great war, we Futurists carry our violent antineutralist action from city square to university and back again, using our art to prepare Italian sensibility for the great hour of maximum danger. Italy must be fearless, eager, as swift and elastic as a fencer, as indifferent to blows as a boxer . . ." (123).

At the turn of the first decade of the twentieth century, as part of a poetics overtly inspired by the disruptive laughter of the variety theatre and aiming to "prostitute all classic art on the stage, performing for example all the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies, condensed and comically mixed up, in a single evening . . . – put Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Zacconi, Mayol, and Fregoli side by side on the stage" ("The Variety Theater" 1913, in 1972: 21), the futurist avant-garde came to fantasize a concise Shakespeare in one act. "Boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act", Marinetti advised (*ibid.*). He knew that the variety theatre had fulfilled and even outdone that indication, when the comedian Petrolini (whose *tournées* were box office events abroad, England included), produced his synthetic *Hamlet* in some fifty lines, performed (as the comedian recounts) for the first time at the Eden Theatre, Naples, in 1912, and created in collaboration with Libero Bovio, who also suggested the musical accompaniment of the funeral march from Errico Petrella's acclaimed opera, *Jone* (Petrolini 1936: 119-20), a circumstance evoked at l. 6 ("suono ad orecchio l'intera Ione" [I can play by ear the whole Jone]), where it also stands for a displacing rhyme, if not a *double-entendre* on its eponymous heroine. For all its brevity, Petrolini's miniaturized *Hamlet* made blatantly evident, "in the terms of the farcical and the absurd", we might say



borrowing from Alessandro Serpieri, “the epistemological checkmate” which is at the core of the play (1997: 10; see also Serpieri 1986: 183-91).

And Ophelia? She still features among its characters, but she is figured as if in the process of being erased or breaking into pieces in the way she is handed over from the realm of the *grand* tragedians (Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini) to that of the comedians (Petrolini in league with the Danish ill-fated “prence”, 2004: 59): thus epitomizing a dismissed ‘passéist’ and superfluous role in a triumph of dismantling nonsense and whimsical rhymes. Interestingly, Ophelia is made to rhyme with “celia” (“making fun/scoffing at”) – a term loved by Petrolini in its interrelations with death, and which he adopted to comment on the tragicomic quality of his art: *Un po’ per celia e un po’ per non morir* (1936):

Io sono il pallido prence danese,  
che parla solo, che veste a nero.  
Che si diverte nelle contese,  
che per diporto va al cimitero.  
Se giuoco a carte fo il solitario  
suono ad orecchio tutta la Jone.  
Per far qualcosa di ameno e gaio  
col babbo morto fo colazione.  
Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini  
stanchi di amare la bionda Ofelia  
forse sul serio o forse per celia  
mi han detto vattene, con Petrolini, dei salamini.  
(*Amleto*, 1-12; Petrolini 2004: 59)

[I am the pale Danish prince / the soliloquant in black rags, / who amuses himself with grave issues, / who finds sport in the graveyard. / If I play cards I do the solitaire / I can play by ear the entire Jone. / To enjoy myself in the gayest of ways / I have breakfast with my daddy who is dead. / Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini / fed up with loving the blonde Ophelia / perhaps seriously, perhaps for fun / told me to go with Petrolini, the fool comedian.]<sup>1</sup>

One might perceive the echo of the Shakespearean ‘nunnery scene’ in the way Petrolini authors this generic passage of Ophelia from the embrace of tragedy to that of the grotesque in ll. 9-12:

HAMLET.       Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . If thou dots marry, I’ll give thee this plague for thy dowry; be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian in this essay, if not attributed, are mine.

if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go – and quickly too. Farewell. (3.1.121-41)<sup>2</sup>

But Petrolini's shortened ventriloquized Hamlet conveys and sweeps away in one stroke a piece of the history of performance, traditional theatrical genres, and the tradition of romantic love, in the way he is exonerated – by the group of *grandi attori* – from his part as Ophelia's irresolute lover, thus enhancing to the extreme Ophelia's Shakespearean role as a tool in other people's game. Indeed, in Petrolini's re-adaptation of Hamlet's 'farewell' to Ophelia she is emptied of any residual agency. She is all in the flash of a caricatured puppet-like figure, conjured up solely to officiate sardonically her dismissal as the heroine of a private sentimental or tragic plot, namely her ultimate rehearsal as a void and vilified signifier in a male-controlled realm of aesthetics and in the story of a dismantling appropriation of Shakespeare. In this sense Petrolini's figuring out of Ophelia might well be one of those "flashes of revealing cynicism" and "emergent new sensibility", which Marinetti so appreciated in the variety theatre: an electrified antidote, for him, to "the contemporary theatre (verse, prose, and musical), . . . stupidly [vacillating] between historical reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism) and photographic reproduction of our daily life; a finicking, slow, analytic, and diluted theater worthy, all in all, of the age of the oil lamp" (Marinetti 1972: 116-17).

Undoubtedly, starting with the second decade of the century, when the iconoclastic futurist evenings (the so-called *serate*) were launched in Italian theatres, modernization and renewal in Italian culture were one with the aggressive futurist aesthetics as well as the prevailing empire-building discourse of the *régime* with which the futurist celebration of speed, machine, and war finally merged during the *ventennio*.

"Yes, our nerves demand war and despise women, because we fear supplicating arms that might encircle our knees on the morning of departure", Marinetti proclaimed ("Let's Murder the Moonshine" 1909, in Marinetti 1972: 46). And also (in his "Manifesto of Futurism" 1909): "We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath . . . is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samotrace*" (41).

It is not our concern (in the context of this article) that, for all the futurist speaking of a 'synthetic theatre', experiments with the modern concepts of speed and machine achieved full realization mainly in the visual arts. Suffice it to mention Balla's painting "Velocità astratta" [Abstract

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is quoted according to Shakespeare 1990.

speed] (1913), where the conjunction of speed and machine seems to embody the sweeping pace of a war machine.

What we are mainly concerned with bringing to the fore is that modernity in art was also a gendering business, a violent gender-coded re-articulation of the relationship between the sexes, which, as we see, was connected to “le mépris de la femme” [scorn for women, 1972: 72] or, as Marinetti took pains to better explain later in 1915, in “War, the World’s Only Hygiene”, to the downgrading, enslaving and paralyzing bourgeois Leitmotiv of love, from which literature – as well as a (male) modern subjectivity – awaited its deliverance:

This hatred, precisely, for the tyranny of *Amore* we expressed in a laconic phrase: “scorn for women”.

We scorn woman conceived as the sole ideal, the divine reservoir of *Amore*, the woman-poison, woman the tragic trinket, the fragile woman . . . .

We despise horrible, dragging *Amore* that hinders the march of man, preventing him from transcending his own humanity, from redoubling himself, from going beyond himself and becoming what we call *the multiplied man*. . . .

We are convinced that *Amore* – sentimentality and lechery – is the least natural thing in the world. There is nothing natural and important except coitus, whose purpose is the futurism of the species.

*Amore* – romantic, voluptuary obsession – is nothing but an invention of the poets, who gave it to humanity. . . . And it will be the poets who will take it away from humanity. (1972: 72)

## 1. The Love Issue

Intended by the futurist avant-garde as a degrading agent of the virile virtues of men, and addressed as a constitutive part of a campaign towards the forging of a “mechanical being”, with a “metallic” sensibility, or what was foretold as “the creation of a nonhuman type”, with no “moral suffering, goodness of heart, affection, and love” (Marinetti 1972: 90-3), and ready to face any challenge or risk – science, war, death –, the love issue, it is interesting to discover, enjoyed high currency during Fascism.

Quite unusually for the leader of a State, but not surprisingly for a leader well aware of the importance of theatre as a tool of mass communication and propaganda, Mussolini – he himself not a stranger to playwriting (see especially his play with Forzano, *Cesare*) – willingly ventured into the realm of aesthetics. Not only did he promote the much acclaimed international Volta Congress (Gordon Graig was among those who participated) in order to put forward his idea of “a theatre of the future, a modern theatre *of* and *for* the masses” (Schnapp 1993: 92), not only did he promote a series of

initiatives aimed at implementing a mass theatrical culture (Theatrical Saturdays, Thespian Cars, a disseminated network of amateur theatre companies, the so-called *filodrammatiche*, etc.), but he also entered more specific issues regarding contents and form such as the long engaged futurist attack on love, and the love triangle, as privileged literary subject-matters, which he likewise seemed to decidedly abhor: "That's enough with the notorious 'triangle' with which we have been pestered so far. The number of triangular options is to be considered exhausted. Do commit yourselves to giving dramatic form to collective passions, and then you will see the stalls packed with people".<sup>3</sup>

What we see here, I want to highlight, is that the synergy between the futurist avant-garde and Fascism is articulated by means of a shared sexual politics. In fact, the futurists had long maintained that the "tyrannical" centrality of *romance* (or "le clair de la lune"), with its related "rancid" sentimentality and slow narrative of the love triangle, was to be discarded as a residuary bequest of the bourgeois drama, or to be conceived of as merely incidental with respect to the more important present "tremors of the crowds": speed, machine, the colonial adventure, war ("Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights. The Pleasure of Being Boomed 1911-15", in Marinetti 1972: 113-15; see also Livio 1976: 45-6).

A rather isolated example of an experimental theatre of and for the masses called for by Mussolini was Blasetti's titanic open-air production of *I8 BL*, whose main character is the truck, *I8 BL*, which we see heroically bulldozing the enemy lines on the advertising poster (see Schnapp 1993: 89-125). After all, critics agree (Pedullà 1994: 211-25) that for all Mussolini's policy regarding a mass theatrical culture, there was no adequate production of theatrical scripts (or a proper Fascist theatre), in keeping with the kind of art for the present he forcefully advocated in his discourses to the artists: "it is necessary for the Italian authors, whatever their art and form of thought, to be true and profound interpreters of their time, which is that of the fascist revolution".<sup>4</sup> All in all, theatre continued to rely on classics or on melodrama.

<sup>3</sup> "Basta con il famigerato 'triangolo' che ci ha ossessionato finora. Il numero delle complicazioni triangolari è ormai esaurito. Fate che le passioni collettive abbiano espressione drammatica, e voi vedrete allora le platee affollarsi" (*Mussolini parla agli scrittori* 1932, qtd in Pedullà 1994: 211).

<sup>4</sup> "Occorre che gli autori italiani in qualsiasi forma d'arte o di pensiero si manifestino veramente e profondamente interpreti del nostro tempo, che è quello della rivoluzione fascista" (qtd in Pedullà 1994: 217). See also the increased efforts made by the Ministero della cultura popolare [Ministry of Popular Culture] to foster a theatre for the masses, and hence the writing of Italian theatrical scripts connected with the actuality of present times, which meant, "inspired by a conception of life which is proper to Fascism and to the ethics of Fascism" ("si ispira alla concezione della vita che è propria del Fascismo, si ispira alla morale del Fascismo", "Discussione sul teatro alla Camera" 1938, qtd in Pedullà 1994: 217).

But this prompts us to pose our initial cluster of questions as even more cogent. What about Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and the Ophelian theme, in a context in which theatre was so strongly conceptualized as a tool of cultural revolution and social formation, or simply chosen (to put it in the terms of contemporary lexicon) as the place *par excellence* in which “collective passions” and “tremors of the crowds” (Marinetti 1972: 113-15) could be triggered?

As a classic, Shakespeare had been an uninterrupted presence on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian stage, and continued to be so. *Hamlet* remained in the repertoire of such famous actors as Memo Benassi, Renzo Ricci, and others (see Bartalotta 1986), while also featuring successfully, if derisively, as the ill-fated “prince”, in Petrolini’s fifty-line parody. However, Shakespeare’s undiminished popularity in Italy between the two ‘Great’ wars, at a time when a nation-based theatrical culture was forcefully ushered in by the *régime*, was mainly linked to his Roman and Italian plays, increasingly exploited as a reservoir of national pride and Caesarean rhetoric. Indeed, the ‘universality’ of Shakespeare was revisited and appropriated through the ‘universality’ of Rome and *romanitas*, or more precisely through such defiant and virile values as the will to power; a drive significantly coincident, as it appears to me, with the Nietzschean heroic individualism prompted by the futurist programme.

A case in point is Giuseppe De Lorenzo’s edition of *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* dated 1924, hitherto surprisingly ignored by criticism on the reception of Shakespeare in Italy in those years. In line with a few other Shakespeareans (see mainly Piero Rebora), he strongly contributed – via Shakespeare – to the rhetoric of the universality of Rome created in Fascist discourse as part of a recovered sense of inheritance and nationhood, not to mention the related growing imperialist claim of the *régime*. For Shakespeare, De Lorenzo asserted in his introduction, “Rome represents and almost summarizes the moral order of the world”. And still: “For Shakespeare . . . all that is beautiful and great is Roman; one can truly say that the spirit of ancient Rome appeared to him as the highest manifestation of humanity on earth”.<sup>5</sup> De Lorenzo did not miss the opportunity to finalize to this end *Cymbeline*’s westward flight of the Roman eagle, whose Shakespearean *translatio imperii* intention he repurposed for the benefit of a phallic image of Rome (De Lorenzo 1924: x):

A questa Roma, la più fulgida espressione della spiritale essenza dell’universo, Shakespeare s’inchinò, riverente e amante, a segno tale, che prima

<sup>5</sup> “Roma rappresenta e riassume quasi in sé l’ordine morale del mondo”. “Per Shakespeare veramente si può dire che, che tutto ciò che è bello e grande, egli è romano ancora; e che a lui lo spirito di Roma antica è apparso come la più alta manifestazione dell’umanità sulla terra” (De Lorenzo 1924: x, xi).

di ritirarsi dall'arte, nella penultima sua opera, il *Cimbelino*, volle celebrare un'auspicata alleanza tra la Britannia e Roma, con la splendida visione del sole occiduo britannico, nei cui raggi, . . . penetra e s'immerge col suo superbo volo possente l'aquila romana.

[To this Rome, the most luminous expression of the spiritual essence of the universe, Shakespeare reverently and amorously bowed, so much so that before retiring as an artist, in his penultimate work, *Cymbeline*, he advisedly celebrated a longed-for alliance between Britain and Rome, by means of the magnificent vision of the British setting sun, in whose radiance the Roman eagle penetrates and dips into in his proud and powerful flight].

But what is even more important to notice is that the greatness Shakespeare attributed to Julius Caesar with his verses "Death makes no conquest of this conqueror: / for now he lives in fame, though not in life" (*Richard III*, 3.1.87-8, qtd in De Lorenzo 1924: xi) is appropriated to construct the mythology of Italy, as that of a nation forever capable of picking itself up from the floor of the ruins of fratricidal strife and marching anew as a disciplined, close-knit army of soldiers to reaffirm its greatness in the spirit of Rome: "the ironed shoes of [those young soldiers] had something rabid about them",<sup>6</sup> De Lorenzo writes, supporting and interspersing his argument with a long quotation from an Italian novel by Panzini (*Il mondo è rotondo*, 1920), "but soaring over that row of soldiers a winged voice seemed to say: Caesar, Caesar, the soldiers of Italy are passing".<sup>7</sup>

What ensues is the celebration of a presumed Shakespearean model of Romanness and superior humanity crystallized in the patrician Roman self-killing; an exemplar masculine capacity to decide of one's life which is also voiced, as De Lorenzo reminds us, in *Hamlet* by Horatio, when he says, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.321), and which in the context of his introduction to Shakespeare's two tragedies is proposed to elicit contemporary patriotic heroism.

## 2. Ophelia in the Prati Neighbourhood, Rome

It is as part of this shared patriotic endeavour that the "young modern male" was also figured as "gaily" pointing a revolver against "the grand romantic Moonshine", the marshalling metaphoric representation of "the disease of *Amore*" in Marinetti's "War, the Only World's Only Hygiene" (1972: 93). Is there a way for a female Ophelia-like character to survive in this to-

<sup>6</sup> "[Le] scarpe ferrate avevano un non so che di rabido" (De Lorenzo 1924: xv).

<sup>7</sup> "[M]a sopra quella fila pareva levarsi una voce alata che diceva: Cesare, Cesare, passano i soldati d'Italia" (De Lorenzo 1924: xv).

talizing masculine (or patriarchal) script? And what is left of her private subjugated lot, if not of her sentimental plot?

In this second part of my essay I would like to speculate on the way in which the evocativeness of the Ophelian imagery in Alba de Céspedes's *Dalla parte di lei* is exploited, against the grain, to raise questions concerning women's thwarted stories, and more specifically a poetics, as well as a politics and a policing, of female language.

Alba de Céspedes (1911-97), who has only recently started to enjoy the appreciation she deserves among Italian critics (see Zancan 2005; De Crescenzo 2015), was one of the most translated Italian authors in her time, a figure of cultural resistance during and beyond Fascism, and a precursor of themes cherished by feminist thought and practice. Between 1943 and 1944, she participated in the antifascist radio programme "Italia combatte" ["Italy fights"], broadcasting from Radio Bari, from an area already liberated by the Allies, to Central and Northern Italy, which were still occupied by the Nazi army. For the occasion Alba adopted the pseudonym of "Clorinda", the woman warrior of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. "I am your Clorinda . . . Your Clorinda is calling" ("Sono la vostra Clorinda . . . vi parla la vostra Clorinda"). In a sense she continued to talk to those who were still trapped in the occupied zone when, soon after the war, in liberated Italy, she wrote on behalf of Ophelia / Juliet / Desdemona / Eleonora / Alessandra in *Dalla parte di lei*, perhaps looking ahead at a different futurist scenario, freed from all violence, whether that be between countries, sexes, affections, or in *ars amandi*.

The novel was written between 1945 and 1948 and published in 1949. But a second abridged edition of it was published in 1994, seemingly based on the author's own cuts amounting to more than a hundred pages, and actually corresponding to the abridged English edition published in New York in 1952 with the title *The Best of Husbands*. Surprisingly, what is dropped out among other things in this second edition is most of the Ophelian motif: which survives as if under the sign of a double erasure, a doubly hindered story which is what this article is all about. For obvious reasons the edition I am using is the 1949 one, even though I quote alternatively from the approved 1952 American translation when the original text remains untouched.<sup>8</sup>

There is a call for translation, interpretation, and rewriting of Ophelia's "half-sense" (4.5.7), in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection", 7-9), which is one with the dangerous space opened by mad Ophelia's disseminative poetics, or else by her disquieting language of flowers; an invita-

<sup>8</sup> The translation of the quotations from the 1949 edition is mine.



tion to “botch up” her secret meaning (“They aim at it, and botch the words up fit to their own thoughts”, 4.5.9-10) which, in my view, represents the disturbing analogue of Hamlet’s mandate to Horatio to report his “cause aright / To the unsatisfied” (5.2.343-4). There is a desire to “botch up”, to heal and make good Ophelia’s fragmented speech in later women’s *re-collection* of her story (see Del Sapio Garbero 2002), as well as a drive to make sense of Gertrude’s ‘sin’ of adultery within the frame of a revisited mother-daughter plot. In the similar masculine context of a Bolshevik/Modernist Russia, Marina Tsvetaeva reunites Ophelia’s voice to her own poetical *persona* and makes her speak on behalf of Gertrude, as her indignant advocate (see the poems “Ophelia. In Defence of Gertrude”, “Ophelia to Hamlet”, “Hamlet’s Dialogue with His Conscience”). This is also what happens in Alba de Céspedes’s novel *Dalla parte di lei*, a story set in Rome in the years going from the late thirties – from pre-war Fascist Italy, to the reorganization of a free parliamentary life in 1945; that is, in the years of a war which evolved, in its later phase, into a war of resistance against Fascism and the Nazi occupation.

I purport to show how Ophelia’s depreciated role as the heroine of sentimental drama in de Céspedes’s times undergoes a re-signification in the prose and everyday life context of her novel, which turns into an empowering transgression of boundaries: the law of language, a normative practice of love, the jurisdiction of truth. In fact, the novel is vibrant with the story of a protagonist who finds in Shakespeare’s tragic heroines, and mostly in Ophelia’s tragic love, a model for a peculiarly female form of unheeded resistance not only against the shallowness of women’s everyday life during Fascism, but also against the patriarchal culture as such.

On opening de Céspedes’s novel, one is amazed to see that its first pages and the grey apartment house in Prati neighbourhood, Rome, where Alessandra, the protagonist (and implied narrator), lives, are teeming with women finding in romance, often of an adulterous kind, and no matter if in some cases degrading, the only identitarian paradigm available to them. Indeed, romance and romance storytelling fill the void of their life, as if to offer, in the way it is handled by the author, an intentional contrastive view of the futurist and *régime* argument on this topic – the other side, or ‘the women’s side of it’.

War and death are not absent in this novel but, through the Ophelian suicidal imagery, they are refocused from a different perspective. For, even when Fascism was defeated and the war ended with the liberation of the country by the Allied Forces, the death toll remained high. In *Il Messaggero*, the paper where the novelist Alba de Céspedes had started a career as a journalist in the Thirties, suicides of both sexes were reported as a daily occurrence. Women took their lives for love, a betrayed or opposed

love, or to escape a grim conjugal bond. Many of them killed themselves by gulping down – or melting into Ophelia's 'element', a liquid, a vortex or gush turned evil – chlorine bleach, petrol, ink, water, blood. Many of them drowned themselves in the Tiber in Rome.

There is an Ophelia-like drowned woman in de Céspedes's novel *Dalla parte di lei*. This is Alessandra's mother, Eleonora, thus named – after Ibsen's famous heroine – by Alessandra's grandmother, an actress who had renounced the stage for the family, and from whom she has also inherited a highly symbolic box with the theatrical garments of Juliet, Desdemona, and Ophelia. The life of Alessandra's mother is suffused from the start with colours the protagonist wants to reverberate on her own. The aura of a long-ing literary figure that Eleonora is given in the novel (Ibsen's Nora, Shakespeare's heroines, and mostly Ophelia as a representation of tragic unfulfilled desire), is the way through which Alessandra, the daughter, forcefully validates a female lineage which escapes the confinement of the feminine within the maternal reproductive function assigned to it by the patriarchy; a function which in Irigaray's terms "de/subjectivizes" women (see 1991: 34-46), in so far as they are denied a symbolic identitarian system of their own, and which was reinforced even more in Italy during Fascism. This is clearly evidenced in the depersonalizing role women were called upon to play in a patriotic policy of population increase, even without considering the ideology which forced upon them the requirement of continually posing before the strongly masculine gaze of that culture.

So, what about Eleonora, and why Ophelia? A piano teacher who contributes with her private lessons to the poor budget of her shabby middle-class family, a person in love with literature, art, and love, Alessandra's mother is the poetic creature of an ill-matched couple, her father depicted as prosaic and unintellectual. Like all the men in the huge grey apartment house in Prati where they live, he is away most of the day, and not only during office hours. This strengthens an exclusive mother-daughter bond (see Torriglia 2000) and a silent sense of intimacy for Alessandra with the other women of the neighbourhood, during those moments when the jurisdictional gaze of men wanes and they can abandon their 'good' pose. Hers is an intimacy with their solitude and prohibited discontent ("Yes, we were a gentle and unfortunate race", de Céspedes 1952: 31), but also with their secret loves whose tales, to Alessandra's eyes, defy anonymity and enrich them with a narrative of their own.

Still, it was outrageous in a novel published in 1949 Italy, when women (by the Fascist penal code) could still be jailed for adultery, that the protagonist might side unconditionally with her mother when she falls in love with Hervey Pierce, an artist of gentle breeding. Her cherishing an adulterous feeling does not disqualify her as a suitable mother. Quite the opposite.

She is given a sacral aura. She is a mystic, a saint. "The sight of my mother in love was the sweetest I had ever seen" (1952: 51). When her mother realizes there is nothing in her poor wardrobe for her momentous concert at Villa Peirce, the adolescent Alessandra euphorically presides over the making of a new dress from the veils preserved in her grandmother's box. "We must make my mother a dress with the veils of Ophelia", she says to their friends Fulvia and Lydia (52); an endeavour which turns out to be the staging of a joyful bridal rite. And when her mother, regretting that she cannot take her daughter with her, drowns herself in the Tiber, she defiantly appropriates both the mourning space and the *post mortem* monumentalizing intention which in Shakespeare's play are litigiously held by Hamlet and Laertes. In a burial with maimed rites as in Shakespeare, but which, in my view, is a radical reworking of the cemetery scene, she visualizes one's gender location as that of an army in front of another, thus pointing at a war within the second Great War which was approaching, and which is doomed to go on unperceived by men, were it not for the erratic intermittence of disturbing crime news.

Since my mother had taken her own life she could not be admitted to the basilica itself. The priest came out in black vestments and eyed us half with compassion and half with suspicion, perhaps because he knew my mother had thrown herself into the river. . . . I found myself between Lydia and Fulvia, for we had instinctively fallen into two separate groups, of men and of women . . . Indifferent to what [the priest] was saying, I stared at the group of men on the other side of the coffin. . . . I stared intensely at [them] and had an urge to tell them to go away and leave us alone. We were divided like two armies preparing to join combat, and between us, in the coffin, lay the body of one of our dead.

My mother was buried in unconsecrated ground; but to me her presence made it holy. The gravediggers draped the blanket of roses over the coffin, tucking it in all around. And my father looked on without showing anger or scorn; his jurisdiction over her was finished. (96-7)

What is most interesting in de Céspedes's novel, I argue, is that the author presents us with a narrative which stealthily patches together in the single character of the innocently adulterous Eleonora the traits of Gertrude and Ophelia. As in Marina Tsvetaeva's poem "Ophelia. In Defence of Gertrude" (1923), the two figures are no longer aligned on the basis of a prohibited female knowledge, the one the mirror of the other's guilt or wretchedness, but on the basis of a defence of passion as opposed to a misogynistic idea of chastity:

Prince Hamlet, you defile the Queen's  
Womb. Enough. A virgin cannot

Judge passion. Don't you know Phaedra  
 Was more guilty, yet men sing of her,  
 And will go on singing. You with your blend  
 Of chalk and rot, you bony  
 Scandalmonger, how can you ever  
 Understand a fever in the blood?  
 (Tsvetaeva 1984: ll. 5-12)

By making her Ophelia take the field in defence of Gertrude, Tsvetaeva forcefully enacts in her poems the political project later advocated by Irigaray of recognizing “the woman in every mother” (1991: 42). Alba de Céspedes never hints overtly at Gertrude in her novel, but her protagonist similarly releases the banned desire of a mother figure, thus constructing the maternal not as a disabling mirror of guilt, or abjection, one might say borrowing from Kristeva (1980), but as a site of resistance and as an engendering matrix of an alternative female iconography: “In truth, she had brought me to the world with our talks near the window, while she read me poetry with her soft voice, told me fables, introduced me to the love tragedies’ heroines”.<sup>9</sup>

Through the oppositional function assigned in this way to Shakespeare’s tragic heroines, the protagonist of *Dalla parte di lei* passionately claims for her mother the role of a language-giving figure, not just a dispenser of life but of signs – like the daisies the mother scatters in the Tiber, in Ophelia-like manner, a few days before drowning in it – and which is the means for the daughter to conceptualize her life and desires differently, however destructive all that may be in the censoring patriarchal culture of the *ré-gime* and of the post-war period.

What I have not said so far, and what is kept secret from the reader until the last of the 549 pages that make up the novel (in its first 1949 edition) is that Alessandra’s life story is born out of a memoir she has written in prison after she has killed her much loved husband, the ‘best’ of husbands, with the intention of setting her “cause aright” (*Hamlet*, 5.2.343) in front of a jury, obviously a wholly male one in the historical context of the novel, but actually with the intention of disputing, as Tsvetaeva had also done with *Hamlet*, men’s jurisdiction over truth and over her truth as a woman. “In my opinion no man has the right to judge a woman without knowing of what totally different stuff she is made. Why should a jury composed entirely of men decide whether or not she is guilty?” (de Céspedes 1952: 55), she says in the course of the novel, when the reader does not yet know she is referring to a real jury.

<sup>9</sup> “In verità ella m’aveva dato la vita coi nostri colloqui accanto alla finestra, con la sua voce morbida che leggeva le poesie, raccontava le favole, mi presentava le eroine delle tragedie d’amore” (de Céspedes 1949: 116).

Shall we imagine a suspicious Horatio-like figure reading Alessandra's improbable appeal or perhaps, hope for more persevering interpreters (than those imagined by Shakespeare in Act 4, scene 5) in 'botching up' a meaning out of a woman's story? For, Alessandra's story is an elusive story, as she takes pains to underline at the end of it, a story which could be collected only by someone willing to piece it together, from as a slow, digressive, and decentring report as the life of a woman is:

Now that I am in prison, waiting for my lawyer to present an appeal, I want to tell the whole tragic story from my point of view. I don't know if the judge of the higher court will have time to read my account. It is a long one, I admit – as long, hour by hour and day by day, as the life of a woman. Seldom can one pick out one simple cause for her sudden rebellion. (de Céspedes 1952: 342)

A complete contrast to, one might think, the conciseness required by the languages of both law and art in those times.

Alba de Céspedes wrote her novel in the aftermath of Fascist Italy, and before the higher court Alessandra has no extenuating circumstance to allege as a justification, on her behalf (*Dalla parte di lei*), if not the ordinary disseminated circumstances of a woman's life, a dissemination well represented in Ophelia's unshaped language of flowers in the mad scene.

Alessandra cannot give us her truth, 'her side of it', by pithily framing her story, according to the aesthetics of the futurist avant-garde. She can only provide a very long account in the confessional mode, in which the retrospective narrative of her mother's unique legacy ("My story was all in the box where my mother jealously kept Juliet's and Desdemona's veils")<sup>10</sup> is interwoven with the detailed narrative of the events subsequent to her mother's death: her university studies and her part-time job as a secretary, her increasing awareness of the existence of a differently policed discontentment, of other *scontenti* [discontents] who in a whisper are called 'communists' and who are occasionally arrested, her falling in love with Francesco, an academic and an opponent of the *régime*, his fascination with the "young girl whose mother had killed herself for love" (1952: 334), their marriage, his imprisonment, her decision to side (like a courageous Desdemona) with her husband's cause in the Resistance during his absence, her hardships during the war, Francesco's return home after the defeat of Fascism, her having to compete with politics for Francesco's love, the sense of having been betrayed in the sacral idea of love she has inherited from her mother, the endless wall of Francesco's back every night, her mute in-

<sup>10</sup> "La mia storia era nella scatola dove la mamma conservava gelosamente i veli di Giulietta e di Desdemona" (1949: 210).

vocation every night, her deluded quest for absoluteness, and the moment she empties the revolver into his back, he who was the 'best' of husbands. Is such a shot in de Céspedes's novel harking back to the futurist revolver pointed at the "romantic Moonshine" (Marinetti 1972: 93)? Be that as it may, Ophelia has stopped killing herself, as the Ophelia imagined by Heiner Müller in *Hamletmaschine* (1984).

What remains to be said is that Alessandra's gesture has been obsessively fantasized in the previous pages as a combat between the poetical/pictorial image of her mother, "graciously posing" ("graziosamente atteggiata", 1949: 541), wavering on her green bed from beneath the transparent water, as in Millais's painting of Ophelia, and that of herself as an unsatiated mad dog living on scraps of food, a *hydrophobic* animal antagonist to Ophelia's element, water. "I no longer felt the river run like a fluid bond between my mother and me",<sup>11</sup> she obliquely warns pages earlier at the first dawning of delusion, as if to say that her unanswered craving self, although empowered by her mother's Shakespearean identifying images, can no longer be contained by them. Alba de Céspedes's heroine is going to get rid of her mother's poetical if tragic box.

In fact, while bringing to light Ophelia's distress, thus complementing with a gender perspective and in yet another, different geography her dangerous "half-sense", de Céspedes renounces, with a final unexpected flick of the tail, the beauty of her suicidal watery image, thus reopening the question of both the Shakespearean maternal legacy and of Ophelia's difficult demand for understanding.

But this other surfacing plot can be fully accessible only to readers who are lucky enough to get hold of the rare 1949 edition of the novel where it can be read, as we have argued in this article, as a crucial Shakespearean intertextual trace; the auratic tragic heroine's narrative which envelops and nurses the feminine trope of suicide it unexpectedly subverts, and which – in conjunction with the problematized maternal legacy – structurally and dramatically underpins the author's poetics in this novel, and the whole content of the story. Curiously enough Alba de Céspedes herself decided to partly expunge it from the abridged edition she prepared for the American publisher with the title *The Best of Husbands* (1952), while working out similar cuts on the original 1949 copy later discovered by Mondadori and used for the 1994 edition.

Was Alba de Céspedes yielding to Emilio Cecchi's criticism who, on its first appearance, had appreciated the novel, but with one important exception regarding precisely the protagonist, whom he considered a self-my-

<sup>11</sup> "Non sentivo più il fiume scorrere come un fluido legame tra mia madre e me" (1949: 323).



thologizing and fatiguing “sentimentale” [sentimentalist]? (See Ghilardi 2005: 109). Cecchi was far from sharing the set of issues the futurists campaigned under the banners “mépris de la femme”, and “let’s murder the moonshine”, but he was undoubtedly using an overcharged, male censoring term when considered in the light of his wartime masculine poetics. Even more curiously, however, is the fact that so far women’s criticism (see Torriglia 2000; Åkerström 2004), has ignored, at least to my knowledge, the novel’s oppositional Shakespearean silver thread and the reverberating role it plays on its themes and symbolism – the love issue, the love triangle, the death by water, the identifying mother-daughter bond – eventually welcoming the novel’s later abridgements under the auspices of the stylistic law of restraint and an achieved mature writing (Ghilardi 2005: 106-23).

Avoiding death in the twentieth-century Italian wartime context was not easy for Shakespeare’s Ophelia. In the revolutionized framework of literary genres and gender roles brought about by diverse forms of modernisms, and most aggressively by the futurists’ poetics, Ophelia seems to succumb with her proverbial evanescent and uninfluential plot. Yet she resists with her Otherness, her disquieting and dangerous “half-sense”, her unexhausted demand for understanding, which invites and defies the law of language, the jurisdiction of truth, and rearticulates her appeal as she migrates across different geographies and a multiplicity of (genre) boundaries: tragedy, poetry, variety theatre, romance, novel.

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## Italian Alternative Shakespeares. Carmelo Bene's Appropriation of *Hamlet*

### Abstract

Carmelo Bene, one of the leading 'alternative' and avant-garde Italian actors and directors, produced his first *Hamlet* in 1962, with a revival at the Spoleto Festival two years later. In 1967 Bene produced *Hamlet o le conseguenze della pietà filiale* [*Hamlet; or, the consequences of filial piety*] from and by William Shakespeare. In 1973 Bene produced a film from his first production (*Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]). In 1975 he performed another *Hamlet*, a sort of conflation of Shakespeare, Laforgue, and himself. The performance was adapted for television in 1975. I will analyse these two productions starting from the script and the videos. After having performed other plays 'from' Shakespeare, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, Bene came back to *Hamlet* in the Eighties, producing his own *Hamlet*, both from Laforgue and Shakespeare. It became a film with the title of *Homelette for Hamlet*. In the Nineties, Bene wrote another *Hamlet*, whose script was published in his complete dramatic works. This article will take into consideration this 'strange encounter' with Shakespeare, made of a sort of love and hatred relationship. Bene himself claims that the only way to stage Shakespeare is to rewrite it. The process of rewriting and adaptation will be studied in the article, together with a close analysis of Bene's scripts and critical essays on Shakespeare.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Carmelo Bene; rewriting; appropriation

### Prologue

In contemporary theatre, as in culture at large, the classics are updated, modernized, in order to free them from a static and inviolable literary tradition, which has been appointed (chosen as) *the* simulacrum of Western culture. The creative act, T.S. Eliot suggests, becomes a critical act as:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (1953: 15)

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The twentieth century, particularly the second half, witnesses many revisings and rewritings of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>1</sup> Revising Shakespeare is often a reading, a re-reading or a mis-reading. It is characterized by an appropriation of the Shakespearean text, hence the original is adapted, re-contextualized to the new contemporary sensibility. The rewriting is, strictly speaking, a transformation either within the same genre or from a different genre, which interprets the text from an ideological standpoint. The rewriting transforms the text and it is based on invention. The adaptation, on the contrary, does not modify the original meaning of the work, as it happens with the real rewriting. Cohn suggests that the "adaptation" is characterized by "substantial cuts of scenes, speeches, and speech assignments: much alteration of language; and at least one and usually several important (or scene-length) additions" (1976: 3); on the contrary, in what she defines as "transformation", it is the invention that prevails, and the characters "are often simplified or trundled through new events, with the ending scrapped" (4). These definitions are hardly applicable to texts such as Charles Marowitz's collages (1978), or Howard Brenton's *Measure for Measure* (1972), where the original text is maintained with cuts and additions, and where the transformation is the starting point. A text could be composed entirely of fragments of the original, but it is necessarily neither an adaptation nor a transformation (rewriting).<sup>2</sup>

Among the many examples of ideological rewritings of Shakespeare, one could quote Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), from *Richard III*, and *Coriolanus* (1955) or Edward Bond's *Lear* (1972) and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987) from *King Lear*. Re-readings, or better appropriations, are first of all musicals, such as George Abbott's *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938) from *The Comedy of Errors*; George Sidney's *Kiss me Kate* (1954), with Cole Porter's music, from *The Taming of the Shrew*; Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the most recent *The Enchanted Island* (2012) by Jeremy Sams, a baroque pastiche from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Among the most significant re-writings are to be mentioned those which update and modernize the Shakespearean text, such as Charles Marowitz's plays (*Hamlet*, 1963/65; *Macbeth*, 1970; *The Shrew*, 1972; *Othello*, 1973; *Variations on the Merchant of Venice*, 1977); those which try to put the text in its historical context (Arnold Wesker's *Shylock*, 1976/90; John Barton's and Peter Hall's *The War of the Roses*, 1963, which gathers the first tetralogy,

<sup>1</sup> For a list of Shakespearean adaptations, rewritings, and localizations, see Fischlin and Fortier 2000; Scarlini 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Christopher Hampton's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses. An Adaptation from Laclos* (1985) is not a rewriting only because of the invention of the last scene, but because the playwright moves the story near to the French revolution, making Merteuil's punishment coincide with that of her social class, which will be swept away by the Revolution (Cioni 1999). On adaptation, rewriting, and localization, see also Tuck Rozett 1994; Massai 2005; Hutcheon 2006.

*Henry VI parts 1, 2, and 3*, and *Richard III*); those which de-historicize it (all the musicals mentioned above, and Eugene Ionesco's *The King is Dead*, 1963, from *Richard II*). The rewriting often rises as a contraposition (ideological, critical, historical) to another text, as its revisitation, or merely as a free creation departing from a source, a hypotext, considered more as a pretext than a pre-text.

## 1. Readings and Misreadings of *Hamlet*: The Case of Carmelo Bene

Io sono già un classico perché vivo nell'eternità,  
sono eternamente vivo.<sup>3</sup>

all reading is misreading . . .  
to live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by the crucial  
act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.<sup>4</sup>

Carmelo Bene produced his first *Hamlet* in 1962, with a revival at the Spoleto Festival two years later. In 1967 Bene staged *Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale* [*Hamlet, or the consequences of filial piety*] by and after William Shakespeare. In 1973 he produced a film from his first production (*Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]). In 1974 he performed another *Hamlet*, a sort of conflation of Shakespeare, Laforgue, and himself. In the same year, he adapted his *Hamlets* for television. The theatre productions are completely autonomous, as the TV adaptation was specifically thought for television.

After having performed other plays 'from' Shakespeare, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, Bene went back to *Hamlet* in the Eighties, producing his own *Hamlet*, from Laforgue and Shakespeare. It became a TV film with the title of *Homelette for Hamlet* (1987). In the Nineties Bene wrote another *Hamlet*, titled *Hamlet Suite*, a collage version from Laforgue, whose script was published in his complete dramatic works (1995).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Bene, qtd in Capitini (2014: 51). [I am already a classic because I leave in the eternity, I am eternally alive]. All the translations from Italian are mine.

<sup>4</sup> I use misreading after Harold Bloom (1975: 19). This definition is perfect for Carmelo Bene's theatre and drama. Bene grafts his theatre onto Shakespeare's canon with that anxiety suggested by Bloom. See also Fink (1990: 171-83).

<sup>5</sup> Theatre: *Amleto*, Rome, Teatro Laboratorio (1962); *Amleto*, Spoleto Festival (1964); *Basta, con un "Vi amo" mi ero quasi promesso. Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale, da e di Shakespeare e Jules Laforgue*, Rome, Teatro Arlecchino (1965); *Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale, da Jules Laforgue secondo Carmelo Bene*, Rome, Teatro Beat (1967); *Amleto di Carmelo Bene (da Shakespeare e Laforgue)*, Prato, Teatro Metastasio (1974); *Homelette for Hamlet, operetta inqualificabile da J. Laforgue*, Bari, Teatro Piccinini (1987); *Hamlet Suite. Spettacolo concerto da J. Laforgue*, Verona, Festival Shakespeareiano, Teatro Romano (1994). Cinema: *Un Amleto di meno* (1973); TV: *Amleto di Carmelo Bene, da Shakespeare a Laforgue* (1974); *Homelette for Hamlet, operetta inqualificabile da J. Laforgue* (1987); Radio: *Amleto da Shakespeare* (1974); CD: *Hamlet Suite* (1994).

Carmelo Bene's 'strange encounters' with Hamlet (the character) and *Hamlet* (the play) cover all his career. It is an 'encounter' where love and hatred for Shakespeare clash one against the other:

Dall'*Hamlet*, *Hommelette*, all'*Hamlet suite* . . . , l'operetta del principe artioide è il refrain delle vite che ho svissuto. La frequentazione assidua, persecutoria del bell'argomento (cinque esecuzioni sceniche sempre cangianti – '61, '67, '74, '87, '94 . . . –, un film ('72'), due diversissime edizioni televisive e registrazioni radiofoniche, audiocassette e compact-disc) mi "definisce" *Amleto* del *novecento*. (Bene 1995: 1351)

[From *Hamlet*, *Homelette*, to *Hamlet Suite* . . . , the operetta of the artsy prince is the refrain of the lives I have mis-lived. The constant and persecutory frequentation of this wonderful topic (five ever-changing performances – 1961, 1967, 1974, 1987, 1994 . . . –, a film (1972), two amusing TV and radio versions, audiocassettes and CD) 'defines me' as the *Hamlet* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.]

In his reading of the play, Carmelo Bene wipes out the rhetorical complexity of *Hamlet*, focusing on the signifier through a deconstruction procedure which affects all the aspects of the play: psychological, rhetorical, structural, and theatrical. "In *One Hamlet Less*, it's the thinking that has been rejected. I have 'disannoyed' Hamlet with the tragedy of thought. The refusal and the conscience of life are necessary".<sup>6</sup> Bene's *Hamlet* is a baroque reading of the play, where every element, from the chromaticity to the light and from the film camera to the use of the voice, does not unravel as the result of a logical and dramatic procedure, but through a process of addition/subtraction. This process will be driven to the extremes in his *Richard III* (1995: 755-831) where "what is amputated, what is subtracted, is the whole royal and princely system" of the play, and where "only Richard III and the women are retained" (Deleuze 1993: 205).

<sup>6</sup> "Dans *Un Hamlet de moins*, c'est la pensée qui est refusée. J'ai 'désammerdé' Hamlet de la tragédie de la pensée. Il faut le refus, la conscience du vide" (1976: 5).

## 2. *Un Amleto di meno* (1973)<sup>7</sup>

The 1973 film *Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]<sup>8</sup> is a clear example of Carmelo Bene's post-modern approach to *Hamlet*. The original play suffers a process of amputation, subtraction, and addition. Shakespeare's text is conflated with Laforgue's morality, in a performance where music, mimicry, and setting form an ensemble characterized by a pastiche, which is the triumph of postmodern.

The film mixes up different genres and is partly more televisual than cinematic. Carmelo Bene's starting point is the impossibility of translating the theatrical language and the theatrical performance into other audio and/or aural forms, such as television, cinema, radio. In one of his provocative statements he argues that:

Visto che in teatro si fa della cattiva televisione e in cinema si fa del cattivo teatro e della cattiva televisione insieme, allora si scende a vedere che cos'è veramente la televisione. (Bene 1978: 161)

[Since there is bad television in the theatre, bad theatre and bad television in the cinema, and worse theatre and worse cinema on television, it's time to see what television really means.]

Both the film and the TV adaptation are at the same time televisual and cinematic. Once again in a provocative way, Bene argues that "big or small screens do not exist. Only great and small minds exist".<sup>9</sup>

The film was successfully presented at Cannes Film Festival in 1973. As Roberto Trovato (Baiardo and Trovato 1996: 55) suggests, the film can be divided into four parts: the first three parts utilize scenes from act 1, 2, and 3 of Shakespeare; the last part focuses on Claudius's and Laertes's scene (4.8) and on Yorick's scene (5.1). The TV adaptation follows the same scheme, it uses partly the same costumes, but the set is less baroque, with a particular

<sup>7</sup> The film was written and directed by Carmelo Bene. Scenery, costumes, and music by Carmelo Bene; with Carmelo Bene (Hamlet), Lydia Mancinelli (Kate), Isabella Russo (Ofelia), Franco Leo (Orazio), Luciana Cante (Gertrude), Alfredo Vincenti (Claudio), Luigi Mezzanotte (Laerte), Pippo Tumminelli (Polonio). The TV adaptation, titled *Amleto di Carmelo Bene (da Shakespeare a Laforgue)* [*Carmelo Bene's Hamlet (from Shakespeare to Laforgue)*], was broadcast by RAI2 in 1978. It is six minutes shorter than the film.

<sup>8</sup> The script of the film was published in French in *L'avant-scene cinema* (1976). All the quotations from the film have been translated from the French script. The script reflects the film before the final cut and differs, sometimes substantially, from it. The script has been checked with the film and integrated when needed.

<sup>9</sup> "Non esistono grandi e piccoli schermi, esistono grandi e piccoli cervelli" (Bene 1978: 165). In Italian "grande schermo" stands for cinema, "small screen" for television.

use of black and white that can be seen properly taking off the colour from the TV set. As Adriano Aprà (1995: 162) has noted, the bodies of the actors come out from the absolute white, whereas the spotlight makes the faces of the actors come out from the black background.

The film opens on a seashore, reminiscent of Laforgue's actors arriving by the sea:<sup>10</sup>

Ah! les voici.

A gauche, sur les berges d'Elseneur, il aperçoit (qui n'a entendu parler de ses étonnants yeux d'hirondelle de mer?) un attroupement qui ne peut être que ces comédiens.

Le passeur dans son large bachot les embarquait; un roquet aboyait à ces oripeaux; un gamin s'était arrêté de faire des ricochets. (Laforgue 1894: 7)

["Ah, here they come." To the left, on the shores of Elsinore, he sees – and who has not heard of those marvelous sea-gull eyes? – a rowdy group which must unmistakably be the players. The Ferryman takes them into his big boats; a cur yaps at their faded finery; an urchin stops skipping stones across the water. (Laforgue 1956: 108)]

Then the camera moves towards the queen and the king:

*Sur un fond de vaguelettes qui avancent doucement sur un rivage marin, les premiers mots du générique: Un film de Carmelo Bene. Une couronne mortuaire dans l'obscurité. Hamlet hoche la tête. Sortant d'une zone noire, éclairée par une lumière verte phosphorescente, la reine Gertrude est en train de se faire chevaucher par le vieux roi Hamlet. L'action est vue de plus près.* (Bene 1976: 7)

*[In the background a choppy sea is lapping gently the shore. Credits: A film by Carmelo Bene. In the dark, a funeral wreath. Hamlet shakes his head. In a dark side, illuminated by a green phosphorescent light, Queen Gertrude is making love to the old king Hamlet. Zoom on the scene.]*<sup>11</sup>

During this scene a voice-over plays the lines of the Ghost:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In Laforgue the water, or rather "the sky reflected in the water", is seen as "the starting point for his [Hamlet] meditations and his aberrations" (1956: 104). The raging sea has always been associated with Hamlet's doubts and his inaction: see Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), where the Danish prince speaks the "to be or not to be" monologue in front of the sea, or Grigori Kozintev's film adaptation (1964) of the play, where Hamlet speaks the monologue nearby a raging sea.

<sup>11</sup> All the translations from the French script of the film are mine.

<sup>12</sup> All the quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Arden Third Series edition (Shakespeare 2006).



I am thy father's spirit [nine times; 1.5.9]  
 If thou didst ever love me [seven times; 1.5.23]  
 Revenge my murder [six times; 1.5.25]  
 Adieu [eight times; 1.5.91]  
 Remember me [three times; 1.5.91]

Hamlet and Claudius, from different sides, witness the scene. As the old king Hamlet falls asleep, Claudius puts the poison in his ear. Hamlet, disgusted, hits over and over a rose bush, symbolizing both the passion and the female sexual organ. This image of Hamlet's destructive impulse is taken from Laforgue:

Jeune et infortuné prince! Ces étranges impulsions destructives le prennent souvent à la gorge, depuis le trop, trop irrégulier décès de son père . . . Il arracha leurs ailes aux papillons futiles, décapita les limaces, trancha les pattes de derrière aux crapauds et grenouilles . . . cinglant à droite à gauche mille fleurs. (1894: 19)

[Unfortunate Prince! *He has often been in the grip of these destructive impulses* since his father's irregular demise. . . . He tore the wings from frivolous butterflies, decapitated snails, sliced off the hindfeet of toads and frogs, . . . *slashing hundreds of flowers right and left.* (1956: 116; my emphasis)]

The prologue, in black and white except the framings on Hamlet, ends with the cry of the Ghost, leaving the scene to Hamlet who, unlike Shakespeare's play, seems to forget his duty to punish his father's murder and to take back his throne. Bene follows Laforgue's story,<sup>13</sup> Hamlet decides to leave his homeland to go to Paris and live with his beloved Kate, the leading actress of the comedians' troupe arrived at court.<sup>14</sup> The whole story appears to him as a good subject for the play to be performed in front of the king and the queen:

Mon sentiment premier était de me remettre l'horrible, horrible, horrible événement, pour m'exalter la piété filiale, faire crier son dernier cri au sang de mon père, me réchauffer le plat de la vengeance! Et voilà! je pris goût à l'œuvre, moi! j'oubliai peu à peu qu'il s'agissait de mon père assassiné, de ma mère prostituée, de mon trône . . . Je m'en allais bras dessus, bras dessous avec les fictions d'un beau sujet . . . Car c'est un beau sujet! (Bene 1976: 7)

<sup>13</sup> In Laforgue, Hamlet and Yorick are stepbrothers. After the mousetrap Hamlet forgets his vengeance and decides to go to Paris on tour with the comedians' troupe arrived at Elsinore. He has forgotten Ophelia and now he is in love with Kate, the leading actress of the company. Before leaving, Hamlet brings some flowers to his father's tomb, but Laertes kills him.

<sup>14</sup> The leading actor's name is William.

[My first feeling was to remember the horrible, horrible, horrible event, in order to exalt my filial piety, to make my father's blood cry its last cry, to warm over my plate of vengeance. And then I began to take a liking to my little work. I forgot little by little that it concerned my murdered father, my prostituted mother, my throne. I went along arm in arm with the fictions of a lovely subject: and the subject is certainly lovely.]

The passage is almost taken *verbatim* from Laforgue:

Mon sentiment premier était de me remettre l'horrible, horrible, horrible événement, pour m'exalter la piété filiale, me rendre la chose dans toute l'ir-récusabilité du verbe artiste, faire crier son dernier cri au sang de mon père, me réchauffer le plat de la vengeance ! Et voilà, je pris goût à l'œuvre, moi ! J'oubliai peu à peu qu'il s'agissait de mon père assassiné, volé de ce qu'il lui restait à vivre dans ce monde précieux (pauvre homme, pauvre homme!), de ma mère prostituée (vision qui m'a saccagé la Femme et m'a poussé à faire mourir de honte et de détérioration la céleste Ophélie!), de mon trône enfin! Je m'en allais bras dessus, bras dessous avec les fictions d'un beau sujet. (1894: 8)

[My first intuition was to restage the horrible, horrible event, to exalt my filial piety, and translate everything with the full undeniability of artistic speech, to wring again from my father his last bloody cry, to warm over my plate of vengeance! And then I began to take a liking to my little work! I forgot little by little that it concerned my murdered father, robbed of the years he had left in this precious world (poor man, poor man!). I forgot that it concerned my mother in her role of prostitute (a vision which has ruined all Womanhood in my eyes and driven me to let heavenly Ophelia die of shame and deterioration), that it concerned, in a word, my right to the throne. I went merrily along arm in arm with all the fictionalized amplifications of a lovely subject. For it is certainly a lovely subject. (1956: 108-9)]

As Hamlet, voice-off, pronounces his last words the credits roll again: "Un Amleto di Meno"; music: Stravinsky's "Scherzo à la russe"; close-up on the actors' trunks where the actors are attaching two labels "Paris" and "Express". In the following exchange with Kate, Hamlet abandons his role, his character, affirming his firm intention not to be Hamlet anymore:<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This cancellation of the role of Hamlet and, consequently, of the whole drama, can also be found in Heiner Müller's *The Hamletmachine*. The play opens with the actor saying: "I am not Hamlet" (Müller 1984: 53); in the fourth section the actor who plays Hamlet says "I am not Hamlet. I play no role anymore. My words have nothing more to say to me. My thoughts suck the blood of images. My drama is cancelled. Behind me the scenery is being taken down. By people who are not interested in my drama, for people, to whom it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to me either. I'm not playing along anymore" (56).

HAMLET. Et cela n'est rien! Je te lirai tout! On ira vivre à Paris. Je t'aime, Je t'aime, Je t'aime. . . . (Bene 1976: 8)

[And this is nothing! I'm reading everything to you! We are going to live in Paris. I love you, I love you, I love you. . . . *I don't give a damn about my throne. The dead are dead. We will see the world! Paris, my life, it's just you and me.*]<sup>16</sup>

The next scene is taken from Shakespeare (1.2.160-254).<sup>17</sup> Unlike Shakespeare, the dialogue takes place in the middle of the preparations for the performance, that last ninety seconds before Horatio addresses the prince. Hamlet, faithful to his new role, does not seem to take too seriously the lines he speaks. Conversely, Horatio is the one who wants the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Hamlet speaks the lines following a script, whereas Horatio is the guardian of the tradition, he will be the one to whom Hamlet will ask to speak the most famous lines, including the "To be or not be" monologue.

The ghost suddenly appears during the settling of the theatrical space:

(*On voit soudain un masque menaçant.*)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi! Souviens-toi de moi! Souviens-toi de moi!

(. . . *Hamlet se précipite vers la caméra. Nouveau plan : Hamlet . . . Rapide panoramique vers le masque.*)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi!

(*L'espace est maintenant sombre: Hamlet tourne sur lui-même comme étourdi. Plan frontal du masque.*)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi!

(. . . *Hamlet s'agenouille. Le masque se fond légèrement. Face à nous, . . . Hamlet gratte une allumette et se penche pour allumer une bougie.*)

HAMLET. Oh pardon, pardon! Tu me pardonnes, mon père, n'est-ce pas? Au fond tu me connais . . .

(*Hamlet soufflé la bougie et c'est l'obscurité totale.*) (Bene 1976: 10)

[(*Sudden menacing mask.*) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! Remember me! Remember me! // (. . . *Hamlet rushes towards the camera. Close-up on Hamlet. . . Fast close-up on the mask.*) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! // (*The space is now dim. Hamlet spins round, bewildered. Close-up on the mask.*) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! // (. . . *Hamlet kneels. The voice fades away. The space is still dim. Hamlet, facing the audience, strikes a match and lights a candle.*) // HAMLET. Forgive me, forgive me, won't you, Father? You do really understand me, I know . . . // (*Hamlet puts out the candle. Dark.*)]

<sup>16</sup> The last sentence of Hamlet's lines, in italics, is not in the French script. See also Laforgue (1956: 131).

<sup>17</sup> Bene cuts thirty lines of the exchange between Hamlet and Horatio.

The mask of the Ghost, half-face and half-skull, with a moustache and a horned helmet, is reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's self-portraits. The reference to the surrealist painter suits the surrealistic scenery, and especially all the settings of the theatrical space throughout the film. Hamlet's last lines, and his behaviour, are taken *verbatim* from Laforgue when Hamlet "throws himself on his knees before the portrait of his father and kisses the feet depicted on the cold canvas" (1956: 109).<sup>18</sup>

The nunnery scene is preceded by a scene where Polonius helps Gertrude to undress herself. During the scene, Polonius whispers her Freud's remarks about Oedipus and the Oedipic love:

*In my experience, which is already extensive, the chief part in the mental lives of all children who later become psychoneurotics is played by their parents. . . . This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles' drama which bears his name.*

Oedipus, son of Laius, King of Thebes, and of Jocasta, was exposed as an infant because an oracle had warned Laius that the still unborn child would be his father's murderer. The child was rescued, and grew up as a would be his father's murderer. The child was rescued, and grew up as a prince in an alien court, until, in doubts as to his origin, *he too questioned the oracle and was warned to avoid his home since he was destined to murder his father and take his mother in marriage. On the road leading away from what he believed was his home, he met King Laius and slew him in a sudden quarrel.* He came next to Thebes and solved the riddle set him by the Sphinx who barred his way. Out of gratitude *the Thebans made him their king and gave him Jocasta's hand in marriage.* He reigned long in peace and honour, and *she who, unknown to him, was his mother bore him two sons and two daughters. Then at last a plague broke out and the Thebans made enquiry once more of the oracle.* It is at this point that Sophocles' tragedy opens. The messengers bring back the reply that the plague will cease when the murderer of Laius has been driven from the land.

But he, where is he? Where shall now be read  
The fading record of this ancient guilt?

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis—that *Oedipus himself is*

<sup>18</sup> "[S]e jeter à genoux devant le portrait de son père dont il baise les pieds sur la toile froide" (1894: 9).

*the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination which he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home. The oracle has been fulfilled.*

...

*It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so.* (Freud 2010: 278-9, 280; in italics the parts used by Bene)

This quotation is an attempt to rid the play of Freud's reading, which has affected the interpretation of Hamlet/*Hamlet* for a long time. Bene emphasizes this when he writes: "Someone has taken seriously this Freud in *Hamlet*. Actually, I put these words in Polonius's mouth to denounce him... to say: Out! This must be out of here".<sup>19</sup>

This scene is another example of Bene's process of subtraction/addition. In the film the scene is set in a library covered with book sheets with half-naked nuns who symbolize, through the showing of their body and their behaviour, corruption and debasement:

*Panoramique découvrant le nonnes nues dans un grand décor de livres empilés. Kate, apeurée, s'en va rejoindre les autres. Hamlet s'approche. Gertrude porte une coiffe rouge. . . . Hamlet s'éloigne. On le retrouve dans une lumière sombre et il neige. Plongée sur Orazio qui tourne brusquement la tête. Au-dessus de lui, Hamlet se détourne. Il donne une claque sur les fesses d'une nonne. Orazio, sous la neige, tourne encore la tête vers le haut. Hamlet feuillette un livre dans la bibliothèque. Il est maintenant sous la neige et lance avec mépris un autre papier à Orazio. Le papier tombe sur la neige près de Orazio qui le ramasse et commence à le lire "Être ou ne pas être, telle est la question." Hamlet traverse vite la bibliothèque. (Bene 1976: 16)*

*[Pan shot discovering the naked nuns in a setting full of books. Kate, scared, joins the others. Hamlet approaches. Kate wears a red headdress. . . . Hamlet leaves. He reappears in a dim light. It's snowing. It falls over Horatio who suddenly turns his head. Above him Hamlet leaves. He claps on a nun's buttocks. Horatio, in the snow, turns again his head up. Hamlet leafs through a book in the library. Now he is in the snow and throws with contempt another paper to Horatio. The paper falls on the snow near Horatio who picks it up and starts reading it: "To be or not to be, that is the question". Hamlet crosses quickly the library.]*

<sup>19</sup> "Qualcuno ha preso sul serio questo Freud nell'*Amleto*. Ma io lo ho messo in bocca a Polonio proprio per denunciarlo... per dire: Fuori! questo qui deve restare fuori" (Bene 1978: 169).

Hamlet is surrounded by the nuns, and a voice-over prompts him, correcting him when he does not remember or does not play his lines properly. The original text is played with insertions from the “To be or not to be” monologue, and Bene/Amleto ironical overlappings: at a certain point, Horatio picks up a letter where Hamlet has written his monologue and, after playing the first line, he bursts out laughing. Amleto/Bene replies “to have or not to have, that is the question”.<sup>20</sup> This line is taken from the Circe episode in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where Stephen, Bloom, and Lynch go to Bella Cohen’s brothel. In this episode, which also suggested to Carmelo Bene the setting of the scene, there are references to *Hamlet* (“To have or not to have that is the question”, 1960: 502; “Aha! I know you, granmer! Hamlet, revenge!”, 524), to *Othello* (“The beast that has two backs at midnight”, 504; “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter / and the Moor are now making the beast with two / backs”, *Othello*, 1.1.117-9) and even to Shakespeare who appears reflected in a mirror invoking Jago (“Iagogo! How my Oldfellow chokit Thursdaymum. Iagogo!”, 508).

Hamlet, in the snow, sees someone faraway: “*King Claudius is also in the snow, escorted by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, with their heads bandaged*”.<sup>21</sup> The exchange between the King and the two Knights is taken from the opening of 3.1 and is followed by a close-up on Horatio who reads the paper thrown to him by Hamlet: “to die: to sleep / No more, and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousands natural shocks” (3.1.59-61), and then comments on it with sarcasm: “That’s crazy!”.<sup>22</sup>

The nunnery scene is set as a rehearsal with Ophelia dressed as a nun, half-naked, and Kate, who prompts all the lines to Hamlet and speaks Ophelia’s lines:

KATE. Comment s’est porté Votre Honneur, tous ces jours?  
(*Hamlet fait plier Ophélie en riant, tandis que Kate est toujours là coiffée de rouge.*)

HAMLET. (*off*) Je vous remercie humblement. Bien, bien, bien.  
(*On voit Hamlet gifler Kate-Ophélie qui tombe par terre.*)

KATE. [GERTRUDE] Monseigneur, j’ai de vous des souvenirs qui je brûlais de vous rendre, les voici.  
(*Hamlet, pendant ces temps, cherche encore à faire tomber Kate par terre.*)

HAMLET. (*à Kate*) Je ne vous ai jamais rien donné.  
(*Kate mord le doigt d’Hamlet. Hamlet cherche à éloigner Ophélie qui s’accroche et voudrait l’embrasser.*) (Bene 1976: 16)

<sup>20</sup> “Avoir ou ne pas avoir, voilà la question!” (Bene 1976: 16).

<sup>21</sup> “Le roi Claude est lui aussi sous la neige, escorté par Guildenstern et Rosencranz, la tête enveloppée de bandages” (Bene 1976: 16).

<sup>22</sup> “Cose da pazzi!” This line is not in the French script.

[KATE. How does your honour for this many a day? // (*Hamlet makes Ophelia bend, laughing, while Kate is always there headdressed in red.*) // HAMLET. (*voice off*) I humbly thank you, well, well, well. // (*Hamlet slaps Ophelia who falls down.*) // KATE. <sup>23</sup> My lord, I have remembrances of yours // That I have longed long to redeliver. // (*Meanwhile, Hamlet tries again to make Ophelia fall down.*) // HAMLET. (*to Kate*) I never gave you aught. // (*Kate bites Hamlet's finger. Hamlet tries to get Ophelia away from him. Ophelia holds on him and would like to hug him.*)]

Then, the king asks for information about the performance ("Do the rehearsals go ahead? Will the performance take place or not?"), the First Knight assures him ("It will, it will"),<sup>24</sup> and the king invites him to continue to delight Hamlet:

1<sup>ER</sup> CHEVALIER. Il m'a chargé de prier vos Majestés d'y assister.

CLAUDIUS. De tout mon cœur, gentils amis! Aiguisez son ardeur en encourageant sa volonté de se divertir.

[FIRST KNIGHT.<sup>25</sup> He beseeched me to entreat your majesties / To hear and see the matter. // CLAUDIUS. With all my heart, it doth much content me / To hear him so inclined. / Good gentlemen, give him a further edge / And drive his purpose into deep delights. (3.1.22-7)]

The rehearsal also continues with Kate who speaks only a line ("A la maison", "At home"). The rehearsal ends with "I say we will have no more marriages; those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go" (3.1.148-50).<sup>26</sup> It follows the real performance of the scene, which is not the one we have seen in the rehearsals, but a dialogue between a husband and his wife caught with another man in La Madeleine, the most social church of Paris. The story is taken, literally, from Laforgue's poem *Complainte de l'époux outragé* ("Complaint of the Outraged Husband", Laforgue 1958: 66-9) and develops the theme of fidelity, which is one of the major topics of Bene's play: (un)fidelity to Shakespeare, to Laforgue, to himself.

The scene in the TV adaptation follows the film script, with some displacements of scenes (for example the First Knight speaking with Claudius is set before Hamlet and Kate rehearse the nunnery scene, whereas in

<sup>23</sup> The French script assigns, wrongly, these lines to Gertrude. In emphasis the right speech prefix as it is in the movie.

<sup>24</sup> "CLAUDE. Est-ce que les répétitions se poursuivent? Et cette représentation, elle aura lieu ou non? // 1<sup>ER</sup> CHEVALIER. Si, si".

<sup>25</sup> In Shakespeare the lines are assigned to Polonius.

<sup>26</sup> These lines are not in the French script, but they are spoken, in Italian, in the movie.



the film the dialogue is divided into three parts throughout the scene). The main difference is the absence of the naked nuns: Hamlet rehearses the scene with Kate, and Ophelia, half-naked, listens to it. Then, Hamlet speaks his lines to Ophelia.

The film ends with Hamlet who, before leaving for Paris, wants to go to his father's tomb:

Kate, attends-moi une minute. C'est pour la tombe de mon père qui a été assassiné, le pauvre homme! Je te raconterai. Le temps de cueillir une fleur qui nous servira de signer quand nous relirons mon drame et que nous serons forcés de l'interrompre dans des baisers. (Bene 1976: 56)

[Wait me a minute, Kate. It's for the tomb of my father, who has been murdered, the poor man. I'll tell you all about it later. I'll be back in a moment. Just to pick up a flower, a simple paper flower, that we can use as a book-mark when we read my drama and we are forced to interrupt the reading to kiss each other.]

On his way to the cemetery, he meets Laertes who first stabs him and then kisses him on his mouth calling him "Comrade". Kate, seen Hamlet dead, comes back to her fellow comedians. All the characters, including Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes lock themselves into the actors' trunks. The film ends with knights approaching the throne where a faceless knight takes off his helmet and wears a crown. Wagner's music from *Tannhäuser* plays in the background.

In the TV adaptation, after Claudius and Gertrude lock themselves into the actor's trunk, a knight in armour closes the trunks, then he takes off his helmet: he has no head, he wears a crown that seems floating over his body. Wagner's music from *Tannhäuser* starts, the knights fade out, followed by the closing titles.

### 3. *One Hamlet Less* <sup>27</sup>

According to Carmelo Bene, each performance of *Hamlet* reduces by one unit the number of its possible performances; it is also another step forward in the removal of the text which Bene continuously tries to deconstruct, through a process of subtraction, which, in Gilles Deleuze's word, is a process of amputation (1993: 204). By amputating parts of the text, by reducing and cancelling the functions of the characters, Bene builds up the

<sup>27</sup> The title is also a quotation from the closing lines of Laforgue: "One Hamlet the less does not mean the end of the human race. Of that you can be sure" (1956: 137). ("Un Hamlet de moins; la race n'en est pas perdue, qu'on se le dise!", 1894: 50).

play on different levels, both from a proairectic and a dramaturgical standpoint. He develops, as is the case with Mercutio in his *Romeo and Juliet*, unexpected solutions. Gilles Deleuze notes how “in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Mercutio was only a virtuality. Mercutio dies soon in Shakespeare, but in Bene’s play he does not want to die because shortly he will make up the new play” (204).

The 1962 *Hamlet* at “Teatro Laboratorio”, for instance, presents a three-fold perspective:

Scale buie e copioni sui leggi (copioni di *Amleto* o di Amleto?). In primo piano Amleto. Di fronte a lui Laerte. Secondo piano, in salire: Ofelia, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, Polonio, servi, la regina, il re. Terzo piano in salire: Marcello, Bernardo, Orazio, Francesco, lo Spettro, i merli, un cielo notturno di un verde indefinito. (Bene 1995: 632)

[Dark stairs, scripts on the lecterns (scripts of *Hamlet* or Hamlet’s scripts?). At the first level Hamlet, opposite him Laertes. At the second level, in order, Ophelia, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, Polonius, the servants, the Queen, the King. At the third level, in order, Marcellus, Barnardo, Horatio, Francisco, the Ghost, the merlons. A nocturnal indeterminate green sky.]

Each from their own level, careless of the other two, the characters play Shakespeare’s lines throwing them to the audience. Hamlet, Claudius, Marcellus, Francisco, and Barnardo set up a vocal ensemble overlapping their lines:

AMLETO. Oh così questa troppo solida carne si fondesse  
[HAMLET. O that this too too solid flesh would melt (1.2.129)]

CLAUDIO. Benché la memoria sia ancor verde del nostro caro fratello Amleto re...  
[CLAUDIUS. Though yet of Hamlet our dear Brother’s death / The memory be green (1.2.1-2)]

ORAZIO. Parla  
[HORATIO. Speak to me (1.1.132); O speak (137)]

Similarly, in the third act, Hamlet, Claudius, and Guildenstern set up an ensemble that is a collage from *Hamlet* 3.1:

AMLETO. Essere...  
CLAUDIO. E non potete voi per via indiretta, trargli di bocca...  
AMLETO. ...o non essere... Sognare, forse.  
GUILDENSTERN. È un pazzo furibondo, svicola sempre...  
CLAUDIO. ...che peso è questo per la mia coscienza...  
AMLETO. ...coscienza fa di tutti noi vigliacchi...

[HAMLET. To be . . . (3.1.56) // CLAUDIUS. And can you by no drift of conference . . . (3.1.1) // Get from him. . . (3.1.1-2) // HAMLET. . . or not to be . . . Perchance to dream (3.1.56, 64) // GUILDENSTERN. With a crafty madness keeps aloof. . . (3.1.8) // CLAUDIUS. . . How smart a lash that speech doth give to my conscience! (3.1.50) // HAMLET. . . conscience does make cowards of us all . . . (3.1.83)]

Bene's journey through the different performances of *his* Hamlet and through the different versions of *Hamlet* is a process of 'dis-Hamletization' where all the certainties of the original are cancelled. These certainties, Carmelo Bene writes (1995: 1354), can be summed up with the following lines:

Questo dramma per me non è nulla.  
L'ho concepito e vi ho lavorato fra  
repellenti preoccupazioni domestiche.  
(ibid.)

[This play is nothing to me / I have conceived and worked on it / Among  
ghastly domestic concerns.]

This process of 'dis-Hamletization' arrives first at Laforgue version, then at a collage version Shakespeare/Bene/Laforgue, and finally at *Hamlet Suite*, which Bene considers his final *Hamlet*.<sup>28</sup>

Lo spettacolo testuale di questa *Hamlet Suite* è esecuzione capitale e *somma* di ogni *Amleto di meno*; è *versione-collage* da tutta l'opera (*moralità e poesia*) di Jules Laforgue, "tradita" dalla composizione "ritmica" e, a volte, *librettistica* della necessità scenica-musicale. (Ibid.)

[The performance of this *Hamlet Suite* is a crucial performance and the *sum* of every *One Hamlet Less*; it is a *collage-version* from Jules Laforgue's works (*moralities* and *poetry*), betrayed by the *rhythmical* composition, sometimes *libretto-like*, of the stage and musical need.]

It is this 'need' that drove Carmelo Bene to the rewriting, which he considers not as an interpretation or a reading (misreading), but a real 'critical essay': "As I have said many times, I do not stage Shakespeare, or my inter-

<sup>28</sup> Roberto Tessari has suggested how Carmelo Bene's *Hamlet*, "a contamination of Shakespeare and Laforgue", is a scenario where "the actor-Hamlet sets the Elizabethan tragedy after Laforgue" (1977: 1389). Armando Petrini notes how "the parody of the possibility of the art, present in Laforgue, becomes in Carmelo Bene the parody of the possibility of the theatre and of the interpretation" (2004: 72). See also Magris (2014: 362).

pretation or reading of Shakespeare, but a critical essay *on* Shakespeare".<sup>29</sup> He believed that the artist is not so dissimilar from the critic and that he re-writes because he is a critic and an artist:

L'artista non è altri dal critico, io mi vergogno di scrivere. Mi diverte, mi appassiona riscrivere per la semplicissima ragione che mi ritengo un critico, un artista. Critica è l'ironia più la lirica. Non sarà mai concepibile una critica che non sia al tempo stesso operazione critica, ma operazione critica taumaturgica, cioè opera d'arte di scrittura, di passato, presente avvenire, e la critica si riscrive perché non si può scrivere. Io riscivo perché non sono Eva e tanto meno Adamo, non sta forse scritto che gli ultimi saranno i primi? Riscivo soprattutto perché mi vergogno di appartenere al mio tempo, quando saprò imitarmi sarò morto. (Bene 1970: 140)

[The artist is not dissimilar from the critic. I am ashamed to write. It makes me happy; I am keen to rewrite, simply because I think I am a critic, and an artist. Criticism is irony plus lyric. Criticism will never be conceivable as a critical process, but as thaumaturgical operation, that is a masterpiece of writing, made of past, present, and future. Criticism re-writes itself because it cannot be written. I write because I am neither Eve nor Adam. Is it not written that the last will be the first? I rewrite above all because I am ashamed to belong to my age. When I can imitate myself, I will be dead.]

#### 4. Epilogue

Theatre during its history has presented multiple and incomplete texts, it has made us perceive a dramaturgical practice which is always changeable, which adapts itself to the media at its disposal and to the cultural context. Shakespeare, as Gary Taylor suggests, "reinvented himself almost every day" (1989: 3); similarly, everyone who has approached his plays has done the same. Staging Shakespeare means also reinventing him. Twentieth-century culture raises Shakespeare as a simulacrum, a simulacrum to be quoted, modified, reinvented, rewritten. This is because, as Peter Brook has suggested, Shakespeare's theatre contains "the possibility to engender ever-changing forms", because "there is no limit to the number of virtual forms present in a great text" (1995: 63).

<sup>29</sup> "Io non metto in scena Shakespeare – l'ho detto tante volte – né una mia interpretazione o lettura di Shakespeare, ma un saggio critico su Shakespeare" (Bene 1977: 19-20).

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## **“The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes”: Reading Beckett’s *Not I* as the (non)End of Tragedy**

### Abstract

Beckett challenges received notions of ‘classical’ tragedy in all of his works. In particular, in *Not I* the very possibility of tragedy is at stake in relation to the construction of subjectivity and agency. The play points to a state of human infirmity, and to a series of “tupenny aches over life and death” which seem to ridicule the notion of tragedy while representing it. Is it a (non)tragedy that life and death are “tupenny aches”? Can the being of being find a tragic representation in the theatre? Can a linguistically determined subject acknowledge and inscribe his/her being with his/her suffering? If we define postmodernism as the age of the end of “master-narratives” (Lyotard 1984 [1979]), we might be limited to the illustration of particular examples of experience, so that the archetypal value of a human condition becomes a problematic issue. But, can there be tragedy without some form of ‘universality’? How can the individual subject be representative of a general human condition? These are the issues raised and developed in this essay, which discusses narrative possibilities, linguistic economy and dialogical performance also in relation to an Aristotelean dramatic tradition.

KEYWORDS: tragedy; ontology; catharsis; action/narration; alienation; agency; universality/particularity; consciousness; logocentrism

### **1. “The trouble with tragedy”**

“The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes / Over life and death and other tupenny aches” (qtd in Knowlson 1996: 100).<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Beckett highlights his knowledge and tongue in cheek parody of Nicolas Chamfort, as well as a cultural condition that is not typical of just one depressed subject (possibly the biographical Beckett, for some readers), nor distinctive of one specific character in Beckett’s plays. The quotation can be taken as a

<sup>1</sup> James Knowlson highlights the fact that Beckett makes a doggerel of a Chamfort’s maxim. Sébastien Roch-Nicolas Chamfort’s maxim reads: “Tragedy has the great moral defect of giving too much importance to life and death” (qtd Douglas 1917: 1809). See also Chamfort 1824-25.

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comment or confirmation of the end of “grand narratives” described by Lyotard as a feature of Postmodernity (1979). So, these are the ‘postmodernist’ terms in which tragedy can be conceived, albeit not just in Beckett.

The quotation in my title points to a ‘general’ human state of frailty and disability, with nothing particularly “grand” about it, a discomfort shown and performed by a varied series of “aches” troubling humans “over life and death”. It is worth noticing that “over life and death” means both ‘about’ and ‘during’ life and death, so as to indicate that the ensuing “fuss” is both a lasting condition and the result of an object of worry. Life and death, throughout a lifetime, become the objects of a “fuss”, i.e. not only a concern, but also a constant display of fret and hassle, which, in traditional notions of tragedy, through an intensification of commotion, become a profound affliction and a dramatic woe for tragic characters.

So we can ask: are life and death just “tupenny aches”, or are they endowed with enormousness and importance, so that the “fuss” tragedy makes about life and death is logical and acceptable? There is no simple answer to this question. As a matter of fact, the minimal size of “tupenny aches” is related to the maximal existential horizon of human reality (“life and death”). Thus, the issue remains an open question: is it a tragedy, or not a tragedy, that life and death (both on the same level in Beckett), are among the many (other) “tupenny aches” of human infirmity? Are life and death unimportant aches, not worthy of “fuss”? And are they comparable pains? So, would a “fuss” about life “and” death make sense? To what extent is it meaningful? Is it a tragic fuss, or a silly one? Ultimately, these interrogatives question the potential issue of meaning ‘in’ life, and the meaning ‘of’ life.

Consequently, we can ask if the ontological condition of suffering and dying can still find a ‘tragic’ representation in our Eurocentric postmodern world.

All of the above are the basic questions I propose to address in this essay while focusing on *Not I*.

## 2. Tragic Potential and Possibilities (also in *Not I*)

Strictly speaking, ‘tragedy’ is not just a dramatic form, but it is both ‘the tragic’ of a dramatic ontology, and the tragic possibility enacted and illustrated by dramatic forms. This semantic overlapping of ontology and form helps highlighting differences and similarities between traditional and postmodernist conceptions of both tragedy as ontology, and as dramatic form.

I believe that the very possibility of ‘the tragic’ (i.e. tragedy as both ontology and form), is ultimately at stake in all of Beckett’s plays, including *Not I*, but not in the way in which tragedy is traditionally understood, i.e.

as the consequence of human decisive errors or sin, or as a specific punishment from the gods. Rather, in Beckett tragedy is a general and unavoidable reality, and therefore a very ordinary and expected certainty. Can we still call it 'tragedy' if it is the norm of human predicament? Its general quality problematizes the terrible, the appalling, the catastrophic dimensions that tragedy is usually endowed with in its traditionally established definitions.

In other words: if the appalling is normal, can it still be tragic?

*Not I* does not provide an immediate answer, but takes the reader-spectator through the labyrinth of some of the most recurrent human questions: i.e. is tragedy the common 'human normal', or is it specific of an individual (e.g. of the woman protagonist of *Not I*)? A number of related questions are also overtly posed in this play: does human suffering have a cause, such as the sins committed? How does God relate to humans (and vice-versa)? Why do Christians teach that God is merciful?

These reflections, uttered or implied by MOUTH in the play, indicate at first a sort of dreadful nemesis which explains human grief: humans suffer because of a punishment from God for their sins. It is a thought formulated by a "speechless infant"<sup>2</sup> as soon as she speaks, but a thought that is eventually "dismissed as foolish" ("... brought up as she had been to believe ... with the other waifs ... in a merciful ... [*Brief laugh.*] ... God ... [*Good laugh.*] ... first thought was ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... she was being punished ... for her sins ...", Beckett 1990: 377).<sup>3</sup> Through the ironical "[b]rief laugh" Beckett denounces the indoctrination of orphans, but, most importantly, ridicules the notion of punishment from the gods (central to traditional tragedy). Furthermore the play shows no sin nor error in the protagonist's life, which could perhaps motivate such punishment. Besides, the mental state of the protagonist is so compromised that issues of responsibility, and therefore of sin, are problematic, if not altogether out of question.

Furthermore, it is worth noticing that, ironically, "waifs" (children with no parents), who could be freed from the 'Law of the Father', are on the contrary trapped into an absolute version of it, the one implicating 'God the Father'.<sup>4</sup> Paternity is clearly not so compelling in being biological, as in being pervasively cultural as 'the Law of the Father' in its multiple versions.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Beckett 1990: 376. All quotations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> For two religious readings with reference to the Gospels and Psalms, see Howard 1993 and Gontarski 1980.

<sup>4</sup> "A third idol . . . is the God who is the Judge of 'sin', who confirms the rightness of the rules and roles of the reigning system, . . ." (Daly 1973: 31).

<sup>5</sup> For a sociological background particularly focusing on abused mothers and children, see Sakauchi 2008.

### 3. Dramatic Structures of Tragedy (Aristotle and Beckett)

Beckett's parody of Chamfort's quotation indicates that tragedy is so real 'in' life and death, and that it is such an unavoidable component 'of' life and death, that adding meaning to it is just a production of "fuss".

What logically follows is that a customary tragic quality (of life and death) is likely to make a high notion of tragedy risible, as defined by Aristotle in these terms: "Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech . . . by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions" (1987: 2.1448a7).<sup>6</sup> A literal reading of Aristotle's definition would include the following features: 1) serious and complete action; 2) magnitude; 3) embellished speech; 4) action rather than narration; 5) catharsis of emotions "by means of pity and terror".

Based on these elements, I will conduct my analysis of *Not I*, showing that one could deduce that *Not I* is, and is not, a tragedy.

#### a) *Rhetorical Features*

The play is not "in embellished speech", and certainly not in verse, even though it displays a highly structured use of language, and a lucid economy of speech. There is very little magnitude in it, apart from the huge wretchedness of the protagonist; it is a referential and a connotative 'magnitude' putting value at stake. Furthermore, the only 'action' in/of the play is a speech act (articulating the narration of a lifetime; see Bigliazzi 2012).

#### b) *Action or Narration?*

Aristotle indicates that tragedy is characterized by "people acting and not by narration". *Not I* interrogates what qualifies as "acting", and specifically, if a narrative act can succeed as "acting". In fact, its dramatic action is a narration. MOUTH's story (thus a narration) is a theatrical speech 'act', because of the dramatic setting: narration is always a performance in the theatre, so it is a sort of Aristotelian "acting", but not necessarily opposed to "narration".

The presence of two characters, i.e. a speaker and a listener (MOUTH and AUDITOR) meets the requirements of "acting" in relation to the audience, but their acting is, paradoxically, just a heard monologue by another character, a monologic speech act.<sup>7</sup> MOUTH's solipsistic narra-

<sup>6</sup> Chapter divisions are the conventional ones introduced by Renaissance editors, and the Bekker numbers are used to refer to page number, columns and lines of his 1831 edition.

<sup>7</sup> AUDITOR was not included in the videotaped production for BBC TV (1977). This structural change abidingly transforms the script (1972) and the play (first produced in New York at the Lincoln Center in 1972, and in London at the Royal Court in 1973). Beckett himself eliminated AUDITOR in the *Pas moi* staging at the Théâtre d'Orsay in 1978.

tion pre-empties the possibility of a classical dialogue or even monologue, which would be conducive to action. This is also demonstrated by the absence of AUDITOR in the videotaped production for BBC TV (1977), and in the staging of *Pas moi* in Paris in 1978.

We could say that AUDITOR ("tall standing figure, sex undeterminable", Beckett 1990: 376) is 'acting', based on Beckett's introductory *Note*: "Movement: this consists in simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back" (375). But do MOUTH's "contortions" (379) qualify as 'acting' (focus would be on MOUTH as character), or is it just a mouth moving? "[G]radually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! .. her lips moving! . . . and not alone the lips ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ..." (ibid.)? Apart from the irony of not seeing a face but only a mouth as MOUTH on a "[s]tage in darkness" (376), we have to conclude that 'acting' is performed by the "not felt at all" (379) contortions of lips and cheeks and jaws. Can acting not have an agent? Is it only a passive acting out? But, even if we consider this minimal movements as 'acting', we cannot ignore the intrusion of narration (through the use of the past tense) 'about' the movement of her lips: "gradually *she felt* ... her lips moving ..." (my emphasis). So, ultimately, the acting is a speech act of constative narration, but with some unidentified addressee, prompted to imagine by that very speech act: "gradually she felt ... her lips moving ... imagine! ..".

Ultimately, in *Not I* the opposition of "acting" and "narrating" is challenged, and the very notion of their conflict is warped.

### c) *Catharsis*

All of the features of the play discussed so far seem to question and rework (but certainly not dismiss), Aristotle's definition of 'tragedy', and yet, one can see *Not I* as a cathartic play, not only arousing pity and terror, but also representing pity as indicated by the Beckettian *Note* referring to AUDITOR: "sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion" (Beckett 1990: 375). Compassion can also be interpreted as the modern psychological form of a traditional purging (of moral and burdensome feelings facing human helplessness), but the play also seems to suggest that a human intellectual understanding can be purged. Such 'feeling' would be the habitual ignorance of the role of language in human life: "not felt at all ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ..." that one ignores "the whole being ... hanging on its words ..." (379). Do humans need to purge their oblivion of the omnipresence of language? This seems to me the most innovative 'postmodern' appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis as 'purging'.

However, in *Not I* the Aristotelian conception of catharsis comes back foremost in all its ambivalent complexity: not only are the objects of catharsis hard to define, but, more importantly, the question is open regard-

ing who the subjects of catharsis are. Is it the public, or the characters, or both? And are the two characters equally or similarly experiencing and producing catharsis?

I think both AUDITOR and audience are cathartic subjects inasmuch as the AUDITOR re-presents the public, in developing a scopic 'magnetic chain' of interpretation of the object of their gaze. The idea of a 'magnetic chain' of interpretation derives from Plato's *Ion*.<sup>8</sup> I think it fits well in relation to the empathy of *Not I* if AUDITOR expresses "helpless compassion", that would presumably be the feeling shared by the audience seeing the same spectacle. But would that be the one and only feeling the audience also feels, just because it hears and sees the same spectacle? I do not think so. For one thing, no one knows for sure that AUDITOR sees exactly what the audience sees; in fact, the audience sees AUDITOR seeing something but what s/he sees is undetermined. Thus, ultimately, what is at stake is the possibility of a projective identification: AUDITOR with MOUTH, and of audience with AUDITOR and MOUTH, but with no guarantee of the preservation of an 'original' spectacle, and of the outcome of similar projective feelings.

Because s/he is called AUDITOR (in the script) it is plausible that MOUTH and 'AUD'-ITOR hear the same things, i.e. the same story, and so would the 'aud'-ience. Does it follow that they share the same cathartic process? There is no verifiable answer. There could not be one, nor does it appear anywhere that they see the same thing.

Furthermore, granted that MOUTH is a full character, in spite of her metonymical body (a human body reduced to a mouth, and a body defined as "machine", 380), does MOUTH experience cathartically her helplessness and compulsion to speak?

Before answering we should remember that the reduction of the human body to a mouth does not signify the abolition of corporeality (as can be argued for *The Unnamable*), but reproduces the symbolism of a traditional interpretation of speech as the distinctive feature of 'humanness', and alludes to an interpretation of 'mouth' as 'vagina'.

<sup>8</sup> While talking to Ion, the rhapsode, Socrates explains: ". . . this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power, which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet, but most people call 'Heraclea Stone'. For this stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone, and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone. In the same manner also the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain" (Plato 2014: 421).

There is no indication that MOUTH interprets her condition with compassion or terror, nor with any other feeling; she just feels, albeit sometimes "insentient" and "feeling so dulled" (377); she 'talks', with no cathartic transformation of feeling, no purging of emotions. However, her story might be cathartic, inasmuch as she reflects on the process of speaking while she delivers her speech: "when suddenly she realized ... words were— ... what? . . . realized ... words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... so long since it had sounded ... then finally had to admit ... could be none other ... than her own ..." (379).

So, MOUTH is definitely dramatic, but is she cathartically tragic? I think she is purely dramatic because she does not perceive herself (as AUDITOR and audience do – to some extent, at least), nor does she question or understand the cause of her being helpless: she just 'is' helpless. It is for the audience to investigate the nature of such disquieting helplessness (and I will provide some interpretations of it in what follows). The onlookers, audience and AUDITOR (the latter designated by way of a proper name as a listener in the script), are exposed to the unstoppable uttering of a 'pure' narrative emotion, plausibly MOUTH's.

Does her lack of awareness arouse compassion in the audience and the AUDITOR? Or is not the audience just startled (both surprised and frightened) by the sustained verbal flow of the protagonist's speech act? Catharsis is for all of them a strong dramatic possibility, albeit different, and fuelled by her story content, and by her speech performance. The audience probably feels more of a desire to assess when the verbal flow will finally stop, than compassion, and is mesmerized by the contortions of the mouth, and is irritated, as Beckett himself suggested: "I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience" (qtd in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 411). Irritation may correspond to a form of purging; in fact it could be an emotional mechanism producing the reconfiguration of the audience's understanding of MOUTH's words and identity. Note that, the proper name (MOUTH) is constructed on a descriptive naming (mouth), so it is not really a 'proper' name. In this way, the audience can become another character in the play, as AUDIENCE.

Catharsis becomes problematic, because the cathartic feeling is irritation (a sort of ironical purging from indifference and boredom). Also the scopic pleasure of the seers (AUDITOR and AUDIENCE) is tricky; in the long run, their voyeurism is turned into a curse: seeing MOUTH, and the audience's seeing AUDITOR's seeing, is an 'obligation' to see. That is why voyeurism is irritating. AUDITOR might not see,<sup>9</sup> both literally and psychologically, but

<sup>9</sup> Readers do not exactly know what the AUDITOR sees: a full body or just the mouth? At any rate, what s/he sees (and understands) remains unspecified.



he certainly hears, and thus “visualizes” a character-subject. This obligation to see is somewhat similar to the Beckettian “obligation to express” defined in *Three Dialogues*: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett 1984: 139). Is there a cathartic possibility in an unavoidable obligation?

The public sees the AUDITOR seeing something, and cannot avoid seeing mouth/MOUTH. Is there catharsis with no freedom? And, if so, is there a liberation presumably connected to this catharsis?

Strictly speaking, AUDITOR, with his/her feeling of “helpless compassion” (Beckett 1990: 375) is not a tragic character, nor is MOUTH, an “insentient” (377) protagonist of her own tragedy. Her lack of identity, i.e. her ‘not I’ poses the question: can a character lacking identity be tragic for herself? Kathleen O’Gorman has suggested that “the theatrical frame . . . constructs the spectator as a voyeur” (1993: 36). To what extent is this a cathartic condition? AUDITOR and audience are on the same level of theatricality; they are caught in a scopic performance of dramatic proportions, but MOUTH is the ultimate character, a powerful one, in which the very distinction between tragedy and its representation becomes evident.

In this sense, the tragedy of a dramatic ontology can for a cathartic minute be suggested to the audience as being different from a theatrical form.

#### d) *Structures of Plot*

With regard to the structural components of the tragic plot in terms of beginning, middle and end, it is worth recalling again an Aristotelian definition:

Tragedy is the representation of a complete i.e. whole action which has some magnitude (for there can be a whole with no magnitude). A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion. . . . Well-constructed plots, then, should neither begin from a random point nor conclude at a random point. (Aristotle 1987: 1448a.7)

Furthermore, Aristotle defines beginning and conclusion as follows: “A beginning is that which itself does not of necessity follow something else . . . A conclusion, conversely, is that which itself naturally follows something else, either of necessity or for the most part, but has nothing else after it” (ibid.).

*Not I* clearly dismisses these imperatives: as I noted, there is no magnitude of heroic actions, nor a high tone of narration, and, furthermore, there is no beginning, no middle and no end prescribed by the script, but just an unstoppable flow of words. Salivation, the last vestige of corporeality, remains the minimal residue of the link between body and language in the play.

Beckett’s stage directions indicate a non-beginning and a non-end, but prescribe the continuing of a voice, even beyond intelligibility: “As house

*lights down MOUTH's voice continues unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds*" (Beckett 1990: 376).

This structural feature of a non-ending verbal flow, as opposed to the actual end of the play in the theatre, highlights the implications of theatrical and dramatic components of any play. In *Not I* there is an end: when the light comes on, it signals that people may leave the theatre, so this is a theatrical ending. But there is no dramatic ending to the play since the monologue could continue till the death of the protagonist. This poses a tragic question: does death contain life or does life contain death?

Regarding the beginning ("*With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient into: // MOUTH: ... out ... into this world ...*", *ibid.*), we should note that the diacritic marks preceding the word "out" reiterate the presence of a breath-voice 'before' the first understandable word is uttered. In other words, the beginning has begun before the beginning. So: what is a Beckettian beginning?

At the level of plot, the word "out" indicates some sort of Heideggerian being 'thrown into the world', a being flung out of a preceding, albeit unknowable world. Thus we could talk of a pseudo-beginning, and, in post-modern terms we can call it a beginning with no origin, and not even *in medias res* (which could be understood if the subsequent 'acts' would explain the origin of the plot). As I will argue in the following paragraph, this beginning with no origin prepares the audience to understand "the buzzing" felt by MOUTH "all the time" (378).

A perfect specular parallelism links the above-mentioned "beginning-with-no-beginning", to an ending-with-no-end ("*Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up*", 383). The 'end' is not in the play, but in the theatre "as house lights up".

It is worth noticing that "*attention sufficient*" (376) is the feeling set by the script for Audience, before any other feeling is mentioned in the play, and before Audience can perceive in AUDITOR his/her "helpless compassion" (375). Attention is the condition required for perceiving a plot in an action with no beginning.

Somewhat ironically, the play accomplishes a major transgression of the Aristotelian definition of a "complete i.e. whole action", unless life is understood as a whole with no plot, as suggested by Barthes (1968) against the mythologies of bourgeois representation which make life into a destiny, or at least into an ordered plot. The lack of a beginning and of an end, indicates that life *per se* will always be an un-representable whole; as Derrida pointed out: "life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation" (1978: 234).

#### 4. The Ordinariness of Beckettian Tragedy

It is now time to return to the question implied in my opening quotation. In what sense, according to Beckett, can we say: "The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes"? The most plausible answer, albeit not fully explicative, seems to point to the fact that in all of the Beckettian works tragedy is an 'everyday normal', something inevitable and familiar, and, as such, not worthy of a special "fuss".

However, for most people, tragedy is understood as pertaining to some honourable and magnificent character stricken by some unforeseeable set of events; thus, it would not apply to the chronically deranged, nor to the full series of Beckettian characters, or, specifically, to the Irish lady protagonist of the story in *Not I*.<sup>10</sup> In Beckett life itself is tragic, but this is not a particularly original thought given that it has been developed since ancient Greece (by cynics and sceptics), and in Jewish wisdom (for example in *Qohelet*), and subsequently up to and beyond Leopardi, who is mentioned, more or less explicitly, by Beckett himself.<sup>11</sup>

In short: it is the very condition of living that brings about tragedy, doom and "aches", and making a "fuss" about it would not change a thing. Tragedy is simply the lifelong atonement for being born.

No doubt all humans are afflicted by "tupenny aches", but some are severely aggrieved, such as MOUTH; their condition does not differ, except in degree, from the general tragic reality of human life. In other words, tragedy is actually a general human condition, but some are more affected than others. In his essay on Bram van Velde Beckett summarized it (ironically) as follows: "There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemed commodities" (Beckett 1984: 143).

<sup>10</sup> Most critics of *Not I* do not express a sustained sympathetic compassion for the woman of the tale; the many levels of her deprivation (physical, psychological, social, etc.), are usually highlighted but not as having a specifically personal or dominant importance in the play. Interestingly, discussions of aesthetic features, formal and symbolic, locate the focus of attention away from 'the tragic' itself in the story, or away from the discussion of this play as 'tragedy'. See the important contributions by Enoch Brater about minimalism in the theatre in Brater 1987 and 1974; Lawley 1983 (about mouth as metonymy); Zeifman 1976 (AUDITOR as a double of Mouth); Worth 1986 (Auditor as judge); Gontarski 1985 (Auditor as internal addressee); Knowlson and Pilling 1980 (AUDITOR as representing the audience); Critchley 1998; Locatelli 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Beckett alludes to, and quotes Leopardi in his essays *Dante... Bruno... Vico... Joyce* and in *Proust*; he also refers to him in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, in *Molloy* and in *How it is*. For an accurate and critical mapping see Caselli 1996.

The difference between "being short of" and "being without" seems particularly interesting in relation to *Not I*, a play that represents a twofold understanding of tragedy: the general (life itself, ending with the achievement of the "without", i.e. with death), and the specific ("the being short of" characteristic of all human lives). The theatre, however, even more than a script, cannot represent or perform the pure "without", as much as one's own death is 'the un-representable' to its subject.<sup>12</sup> In other words, language cannot register (beyond a collective and symbolic conceptualisation), a pure "without", and is bound to the "being short of" in its spectacles.

a) *Is 'the Ordinary' General or Particular?*

Can language represent suffering apart from conceptualizations (i.e. generalizations)? Can it display a human suffering subjectively unique?

Basically, we can understand suffering in general, and MOUTH's suffering in particular, but only as an instance or an example of previously verbalized notions of suffering (including those in relation to the intra-psychic verbalization of our own suffering). Catharsis would then be, in a postmodern sense, not a purging of feeling, but the possibility of transforming our conceptualizations of suffering.

Furthermore, if suffering cannot show itself without a linguistic statement, then tragedy is a representation of an inevitable pain ordinarily belonging to the unutterable and inexpressible process of living and dying, understood by a 'pessimistic' tradition as an inevitable pain.

On a formal level, the variance between universality and particularity also brings back an old set of different questions: can there be tragedy without some form of universality? How could possibly the particularized subject and his/her ailments be representative of 'the tragic'? And: can specific ailments be tragic, and not just more spectacular than life?

In facing these questions today, we realize that if we classify *Not I* as a postmodernist play we should recall Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as the age of the end of "master-narratives", and consequently abolish or restrict a universal notion of tragedy, and make it applicable only to the particularity of infirmities, so that the representative (i.e. potentially universal) value of a personal doleful condition is impossible or unjustified.

And yet, we should also remember Antonin Artaud's defence of dramatic universality in his anti-bourgeois resistance to naturalistic representation: "The theater must make itself the equal of life – not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which CHARACTERS triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida raise the question of what it means to write about death, that is, about a non-experience of the I, see Blanchot and Derrida 2000.

is only a reflection" (1958: 116). Should tragedy be the play (both theatrical and ontological) of a "life which sweeps away human individuality"? Is "individual life" a non-object of tragedy? Once more, an artist's voice denounces a 'bourgeois' aesthetics, but more importantly, I think that Artaud's defence of universality must be understood as an anticipation of a post-human *episteme*, one in which the anthropocene is deeply challenged, if not altogether displaced as central to life in the universe. The particular human "tupenny aches" have to disappear in order for life as tragedy to appear. No space for 'master narratives' and no space for 'individual life': so where is the space for tragedy?

b) *Ordinary "I" = Ordinary Alienation.*

In *Not I* there is some form of generalized human empathy galvanized by MOUTH's story, even if the audience resists a projective identification with a character who is hardly representative of a universal human experience because of her particularly wretched situation. MOUTH is a deranged character, but her de-personalized utterances convey a deep philosophical questioning regarding how human subjectivity and consciousness are constructed.

Her insensate logorrhea, which bans her from acknowledging herself, simultaneously expresses for the onlookers her state of being 'alienated' but also the pervasiveness of logocentrism.

Both extremely powerless and lucid, MOUTH refuses "to relinquish third person" (Beckett 1990: 375); that means that she will not erase the insurmountable abyss that separates her from her words, her brain from her speech. As we have seen, corporeality produces speech: "her lips moving . . . and not alone the lips ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ..." (379), but the linguistic use of an 'I' would create an 'I' only as pure spectacle, as a grammatical 'person', and she utterly resists this universal form of identifying solidification. The price she pays for this extra-ordinary resistance is being unreservedly dysfunctional; she wins by showing the emptiness of the 'I', but she loses in denoting herself for AUDITOR and audience as an 'I' of no use, and ultimately as a literal 'not I'. The double bind of her condition exacerbates the social gravity of her refusal "to relinquish third person". Her refusal is simultaneously assertive and self-effacing and tragic; it is an ontological double bind: not using the 'I' is somehow a choice, but a choice that dissolves her into a 'Not-I'.

MOUTH is incapable of appropriating her own 'I', in spite of her unstoppable talking ("what? ... who? .. no! .. she!", 375). The audience is provoked when they see the discrepancy between linguistic designation and performance because of the failure of the sustained attempt to bridge the gap in MOUTH's speech. She shows that breath and speech (corporeality and language) are not enough to establish the consciousness of a self, nor

to grant linguistic mastery and control; she has no apparent power over what she says, but it is the power of language that speaks through her. This is the cathartic revelation: the audience sees her spoken by her speech and is profoundly upset in acknowledging that this is a general condition and not just her particular one.

Her verbal discharge is a vain attempt to put an end to the pervasiveness of linguistic inevitability which would design her as an 'I' to herself. In this case: "The master tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984: 112), that is: logocentrism cannot be put to an end by speech. This explains why her speech cannot stop.

MOUTH's resistance to the torturing condition of hearing a "buzzing" (Beckett 1990: 377ff.) which does not stop with her speech, is indicated by her narration: "whole brain begging ... something begging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop ... pause a moment ... if only for a moment ... and no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't ..." (380). In this passage, very clearly, desire ("begging") and language are breached: there is "no response", because the begging cannot be heard by the language that formulates it, and also because the brain cannot "make sense of it" (ibid.). Can the audience "make sense", i.e. understand, the pervasiveness of logocentrism? Can the audience make the logocentric buzzing stop? The required understanding can happen only through the refinement of attention, i.e. through a shift from the attention to what is said to the conditions of its saying. The attention to the conditions of possibility of speech highlights the inevitability of logocentrism beyond the contingency of utterance. This also reveals that the "buzzing" cannot stop, even if unheeded.

## 5. Who is the Author of the Words? The Tragedy of Logocentrism

The coexistence of resistance and passivity in the speech of a 'Not I' shows the tragedy of linguistic pervasiveness, and explains the ordinariness of a specific aspect of human tragedy. This is the conclusion of my reading of the play.

In my opinion, *Not I* illustrates the double bind of using language to defeat language, thus implying tragedy as a human linguistic condition, both ontological and existential. Tragedy, inscribed in the human predicament, is not a meta-physical state, but it is a concrete and linguistic condition (i.e. the way we understand our very existence and name feelings, sensations and thoughts). It is specific in the content of the tragic stories that the protagonist of *Not I* tells about her life of deprivation, of lack of love and comfort, of absence of faith. She tells the story of a life marked by poverty, illness and marginalization. Her pain is so abysmal that she can survive



only “drifting ... in and out of cloud ... but so dulled ... feeling ... feeling so dulled ...” (Beckett 1990: 377). Dullness is the only poison-remedy to soothe her pain: “she suddenly realized ... gradually realized ... she was not suffering ... imagine! .. not suffering! ..” (ibid.).

As Linda Ben-Zvi has noted, *Not I* is “a fifteen minute *tale* of birth, solitude, silence, fear, guilt, and loss”, but the tragedy is in “the image that underlies all other Beckett works: a mouth, unable to stop, unable to get ‘It’ right or ‘I’ acknowledged, attempting to talk itself – in this case herself – into sense, attempting in the process to find an author of the words and of the self, and failing both endeavors” (1992: 243; my emphasis). The impossibility of ‘talking herself into sense’ reveals not only her lack of agency, but also the failure of the search of “an author of the words”. There is no way of ‘talking anyone into sense’ because ‘a mouth’ (itself) and ‘MOUTH’ (herself) are displacing each other “in the process to find an author of the words”.

Is MOUTH’s logorrhea in search of an author tragic, or is it insensate? It bans her from acknowledging herself in the umbrella-figure of an ‘I’, but also expresses an astonishing resistance to the hegemony of the linguistic system. For the audience she is both a disturbed character within a pitiful tale, as well as the wrestling agonist relentlessly resisting the unseen linguistic force determining identity. And yet, through MOUTH’s verbal discharge, articulating both the impossibility to express and the obligation to express, the audience can come to acknowledge the pervasiveness of logocentrism.

Her particular logorrhea reflects a general human unavoidable condition: the one of being spoken by language, a language preceding us as an inarticulate “buzzing”: “for she could still hear the buzzing ... so-called ...” (Beckett 1990: 377). MOUTH’s words talk about the “buzzing” as something “so-called”. So what is a “so-called buzzing” (my emphasis)? I believe that this warning designation (“the buzzing ... so-called”), restricts the power of description, and ultimately exposes the simultaneously universal and particular condition of being condemned to speak while spoken by language, once humans are thrown into life.

Language says too much and too little simultaneously (MOUTH’s speech shows it); it works apart from a self-expression, and in her case it evades the subject and provides no remedy for human “tupenny aches”. Actually, the compulsion to speak is itself one of the many aches.

In his reading of Artaud’s work Derrida highlights philosophically what MOUTH theatrically tells us: “Consciousness of speech, that is to say, consciousness in general is not knowing who speaks at the moment when, and in the place where, I proffer my speech” (Derrida 1978: 176). This consciousness of “not knowing who speaks” in the speech of an ‘I-speaking subject’ is expressed in *Not I* by showing the fact that the grammatical subject al-



ways forecloses the possibility of access to the phenomenological subject. The recurrence of a series of tragic repetitions: "... what? .. who? .. no! .. she!" illustrates a pattern of questioning progressively beyond the contingent and the referential.

After obsessively returning to these compelling questions and radical negation ("what? .. who? .. no!"), MOUTH shows us that we "slip into the nothing that separates me from my words . . . so that having found them, I am certain that I have always already been of them" (Derrida 1978: 177). So the 'I' is a 'she!' always dissociated by the determination of speech. This radical quality of dispossession and withdrawal is not exclusively typical of MOUTH, but inscribes all human verbal interaction. Communication works because no 'without' (no absence of language) can interrogate it. Even if communication is a staging of the unsaid in what is being said, the attention to the content of what one says usually prevents the vision of "speech as it eludes itself" (ibid.).

As we have seen, we can read the very first words of *Not I* as the beginning of life and as the beginning of speech ("... out ... into this world ...", Beckett 1990: 376). The dots, *qua* diacritic marks (i.e. "..."), compounded with the Beckettian stage directions, are not only a sign of the fact that something has already started (as I said), but they also highlight the material and verbal texture of the utterance. The dots translate into breath/voice, so that glossopoeia appears in all its signifying force: "Glossopoeia, which is neither an imitative language nor a creation of names, takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet discourse" (Derrida 1978: 240). In the oscillation between "shout" and "discourse" lies the locus of the telling: "[she] ... found herself in the dark ... and if not exactly ... insentient ... insentient ... for she could still hear the buzzing ... so-called ... in the ears ..." (Beckett 1990: 377). The "buzzing" is the discerning residuum that makes her "not exactly ... insentient". Thus, the spectator-reader is made to realise that the beginning of the story and of the play is a tragic verbal *incipit*, not quite a tale "full of sound and fury", and yet one "told by an idiot" (Shakespeare 1988: 5.5.25-6).

Tragedy is real and ordinary, and language makes it so: "... all that ... vain reasonings ... till another thought ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but- ... what? .. the buzzing? .. yes .. all the time the buzzing ... so-called in the ears ... though of course actually ... not in the ears at all ..." (Beckett 1990: 377-8). The "buzzing" is and is not corporeal; logocentrism is and is not in the ears and in the brain; it is ontological.

Tragedy is so normal that the protagonist "indeed could not remember ... off-hand ...when she had suffered less ..." (377), and yet, the "fuss" is about the unstoppable verbal flow over which there is no human control: "... and now this stream ... not catching the half of it ... not the quarter ...

no idea ... what she was saying ... imagine! .. no idea what she was saying!" (379). Language comes before the I can be recognized as appropriate to the self: "... all dead still but for the buzzing . . . who? .. no! .. she! . . . realized ... words were coming ... imagine!.. words were coming ... a voice she did not recognize ... at first ..." (ibid.). "Words are coming" regardless of their use: "... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ... even to herself ... never out loud ... but not completely" (382).

The tragedy resides in the wrestling with logocentrism, illustrated as a corporeal reality but also as the condition of being human: "... the tongue in the mouth ... all those contortions without which ... no speech possible ... and yet in the ordinary way ... not felt at all ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ... the whole being hanging on its words ..." (379).

Even when one speaks without intention or purpose ("[words] not felt at all ..."), i.e. without adhering to, or comprehending what one is saying, the verbal flow speaks. If logocentrism is made visible through the cracks of speech, it speaks a 'not-I', i.e. a subject displaced because no longer "... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ...". Rather, this 'not-I' sees its "whole being ... hanging on its words ..." (ibid.). The visibility of logocentrism is the birth of the 'not-I'. As Lévinas pointed out: "The 'I' is the very crisis of the being of a being [*l'être de l'étant*] in the human" (1999: 28).

Beckett gives many names to logocentrism: "buzzing" in *Not I*; "voice" in *Company* ("a voice comes to one in the dark", 1996: 3), and in *The Unnamable* he illustrates it as "it": "[I]t issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I cannot prevent it, from rearing me, racking me, assailing me" (Beckett 1960: 358).<sup>13</sup> Logocentrism is the not-I dilemma; it is the quandary of linguistic hegemony, which is unavoidable, even when there is "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett 1984: 139).

Expiration and inspiration (signalled by the suspension dots, i.e. diacritic marks, in the script, and by breath in the performance), are indispensable in the production of speech, but they are also expiations, i.e. they are both punishment and compensations for a linguistic ontology (a human condition) that cannot be repaired. If being born is 'seeing the light' (MOUTH is exposed to "a ray of light [that] came and went ... came and went", Beckett 1990: 217), hearing the "buzzing" is the awareness of having accessed language, and never to leave it. "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate".<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> On the development of this theme in Beckett's "Second Trilogy" (i.e. *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstword Ho*), see Locatelli 1990.

<sup>14</sup> "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" (Alighieri 1888, Third Canto, l. 9, and 1988: 57).

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## *Nashe's (Self-)Portrait of a Town*

### Abstract

Thomas Nashe took refuge in Yarmouth after his involvement in *The Isle of Dogs* scandal. In the coastal town he found hospitality and in 1598, during Lent, he started working on his pamphlet *Lenten Stuff*: an encomium of Yarmouth and of its major resource, the herring, in which history and myth are freely intermingled. With a focus upon the relation between that play and that later mock-encomium, the aim of this paper is to analyse and discuss Nashe's peculiar mythical method as a means of celebrating the town and, above all, his own writing.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Nashe; encomiastic literature; parody

Around 29 BC, Virgil was commissioned to write a poem celebrating the heroism, greatness and prosperity of Rome. By that time, the town was dominating a vast empire ruled by its emperor Octavianus Augustus.

Virgil's task was to compose a national epic in Homeric style that would link the mythical and heroic age depicted by his Greek predecessor to the founding of the town and the present Augustan era. Rome already had a history of success and prosperity, but Augustus wanted to consolidate his position by creating a myth that would magnify the origins of the town and *his* origins: the *gens Iulia* (Bringmann and Schäfer 2002).

It is the same old story. When nations reach the peak of their power, they do not make recourse to historiography but to mythopoeia, for historical truth might reveal that "this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth", to quote Conrad's Marlow's meditation on a ship at the sea-reach of the Thames (Conrad 1999: 33). Historiography, in fact, might disclose unpleasant circumstances, such as barbarity, savageness, brutality, and it could be quite embarrassing and unbecoming for civilized people to acknowledge that their ancestors were unrefined and humble beings, whose behavioural standards were far from being heroic or noble.

Powerful nations take for granted that they have the assurance of a sort of eternal safe conduct pass to an a-historical dimension, in which they do not stand under the law of the historical principle of – in Samuel Johnson's words – "original savageness" (1825: 5.612), on the one hand, and of future decline or decadence, on the other. They seem to ignore Herodotus's words: "those [cities] which in old times were great have for the most part become small, while those that were in my own time great used in former times to be small: I know that human prosperity never continues steadfast" (1890: 1.5).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ αὐτῶν σμικρὰ γέγονε, τὰ δὲ ἐπ' ἐμεῦ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρά. τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ὧν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην οὐδαμὰ ἐν τῷ τῷ μένουσαν" (Herodotus 2011: 4).

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When celebrating the glory of a town, of a state, of a nation, it is more expedient for those in power to omit historical facts and to tell a story in which the real diachronic perspective of events disappears, to be replaced by a legendary/mythological prospect: a cyclic self-renewal, where at least one, possibly identical, progeny remains undifferentiated and capable of passing down wisdom, heroism and other ideal and eternal values to their natural heirs, thus linking two or more cultures in a sort of synchronic and a-temporal dimension in which past, present and future intermingle, as we can see from this passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Now turn your eyes this way and behold these people,  
your own Roman people. Here is Caesar and all the line of Iulus  
soon to venture under the sky's great arch.  
Here is the man, he's here! Time and again  
you've heard his coming promised—  
Caesar Augustus! Son of a god, he will bring back the Age of Gold  
to the Latian fields where Saturn once held sway.  
(2006: 6.788-94)<sup>2</sup>

In this a-historical dimension, even mediaeval Britain can be imbued with the very same nobility of Troy, thanks to Aeneas's nephew, Brutus, "the first king of the Britons" ("primo rege Britonum"), and to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*:

The island was then called Albion, and inhabited by none but a few giants. Notwithstanding this, the pleasant situation of the places, the plenty of rivers abounding with fish, and the engaging prospect of its woods, made Brutus and his company very desirous to fix their habitation in it. They therefore passed through all the provinces, forced the giants to fly into the caves of the mountains, and divided the country among them according to the directions of their commander. After this they began to till the ground and build houses, so that in a little time the country looked like a place that had been long inhabited. At last Brutus called the island after his own name Britain, and his companions Britons; for by these means he desired to perpetuate the memory of his name. From whence afterwards the language of the nation, which at first bore the name of Trojan, or rough Greek, was called British. (1999: 1.1; 1.16)<sup>3</sup>

The legendary, poetical way of celebrating the glory of towns and nations is, at the same time, a sort of self-celebration of the writer who glorifies them. Indeed, the

<sup>2</sup> "Huc geminas nunc flecte acies, hanc adspice gentem / Romanosque tuos. Hic Caesar et omnis Iuli / Progenies, magnum coeli ventura sub axem. / Hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis, / Augustus Caesar, Divi genus: aurea condet / Saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva / Saturno quondam" (Vergilius 1969).

<sup>3</sup> "Erat tunc nomen insulae Albion, quae a nemine, exceptis paucis gygantibus, inhabitabatur, amoeno tamen situ locorum et piscosorum fluminum copia, nemoribusque praelecta, affectum habitandi Bruto sociisque inferebat. Peragratu ergo quibusque provinciis, repertos gygantes in cavernas montium fugant, patriamque donante duce sortiuntur. Agros colere incipiunt, domos aedificare, ita ut brevi tempore terram ad aevo habitatam censeret. Denique Brutus de nomine suo insulam Britanniam, sociosque suos Britones appellat; volebat enim ex derivatione nominis memoriam habere perpetuam. Unde postmodum loquela gentis, quae prius Trojana sive curvum Graecum noncupabatur. Britannica dicta est" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1854: 3, 18).



connection with illustrious ancestors is felt both by the powerful people who commission the work and by the poet himself who creates this connection thanks to his imagination and poetic ability: Augustus considers himself to be the legitimate descendant of a great hero, Aeneas, and maintains that the town he rules is 'another Troy'; Virgil considers himself to be the legitimate disciple of a great poet, Homer, and maintains that his work is a new *Iliad* or a new *Odyssey*.

Another time, another place: 1598, Lent time, Thomas Nashe's primary concern is to produce an encomium of Yarmouth in Norfolk.

The year before he had taken refuge in the coastal town after his involvement in *The Isle of Dogs* scandal. The satirical play, co-written with Ben Jonson and performed by the Pembroke's Men, had offended the City authorities of London. Jonson and two actors of the company had been jailed (Forse 1993: 167-8), while Nashe had fled, in order to escape the same legal consequences:

The strange turning of *The Isle of Dogs* from a comedy to a tragedy two summers past, with the troublesome stir which happened about it, is a general rumour that hath filled all England, and such a heavy cross laid upon me as had well near confounded me. . . . That infortunate imperfect embrion of my idle hours, *The Isle of Dogs* before mentioned, breeding unto me such bitter throws in the teeming as it did, and the tempests that arose at his birth so astonishing outrageous and violent as if my brain had been conceived of another Hercules, I was so terrified with my own increase, like a woman long travailing to be delivered of a monster, that it was no sooner born but I was glad to run from it. (Nashe 1972: 377-8)

He had hidden out in Yarmouth, where he had been kindly welcomed:

*post varios casus*, variant knight-errant adventures, and outroads and inroads, at Great Yarmouth in Norfolk I arrived in the latter end of autumn. Where, having scarce looked about me, my presaging mind said to itself: '*Hic Favonius serenus est, hic Auster imbricus*; this is the predestinate fit place for Pierce Peniless to set up his staff in.' Therein not much diameter to my divining hopes did the event sort itself, for six weeks first and last, under that predominant constellation of Aquarius, or Jove's Nectar-filler, took I up my repose, and there met with such kind entertainment and benign hospitality when I was *Una litera plusquam medicus*, as Plautus saith, and not able to live to myself with my own juice. (378-9)

"My luck was", he goes on, "to bend my course to such a courteous-compassionate clime as Yarmouth" (380), and so he resolves to write an encomium of the town and its inhabitants: *Lenten Stuff*.

It has been pointed out that that lost play and *Lenten Stuffe* are in fact connected in many respects, not only because *The Isle of Dogs* incident forced Nashe into exile at Yarmouth, but also because of a disingenuous attitude common to both works (see e.g. Bennett 2014). Hadfield noted that, despite the seemingly humble tone of Nashe in the above-quoted passage, the fact that the "comedy" was turned into a "tragedy" was no accident and the play "must have insulted many of the great and good" (2011: 76). Here I will argue that *Lenten Stuff* responded to that lost play also in other ways concerning the rhetorical and stylistic strategies aimed at both self-defence and self-celebration.



*Lenten Stuffle* begins with a survey of the history of the town – “I purpose not . . . to leap over the laudable pedigree of Yarmouth” (383) – but he soon realizes that the task is not an easy one, because of the scarcity of historical documents (only two documents exist, i. e. “a worm-eaten parchment”, 384, and “a chronographical Latin table, which they have hanging up in their Guildhall”, 386) which reflects the irrelevance of the town.

Moreover, Nashe is not a professional historian. He is a poet and he knows that the best way to exalt and ennoble a place is to turn to myth, following the tradition of “that good old blind bibber of Helicon”, as he jokingly calls Homer (379).

Like Virgil for Rome, he wants to provide a mythological background for Yarmouth, and, to do so, he refers to an ancient legend. According to the Elizabethans, this is the story of “the first two lovers that ever muse shrined in the temple of memory”, written by a venerable “divine and eternal” author: Musaeus.<sup>4</sup>

“Let me see,” Nashe asks in *Lenten Stuffle*, “hath anybody in Yarmouth heard of Leander and Hero, of whom divine Musaeus sung, and a diviner muse than him, Kit Marlowe?” (Nashe 1972: 424)

Then he goes on telling the whole story of the two unfortunate young lovers. Hero, a virgin priestess of Aphrodite who dwells in Sestos, is seen, during a festival, by Leander, a handsome man from Abydos, the town on the opposite side of the Hellespont. They fall in love. However, to conceal their passion from Hero’s parents, Leander has to swim every night across the strait to visit her. To guide him safely, Hero places a burning torch on the top of the tower where she lives. One stormy night the light is extinguished and Leander eventually gets lost and drowns. When Hero sees his body washed ashore, she drowns herself likewise.

A famous myth indeed, but what is the connection with Yarmouth? Virgil could refer to the old tradition of Aeneas as the cultural ancestor of Roman upper classes, but there were no traditional associations between Hero and Leander and the English town.

Moreover, at the time of Augustus and Virgil Rome was *caput mundi*, while Yarmouth was – both culturally and historically – an unimportant town at the time of Nashe, and the connection with a serious myth might be inappropriate as well as ridiculous. It would be inadequate to create a pompous pedigree for Yarmouth, a town that was known only for its herrings and its food: again, the red herring.

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is from George Chapman’s Prefatory epistle to his continuation of Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (Marlowe 1971: 41). We now know that this Musaeus was an Alexandrian poet of the fifth century AD, but his venerability was the result of the erroneous Renaissance belief that he was the mythical Musaeus, a supposed ancestor of Homer: for instance, Sir Philip Sidney writes in his *Defence of Poesie*: “Let learned Greece in any of his manifold Sciences, be able to shew me one booke before Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod” (Sidney 1968: 4); while in the title page of his translation of *Hero and Leander* (1616) George Chapman writes that Musaeus “was a renowned Greek Poet, born at Athens”, who “lived in the time of Orpheus”, the very father of poetry, and that he was the author of the first of all books: *The Divine Poem of Musaeus. First of all books. Translated according to the Originall* (Chapman 1875: 94). In Renaissance belief, the author of *Hero and Leander* was mistaken for “the best of Poets” whom Aeneas meets in the Fields of Elysium in *The Aeneid*: “Musaeus first, who holds the center of that huge throng, / his shoulders rearing high as they gaze up toward him” (Virgil 2006: 6. 667-8) (“Musaeum ante omnes – medium nam plurima turba / Hunc abet, atque humeris extantem suspicit altis”, Vergilius 1969).

Yarmouth was neither Rome nor London. In their works, Virgil and Geoffrey of Monmouth were allowed to make hyperbolic references to the heroic tradition, because the places they were celebrating, by the time they were writing, had already reached heroic status. Nashe cannot "praise Yarmouth so rantantly" (392), he cannot "break out into a boundless race of oratory, in shrill trumpeting and concelibrating the royal magnificence of her government", because that would be preposterous and "would be a theme displeasing to the grave modesty of the discreet present magistrates" (383).

He, therefore, harks back to another classical tradition, that is, the Ovidian one of metamorphoses,<sup>5</sup> and adds a sequel to the story, in which the gods regret the tragic end of the two young lovers and try to make amends for their deaths:

The dint of destiny could not be repealed in the reviving of Hero and Leander, but their heavenly-hoods in their synod thus decreed, that, for they were either of them sea-borderers and drowned in the sea, still to the sea they must belong, and be divided in habitation after death as they were in their lifetime. Leander, for that in a cold dark testy night he had his passport to Charon, they terminated to the unquiet cold coast of Iceland, where half the year is nothing but murk-light, and to that fish translated him which of us is termed ling. Hero, for that she was pagled and tympanized, and sustained two losses under one, they footballed their heads together, and protested to make the stem of her loins of all fishes the flaunting Fabian or Palmerin of England, which is Cadwallader Herring, and, as their meetings were but seldom, and not so oft as welcome, so but seldom should they meet in the heel of the week at the best men's tables, upon Fridays and Saturdays, the holy time of Lent exempted, and then they might be at meat and meal for seven weeks together. (429)

Hero's old nurse undergoes a transformation as well, and becomes a condiment for fish: "And hence it is that . . . Hero and Leander, the red herring and ling, never come to the board without mustard, their waiting-maid" (430).

It might appear disrespectful to "divine" Musaeus, but Nashe advocates the value of competing traditions in literature – for instance, he does not agree with Sidney, that "in it selfe antiquity be venerable" (Sidney 1968: 4), and maintains that his friend Christopher, or Kit, Marlowe, who had given his own version of the story, is "a diviner muse" than Musaeus (424). Moreover, his comic sequel of the myth allows him to connect it with Yarmouth in two ways: from the historical and economical point of view, since the herring had been and was (and still is) the major resource of the town, and from a literary point of view, as the comic reworking of a serious legend – that is, the deflation of myth – appears to be the most appropriate means of relating to an undistinguished place: "In *Lenten Stuff*. . . Nashe assures the reader that prose can record the economy of the world, and create its own mythic economy, and that the two can coexist without doing violence against each other" (Barbour 1993: 110).

<sup>5</sup> In *Lenten Stuff*, Nashe also identifies with Ovid emotionally: he compares his current plight of exile to that of the Roman writer, who had been sent by Augustus away from Rome and into exile (*relegatio*) in a remote province on the Black Sea: "I may justly complain with Ovid, *Anchora iam nostram non tenet ulla ratem*, my state is so tossed and weather-beaten that it hath now no anchor-hold left to cleave unto" (380).

To celebrate his un-heroic town, Nashe develops a literary genre in which the allure of myth and the mythologizing of reality are preserved, but the scale is drastically reduced thanks to the reworking of parody. The essentials of his method may be explained in that he recalls the tradition of paradoxical encomium of trivial and/or odd things and mock-epic (Brown 2004: 83-4; Scott-Warren 2005: 97; Andersen 2013: 45-62), starting from the *Margites*, also known as *The Battle of Frogs and Mice* (the lost mock epic attributed to Homer by Aristotle in his *Poetics*) and then listing a long catalogue of objects that have been mockingly praised by different authors in time: the flea, the hazel-nut, the grasshopper, the butterfly, the parrot, the popinjay, sodomy, the strumpet errant, the gout, the sciatica, folly, and so on:

The application of this whole catalogue of waste authors is no more but this: *Quot capita tot sententiae* (so many heads, so many whirligigs). And if all these have tterly-ginked it so frivolously of they recked not what, I may *cum gratia et privilegio* pronounce it, that a red herring is wholesome in a frosty morning, and rake up some few scattered syllables together in the exornation and polishing of it. (405)

Nashe confesses that “it is [his] true vein to be *tragicus Orator*” (376). In this specific case, however, he has to mix the tragic with the comic, Hero and Leander with a herring and a ling. Here is the full title of the work:

*Nashe's Lenten Stuff*  
CONTAINING  
The Description and first  
Procreation and Increase of the Town of  
Great Yarmouth in Norfolk  
With a new play never played before,  
of the praise of the  
RED HERRING  
Fit of all Clerks of Noblemen's  
kitchens to be read; and not unnecessary  
by all serving men that have short  
board-wages to be remembered.  
(371)

In Nashe's culinary terms, we may say that he revises a literary recipe – that of the traditional, serious encomium – by adding his personal, comic ingredient: “Now you must accept of it as the place serves, and, instead of comfits and sugar to strew him [this Marine Magnifico] with, take well in worth a farthing worth of flour to white him over and wamble him in, and I having no great pieces to discharge for his benvenue, or welcoming in, with this volley of Rhapsodies or small shot he must be pacified” (401-2).

In short, to imbue the town with a former glory, Nashe resorts to a conventional austere literary paradigm solidified in tradition, but reworked through parodic displacement, following the tradition of Renaissance paradoxical literature (Cole 1966: 269). In so doing, he produces, despite comic deflation, his own original encomium, in which the real fish that nourishes the Yarmouthians and the fish symbolically and metaphorically transfigured by poetic imagination and discourse are the

focal point of a mythopoeic work. It is a work written in a magnificent prose style full of witty linguistic neologisms and sophisticated rhetorical devices that endows a town regarded as worthless with the merit of being treated with the same literary care and artfulness as it would be in serious narratives; a work which will provide, according to Nashe's optimistic vein, a literary model worthy of future emulation:

some of the crumbs of it (like the crumbs in a bushy beard after a great banquet) will remain in my papers to be seen when I am dead and under ground; from the bare perusing of which, infinite posterities of hungry poets shall receive good refreshing, even as Homer by Galataeon was pictured vomiting in a basin in the temple that Ptolomy Philopater erected to him, and the rest of the succeeding poets after him greedily lapping up what he disgorged. (379)

And indeed, a similar parodic method will be adopted by other authors, such as Fielding (who, in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, affirms the role of parody in framing his new kind of romance or "comic epic poem in prose", that is, the novel) and Alexander Pope (who wants to align his poetry with ancient epic models in order to portray the aristocratic society of his time. His world, however, is no more inhabited by heroes and it would be indeed improper – according to the neoclassical rule of decorum – to depict it as if it were such, with great gods, noble deeds and in solemn terms. So, Pope parodically reworks the traditional form and subject matter, and the rape of Helen of Troy becomes *The Rape of [a] Lock*) – by the way, Joyce will do the same with his parody of the *Odyssey*, in which an ordinary man, Leopold Bloom, becomes the modern alternative to the Homeric Ulysses in an age of moral and cultural decadence (Wells 2015: 20).

The value of *Lenten Stuff*, however, does not lie only in its originality and possible relevance for English literature. As is often the case with parody, the dialectical antithesis between past and present works involves a critical process and a meta-fictional reflection on the genre itself and on literary creation in general (Billi 1993), which, in this case, manifest themselves in the attempt to unmask the artificiality of the traditional, serious conventions of the encomium and of literary forms:

at the first sight of the top-gallant towers of Yarmouth, . . . my muse was ardently inflamed to do it some right; and how to bring it about fitter I knew not than in the praise of the red herring, whose proper soil and nursery it is. But this I must give you to wit. . . . Of my note-books and books else here in the country I am bereaved, whereby I might enamel and hatch-over this device more artificially and masterly, and attire it in his true orient varnish and tincture . . . Had I my topics by me . . . , I might haps marshal my terms in better array, and bestow such costly coquery on this Marine Magnifico as you would prefer him before tart and galingale, which Chaucer preheminentest encomionizeth above all junktries or confectionaries whatsoever. (Nashe 1972: 401-2)

While complaining about his exile – he is now writing *Lenten Stuff* in an unspecified place during Lent time –, Nashe denounces the artificiality of the literary process: that is, the ability of poets to fill the gaps of history, "artificially and masterly", thanks to the power of their imagination and invention. They fabricate a world of their own creation where anything is *alchemically* possible: where, for

instance, a common, dark-skinned fish becomes the “golden-coated herring”, “the golden Hesperides red herring” (423, 457), the heir of the mythical Hero, *the first girl celebrated in the first of all books*:

How many be there in the world that childishly deprave alchemy, and cannot spell the first letter of it! In the black book of which ignorant band of scorners it may be I am scorned up with the highest. If it be, I must entreat them to wipe me out, for the red herring hath lately been my ghostly father to convert me to their faith; the *probatum est* of whose transfiguration *ex Luna in Solem*, from his dusky tin hue into a perfect golden blandishment, only by the foggy smoke of the grossest kind of fire that is, illumines my speculative soul, what much more, not sophisticate or superficial effects, but absolute essential alterations of metals, there may be made by an artificial repurified flame. (451)

The poet is a kind of alchemist who transmutes a base metal into a precious one, dissolving and exalting, still “artificially and masterly”, the otherwise mediocre, trivial, un-heroic reality.

In his *Defence of Poesie*, Sir Philip Sidney had praised the poet’s ability to produce a better world than that created by nature: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich Tapistry as diverse Poets have done, neither with so pleasaunt rivers, fruitfull trees, sweete smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely: her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden” (1968: 8). Similarly, as Nashe remarks in *Lenten Stuff*, poets, through their “alchemical” art of imagination and rhetorical artifices and devices, recast our ordinary, historical reality *into* an archetypal imaginative shape. They write “volumes of immortality” in which the phenomenal world can achieve the highest degree of idealization which is the eternal, mythical dimension pertaining to stories of great symbolic depth:

That good old blind bibber of Helicon [*id est* Homer], I wot well, came a-begging to one of the chief cities of Greece, and promised them vast corpulent volumes of immortality if they would bestow upon him but a tender out-brother’s annuity of mutton and broth, and a pallet to sleep on; and with derision they rejected him. Whereupon he went to their enemies with the like proffer, who used him honourably, and whom he used so honourably that to this day, though it be three thousand year since, their name and glory flourish green in men’s memory through his industry. (379)

For this reason, poets should not be despised or prosecuted. Rather, they should be held in high esteem and praised for their work or “industry”. In *Lenten Stuff*, as in other works,<sup>6</sup> Nashe complains about the often indigent and wretched condition of poets – “bounty is bankrupt . . . that poetry, if it were not a trick to please my Lady, would be excluded out of Christian burial” (374) – and, above all, about the common

<sup>6</sup> In *Pierce Pennilesse*, for instance, whose opening lines read: “Having spent many years in studying how to live, and lived a long time without money, having tired my youth with folly, and surfeited my mind with vanity, I began at length to look back to repentance, and address my endeavours to prosperity. But all in vain I sat up late, and rose early, contended with the cold, and conversed with scarcity: for all my labours turned to loss, my vulgar Muse was despised and neglected, my pains not regarded, or slightly rewarded, and I myself, in prime of my best wit, laid open to poverty” (Nashe 1972: 51-2).

misinterpretations of their works. He himself had just experienced the dangers and distress caused by the misinterpretations of his latest play, *The Isle of Dogs*, and we might reasonably infer that the gallimaufry of intertexts and the abundance of literary artifices of *Lenten Stuff* function both as a defensive posture against those misinterpreters (Hutson 1989: 246-8; Kendrick 2004: 238-87; Mukherjee 2015: 57-8) and as a strategy of diversion designed to hide the real object of his praise:

what with these lawyers and self-conceited misinterpreters, so long that my red herring, which was hot broiling on the coals, is waxed stark cold for want of blowing. Have with them for a riddle or two, only to set their wits a-nibbling and their job-bernowls a-working, and so good night to their signiories, but with this indictment and caution: that, though there be neither rhyme nor reason in it (as by my good will there shall not), they, according to their accustomed gentle favours, whether I will or no, shall supply it with either, and run over all the peers of the land in pee-vish moralizing and anatomizing of it. (446)

It is worth recalling that “to draw the red herring across the track” means, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “to attempt to divert attention from the real question” (OED, *n.*, ‘red herring’, 2.b). And indeed, in *Lenten Stuff*, the “real question” is not only, and principally, to pay tribute to Yarmouth or to the red herring (Brown 2004: 83). The lavish, elevated manner in which Nashe approaches a trivial subject, his lofty style, the dazzling display of verbal virtuosity, the rhetorical devices and magniloquence and the imaginative richness of *Lenten Stuff* become the ontological reality of the text itself, eventually prevailing over its openly declared referent, the town of Yarmouth and its encomium:

Let me speak to you about my huge words which I use in this book . . . , not caring for this demure, soft *mediocre genus*, that is like water and wine mixed together. But give me pure wine of itself, and that begets good blood and heats the brain thoroughly. I had as lieve have no sun as have it shine faintly, no fire as a smothering fire of small coals, no clothes rather than wear linsey wolsey. (376-7)

In this pamphlet Nashe pushes artificiality to its farthest point, by emphasizing the discrepancy between the signifier (his magniloquent and refined enunciation) and the signified (the trivial object of the encomium). The enlarging of the gap between his polished form and style, i. e. the product of his own artistry and invention, on one side, and content and subject-matter, on the other, enables him to enact a self-referential encomiastic process aimed at raising the profile of his own art. He even implies that his literary task is more difficult – and therefore worthier of praise – than that of his eminent predecessors such as Homer and Virgil, for they drew their matter from lofty sources and wrote about a heroic world in which it was easy to rise to epic standards:

Every man can say Bee to a Battledore, and write in praise of virtue and the seven liberal sciences, thresh corn out of the full sheaves and fetch water out of the Thames; but out of dry stubble to make an after-harvest, and a plentiful crop without sowing, and wring juice out of a flint, that's Pierce a-God's name, and the right trick of a workman. (376)

Despite the lack of historical relevance of the object portrayed, Nashe produces a refined comic literary work in which, in the end, Yarmouth and especially the immortal nature of the work itself are celebrated nonetheless. "Through his industry", he has transfigured everyday reality into the "starry sublimity" (383) of art: "the significance of *Lenten Stuff* lies in the fact that Carnival, displaced into prose style, assumes a directly utopian role by making Yarmouth a fantastic place, and thus lifting it into figurative status" (Kendrick 2004: 287). In other words, we might say that Nashe has painted a portrait of a town worthy of being hung in a gallery alongside with other previous eminent literary, austere, mythological paintings, and, at the same time and above all, a self-portrait of his own ingenuity. A little more than a century later, in the already mentioned *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope reaches a very similar conclusion about the eternalizing power of his parody, when in the very last lines of the poem, he, or rather his narrator, tells the heroine to stop mourning the "ravish'd Hair" because "This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame, / And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name!" (2011: 5.149-50).

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Around 29 BC, Publius Vergilius Maro began to write, at Augustus's behest, his epic poem in praise of the Roman Empire. He was not keen on the assignment, but he had to try his best to please his readers, the noble, powerful Romans, and, of course, the greatest emperor of the world, Augustus, who had commissioned the work.

1598, Lent time, Thomas Nashe is writing his pamphlet in praise of Yarmouth. He likes his self-assignment and wants to please the modest, humble inhabitants and fishermen of Yarmouth, but, most importantly, he wants to celebrate the superiority of poetic invention, and of *his own* poetic invention, over reality: "This is a light friskin of my wit, like the praise of injustice, the fever quartan, Busiris, or Phalaris, wherein I follow the trace of the famousest scholars of all ages, whom a wantonizing humour once in their lifetime hath possessed to play with straws, and turn mole-hills" – that is, base reality – "into mountains" (376) – that is, base reality elevated by poetic transfiguration.

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## Is Hamlet's Madness True or Faked?

### Abstract

The article discusses Hamlet's artificial madness by examining his own declarations of intent, his witticisms and intellectual constructions, as well as his relation with Ophelia. The argument is set against the backdrop of a few classical examples of Shakespearean criticism holding idealizing views.

KEYWORDS: Hamlet; Ophelia; madness; performance

### 1.

The old stratagem of simulating madness in order to evade difficult situations or conflicts is drawn by Shakespeare from Saxo Grammaticus, but when it breaks into his tragedy it creates a brilliant antiphrasis in respect to the already consolidated values of the protagonist. One of *Hamlet's* first cues is in fact a passionate declaration of authenticity, entailing his rejection of all pretence. To his mother's question about why his father's death – a common event – appears “so particular” to him, he retorts: “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems” (1.2.76).<sup>1</sup> Then he explains that conventional forms of mourning “indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play” (83-4).<sup>2</sup>

This position is radicalized after his father's ghost's revelations: Hamlet no longer only hypothesizes generic insincerity (“they are actions that a man might play”), but is also led to notice a glaring contradiction between reassuring appearances and the perverse substance of murder and fraud both at the highest level of the State and in his uncle's exhibition of affection for him:

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables. Meet it is I set it down  
That one may smile and smile and be a villain.  
(1.5.106-8)

But if the “time” that a reluctant Hamlet is called to “set right” (1.5.196, 197) is structurally ruled by pretence, if this world understands no other language than

<sup>1</sup> All references to acts and lines of *Hamlet* are from Shakespeare (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Hamlet will adopt the same attitude, with paroxistic accents, with regard to Laertes's magniloquent laments over his sister's tomb in 5.1.

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this, he himself can only use pretence in order to turn it into the paradoxical instrument of truth.

To this end Hamlet devises two forms of pretence. On the one hand, the institutional pretence of theatre: Hamlet hires a company of players, just arrived by chance, to perform a drama closely following Claudius's murder. He relies on the fact that the murderer, "by the very cunning of the scene, / Been struck so to the soul" (2.2.568-9), will reveal his own guilt; at the same time, this experiment will provide the definitive evidence of the ghost's veracity.

On the other hand, the performance of madness allows Hamlet to express his own *Weltanschauung*, or, to say it better, the judgement and condemnation of the world he pronounces under the licence of folly, which exempts him from the social pact of non-aggression. Concurrently, his self-portrait as harmless will conceal his revengeful plans socially, as his madness will be traced back to Ophelia's unrequited love, a motive that excludes more embarrassing interpretations linked to suspicions of conflict with power. This mechanism at the basis of his pretence guarantees that it be one. Nonetheless, this fact has not prevented the precocious spreading among Shakespearian critics of the opinion that pretence may be tinged with authenticity, implying that Hamlet believes that he is faking folly, while in fact folly is deeply rooted in his own personality.<sup>3</sup>

If I take this opinion into account it is not because I mean to acknowledge its reliability,<sup>4</sup> but because I believe it useful, for hermeneutical reasons, to consider carefully the textual data that may have fostered or favoured it.

In this respect, it should be remarked that Hamlet declares his intent only twice, at moments when the parental relations constitutive of the tragic action are being defined: the first one follows his father's ghost's revelation, the second one occurs at the end of Hamlet's dialogue with his mother. In both cases, his plans are illustrated lucidly, and yet with a digressiveness resulting in reticence, as if tortuous discourse almost underlined Hamlet's own difference and the violence his nature suffers.

This is in fact Hamlet's request to his friends at the end of Act 1:

... But come,  
Here as before, never, so help you mercy,  
How strange or odd some'er I bear myself –  
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet  
To put an antic disposition on –  
That you at such time seeing me never shall,  
With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,  
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase

<sup>3</sup> One for all, Bloom (2008: 403): "feigning derangement, Hamlet also becomes deranged". Kitto, with regard to Hamlet, talks about two forms of madness, albeit neatly distinct ("his real 'madness' is something much deeper", 1964: 290).

<sup>4</sup> Which it has, if we consider the merely intellectual construction. Confirmation may be found in the episode of *Don Quixote* where the protagonist fakes or performs his amorous madness in the Sierra Morena in the footsteps of Amadis and Orlando, replacing their form of madness with emulation, which constitutes his own peculiar form of madness. Apart from any other difference, it should be noticed that the narrative discourse is much better equipped to manage this complex construction, with the alternation of the narrator's perspective and the character's limited point of view.

As "Well, well, we know" or "We could and if we would",  
 Or "If we list to speak", or "There be, and if they might",  
 Or such ambiguous giving out, to note  
 That you know aught of me – this do swear,  
 So grace and mercy at your most need help you.  
 (1.5.176-88)

Hamlet has already urged them "never to speak of this that you have seen" (1.5.162), and he apparently mentions the possibility, and his intent, of behaving oddly ("antic disposition" sounds almost like an euphemism for his simulated madness), only to prevent the additional risk that his odd behaviour might prompt gossip – which indeed he depicts with the vividness of an autonomous *scène de genre*.

Also, in his dialogue with his mother he avows that pretence is, on his part, an unnecessary addition. His choice of speaking with her from the outset the language of truth would dispense him from explaining the corollary that truth and falsity are entirely under his control. This is all the truer since he has already had the opportunity to claim the same when Gertrude interpreted his address to his father's ghost – visible to him only – as a symptom of folly:

This is the very coinage of your brain.  
 This bodiless creation ecstasy  
 Is very cunning in.  
 (3.4.141-3)

His need to demand that Gertrude be explicitly bound to secrecy derives from the risk that the truth may reach Claudius. And yet, in order to express that request he resorts to negative phrasing leading to a lengthy description of what his mother must not do. Thus, he shifts the attention onto the lasciviousness of the adulterous relation, showing clear signs of oedipic jealousy, and contrasting it with a touching, idealized image of maternity:

Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed,  
 Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,  
 And let him for a pair of reechy kisses,  
 Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,  
 Make you to ravel all this matter out,  
 That I essentially am not in madness,  
 But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know,  
 For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,  
 Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,  
 Such dear concernings hide?  
 (3.4.186-95)

Gertrude solemnly promises that she will keep the secret, and will maintain that promise, reporting to the king as follows:

Mad as the sea and wind when both contend  
 Which is the mightier.  
 (4.1.7-8)

## 2.

Much of Hamlet's artificial behaviour raises no problems: I am alluding to the prodigious series of malicious witticisms that pin down Claudius's universe and his Court on their own nothingness ("The King is thing . . . Of nothing", 4.2.26, 28). With good reason this behaviour has been likened to that of the fool, the official speaker of uncomfortable truths through playful eloquence (Dover Wilson 1935: 95; Gentili 1978: 84-5). In this case, it exposes Hamlet's extraordinary lucidity and acuity, his peerless intellectual mastery. Rather, it may be useful, if anything, to reconsider a few passages in order to rule out trivializing readings or interpretations reducing them to gratuitous word play.

Here are only a few examples: to the King's question "where's Polonius?" (4.3.16), Hamlet first replies with a calembour ("At supper", 4.3.17, further specifying "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten", 4.3.19), then he gets it right, eventually providing the required information:

In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby. (4.3.32-5)

Hamlet gets the satisfaction of sending the king to hell, only slightly covering the vulgar aggressiveness of "yourself", as opposed to the ceremonial language of the "messenger", through the euphemistic "i'th' other place". The force of the expression may be fully perceived, however, once we relate this passage to the moment when Hamlet spies on the king praying, and repels the temptation to kill him because repentance would send him to heaven – an inappropriate revenge for his father who was instead "[c]ut off even in the blossoms of [his] sins" (1.5.76).<sup>5</sup>

Soon afterwards Hamlet takes leave from Claudius with "Farewell, dear mother" (4.3.50), and to Claudius's objection "Thy loving father, Hamlet" (4.3.51),<sup>6</sup> phrased with all the patient attention owed to madmen, he reiterates: "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, so my mother" (4.3.52-3). This line has dizzying implications: Hamlet rejects Claudius's metaphorical paternity as twice false: in respect to his real parental relations and to their affective import. By alluding to the Biblical and Evangelical definition of marriage, he recalls the incestuous and murderous nature of this marriage. Finally, he subjects the sovereign's patriarchal virility to a vilifying process of feminization, the same that Aeschylus (Choe. 304-5) applies to the homologous figure of Aegisthus.

Finally, I would like to recall a particularly elaborate passage in his skirmish with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the prince has avowed that he has "bad dreams" (2.2.250-1), and Guildenstern, inferring that the content of those dreams is

<sup>5</sup> Language is here treated as in Aristophanes' *Birds*, where *es korakas* (meaning to go 'rack and ruin', but literally 'to the crows') refers to the actual migration of humans to the birds' country: ΠΕ. οὐ δεινὸν οὖν δῆτ' ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς δεομένους / ἐς κόρακας ἐλθεῖν καὶ παρεσκευασμένους / ἔπειτα μὴ ῥεῦρεῖν δύνασθαι τὴν ὁδόν; [What misfortune is ours! we strain every nerve to get to the crows, do everything we can to that end, and we cannot find our way!, Aristophanes 1938: 734].

<sup>6</sup> Strangely Jenkins (1982: 342) thinks that Hamlet refers to Gertrude, and that it is the king who misunderstands his words.

his ambition, declares, with conventional morality, that ambition is "the shadow of a dream" (253-4). But "a dream itself is but a shadow" (255), Hamlet insinuates, maieutically inducing Rosencrantz to draw the conclusion: "Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that is but a shadow's shadow" (256-7).

From this rhetorical dawdling Hamlet's powerful final statement eventually stands out: since all shadow implies a body projecting it, "our monarchs and outstretched heroes" (258-9), whose substance lies in their own ambition, may be called the shadows of beggars, who, precisely because devoid of ambition, constitute the authentic body of reality.

It is up to us to decide whether this conclusion, which mimics the caustical extremism often attributed to madness, limits itself to ridiculing the moralistic cliché (Jenkins 1982: 251), or expresses a revolutionary potential comparable to the solidarity with the lowest of the low Lear voices in the storm. Be it as it may, it cannot be coincidental that Hamlet qualifies himself as a "beggar" (2.2.267).

What is certain, instead, is that this mystification is mirrored in Hamlet's mocking admission of his own folly ("For, by my fay, I cannot reason", 260; "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw", 364-5) which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are gullible enough to take seriously: "He does confess he feels himself distracted, / But from what cause a will by no means speak" (3.1.5-6).

### 3.

Yet, Hamlet's derisive inclination intertwines with, and is overcome by, his tormented and anguished reflexivity which has turned him into an icon of human thinking, at least starting from Schlegel's definition of *Gedankentrauerspiel*. Is it possible to trace in it a pathological dimension, which appears justified by yet another common definition of the prince, that of 'melancholic'?<sup>7</sup>

I believe that Hamlet's pessimistic view of the world and of man as "this quintessence of dust" (2.2.301) is entirely adequate to the dramatic situation. But what is of interest here is only the extent to which it interferes with the pretence he has devised, and therefore with the only affective relation involved in it: that with Ophelia. This is part of the plot that requires that Hamlet should consider the chamberlain's daughter too close to the establishment he perceives as hostile to let her share in his secret.

The first news we hear about Hamlet after the ghost's revelation is indeed brought by Ophelia: she tells her father that Hamlet suddenly presented himself to her, pale and half-undressed, "with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (2.1.85-7); he "took [. . . her] by the wrist" (90) and long stared at her; then "He raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being" (97-9). Finally, he went out without ever diverting his eyes from hers. The anguish palpably showing through this tale (consider the recurring "piteous") misled Wilson Knight into denying the

<sup>7</sup> In the tragedy it is Claudius who attributes it to him (3.1.164), albeit within a context which explicitly excludes madness.



“mock-madness” (1989: 22);<sup>8</sup> yet, while there is no reason to exclude Hamlet’s anguish also in performing his plan, the effectiveness of that plan may be judged only by other peoples’ reactions: already halfway through the tale Polonius shows no hesitation in speculating about amorous folly (“Mad for thy love?”, 2.1.88), and Ophelia fundamentally agrees, although in soft tones as dictated by *bienséances* (“My lord, I do not know, / but truly I do fear it”, 88-9).

Validated by Polonius’s personal experience in ways that his overall characterization endows with more than a tinge of the grotesque (“and truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this”, 2.2.189-90), Polonius’s hypothesis turns into pompous arrogance as he boasts about it with the king:

... If he love her not,  
And be not from his reason fall’n thereon,  
Let me be not assistant for a state,  
But keep a farm and carters.  
(165-8)

He goes so far as to draw, with presumptuous accuracy, the story of Hamlet’s infirmity, distinguishing six stages in his mental deterioration, while Polonius’s frigid playing on the word ‘true’ (“That he is mad ’tis true; ’tis true ’tis pity, / and pity ’tis ’tis true”, 97-8) denounces his own blindness by antiphrasis, thus guaranteeing the success of Hamlet’s ruse. It is in fact entirely unmethodical to think that Polonius falls into a trap that has not been set for him, that is, that Hamlet involuntarily achieves the result he had shown he wanted to achieve (this may very well happen in everyday life, but not in the semantic system of a work of art ruled by Aristotelian universality).

The king himself will take Polonius’s thesis seriously and will accept to assess it through espionage:

... Her father and myself [lawful espials],<sup>9</sup>  
We’ll so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,  
We may of their encounter frankly judge,  
And gather by him, as he is behaved,  
If’t be th’affliction of his love or no  
That thus he suffers for.  
(3.1.31-7)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Along the same lines is Jenkins (1982), although he claims that it is impossible to distinguish “what is and is not feigned” (“an anguish which goes beyond anything put on”, 461). The problem was insoluble also for Bradley (1964: 157).

<sup>9</sup> The part within brackets is in the Folio only.

<sup>10</sup> At the end of the experiment, however, Claudius’s perspicacity derived from his guilty conscience keeps him sceptical about Polonius’s thesis: “Love? His affections do not that way tend” (3.1.161). On the contrary, the queen is comforted by believing it: “And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause / Of Hamlet’s wildness; so shall I hope your virtues / Will bring him to his wonted way again, / To both your honours” (37-41). Besides ensuring her son’s recovery, this perspective silences her guilty feelings that had pushed her to claim that his disease had no other cause than “his father’s death and our hasty marriage” (2.2.57). Nevertheless, this remains an isolated pathetic touch, as it is not his mother that Hamlet wants to deceive.

Something more should be said about Hamlet's 'silence' during his spectral visit to Ophelia. On the one hand, his suspension of communication, creating distance and isolation, is a traditional symptom of madness (compare, for instance, Euripides' *Heraclides*, 929-30) – but of course it can be easily faked. On the other hand, we are presented with a disturbing structural, or rather architectural, symmetry: Hamlet's own performance begins with a pantomime, just like the actors' performance, which in this regard offers one of the tragedy's most difficult cruces, since Claudius does not react to the visual representation of the murder, and stops it only when in its 'spoken' re-enactment the poisoner gives voice to his own murderous intent (on this see Jenkins 1982: 501-5). In the two 'performances', the climax and the consequent hierarchy of deceptive means remain constant: in both, the expressive gesture is succeeded by the power of the hegemonic word, as can be seen in the terrible confrontation between Hamlet and Ophelia, often misunderstood either by interpreting Hamlet's behaviour on the basis of *bienséances*, or by padding their relationship out with romantic details.

It may be worth repeating that Hamlet has nothing to blame Ophelia for (as justly noted by Jenkins 1982: 124, 149-50); the violence with which he sets upon her is the application – in fact, the most impressive application within a literary text – of the so-called principle of generalization that, as Matte-Blanco (1975, 1988) has shown, presides over human emotions. His mother's guilt becomes Ophelia's own guilt, because it is interpreted as every woman's guilt, undermining all faith in love, marriage, procreation. There follows that Ophelia too may be turned into the victim of his jeering humour, resulting in malicious insinuations and obscene avances. Clearly, the generalization – an evident violation of the ethical-juridical principle of personal responsibility – is not only unjust and ungenerous, but also extremely unreasonable. However, folly, I believe, is one of those cases, possibly the extreme case, showing how one's way of being is part of one's physiological experience, competing with reason for a place in everyday life.

On the contrary, madness is played out by Hamlet with too much accuracy and tenacity for not being part of a planned performance, starting from his repeated blatant exceptions to the principle of non-contradiction: firstly, the cyclothymic changes in Hamlet's attitude, from respectful sweetness ("Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered", 3.1.88-9), to the insistent aggressiveness of the "Get thee to a nunnery" speech (120ff.).

Secondly, Hamlet's denial of a fact: he has given Ophelia certain objects that she now wishes to return to him, since the giver's affection has changed – objects that are present and visible on stage.

Finally, the disowning of the gifts is accompanied by the disowning of love through a formal contradiction within only a few lines ("I did love you once", 113-14, and "I loved you not", 117-18): personally, I have little doubt that also this negation may be specious; after all, who would deny that Othello continues to love Desdemona when he attacks her with even greater violence?<sup>11</sup>

Hamlet's authentic voice will be heard in that terrifying love-test which is his encounter with Laertes in the cemetery:

<sup>11</sup> Hamlet's most famous denial of his love for Ophelia is in Turgenev's comparison between *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* (Turgenev 1965); on this see Bloom (2008: 168).

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
 Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
 Make up my sum.  
 (5.1.254-6)

I have no doubt that “loved” here refers to the death of his beloved, not to the death of love.

The last passage in the tragedy, which has been discussed as part of Hamlet’s pretence, is his speech to Laertes with his apologies for the damages he has caused him – a euphemism to mean Polonius’s murder –, attributing them to his own madness:

What I have done  
 That might your nature, honour, and exception  
 Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.  
 (5.2.213-8)

The high and noble tone of this speech should not induce us into the same mistake made by idealizing critics, one of whom has written that “to suppose it based upon a subterfuge is monstrous” (Dover Wilson 1935: 217; see also Kitto 1964: 293; Jenkins 1982: 567). As a matter of fact, the thesis that Polonius has been killed in a fit of folly is the one argued by Gertrude with Claudius at her son’s implicit request:

. . . In his lawless fit,  
 Behind the arras hearing something stir,  
 Whips out his rapier, cries “A rat, a rat!”,  
 And in this brainish apprehension kills  
 The unseen good old man.  
 (4.1.8-12)

In no case could Hamlet not endorse this version, also because the truth we have witnessed remains unspeakable: Polonius killed by mistake because confused with Claudius, the murderer whom Hamlet has the duty to kill. To believe in a different truth, as Dover Wilson admittedly does not hesitate to (“It follows that when Hamlet tells us that he is subject to “a sore distraction” and killed Polonius in madness we are expected to believe him”, 1935: 217), would oblige us to rewrite the story *a posteriori*, as the diligent bureaucrats in George Orwell’s 1984 rewrote history, with the aggravation of an unbearable violation of dramatic time.

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## ***Hamlet*: Origin Displaced**

### Abstract

This article focuses upon the category of ‘origin’ from a theoretical viewpoint, which, besides including philological/textual aspects, inevitably opens up the issue of interpretation, not limited to ‘capturing’ an authorial, foundational meaning. In the wake of Continental philosophical thought and in particular Derrida and Lacan, I argue that origin can never be recovered in conventional terms, but is rather displaced in space and time, in the materiality of subsequent edited texts: much in the same way as, for Freud, telling a dream is already an experience of displacement, in which what remains of the dream are significant traces. A case in point are the multiple versions of *Hamlet*, approached as a palimpsest to illustrate my argument, dealing in particular with important editorial choices in classic editions of the past two decades.

KEYWORDS: *Hamlet*; origin; hermeneutics; displacement; textual history; authorship

This paper is the result of a long-standing dialogue with Alessandro Serpieri, both as textual scholar and first translator in Italy of the early *Hamlet*, a true turning point in his everlasting interest in source and attribution studies.<sup>1</sup> From the moment he translated Q1, “young Shakespeare’s young Hamlet” – to quote Terri Bourus (2014)<sup>2</sup> – this text continued haunting him as the voice of an author displaced onto the page: for him, as critic, an experience of loss. To this issue Serpieri returned on a number of occasions – among which I remember in particular a conference we were both part of at Rome’s Teatro Argentina, where he argued in favour of the “archaic beauty” of Q1 (Serpieri 2015a). And in an unforgettable radio interview about his last book *Avventure dell’interpretazione* (Serpieri 2015b),<sup>3</sup> a few months before he passed away, he focused – *contra* Plato – on the erratic quality, *per se* dramatic, of literary writing *contra* Plato; adding that, since the life of a text is subject to change in time, it entails a process of loss and regeneration. *Hamlet* was for him the supreme evidence of such mutability.

A crucial issue in our conversations on the many secrets of *Hamlet*’s origin was at some point Stanley Wells’s and Gary Taylor’s choice to edit *King Lear* in dual

<sup>1</sup> See Serpieri et al. 1988-90. The translation of Q1 was first published in 1997 by Marsilio (Serpieri 1997b). The same series also features his own parallel translation of the more authoritative Q2 (Serpieri 1997a). Among his contributions to the question of authorship I am most indebted to his study of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Serpieri 2012).

<sup>2</sup> This recent, engaging study has helped me reflect on this topic; not to mention Giorgio Melchiori’s leading studies in Italy on *Hamlet*’s authorship, particularly Melchiori 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Fahrenheit, *Avventure dell’interpretazione*, 10 May 2016, <http://www.raiplayradio.it/audio/2016/05/Fahrenheit---Avventure-dellinterpretazione---ore-1600-del-10052016-7b26af5a-3ae4-4f37-9814-b64f95d9ea9e.html> (last access 21 March 2018).

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form in their 1986 Oxford *Complete Works* of Shakespeare, a challenge in the history of Shakespeare's textual editions. It is from a dialectical relationship between Sandro's philological and semiotical response and my own approach, indebted as it is to Continental theory, notably to Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida, that this essay has taken its cue.

It is with fondness that I dedicate it to Alessandro's memory.

In the beginning was the plot (?). And *Hamlet's* plot was of mythical ancestry, for besides historical sources such as Saxo Grammaticus and Froissart, Shakespeare drew on archaic Nordic myths (not without analogues in Greek and Latin drama). Interestingly, however, the core of the plot was the loss of the father, i.e. of one's origin. Behind the textual history of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, before the play actually begins, there is already an absence, which, in Shakespeare's metamorphosis of the myth, is thematically embodied in the figure of the Ghost: who – or which – is similar, but not identical to Hamlet's authentic, dead father. What the Ghost displays is a displacement of the father: any access to the father, along with any objective truth about his end, is in fact barred in this. It is only to a certain extent that the son's play-within-the-play can capture, or, in Hamlet's word, "catch", the agent, and the cause of such loss.

In its turn, the play-within-the-play displays thematic evidence of the metamorphosis of an original text: the piece is given a new title (*The Murder of Gonzalo* becomes *The Mousetrap*), and it is altered in length and authorship by the insertion of "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.520), morphing into a revised, collaborative text.

Variation is constitutive of myth, and so is instability. This is brilliantly argued by Giorgio de Santillana in his celebrated *Hamlet's Mill* (1969), in which he takes *Hamlet* as a case in point of the instability of myth, highlighting the constant displacement of meaning in different versions of the plot – a dynamic that has obvious cultural and historical reasons, but which also depends on the theoretical assumption that processing is a mode inscribed in the very essence of language, that is, in the constitutive relationship between language and vision. It is the very process highlighted by Sigmund Freud in his Introduction to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he argues that the act of telling someone a dream is already one of displacement, in which the original experience is forever lost. What remains in the telling of the dream are merely traces: these are the only referents for the work of interpretation. To be sure, the dream itself is not a primary text either, being a representation of an unconscious, obscure, original desire; a thesis radically adopted and taken a step further by Lacan, who speaks of *the thing* which resists symbolization (one of the reasons why the elaboration of self-knowledge in psychoanalysis is an interminable process).

I have given these references in support of my argument on *Hamlet* as an icon of the question of origin, in fact *the* question of modernity, both in the sphere of textual criticism and in the theoretical field of aesthetics, where hermeneutics is a crucial issue. The question of meaning intertwines with the question of origin – one must ask whether any access to it may be found, or rather whether such a gateway is forever and constitutively inaccessible. In this light, it is worth noting that displacement is a key feature in the map of the editions of Shakespeare's own time, particularly the three seventeenth-century ones which are the stock-in-trade of



Shakespearean attribution studies and which ideally come after a hypothetical, lost *Ur-Hamlet*: Q1 (printed in 1603, but whose date of composition is still debatable, at least according to Terri Bourus), Q2 (1604), and the Folio version (1623).

All three texts are currently considered worthy of critical attention by the most distinguished current editions, Oxford (1986, and 2005), Arden Shakespeare (2006), and Norton (1997 and 2012): Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor starring in the Oxford edition, with Taylor prime responsible for *Hamlet*; Stephen Greenblatt in the 1997 Norton edition, based on the Oxford, later replaced by Robert Miola, in the next Norton Critical Edition issued in 2012; Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor in the Arden Shakespeare (2006). But to revert to the early ones, it is worth recalling that among the three, the difference is principally in length as well as in chronology: Q2 is about 3,000 words longer than Q1, which is more suitable for performance; while the Folio version is 73% longer than Q1, but 4% shorter than Q2. This is elementary, commonplace learning, but it is a necessary ingredient in my argument. I find support for including such details in the Judaic tradition's regard for the trivial, i.e. what is evident, as an essential feature of knowledge, as it triggers the process of questioning.<sup>4</sup> In any case length is not only the mark of a technical difference. It is also a difference in quiddity.

Q2 is traditionally accorded a superior status to Q1 – according to Giorgio Melchiori, this is rather a drama meant for the closet compared to Q1, which is less literary and no doubt meant specifically for the stage. A case in point is the absence of the Prince's most famous soliloquy, "to be or not to be" (3.1.55ff). However, the Folio version is considered just as authoritative as Q2, so much so that it was used as the copy text by the 1986 editors of the Oxford *Complete Works* of Shakespeare (with no afterthought in the 2005 revision) as well as in Greenblatt's 1997 Norton edition; and Kenneth Branagh chose the Folio text for his 1996 film. In the Critical Norton, however, Robert Miola adopted Q2.

I take the Norton Edition of Shakespeare's complete works itself as a hybrid text from an editorial point of view: it features the same introductions and notes from the previous one (indebted to the Oxford *Complete Works*), but also a change in the editing of the text (perhaps texts?), in which several scholars are involved.

And yet it seems to me that in the last two decades of debate about *Hamlet's* authorship, a number of scholars have not entirely given up the challenge of reconstructing evidence of an authentic, single creative work out of the early seventeenth-century editions. Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, for instance – whether or not it is true that they were simply tired, as they confessed – did not care to adopt the same method as the one used with *King Lear*, which they presented in the two versions I have mentioned – inevitably causing a shock to a number of scholars, but also producing a refreshing change in the tradition of Shakespeare's textual scholarship. The Arden Shakespeare editors made an alternative, radical choice, which consisted in publishing the three *Hamlets* separately. In spite of their penchant for unconventionality, at least in the case of *Hamlet* Taylor and Wells do

<sup>4</sup> In particular I refer to the work on the intrusion of what is apparently insignificant in the thought process of by Rabbi Jospeh B. Soloveitchik, who taught at the Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University in New York City until his death in 1993.

not seem to have altogether abandoned the mirage (inaugurated by Heminges and Condell) of grasping Shakespeare's plays "as he conceived them" (Folio 1623: A3) – and personally I believe that this may be one unconscious motive for their having based the 1986 Oxford *Complete Works* edition on the Folio version. For her part, Ann Thompson has no such nostalgia for an original, allowing herself a certain dose of sarcasm at the expense of scholars who cannot resist a conflated version, and who thus opt – like Greenblatt in the Norton *King Lear* – for a compromise. In her Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet* in the Q2 version (1604), she writes:

As we have seen, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor decided to print two texts of *King Lear* in the Oxford Shakespeare *Complete Works*. Stephen Greenblatt, the general editor of the 1997 Norton Shakespeare, which took over the Oxford texts, nevertheless decided not only to print the two texts of *King Lear* but to add a third, 'a conflated version' . . . so that readers can encounter the tragedy in the form it assumed in most editions from the eighteenth century until very recently (Norton, 2315). Mercifully, you may feel, the general editors of the Arden Shakespeare have decided not to break all records by including a conflated text of *Hamlet* and making this the first four-text edition. (Thompson 2006: 94)

She also states outright that the only features that the three seventeenth-century *Hamlets* share are "the name and designation of the chief character, and the fact that they are plays" (76). Of course, each is connected with one or both of the others, whether through the printer, the publisher, the acting company or the author (thereby implicating Shakespeare's own revision). But – Thompson argues – the question remains as to what extent each of the three *Hamlets* may be a revision of the preceding one. Is there a text printed with the author's consent behind any of the three editions?

The answer is that there is no such thing as a text authorized by William Shakespeare. Much of the evidence, such as it is, is either contradictory or ambiguous. Few scholars now see in Q1 an early draft of a play by another playwright, perhaps Thomas Kyd. To cut the matter short, there is no consensus as to the texts' transmission; indeed, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, *Hamlet* is a monument built on shifting sands.

There is, however, general agreement that *Hamlet* is a multiple text, in fact a palimpsest. Quite apart from the metaphysical implications of the search for an origin, which by definition is one and the same, the philological issue of the loss – or the displacement – of an original text challenges a hermeneutic, ontological approach to the play with regard to its intended meaning, and consequently to the sense of an ending.

Meaning is a category based on the assumption that there is a *telos* that connects the various parts of a text – the text of a life as well as the printed one – and brings it to a close in accordance with its beginning, where beginning is metaphysically understood in terms of a driving force, yet itself unmoving, as claimed by the Aristotelian and Christian classical tradition.

By contrast, a multiple text like that of *Hamlet* eschews the possibility of discovering an unquestionable pattern of meaning in it. Origin is not an ontological foun-

dation, a meaning that is *given*; it is always situated elsewhere. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in fact, is inscribed in a horizontal series of texts, within which one refers reciprocally to another – not in teleological order, but in a systematic interplay of traces and differences. One obvious example is the uncertainty of the ghost's ontological status, a simulacrum of the dead father, which being similar but not identical to the dead king – just 'like' him (1.1.45ff) – foregrounds the issue that difference is a signifying condition which disseminates origin within a cluster of traces.

This is why, rather than a reading of the three *Hamlets* in ordinary chronological sequence, to my mind the palimpsest is a more fruitful model: instead of one text being obliterated or supplanted by the later one, each can be superimposed on the other, allowing traces and shadows of the earlier text to surface in the language. And thus calling for an interrogation of *Hamlet's* meaning *within* its constitutional instability.

The issue of origin in *Hamlet* may thus sound like a parody of the Homeric question, but is in tune with the current cultural climate, in which the crisis of classical philology has been a turning point. Roberto Antonelli discusses the question in his important opening essay of volume 8 of the journal *Memoria di Shakespeare* quoted above.<sup>5</sup> Antonelli's essay focuses on the crisis of philology as a defining feature of the twentieth century; a predicament created by the severing of an etymological link between the categories of *author* and *authority*, categories which for centuries had been regarded as indivisible, both terms possessing the aura of *classics*. Shakespeare's unstable authorship is evidence of his modernity; it challenges the sacred conception of the author and its correlative, *the* text, according to the author's last wishes and his signature. Shakespeare's signature either does not appear in the printed versions of his time, or it is in no way proof of authenticity in an early modern landscape in which the printing process is not considered automatically trustworthy (one cannot forget Swift's later challenge to the manipulative agency of the press). From the very dawn of modernity, the instability of Shakespeare's canon has prefigured Walter Benjamin's thesis of the radical crisis of the Author – expressed in his memorable 1939 study on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin penetratingly understood the loss of the Author's sacred status in terms of an abdication of the original and the one in favour of the copy and the multiple, a novelty brought about by the increasing power of technology and the consequent hegemony of the press. As a result, the paradigm of authority began to totter, producing a shift from the domain of the author as giver of meaning to the empire of the reader – who, however, is in turn doomed to an ever imperfect interpretation. At the same time the fantasy of a single text that would be closest to the original of the author, a vision which for a long time had seduced textual critics, was decidedly over; at least in Continental philology and philosophy.

In this context, the text in time, its origin displaced, was engaged in resisting a violent act of hermeneutic appropriation. And it is not surprising that the predica-

<sup>5</sup> Volume 8 refers to the last printed issue of the journal founded by Agostino Lombardo, which has now gone online and is published in open access with the new name *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, <http://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/MemShakespeare/index> (last access 21 March 2018).

<sup>6</sup> It took thirty years for this enlightening study to be acknowledged by British culture, in Hannah Arendt's translation into English, included in the volume *Illuminations* (Benjamin 1968).

ment of the fatherless *Hamlet*, its radical questioning of the category of origin, became so crucial in late twentieth-century theories of deconstruction, notably for Derrida, Lévinas, and Lacan.

In *Avventure dell'interpretazione*, Alessandro Serpieri argues that a text is like an oracle: not only a thing to be interrogated, but itself interrogating. He concentrates on Shakespeare's epistemological scepticism about an ontological textual stability and truth: a veritable disowning of knowledge which in time (and in the wake of Stanley Cavell) would become a crucial aspect of Serpieri's own hermeneutics as literary critic. From his commitment to the search of an origin, witnessed by his work as critic and translator of *Il primo Amleto*, he had moved towards the conviction that all that counts is an interminable, ever open, forever imperfect approach. Rather than the search for a beginning or the reaching of an end – that is to say, meaning – what counts for the late Alessandro Serpieri is the intellectual and existential *journey between*: the persona's journey towards self-knowledge; and the readers', critics', and spectators' towards their own understanding of the play. In the words of Stéphane Mallarmé: "Hamlet walks about, and the book he reads is himself".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Qtd in Taylor et al. (eds) 2016: 1995. The text of this edition, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, edited by John Jowett, is based on the Q2 of 1604-05, acknowledged as the most authoritative early text. Q1 and the Folio text are printed and edited separately in the *Alternative Versions* volume. On the complexity of the textual problem see in particular Wells and Dobson 2009, ch. 25.

## ***À propos of King Lear in the New Italian Translation and Edition by Alessandro Serpieri (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018)***

### Abstract

This new Italian translation and edition of *King Lear* by Alessandro Serpieri foregrounds at least three points for discussion: 1. the sense of subjective identity so crucial to Renaissance thought; 2. the polyphonic, plurivocal orchestration of this play, when opposed to the monologic structure of other so-called great tragedies; 3. the theme of madness, from the Erasmian *Praise of Folly* to modern psychoanalytical interpretations.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *King Lear*; translation; madness; Alessandro Serpieri

Let us begin with King Lear's famous question (which actually sounds much more like an implicit statement to me): "Who is it that can tell me who I am? (Serpieri ed. and trans. 2018, 1.4.204). Italian versions of this crucial question/statement are, among others (taken from the most popular ones) the recent Bompiani edition (D'Amico trans. 2014): "C'è qualcuno che possa dirmi chi sono?"; or the classic Sansoni edition (Chiarini trans. 1977): "Chi è che mi sa dire chi sono?". Serpieri drastically and incisively shortens the sentence, switching its meaning from a merely poetic/literary stance into a dramatic, oral performance, by transferring the implicitly neutral *someone* into the subjective 'I', a spectacular finale: "Chi sa dirmi chi sono *io*?", which requires the actor to stress the last syllable. Lear's imperative musing is basic to all Shakespearean drama. And particularly in the plays mostly admired by Serpieri, from *Richard II* through the so-called great tragedies to the so-called last *romances*. *Who am I?* could also have been easily resounding in Serpieri's inner ear, given his fondness for Puccini's operas ("Chi son?", sings Rodolfo in *La Bohème*).

Thus, who am I? Lear's hopeless, maybe a madman's cry both reflects and challenges Hamlet's too famous words ("What a piece of work is a man . . .", 2.2.303), construed as it is upon Psalm 8:44 ("What is man, that you are mindful of him?"). If both Hamlet and the Psalmist are vague about what the 'quintessence' of humanity is (physical or metaphysical? Human or un/sub/super-human?) Lear's tragic interrogation is strictly but doubly personal. His rhetorically emotive explosion of desire about his own identity – probably aroused by his mental instability – condenses at least two fundamental questions. Who am I in particular, to be sure, but also, who is in the intellectual or psychological position to know and tell

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me? This search for an understanding of one's self is notoriously central to Renaissance humanist thought. The *self* becomes an obsession, an entity to be analysed and known, as Polonius famously advises his son Laertes; also introducing the notion of multiple identities: individuality is necessarily a shifting phenomenon, always under negotiation, and a substantially Joycean 'work in progress'. Identities are evasive and precarious, slippery and provisional, and therefore subject to the phenomenon that Stephen Greenblatt – with reference to Renaissance thought – has called *improvisation* (1980): a practice of symbiotic creativity and concealment through which the 'selfhood' is formed, or – so to speak – under construction. Part of Lear's identity crisis includes the dissonances of his commitments in simultaneously being the father of three daughters and "every inch a king" (4.6.103: "dalla testa ai piedi un re"). The trauma caused by the perception of losing the respect that is due to his kingly authority comes to the fore in Lear's encounter with Oswald who, in reply to the king's question "Who am I, sir", coldly affirms, "My lady's father" (1.4.66-7). Which means that identity is after all the convergence of how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others. It is precisely in the conflict between internal and external views that the Shakespearean drama of identification lies. It is also a drama of social and political reputation. This is why Serpieri always detects in Shakespeare's historical/tragic plays *exempla* of the 'overall symbolic and signic system' (both medieval and early-modern) which advancing modernity was due to disrupt.

Anyway, in order to understand his own identity, Lear needs to be 'told' by someone else, as if recognizing himself solely by a narration told by 'others'. Just to name Shakespearean characters Serpieri has frequently dwelt upon, dealing with this specific subject: Richard II, Hamlet, Othello, and precisely Lear. Richard II, in a delirium of self-effacement, only claims to be remembered in a biography narrated in retrospect and sorrow. Hamlet, when dying, commands Horatio to "draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (5.2.339-40).<sup>1</sup> Othello, not relying on anyone else to commemorate him, manages to give his own version of his story just before committing suicide. It is indeed a typical Shakespearean paradox that identities can only be known when they are about to be lost, as if 'loss of identity' should be 'the condition itself for self-fulfilment'. Moreover, the search for an identity, the need to be a distinctive individual both implies awareness and requires acceptance of the self's *tragically isolated* condition. When Lear puts his question, it is pertinently the Fool who answers: "Lear's shadow" (1.4.205). Where a binary explanation opens up: foreknowledge of the mad king's desperate solitude, and also the relation between identity and drama, in as far as "shadow", in Shakespeare's idiolect, can mean an 'actor'. Subjective identities can, in a dramatic context, not only be precarious and evasive, but performative as well: both fictional roles and interpersonal, dialectic, fluid 'personations'.

In Serpieri's analysis (which is equally distributed among introduction, marginalia and notes), his emphasis on this tragedy of non-entity continuously oscillates between the existential and the political levels. He envisages Lear's 'fall' – in strictly Elizabethan terms, a downfall from high to low existential/political/nomi-

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from *Hamlet* are from Shakespeare (1997).



nalistic attributions – as the embodiment of the collapsing symbolic and social system derived from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Lear, as the apex of the feudal pyramid, not only loses his political power when he arbitrarily delegates it to his mischievous daughters, but more substantially destroys it when he accepts to be defrauded of his axiological commitment as both father and monarch. It is in this ‘undoing’ – reminiscent to me of Richard II’s – of his simultaneously political and existential function that Lear achieves his nullification, his becoming “nothing”. Lear – and to be sure Gloucester, his double or alter ego – can stand for the partial truths of a passing defective society; but they are fundamentally undone by the total lies of their respective existences.

One further point which I would like to foreground concerning Serpieri’s linguistic, critical, and epistemological vision of *King Lear*, is the one according to which this play is a symphonic and polyphonic architectural composition, almost unique among the great monologic, introspective tragedies based on the sole interiority of the eponymous leader (both as a character and an actor). Here we find a multi-functional interaction, with two plots, two fathers, two daughters, two sons-in-law, who interfere with each other; moreover, there is a friction of two possible worlds *within* the conscience of the tragic hero; but chiefly we have the continuously strained and endemically subversive ‘duologue’ between the King and his Fool. Thinking of which, one should recall Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, which Serpieri correctly recognizes as one of the fundamental matrixes for this play.

*King Lear* states indeed the basic ontological distinction of Erasmus’s two folies, a distinction which goes far beyond the classic Platonic opposition between a creative and a disruptive *mania* as posited in *Ion* and *Phaedrus*. Following Moria’s eulogy, Shakespeare discriminates folly as true, genuine perception of the inner nature of human things (here represented by the Fool) from madness as the false, distorted perception of it (the King’s). The same bipartite structure informs any articulation of this primary, founding opposition, in as much as: 1. both folly and madness can be either authentic or simulated; 2. each category is signified by two characters; 3. the opposition between authenticity and simulation is represented by couples of characters. According to this scheme, one can find pure Erasmian folly in the nominalistically privileged figure of the Fool, and a fake (though semantically authentic) Erasmian folly in the figure of Kent (who feigns folly to be helpful to his dethroned master), while we can detect pure Erasmian madness both in Lear (a genuine one) and in Edgar (an affected one). On the side of naturalness there is the veridical foolishness of the Fool contrasted with the veridical madness of Lear, while on the side of artificiality we have the supposed – but true to Erasmus – foolery of Kent contrasted with the supposed – yet, in Erasmus’s terms, correct – madness of Edgar.

The most elementary thematic antithesis, that between the King and the Fool, moves from one of the simplest Erasmian distinctions, that between folly either in old or young people. Old age, Erasmus says, provokes a form of *stultitia* which deprives people of any sense of intellectual discrimination, forcing them again to the state of wayward infancy; Shakespeare delegates the formulation of this topic to Goneril, the hater of all filial dignities: “Old fools are babes again, and must be used / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused” (1.3.19-20; Serpie-



ri's translation: "I vecchi sciocchi sono di nuovo bambini, e li si deve trattare / con le sgridate, oltre che con le lusinghe, quando li si vede traviati"). Completely different, that is, lively and witty, is the folly of the young: an instinctive foolishness, an apparent fickleness which is typical of the "sweet" Fool, the one outspoken and unrestrained, and such is the self-conscious foolery of a disguised jester like Kent. The Erasmian polarity is fully established by Lear's famous exclamation when the symbolic storm – both natural and psychological – is approaching him at the end of Act 2: "O Fool! I shall go *mad*" (2.2.473). Significantly enough, the "bitter fool" that Lear embodies is echoed at a distance by his own counterpart, the "sweet fool" reified in the lineaments of his court jester, when the storm is actually raging: "This cold night will turn us all to *fools* and *madmen*" (3.4.71: "Questa fredda notte ci farà diventare tutti matti e pazzi").

The old king proves to be decisively mad within an Erasmian frame of reference. His folly makes him *blind*, as Kent intuitively: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eyes" (1.1.158-9). Serpieri's translation: "Guarda meglio, Lear, e lascia che io rimanga / la veritiera messa a fuoco del tuo occhio". Lear is 'blind', as Erasmus comments on his unhinged, uptight men of power, justly because he refuses to see truths otherwise manifest before his blurred (in)sight. Lear is also connoted as mad because he is 'dreadfully' furious, enraged by too violent and disruptive passions, like those defined in the *Praise of Folly* as misplaced love, covetousness, desire for revenge, and anxiety about punishment.

Turning to the eponymous Fool, he, like Moria's devotees – as well as Moria herself – has an innate instinct to ever tell the truth, whatever the external circumstances: "Prithee, Nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can / Teach thy Fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie" (1.4.156-7; Serpieri's translation: "Ti prego, zietto, prenditi un maestro che insegni al tuo / Matto a mentire; vorrei proprio imparare a mentire"). Kent's affected foolishness also comes to the fore (2.2.85-9) as that of an honest, straightforward fool: "praised from bluntness" ("apprezzato per la sua schiettezza"); "he cannot flatter, he" ("non sa lusingare, lui"); "an honest mind and plain" ("mente onesta e sincera"); "he must speak truth" (ll. 85-90; "deve dire il vero"). In any case, the Fool's primary role is that of relieving the king's existential pains, which Kent worries about. When asking if someone is caring for Lear's mental and physical status (3.1.15-17), the answer sounds quite obvious: "None but the Fool, who labours to outjest / His heart-struck injuries" (ll. 16-17); Serpieri's translation: "Solo il Matto che tenta di lenire con le burle le sue ferite al cuore". A particular device the Fool adopts to alleviate Lear's sufferings is the one enacted at the beginning of Act 3. To soothe the old man's anguish, his Fool conceives a long prophecy, in his version of Merlin's style, foreseeing a forthcoming ideal world where everything in life shall be just as it should be: honest, pure, balanced, fair (3.2.75-91): such is the pure Erasmian 'inspiration and divinity' formulated in history by Merlin, because the Fool, like the Magus, "lives before his time" (ll. 91-2; "Questa profezia la farà Merlino, perché io vivo prima del suo tempo").

At the end of his critical introduction, with a formidable but not at all arbitrary jump from Erasmus to Freud (after all, deranged people are still at stake!) Serpieri summons up a modernist/psychoanalytic view of this play with reference to Freud's famous annotations on *King Lear* (Moran 2010; Hollitscher 2017). The ina-

bility of the old and insane man to evolve from his primitive mental state, as well as the insistent need for the accomplishment of prohibited (probably sexual/incestuous) desires, leads to a decline into madness and determinist inevitability. Indeed, his legal and familiar abuses have been determined by his privileges both as a father and a king. In Freud's interpretation, a crucial, devastating event has separated him from both his family and his kingdom. He cannot move beyond his splitting mental status. His only possible reaction is that of anger, endemically reverting to a paranoid schizoid position, when his desires are not being fulfilled or when his repressed intents are made manifest through his own or other characters' inability to convey what they mean to say. The destabilisation of both his family and his kingdom shows Lear's regression into symbolic formations and internalisations of events throughout the play, up to the moment of his acceptance of Cordelia's death.

Multiple recent psychoanalytical readings of this play mostly attend to the Freudian incest taboo intertwined with Melanie Klein's object relations: absence of mothers or disregard for motherly figures; one could name scholars such as Bott-Spillius, Milton, Couve, Garvey, and Steiner (2011), Daniels (1987), Chiu (2012). In my very tentative exemplification, the objectification and introjection of the mother (who is talked about but never present in the plot) trigger numerous complex conceptual and social consequences. Flaunting an aggressive attitude towards the mother figure (as in "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb / Sepulchring an adulteress", 2.2.313-14; "Io divorzierei dalla tomba di tua madre / perché sepolcro di un'adultera") Lear demands a form of validation from his daughters, which can – in psychoanalytical terms – be regarded as internal objects, or projections of what he sees as Good. Lear's projective identification of his fears into the validation he demands from his daughters might be his unconscious defending what he fears most. These defences are the pathological organization of a personality, where unconscious fantasies constitute the basis for all his symptoms, patterns, thoughts, dreams, etc. The old king displays behavioural aspects that would indicate that he has not matured beyond personality splitting, a condition which explodes when Cordelia refuses to fulfil his fantasy of validation itself. To his request to the three daughters: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most" (1.1.50; "Chi di voi dovremo dire che più ci ama"), Cordelia merely replies with a triple *nothing*, which means that, unlike her sisters, she does not lend herself as an object of incestuous desire, and precisely this refusal establishes Lear's *thanatos*, i.e. his aggression or death instinct.

It is unfortunate – a naive reader could observe – that the character of King Lear himself, unlike those of Richard II, Hamlet, Macbeth, or Othello, does not offer a single soliloquy to allow for such unrestricted (farfetched?) accesses to his mind. What can I add? Psychoanalytical leads have been meanwhile intercepted by medical researchers to whom Lear's madness can be simply the sign of a mental illness, more specifically he could be suffering from 'senile dementia', or 'Alzheimer's disease' (see Lee and Jarvis 2004 and Daniels 1987, among others). For life expectancy of the period, to have Alzheimer's disease being more than eighty years old could have been almost a miracle.

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## **A Double *Dovere/Diletto*: Using Alessandro Serpieri's Translations for Bilingual Productions of Shakespeare's Plays**

### Abstract

These director's notes pay homage to Alessandro Serpieri by explaining how his outstanding translations of *The Tempest* and *Richard II* enabled experimental bilingual productions of these two plays, the one performed mainly in English in Florence (2004), the other performed mainly in Italian in Verona (2017). A case is made for appreciating how bilingualism can function as an enhancement rather than an impediment to interpretation, as part of the double 'duty and delight' of the director and cast in mixing and sometimes grafting together distinct verbal utterances, along with disparate cultural references and styles of performance. Also addressed are questions of intersemiotic translation, as well as the application of Serpieri's salient, illuminating insights into deixis and gestic language.

KEYWORDS: Translation for theatre; Shakespeare; bilingualism; hybridity; experimental *mise en scène*; intersemiotic translation

Among Alessandro Serpieri's numerous amiable traits was his exceptional generosity. I could devote this entire article to narrating specific instances of how he gave his time, energy, knowledge, insights, and genial support to his students and colleagues. Indeed, to recount these episodes adequately, we would need far more space than we have here. In my own case, I always will recall how Sandro went out of his way to provide illuminating advice and comments on several of my theatrical productions at both the Syracuse and New York University programmes in Florence, which he and his beloved, also deeply missed wife Anna made special efforts to attend. Most importantly, and most pertinently for the purposes of this commemorative volume, I need to acknowledge with the deepest gratitude my equally profound debt to the two outstanding translations Alessandro made of *The Tempest* and of *Richard II*: these enabled the bilingual scripts for my theatrical interpretations of these plays. The following pages, then, offer some anecdotes as well as analyses of the productions that I directed in 2004 and 2017, the first entitled *La Tempesta, the Imperfect Storm* (at Syracuse University in Florence), the second *Riccardo II in-contra I Sette contro Tebe*, at the Teatro Laboratorio in Verona. I will devote particular attention to questions of translating not only Shakespeare's words into Italian – as Professor Serpieri so magisterially did – but also his stagecraft into live, ensemble action, thus aiming to coordinate a bilingual text with congruent gestic language. Following the persuasive assertion of Silvia Bi-

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gliazzi, Peter Kofler, and Paola Ambrosi, namely that bilingualism can be “vindicated as a cultural opportunity” (2013: 13), I also will argue that polyglot dramaturgy can overcome the potential confusion of the ‘Babel effect’, and sometimes elucidate references and associations that would remain obscure in a monolingual rendition.

Directing undergraduate actors with diverse levels of theatrical training and experience, and relying on limited technical resources as well as minimal rehearsal time, I have necessarily developed my productions at Syracuse University in Florence as exercises in rough, experimental theatre. To stage a complete version of a play even as relatively short as *The Tempest* would be an over-ambitious, logistically risky undertaking. Therefore the primary task is to locate the essential scenes, dialogue, and action for an abbreviated yet dramatically coherent rendition. Given that the vast majority of the typical cast are native English speakers, with a similarly high percentage of anglophone audience members, most of the original Shakespearean text can be kept, excising the more verbose or lexically obscure passages. At the same time, enough non-English speakers attend the performances – usually the actors’ ‘host families’ – that a good measure of translation into Italian is called for. Moreover, since all of the American student actors are required to study the local language during their semester in Florence, giving them the chance to speak even a few of their lines in Italian functions as a worthwhile teaching device. At a more interpretative level, and in the context of studying comparative transnational theatre history, the bilingual script de-familiarises and re-adjusts a Shakespearean play: this approach can reveal the Italianate qualities pulsing both denotatively and connotatively through *The Tempest*’s chronotopes, intertexts, and *mise en scène*. For example, it gives an English or Theatre Studies major the opportunity to speak and body forth a character like Trinculo in all his bizarre, motley, surprising, tipsy-turvy hybridity, going beyond an academic study of how he mixes elements of the Tarlton/Kemp-esque Elizabethan improvising solo clown with touches of the Neapolitan *maschera* of Pulcinella. For the entire ensemble, the very process of speaking and hearing lines in Italian, of wearing Italian-style costumes and playing Italianate *vivo contrasto* theatre games in rehearsal can confirm and illuminate how *The Tempest* is indeed a tragicomedy *all’italiana*, a version of late Renaissance “magical pastoral”, as Richard Andrews and Robert Henke have convincingly shown.<sup>1</sup>

Here Alessandro’s translation provided an exact cue. When Stefano asks Trinculo to “swear” how he escaped the shipwreck, Trinculo replies “Swum ashore, man, like a duck. I can swim like a duck, I’ll be sworn” (Shakespeare 2000: 2.2.122–3), rendered by Serpieri as “Nuotando a riva come un’anitra, caro mio. Io nuoto come un’anitra, te lo giuro” (Shakespeare 2001: 461). Although this Trinculo does not speak in a full Neapolitan dialect, his repeated “anitra” (instead of the more standard “anatra”) conveys a distinct sense of his southern Italian origins. The repetition of the word, combined with the implied *gestus* of imitating a duck’s movements – then commented on by Stephano as resembling those of a goose – made this moment an ideal one for switching from English to Italian. Sticking out his “tail-feathers” while

<sup>1</sup> See Andrews (2014: 56–8) and Henke (2014). I use *vivo contrasto* to designate the performative principle and techniques of boldly contrasting, suddenly shifting moods, thoughts, and movements – reflective of *chiaroscuro* aesthetics – that mark sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian and Italian-influenced theatre. On this topic, see Taviani (1986).

eagerly swigging from Stefano's bottle, Trinculo thus translates the Italian meaning of his compound name ("Trincare", to drink, plus "culo", buttocks) through his body language, working in tandem with his self-conscious Neapolitan-style clowning. As Serpieri argues in an illuminating essay on "The Translator as Editor", it is not enough to transmit the sense of the words alone, for "translating a dramatic text requires an understanding, and a rendering, not only of its verbal contents but also of the theatricality implicit in its language" (2012: 175). Thus his choice for Stefano's immediate reply to Trinculo – "Bacia questa bibbia" for "Here, kiss the book" (2.2.124) – also strongly suggests a stage direction for Trinculo to kneel and ironically treat his wine-guzzling as an explicitly Catholic ritual. Through rehearsal, and our own repetition of listening and moving through this *lazzo*, we realised that the strongest choice was to have Stephano utter the line in both languages: the exaggerated importance of the action was thus conveyed, as was Serpieri's inspired use of the deictic demonstrative pronoun "questa" (instead of the definite article "the"), sounding uncannily like "kiss the", while retaining its aptly bibulous sibilant 's' and comically enhancing the bilabial first consonant of "book" through the alliteration of "Bacia" and "bibbia".

This was a satisfying application of the principle of 'intersemiotic translation', advocated by Serpieri himself, and articulated by several influential theorists of translating for theatrical performance (Bigliazzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013). We were also aiming to test out and express the creative potential of bilingual sonorities, dependent on the particular inflections, timbres, and rhythms of the players' voices and varying command of Italian and English. Indeed, this was (and is) an essential facet of our physicalised inter-cultural staging, for as Jean-Michel Déprats has aptly observed, "[t]ranslating a play thus means more than just rendering a text into another language: it involves, above all, translating for the muscles, nerves, and lungs of the actors who will speak the text" (2012: 136). In this same context, we also had the pleasure of translating/reviving for a mainly American audience the suggestive and convincing directorial choice of Giorgio Strehler, whose celebrated 1978 Piccolo Teatro di Milano production of *La Tempesta* interpreted Stephano and Trinculo as the *commedia dell'arte* servant *maschere* of Brighella and Pulcinella, the latter of documented origins in Naples and indeed an iconic emblem of the city itself. Once she donned her long, flouncy, loose-fitting white chemise and her custom-made leather Pulcinella mask, the relatively inexperienced actress playing Trinculo was transported into her stage persona, so different from her real-life one in age, gender, status, attitude, and cultural historical associations. She later told me that playing Trinculo not in the 'typically Shakespearean' but rather in the 'masked Italian' way gave her the confidence to stay in character while speaking two languages, and to develop a trusting synergy with the much more experienced male actors playing Stephano and Caliban. This was thus one way of confirming the insight that a "different type of speakability" – in this case an alternation between the source-text and the target-text – entails demanding technical challenges, but in this same process "finds in 'difficulty' a peculiar performative asset" (Bigliazzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013: 8).

Adopting Strehler's use of the Italian *maschere* was a deliberate homage to one of the most compelling Shakespearean productions of the twentieth century, but at a more profound interpretative level it was a realization of Serpieri's intersemiotic allusions, with their stylistic burden: once the choice is made, the director has a cer-



tain obligation, or *dovere*, to elaborate the visual, aural, and kinetic codings implicit in that choice. For as Strehler himself observed, “the problem of *The Tempest* is above all, and now more than ever, a stylistic problem” (Griga 2003: 75; translation mine). I would argue that this observation is yet another way of recognizing the well-known status of the play as an incomplete, interrupted, reticent, and elusive drama: trying to make *The Tempest* ‘mean’ something, especially in a coherent and definitive way, somehow seems obligatory for readers and spectators, yet it also seems to be an enterprise as inconclusive and insubstantial as the pageants both staged and dismissed by Prospero (Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014: 3-7). At the same time, the objective is to make this interpretative process an enjoyable one, for actors and audiences alike, bringing a spirit of delight, or *diletto* to the *dovere*, and perhaps even fusing them together. The sometimes overlooked and underrated Ferdinand, the maddened, suicidal prince of Act 1 who becomes Miranda’s “patient log-man” (3.1.67) in Act 3, serves as a model for this paradoxical engagement with the play, declaring that his labours are pleasures. Perhaps somewhat disingenuously, Prospero avows that his aim was “to please” (Epilogue, 13), even as he – or rather his author – leads audiences through a hermeneutic labyrinth. This paradigm of the ‘maze’, and its concomitant effect of ‘amazement’, is one that Serpieri convincingly identified as a key to understanding the theatrical energies of *The Tempest*, and it likewise helped me and my cast enjoy ourselves as we devised stylised movements, with characters taking sudden right-angle turns, or going around in circles, or stopping abruptly inside invisible *culs de sac* (Serpieri 2014: 101-5). Our subtitle, inspired by the then recently released Hollywood action-disaster film *The Perfect Storm* starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg, thus was deliberately intended both to announce a theatrical parody and to emphasize that our production would be ‘imperfect’ in every sense: rough, ragged, provisional, incomplete, and open-ended. Again Strehler’s interpretation prompted ours, as we were extending the director of the Piccolo Teatro’s contention that “the desired creative effect is that each scene [of *The Tempest*] seems to have been cut off at some point, before it could be finished. The audience ought to have a sensation of an interrupted action, they ought to feel a sensation of uncertainty” (Griga 2003: 103; translation mine). We likewise sought to create an experience of trial and error, as both an affirmation of our own university ‘rough theatre’ status and an active, mobile embodiment of the play’s own tropes of ‘trying’ things out, of ‘trying’ others, and of ‘erring’ in almost every sense, from mistaking illusory tempests, harpies, reports of death and sea-changes for realities, to wandering off course, straying about aimlessly, and launching projects – assassination attempts, political coups, a wedding masque, etc. – that suddenly dissolve, leaving no rack behind but the memory of a dream-like performance.<sup>2</sup>

There was another crucial reason for our cinematic allusion. Our theatrical intertext – or more appropriately inter-*mise en scène* – attempted a variation on Stre-

<sup>2</sup> Much critical attention has been given to the intertext of the play – seen most notably in Gonzalo’s utopian “excel the Golden Age” (2.1.169) – with Michel de Montaigne’s “Des Cannibales” (as translated by John Florio) and its critique of culturally biased, ethnocentric, and colonialist attitudes. Beyond this connection, one might argue that *The Tempest* also plays out Montaigne’s fundamental premiss that his *Essais* are precisely and indeed ‘essays’ (or trials): “If any mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial” (book 3, chapter 2, “Of repentance”; Montaigne 1965: 611).



hler's (and not only Strehler's) interpretative chronotope of the 'uninhabited island' as the bare theatre stage/duration of performance: we altered our adapted salone/lecture hall playing space to suggest a film studio, specifically Teatro 5 of Cinecittà, where Federico Fellini created most of his major productions. Our low-budget, 'low-tech' circumstances limited us to using a few tripods and video cameras, a spotlight, ladder, electrical cords, and the lecture hall's projection screen. The idea was that our live audience members were guests at a series of takes for a theatrical-style, bilingual cinematic adaptation of *The Tempest*. Thus the director, dressed in Fellini style with signature long white scarf, sat adjacent to the audience in his folding chair (with "IL REGISTA" written on the back), exhorting the actors, whispering notes to his assistant (Ariel), and periodically calling out "Azione!" [Action!] and "Cut!". As our performance progressed, this "regista" entered into the action as none other than Prospero. Our cinematic allusions did not stop there, however: taking cues from Peter Greenaway's 1991 adaptation *Prospero's Books*, there were multiple Ariels/assistant film directors (three, instead of four, two of them played by women, and each with varying levels of deference to the lead director/Prospero). For the opening 'storm-at-sea' scene, we shook a thunder sheet, banged on percussion instruments (devices also used by Strehler in his stage version), and repeatedly fast-flashed the spotlight and the actual light switches of the lecture hall/playing space, to create a crude but strangely persuasive effect of lighting. Inspired by Greenaway's model of a ship held and splashed around by Prospero (John Gielgud) in his bathtub beneath urinating Ariels suspended on ropes, one of our (non-urinating!) Ariels dangled and more and more rapidly-zigzaggedly swung a toy schooner above the heads of the audience.<sup>3</sup> The fact that this toy boat was attached to a long fishing pole was itself an act of translation, communicating a gestic/verbal pun: the fishing-reel played on the idea of a film reel, while also looping into the script's "reeling ripe" (5.1.279) description of Trinculo, spoken by Alonso at the end of the play. Here we also took a slight bilingual liberty, as after our American-born Alonso spoke the line in English, the native Florentine actor playing Antonio interjected "sì, è così cotto da *barcollare*", thus emphasizing "reeling" in the equivalent Italian form astutely chosen by Serpieri, with its etymological root of "barca" ("boat").<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the opening sequence of *Prospero's Books*, directed by Peter Greenaway and released in 1991 (Miramax Films). Greenaway's choice of action for Ariel is most likely an allusion to the famous 'Manneken Pis' fountain of Bruxelles, as well as a physical-visual troping of the British popular expression "taking the piss", or making fun of something.

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's script itself invites bilingual jesting at this point, since Stefano twice repeats "Coraggio" (F2 revision of the First Folio's "corasio", possibly rendering Stefano's drunken state, or a Neapolitan dialectal form) as he enters this scene, addressing Caliban as "bully monster", with an adjective derived from 'bello': again we used Serpieri's translation, also preferring the exact cognate "crampo" for Stefano's later quip "I am not Stefano but a cramp", especially because of its deictic "non toccatemi" (5.1.286; an inevitable stage direction for Sebastian to pinch or tickle him). Although we maintained the original English punning on "pickle" spoken by Alonso and Trinculo, I would like to acknowledge Serpieri's brilliantly accurate as well as redolent translation here, which overcomes a potential 'loss': as he explains, "The English 'pickle' here means both 'pickle-brine' (and indicates the liquid, the filthy water of the swamp, or the wine that he has drunk, with which Trinculo stinks) and, figuratively, a botched-up mess. The Italian 'intruglio' can render both meanings" (Shakespeare 2001: 502; translation mine).

Our pseudo-, mini-Cinecittà set also supported use of projections of clips from pre-taped filmings. The first was a brief excerpt from the recently released movie *The Beach*, starring Leonardo Di Caprio, providing a vision of the (then) paradisiacal Phi Phi island of Thailand for the “three men of sin” Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio (3.3.18-53). This clip was then put on pause at the sudden entrance of Ariel as Harpy, in our version spreading his multi-coloured cloth wings while perched upon a tall ladder, his cast shadow overwhelming the film projection behind him. The second was a video recording we ourselves had made, of Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess, with the board and Queen and King pieces seen in close-up. The clip paused as the live Prospero called out “Azione”, and the live Miranda spoke the line “Sweet lord, you play me false” (5.1.172), before the playing-area lights came up gradually, between her words “fair play” (spoken in English) and Sebastian’s “grandissimo miracolo” (spoken in Italian, 177).

Given, however, the ‘most fair’ play-ability as well as exceptional speakability of Alessandro’s translation, it was neither a miracle nor any surprise at all that our audience members – including those with little command of English – responded favourably to the bilingualism of the production. The Italian speakers also could more fully understand and appreciate special dramatic effects, such as the dissenting status of the unrepentant Antonio, who spoke nearly 100% of his lines in translation. For example, the insinuating “What might, / Worthy Sebastian, O, what might –? No more; / And yet, methinks I see it in thy face / What thou shouldst be” (2.1.204-7) became instead “Cosa potrebbe, buon Sebastiano, cosa potrebbe...? / Basta. Eppure mi sembra di leggertelo in faccia / che cosa tu dovresti essere” (Shakespeare 2001: 451). With its usage of the fortuitous long ‘o’ of “cosa” to convey the vocative ‘O’ of the original, of “Basta” to match the disyllabic cadence of “no more”, and of the line-ending cognate word “faccia” (instead of ‘viso’) for “face” – also preserving the consequent *enjambment* – this is an admirable example of Serpieri’s commitment to emulating the phonic values, metrical rhythms, and syntactical structures of Shakespeare’s scripts. In this particular case, however, he allowed himself an intertextual citation/extrapolation, which enriches and possibly even improves on the English of *The Tempest*’s script. Antonio’s “leggertelo” is not a strictly accurate version of “see it”, but rather an ingenious – and contextually apt – evocation of the famous line uttered by Lady Macbeth as she and her husband begin to plot the assassination of King Duncan: “your face, my thane, is as a book, where men / May *read* strange matters” (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.62-3; my emphasis). In fact, our Italian actor playing Antonio knew and deeply admired *Macbeth*, and thus the allusive ‘mis-translation’ helped him to focus and sharpen his actor’s interpretation of the ambitious conspirator and would-be regicide role.

We thus maintained our *dovere* of respecting our chosen Italian translation, in the process obtaining *diletto* for both performer and audience. Without the burden of maintaining absolute fidelity to English lines originally written and spoken in 1610-11, we found that using a polyglot approach offered fresh vitality and truly playful impromptu delights. For instance, when our fully bilingual, guitar-strumming Stephano entered through the audience, he lugubriously belted out the lyrics “Here shall I die ashore...”, “su questa spiaggia io morirò” (2.2.42), but then interrupted himself to exclaim with a drunken cadence, “for a desert island there sure

are a lot of people around here!” (performance improvisation, November 2004). Finally, while we deliberately aimed for an imperfect, open-ended ‘conclusion’, we felt satisfied that our hybrid theatrical/cinematic staging encouraged a collective interpretation of the play, in a salutary repudiation of potentially Prospero-centred, autobiographical ones.<sup>5</sup> Resuming the Fellini references that included themes from the soundtrack of *E la nave va* [And the Ship Sails On], there appeared on the screen a silent projection of the famous collective farewell to the ‘Rex’ ocean-liner from *Amarcord*, as Prospero promised “mari calmi” and “venti favorevoli” to Alonso and his cohorts. The third, least obedient “assistant director” Ariel then removed Prospero’s white scarf/magic cloak and meerschaum pipe/magic wand, before proceeding to shout “Ciak!”, as he used the clapperboard one last time and introduced the Epilogue, its clauses spoken first by the Prospero-Regista, but then in turns by each member of the cast, with recorded music from the finale of Stravinsky’s *Firebird* growing louder, climaxing with “set us free” sung in choral unison. This, then, was neither a palinodic Prospero/Shakespeare taking leave of his poetic-theatrical ‘art’, nor a conflicted colonialist invader relinquishing control of the island to its prior inhabitant, nor even a solo *auteur* making one last metatheatrical/metacinematic flourish, but rather one member among more than a dozen, of a primarily young and amateur performing ensemble. This choice also aligned with several of Serpieri’s theoretical writings, which emphasize the particularly collective, multimedial and multisemiotic nature of the theatrical *mise en scène* and therefore of conscientious theatre translation (Serpieri 1977; Serpieri et al. 1978).

In contrast to this ‘Imperfect Storm’ version of *The Tempest*, the adaptation of *Richard II* that I directed in Verona in the spring of 2017 was performed mainly in Italian, by a cast whose majority were native Italian speakers; in addition, this Practice-as-Research production grafted scenes from Shakespeare’s lyrical history play with scenes from another classic, Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* (*Sette contro Tebe*, here translated brilliantly by Guido Avezzi). I gave the resulting hybrid the title of *Riccardo II in-contra I Sette contro Tebe*, with the verb indicating how our adaptation had Shakespeare’s doomed king encounter the Greek tragedy by watching key scenes from the latter being performed as a ‘play-within-the-play’, for his close observation and potential instruction. It was a challenging and certainly original experiment, and in fact I would not have attempted it without the availability of Alessandro’s outstanding and recently published translation (Shakespeare 2014). At first glance, the two disparate plays would seem to have little in common, but our commixture of them managed to bring out their dynamically similar as well as contrasting qualities.<sup>6</sup> One of their shared characteristics is brilliant use of tragic irony, and thus it was a truly heavy and sorrowful burden to suffer a real-life tragic irony, soon after the beginnings of my preparations for the production: with Alessandro’s sudden passing, what was intended as a project he could advise on, and eventually enjoy seeing on stage, turned into a commemoration of his illustrious career, his innumerable scholarly and creative contributions, and his treasured friendship.

<sup>5</sup> On this long-standing tradition, its traps, variations, and distortions, see Gurr (2014).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this point, and for a more extended account of the production and its various elements, see Nicholson (2017).

With all the more poignancy, then, resounded the line I chose as the starting and ending utterance of the entire performance, spoken in choral unison by several members of the cast both in English and in Serpieri's translation: "they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain", "soffia verità chi soffia le parole con affanno" (2.1.8). My choice was a deliberate tribute to the translator himself, since he had so incisively explained how Shakespearean theatre deploys "a dynamic development of speech acts" (Serpieri 1985: 122), and so convincingly taught the primacy of the act of breathing/speaking – stressed by Émile Benveniste as the *énonciation* – in the deictic orientations of theatrical discourse (Serpieri 1978; see also Elam 1980: 144-5). As with the epilogue/*envoi* of my bilingual 'Imperfect Storm' production, a usually solo speech was delivered by a group of actors, this time in Italian: again, this move towards emphasizing the communal over the individual perspective of John of Gaunt's monologues was itself a post-Brechtian act of translation, aiming at an "epic" effect, and thus a contemporary "interlingual and intertemporal transfer" of the kind that Susan Bassnett, citing Walter Benjamin's "justification for free translation" (Benjamin 1992: 80), has posited as capable of achieving gain, and not merely loss (Bassnett 2012: 53-4). Thus, while we did have a single mature actor play the role of the dying Gaunt, there were also his brother York and six members of his household supporting and collaborating with him, alternating lines not only of the famous "This England" speech, but also of the direct harangue of the insolent Richard, before reaching a powerful in-unison crescendo with "Proprietario dell'Inghilterra ora tu sei, non re" ("Landlord of England art thou now, not king", 2.1.113). If this climactic line's two opening substantives, one of them a proper name, call for semantic accuracy and thus in Italian double and treble in syllabic length, Serpieri at least was able to preserve the strong monosyllabic rhythm and hammering spondee at the end. Having a crowd of voices shout these final words provoked all the more fury and outrage in our Richard, and also increased the king's motivation to interrupt, with impatient vehemence, Gaunt's next status-lowering jibe, "Thy state of law is bondslave to the law, / And thou –" ("Tu che sei la legge ora sei schiavo della comune legge, / e tu –", 2.1.114-15). We returned to the single voice here, partially to clarify the subtle adjustment made in the Italian rendition, with the addition of the adjective "comune" ("common") underlining the self-debasement and therefore regal and national humiliation that Richard's uncle claims his nephew is making. This kind of semantically precise locution recurs in Serpieri's translation of Richard's retort, as the "lean-witted" insult-epithet becomes the much more exactly and vividly physical "cervello smagrito", qualifying "uno stolto lunatico" in a deft preservation of the lilting, alliterative 'l's' and 't's' of the original's "lunatic lean-witted fool" (2.1.115; Shakespeare 2014: 119). Our fluently bilingual actor of Richard, Ms Elena Pellone, could easily have spoken the original text, but she felt that at this point the Italian wording gave her more force, impetus, and authenticity, especially in response to the chorally uttered Italian version of Gaunt's mocking denunciation.

In his stimulating and eloquent study entitled *Polifonia Shakespeariana* (2002), Serpieri makes a compelling argument for understanding Shakespeare's theatre as one that continually stages the early modern European crisis of monological representation, as seen in the multiple dismantlings and de-mystifications of king-

ly rituals, ceremonies, and paraphernalia in *Richard II*. As he observes, “the decisive deposition in this play is not so much that of a king as it is that of a symbolic cosmos, and of the sun-king that represents, interprets, and guarantees it” (Serpieri 2002: 57; translation mine). And indeed, since this deposition is a symbolic and epistemological one – and here Serpieri acknowledges the salient reading of Foucault’s *Order of Things* (1970) – the intersemiotic translation privileges props, costumes, set items, movements, and gestures over verbal signifiers. To convey the paradoxical sense of a cycle of royal power that was devolving toward nothingness and yet was destined to resume and move towards another cycle, we not only used a circular mirror but also a circular mound of actual earth – placed at the centre of our playing area – to match the circular, hollow crown which Richard holds out and ultimately hands over to Bolingbroke. It was over this central ‘earthy pit’ – where the king of Thebes Eteocles, in the prior scene of our hybrid script, had just donned his armour in preparation for his climactic, fatal duel with his brother Polynices – that our Richard divested himself, crowning his cousin, taking off the latter’s leather jacket and replacing it with his ermine-lined regal robe, before hailing him with “God save King Henry, unking’d Richard says, / And send him many years of sunshine days” (4.2.220-1).

If at this point it seemed to be our own duty to respect the English rhyming couplet flourish of Richard’s ambivalently full/empty salutation/blessing, conveying a touch of hyperbolic sarcasm and thus a potential ‘infelicity condition’ that might undo the perlocutionary speech-act, it was a delight to return to Italian a few moments later, for the performance of Richard’s contemplation of the mirror. No longer king but instead a witty poetical satirist, Richard devises a series of variations on the noun/verb signifier “face”, made all the more unstable and self-destructive through anaphoric questioning combined with the ostensive deixis of Richard’s simultaneous physical (actor’s) face and “shadow” or reflection in the mirror (in the process also obliquely and appositely echoing Faustus’s famous “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships [?]”, Marlowe 1995: 5.1.93):

RICHARD.                                Was this face the face  
    That every day under his household roof  
    Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face  
    That like the sun did make beholders wink?  
    Is this the face which faced so many follies,  
    That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?  
    A brittle glory shineth in this face;  
    As brittle as the glory is the face  
    [Dashes the glass against the ground]  
    For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.  
    (4.2.281-9)

By switching into Italian for the question “Era questa faccia la faccia che teneva / ogni giorno sotto il tetto del suo palazzo / diecimila uomini?” (Shakespeare 2014: 243), then back to the English, and finally to Italian once more for the two lines immediately preceding the violent climactic gesture, our Richard’s bilingual delivery accentuated all the more vividly the decline, fall, and dissolution of pre-

vously unitary regal signs. The perfect rhyme of “face/face”, preserved by Serpieri in “Una fragile gloria splende su questa faccia, / e fragile come la gloria è la faccia” (ibid.) cannot cover the fragile, fleetingly imperfect status of the mortal, deposed king’s face/image, an insight punctuated and demonstrated by the shattered looking-glass.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that my bilingual, hybrid, Practice-as-Research Shakespearean productions often have been things, if not of darkness, at least of varying kinds and degrees of lucidity. In their brighter and clearer moments, they perhaps have revealed a few brave new worlds of interpretation: if so, much of the credit must go to Alessandro Serpieri’s illuminating, vigorous, and sustaining translations. It is fitting to close with citations of his own wry, sceptical, but also encouraging reflections on the theatre translator’s task, as well as of lines by his beloved John Donne, to whose poetry he also gave eloquent voice and powerful energy in modern Italian (Donne 2009): “Any translator is doomed to lose the game. Still, translation does cooperate to give new life to Shakespeare’s plays, introducing them into a new language and a new world” (Serpieri 2012: 169).

... small things seem great  
Below; but up into the watch-tower get,  
And see all things despoiled of fallacies:  
Thou shalt not peep through lattices of eyes,  
Nor hear through labyrinths of ears, nor learn  
By circuit, or collections to discern.  
(Donne 1977, “The Second Anniversary”, ll. 293-8)

Alessandro Serpieri was a unique and brilliant scholar-translator, a true friend and *bravissimo* maestro. His work remains a genuine inspiration, for as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare’s well-turned and true-filéd lines, it “seems to shake a lance, / As brandished at the eyes of ignorance” (Ben Jonson, “To the Memory of my Beloved”, ll. 69-70). To the elements be free, Sandro, and fare thee well!

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## Eros in Shakespeare

### Abstract

This brief essay is a translation of the introduction to the volume *L'Eros in Shakespeare*, edited by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam in 1988. In discussing the role of the passions in Shakespeare's plays and poetry, it brings together considerations from semiotics, psychoanalysis, drama theory and early modern English history. These approaches are all pertinent to the analysis of the multi-perspective and performative language of Shakespeare's plays. The essay also surveys the four Shakespeare conferences held in Taormina, under the direction of Alessandro Serpieri, between 1984 and 1987.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; passions; semiotics; psychoanalysis; early modern English history

This brief essay is a translation of the introduction to the volume *L'Eros in Shakespeare*, edited by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam in 1988.<sup>1</sup> The volume in question presents the proceedings of a conference held the previous year in Taormina. It seemed to me appropriate to translate this essay on its thirtieth anniversary, as part of the celebration of Sandro's life and work. This choice was also encouraged by a recent article by Armando Massarenti in the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, published on the occasion of the fourth centenary celebrations of Shakespeare. Massarenti's reflections on Shakespeare's "lessons of love and power" are prompted by his re-reading of what he calls "a precious and now unfindable little book", which he deems "a highly useful re-discovery, in this period of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Bard". Massarenti writes,

Serpieri and Elam underline the extraordinary modernity of [Shakespeare's] conception of Eros, which 'is tested against Plato, Ovid and Petrarch' only to find new, fruitful itineraries. In Shakespeare, 'Eros runs everywhere... it is quest, game, play, performance, fiction, deception, disgust, formless spectre', and not infrequently, as shown by the passionate plots that move Shakespearean heroes, 'it can give rise to unprecedented violence and frustration, because the investment of desire can always be deformed into the most secret and disturbing psychic spectres...' . . . Whether in the joyful dynamics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or in the intricate machinations of a Iago or a Pandarus, Eros runs everywhere and, if it runs, it often runs in circles.

<sup>1</sup> See Serpieri and Elam 1988. The volume includes papers by Giorgio Melchiori, Jaqueline Rose, Agostino Lombardo, Barbara Arnett Melchiori, Giuseppe Galigani, Terry Eagleton, Silvano Sabbadini, Franco Marengo, Fernando Ferrara, Sergio Bonanzinga, and Maurizio Grande.

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This translation endeavours to make the ‘rediscovered’ introduction available, thirty years on, to a new and wider readership. It is clearly an essay of its time, especially in its primarily semiological discourse, but at the same time it addresses a theme – that of the passions in Shakespeare – that has certainly not lost any of its fascination, and that probably deserves closer analysis than it has received, in the meantime, in the critical literature. Above all, the essay reflects some of Sandro’s abiding critical and cultural interests, from semiotics to psychoanalysis, from drama theory to intellectual history, all of which converge in the analysis of the multi-level and performative language of Shakespeare’s plays.

The 1980s Taormina Arte conferences to which this introductory essay refers were a significant part of Sandro’s broader cultural engagement with Shakespeare’s plays and their translation and performance. We organized the first conference, in 1984, to accompany Gabriele Lavia’s celebrated staging, in the vast Greek theatre, of *Hamlet* in Sandro’s own excellent translation (Shakespeare 1982). Tom Stoppard was guest of honour of both the performance and the conference. The 1985 meeting offered, among other presentations, the then ongoing and unpublished University of Florence research project, led by Sandro, on Shakespeare’s dramatization of his historiographical sources. The following year the theme of “Staging Shakespeare” brought together international artists of the calibre of Krzystof Zanussi, Leo De Berardinis, and Enrico Baj, as well as leading Shakespearian scholars, and was marked by Declan Donnellan’s highly innovative Cheek-by-Jowl production of *Twelfth Night*. The final conference, to which this essay refers, again accompanied the performance of a Serpieri translation at the Greek theatre, in this case Lavia’s production of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare 1996). These events, at once scholarly and performative, underline Alessandro Serpieri’s unique combination of critical, theoretical and translational skills, and his multi-perspective commitment to understanding and presenting Shakespearian drama and poetry on page and stage.<sup>2</sup>

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## Introduction

This volume presents the proceedings of the fourth conference on Shakespeare, organized and hosted in Taormina in August 1987, within the framework of the annual Theatre Festival. The conference in question concluded at least the initial phase of the summer meetings dedicated by Taormina Arte to Shakespearian drama. It might be apt, therefore, to recall briefly the topics of the previous three meetings, and offer a summary of the overall conference debates and their central themes.

The first conference, held in 1984, was dedicated to the topic of “the nostalgia of

<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Alessandro Serpieri’s heirs, Chiara, Simone, Nicola, and Marco Serpieri, for permission to translate and publish this essay.

being" (Serpieri 1985), a nostalgia that can be discerned in works of the great dramatist, as in other European artists of the time: nostalgia for a model of the world founded on a powerful symbolic and transcendental system that had sanctioned, for centuries, a general and shared cohesion of meaning. In post-Copernican civilization, marked by the first clear signs of the 'new science', knowledge tended towards relativism, towards the perspectival – and therefore variable – vision of subjects and events, and towards the multiplication of routes of signification and of communicative pacts. Of all this, Shakespeare was certainly one of the most acute and troubled interpreters, committed to seeking out and representing the new and more problematic relations of man with the world, but attracted, at the same time, to the earlier model of meaning that was undergoing such an epochal crisis.

The second conference, held in 1985, had a more technical theme, but no less relevant in terms of the construction of meaning: the compositional work of the dramatist in adapting his narrative sources, in particular the historical chronicles (Hall, Holinshed) and Plutarch's *Lives*. This dramaturgic work consisted in the transformation, adaptation and transcodification of 'histories', appropriated within modes of theatrical representation that were unprecedentedly varied, and commensurate with the problematics of a new, already modern consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

The third meeting, which took place in 1986, was centred on the theme "Staging Shakespeare", and thus on the work of twentieth-century actors and theatre artists, in relation to the possible modes of appropriation of a dramaturgical era – the early modern period – with which all the participants agreed it was necessary to come to terms (Serpieri and Elam 1986).

This brings us to the most recent summer meeting (1987), dedicated to the theme that has provided the title of this volume: "Eros in Shakespeare". This theme is connected in a certain sense to the topic of the first conference, addressing from a different angle of vision the question of Shakespeare's 'modernity'. If, in discussing the "nostalgia of being", the main point of view had been of a cognitive and epistemological order, here, in the discourse on Eros, the privileged point of view was naturally that of the emotions – the passions – running throughout Shakespeare's work. It is a field no less new and mobile, varied and unpredictable, than the cognitive and rational field. Shakespeare's new tragedy, new comedy and new lyrical poetry are the result of a highly intense relationship with a period of vertiginous transformation, and therefore with a particularly acute and problematic sense of history, as well as with the uncertain status of time itself, in which human affairs are conducted and defined in an increasingly precarious fashion. What emerges in this relationship, in Shakespeare as in his great contemporaries (from Lope de Vega to Cervantes to Donne), is a modern sense of Eros and, complementarily, a modern sense of death. We are now quite beyond the Petrarchan tradition, even if the themes and modules of that tradition continue to exert their influence.

<sup>3</sup> The central session of the second conference was dedicated to the ambitious research project, entitled "In Shakespeare's workshop: from the sources to the plays", carried out by a group of University of Florence researchers under the direction of Alessandro Serpieri. The results of this project were later published in four volumes (Serpieri, Bernini, Celli, Cenni, Corti, Elam, Mochi, Payne, and Quadri 1988). The same publisher, Pratiche, likewise published the proceedings of the Taormina conferences, including the present volume.

The experience of Eros is now presented in the most varied registers, along unexplored and dynamic dramatic trajectories, in a continuous restructuring of the relations and emotions invested in it.

Dominant in this discourse is the word/concept 'desire': an 'infinite desire' according to the most ancient tradition, from the 'distant love' of the Provençals to the varied modulations of the Sicilian and *Dolce stil novo* schools, and thus of Petrarch and of all the Petrarchists. But this 'infinity' is now relocated within an extraordinary form of mobility that shatters the canonical Petrarchan *messa in forma* with its underlying narrative involving the lover and the distant or missing woman, and with its predominantly nominal-adjectival discursive structure (acutely explored by the critical genius of Contini). Desire becomes modern in all senses, because it is no longer codified in 'a' typical situation, investigated with reference to variations on the theme, but is refracted through multiple possibilities and perspectives: it draws on tradition, or rather traditions, and at the same time invents new routes and new targets. In Shakespeare, but also in his other great contemporaries, desire is tested against Plato and Ovid and Petrarch, without any overt or even implicit hierarchy, and, confronting these paradigms, finds unknown and disturbing new itineraries.

It could not be otherwise, since, as Greimas suggests, "every society traces the contents of its own particular pathemic configuration, which – interpreted as a grid for connotative social reading – has among other tasks that of facilitating inter-subjective and social communication" (1983: 14). If this is true in general, in Shakespeare and in his era the dissemination of Eros through the prismatic mirrors of the great epistemic crisis, and of the new cognitive relativism, allows us to glimpse that 'excess' and 'insaturability' that determine the whole development of the modern. Desire, like knowledge, is losing its 'ontological' object, its codified reference.

Eros 'runs' everywhere, in traditional and transgressive relationships, in surprising situations, in registers and modules of multiple stylistic, rhetorical, parodic and slang inventiveness. The constraints of the puritans are countered by a tumultuous conceptual and expressive wantonness; and ideal love is conjugated alongside the parody of love, or together with the inexhaustible discovery of the obscene. Amorous play can reach new heights, just as it can give rise to unprecedented violence and frustration, because the investment of desire can always be deformed into the most secret and disturbing psychic spectres: of death, of jealousy, of nausea towards carnal experience, first pursued as a mirage and then perceived as extreme degradation (see, for example, Sonnet 129).

Desire has no boundaries, as we read in *Venus and Adonis* ("The sea hath bounds, but deep desire hath none", l. 389),<sup>4</sup> and again in *Troilus and Cressida* ("the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit", 3.2.79-80). It is 'false' or 'foul', as can be discerned in the numerous lexicalizations scattered in the comedies no less than in the tragedies; it can turn into its opposite, death ("I desperate now approve / Desire is death", Sonnet 147, ll. 7-8); and above all it never reaches its target in full (as can be seen for example in *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.6.8-19, or in the incipit to *Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1-15, where, affirms Duke Orsino, love must be understood as

<sup>4</sup> All references are to Shakespeare (1986).

fantastic, insatiable, multiple and restless, because its final object is only itself or its own reflection: "So full of shapes is fancy / That it is alone is high fantastical", 14-15).

Desire, therefore, is everything in Shakespeare. It is spiritual attraction towards the Neoplatonic archetype (as in the sonnets of immortality), quest, game, play, performance, fiction, deception, disgust, formless spectre. Its workings are an extraordinary field of investigation for addressing the passions on a historical, theoretical or hermeneutic level. This is not surprising, because the theatre, which is the main point of reference here, lives by the passions, represents the passions and arouses the passions, both as an elective site of enunciation and as an imitation of life, and therefore, as the privileged territory of the great pathemic modes that manifest themselves along the axis of the 'will': namely, seduction and temptation. These are modes of manipulation, as Greimas observes, that pass through the speech act, and that live by language (always both a means and an end, within artistic fiction), like the other two types of manipulation: that unfolding along the axis of power (threat or provocation) and that manifested along the axis of knowledge (to make known or to make people believe, see Greimas 1983: 119). Such passionate modes, of course, take on particular significance within the narrative and performative fabric of the drama.

Let us consider more closely the three above-mentioned levels of investigation of the passions in Shakespeare: the historical, the theoretical and the hermeneutic. On a historical level, his drama discloses the forms of expression of the first truly modern sensibility, within the cultural and intertextual context of his era, and sketches out the features of a new Eros in relation to the transformed social, urban and commercial transactions of the time. The English Reformation had led, on the one hand, to a supposed consensus, and thus to an apparent control of the passions, but, on the other hand, with its repressive influence – not only political-religious but also psycho-ethical – it had given rise to extraordinary degrees of verbal vulgarity and, more secretly, to novel forms of passionate obliquity, Freudian negation and morbid projection: on the one hand, therefore, foul language, on the other the puritan phantasmatisation of desire, of which *Othello* is one of the most paradigmatic and powerful examples.

On a theoretical level, Shakespearean drama offers highly significant material, both for a psychoanalysis of the passions (not by chance Freud, Jones, and Lacan drew on his plays in enucleating their analytical models), and for a semiotics of the passions, such as that of Greimas, intent on studying the passions as an implementation of actantial structures, in the awareness that passion is never unilateral, and cannot be simplistically anchored to the subject, but always interacts with networks of relations within the very pathemic possibilities of the era in which it is manifested and textualized. A semiotics of the passions must of necessity be, at one and the same time, a historical, rhetorical and psychoanalytic investigation.

Finally, in hermeneutic practice, Shakespeare's works can also be read along the great new emotional trajectories – and in the subtlest of pathemic traces – supporting, moving and disturbing both thought, concept and image. Today it might be highly profitable to work on Shakespeare's drama in search of the 'signs' and 'systems' of the passions, thereby returning, in a certain sense, to Aristotle: the

great, original system of emotions lying behind all theatrical codes. A similar return can also represent, at the same time, an analogous recuperation of Elizabethan, and more generally Renaissance, theoretical reflection, which often took the form of an authentic psycho-semiology of the passions, as, for example, in Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1601) a 'scientific' investigation of the psychic and behavioural mechanisms of human relations. We progressively lost track of such approaches, and have only recently rediscovered them, bringing to light again the extraordinary modernity of their theoretical structure and of their empirical research, albeit within the specific episteme of the age.

The papers presented in this volume explore, in far greater depth than we could attempt in this brief opening discourse, virtually all the points that we have summarily expounded here, and undoubtedly represent a significant overall contribution to the study not only of Eros in Shakespeare, but also of the whole vast and complex range of the passions, investigated in their historicity, in their rhetoric and in their textual complexity.

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ALESSANDRO SERPIERI — PINO COLIZZI

## **Intervista a Prospero**

Con un postscriptum di Pino Colizzi

## **Interview with Prospero**

With a Postscriptum by Pino Colizzi



### Intervista a Prospero\*

Al professor Alessandro Serpieri viene chiesto di scrivere un'intervista immaginaria a Prospero della *Tempesta*, e di partecipare a uno spettacolo: "Lezioni di anima", in un teatro romano. Il Professore rifiuta; ma qualcuno gli fa arrivare voce che sotto una misteriosa forma o sembianza, di più non si sa o non si può dire, l'intervistato Prospero proprio lui, sarà in quel teatro. La fantasia del Professore vola. "Ci sono più cose, in cielo e in terra, Orazio, di quante la tua filosofia riesce a immaginare." E anche Ovidio ha il suo peso, e la grande maga Medea che aveva concorso a creare lo stesso Prospero. Curiosità accademica e spirito ludico si mettono insieme, per una volta. Accetterà la proposta, scriverà un'abile intervista che gli servirà per farsi rivelare il segreto che sta a monte anche di Prospero. *Chi* era davvero Shakespeare! Quanti hanno voluto ancora escluderlo dalla scrittura dei suoi drammi! Il gioco coinvolgerà i due protagonisti più del previsto. Il professore, stimolato nel suo spirito critico, troverà risposte alle sue domande proprio nel testo che lui stesso ha scritto; e il vecchio attore sentirà miracolosamente rinverdire in sé la gioia di recitare che credeva sopita per sempre. Shakespeare compie un altro prodigio.

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*(Musica e rumori che dovrebbero creare un'atmosfera di tempesta. Un uomo prova a rappresentare un naufragio mettendo un modellino di carta di un veliero tra una luce e il fondo e cerca di produrre anche con la voce gli schianti e il fragore del mare; poi simula le voci dei naufraghi:)*

Ammainate le vele! Presto! Presto!! L'albero cede!! Affondiamo!

*(Alessandro Serpieri entra dal fondo con due copioni e osserva l'uomo nel suo impegno maldestro; poi gli si rivolge forse divertito, e comunque incuriosito; lo apostrofa.)*

ALESSANDRO. Prospero?

PROSPERO. Sì, Prospero, sì. Sono io.

*(Mostra il modellino come per dire: la prova è questa. I due si avvicinano circospetti; non si danno la mano. La lentezza e l'imbarazzo creano un'atmosfera irreale)*

Lei è il Professor Serpieri? *(Pausa.)*

Il Professor Alessandro Serpieri che ha tradotto tutto Shakespeare!

\* Interpretata da Alessandro Serpieri e Pino Colizzi e trasmessa da Radio Vaticana il 18 dicembre 2014. Il testo qui presentato comprende alcune variazioni rispetto al copione originale; come tale è andato in scena a Roma al Teatro dell'Angelo il 19 gennaio 2015. Le traduzioni dei passi shakespeariani citati nel copione sono di Pino Colizzi.

### Interview with Prospero\*

Professor Alessandro Serpieri is asked to write an imaginary interview with Prospero from *The Tempest*, and to appear in a performance titled “Lezioni di anima” [Lessons of the soul] to be staged in a theatre in Rome. Professor Serpieri refuses. But someone somehow informs him that, in a mysterious form or guise, Prospero himself will be present in that theatre; more is unknown or cannot be said. The Professor’s fantasy flies high. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. And Ovid too has a role, as well as the great sorceress Medea, who had contributed to the creation of Prospero himself. Academic curiosity and playful spirit join forces. He will accept the proposal and will write a clever interview which will finally disclose to him the secret behind Prospero too. Who was Shakespeare really? How many people have tried to disclaim his hand in the writing of his plays? The trick will involve the two protagonists more than expected. Spurred on by his aroused critical spirit, the Professor will find the answers to his questions in the text he himself has written, and the old actor will miraculously feel again the joy to perform, which he thought dormant for good. Shakespeare performs yet another miracle.

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*(Music and noises that should create a tempest atmosphere.)*

*A man tries to represent a shipwreck by putting a paper miniature of a sailing ship between a light and the backdrop, while also attempting to reproduce the crash and roar of the sea with his voice; he then imitates the voice of the shipwrecked:)*

Lower the sails! Quick! Quick!! The mast is splitting!! We sink!

*(Alessandro enters from the backstage carrying two scripts, watches the awkward conduct of this character and, amused or perhaps annoyed but anyway intrigued, he addresses him:)*

ALESSANDRO. Prospero?

PROSPERO. Yes, Prospero, yes. That’s me.

*(He shows the miniature as if saying: “This is the proof”. The two come nearer; they do not shake hands. Their slowness and awkwardness create an unreal atmosphere.)*

Are you Professor Serpieri? *(Pause.)*

That Professor Alessandro Serpieri who translated all of Shakespeare?

\* The original script was performed in Italian by Alessandro Serpieri and Pino Colizzi and broadcast by Radio Vaticana on 18 December 2014. The text here presented includes a few changes of the original script. This text was performed at Teatro dell’Angelo in Rome on 19 January 2015. The translations of Shakespeare’s lines quoted in the script are by Pino Colizzi.

ALESSANDRO. Tutto no! (*Pausa.*) Una quindicina di drammi e i sonetti.  
PROSPERO. Ah... Ecco... Sì... Beh, non può immaginare quanto sia capitato a proposito, qui stasera.  
ALESSANDRO. A proposito per cosa?  
PROSPERO. Lezioni di anima, no?

*(Si ferma, non sa come proseguire, poi imbarazzato gli si avvicina e con tono confidenziale continua.)*

Mi hanno chiesto di parlare di me, della Tempesta, quella che ho scatenato e placato; dell'isola, di mia figlia, dei miei incantesimi, di Calibano, di Ariel, dei miei folletti, e soprattutto.... di parlare della mia anima.

ALESSANDRO. Sì certo. Ah ecco, certo.  
PROSPERO. Ma un personaggio cosa può saperne della propria anima? Un personaggio vive, non parla di sé.... e io non so proprio cosa dire di me, della mia anima, e farei scena muta o direi sciocchezze.

*(Alessandro gli porge uno dei due copioni.)*

Vede Professore, nessuno può dubitare che io sia Prospero; ma fuori dalla *Tempesta* cosa significherei? Quale interesse posso destare in chi è venuto per conoscermi? Lei capita davvero a proposito, mi creda. Non avrei potuto sperare in qualcosa di più autorevole di quello che lei avrà scritto qui, per me.

ALESSANDRO. Bene.

*(Lo guarda, gli indica il leggio, va verso il proprio e aspetta che l'altro continui.)*

PROSPERO. La prego, mi aiuti.  
ALESSANDRO. Se posso... Non fosse altro perché io sono stato catturato da lei, dal suo autore.  
PROSPERO. Da lui capisco, ma da me poi! Il mio solo fascino sta nell'essere l'ultimo che ha creato.  
ALESSANDRO. Quasi l'ultimo... Ma in che modo dovrei aiutarla?  
PROSPERO. Non so... lei mi fa le domande... e io leggo qua, e le rispondo nel modo giusto.

Non sono abituato a parlare, sa; il mio destino è essere, non descrivere quello che sono. Sarebbe un fallimento nel fallimento.

Lei invece, lei che è un Professore, uno studioso; lei lo sa dire bene come Lui mi ha voluto.

ALESSANDRO. Già, Lui... Lui!

ALESSANDRO. Not all of it! *(Pause.)* Some fifteen plays and the sonnets!  
PROSPERO. Ah... there... yes... well, you cannot imagine how much you turned up at the right time, here, tonight.  
ALESSANDRO. Right time for what?  
PROSPERO. Lessons of the soul, what else?

*(He stops, does not know how to go on, then goes close to him, embarrassed, and continues with a confidential tone:)*

They asked me to talk about myself, about the *Tempest*, the one I set off and quelled, about the island, about my daughter, about my spells, about Caliban, about Ariel, about my spirits, and, above all to talk about my soul.

ALESSANDRO. Ah, they asked you... sure, I see... sure.  
PROSPERO. But what can a character know about his own soul? A character lives, does not talk about himself... and I really don't know what to say about myself, about my soul: I would stand speechless or talk nonsense.

*(Alessandro hands him one of the two scripts.)*

You see, Professor, no one can doubt I am Prospero; but outside the *Tempest* what do I mean? What interest can I raise in whoever has come to meet me? Believe me, you turned up at exactly the right time. I could not hope for anything more authoritative than what you wrote for me here.

ALESSANDRO. All right. *(He looks at him, points to a lectern, goes towards his own, and waits for him to go on.)*  
PROSPERO. Please, help me.  
ALESSANDRO. If I can... If only because I have been hooked by you, by your author.  
PROSPERO. I understand by *Him*, but by *me*! My only charm lies in being his last creature.  
ALESSANDRO. Almost the last one... But how should I help you?  
PROSPERO. I don't know... you ask me questions... I read here and give you the right answers.

I am not used to talking, you know; my destiny is to be, not to describe what I am. It would be a double failure.

While you, you are a Professor, a scholar; you can say it well how He wanted me.

ALESSANDRO. Yes, He... He!

Beh, Lui ha voluto che lei fosse mago, ambiguo, ingannatore, inventore e regista di un grande spettacolo che si sarebbe dovuto concludere con la punizione dei colpevoli, dei traditori... e che poi...

Però adesso, scusi, vorrei sapere, da lei che l'hai visto, che l'ha conosciuto...

*(Convinto che non è vero e che presto lo proverà.)*

Perché lei l'ha conosciuto, no?

*(Guarda il Professore e sfidandone la diffidenza evidente, con tono di sufficienza, prende sicurezza.)*

PROSPERO. Eh? Ah... Sì...Ehh... Beh, certo.

ALESSANDRO. Ecco, chi era? Lui, in carne e ossa?

PROSPERO. Come, chi era?

ALESSANDRO. Prima di tutto secondo te era davvero l'autore di tutte quelle opere? Tu – mi permetti di usare il tu? – dovresti saperlo se chi ti ha creato era proprio quello lì, Shakespeare, il grande genio che avrebbe scritto tutta quella roba.

*(Una pausa.)*

E non lasciava tracce? Perché?

Perché dopo neanche cinque secoli, che sono un soffio, di lui si hanno notizie confuse? Era un fuorilegge, doveva nascondersi alla giustizia?

*(Prospero diviene di momento in momento più credibile.)*

PROSPERO. No, no. Era gentile, non si dava arie, e il teatro lo prendeva tutto, o quasi.

Al pub era un'altra cosa, pronto a scolarsi boccali di birra e a scherzare con gli amici, coi macchinisti, a volte anche nel suo dialetto mescolato a quello di Londra.

E poi ore e ore sul palcoscenico a dire: falla così questa, ricorda cosa ho scritto e non metterci troppo del tuo. Non muovere le mani come se dovessi impacchettare l'aria.

ALESSANDRO. E quelli che dicono che il vero autore era Bacone, quel filosofo della *Nuova Scienza*, che avrebbe messo da parte un giorno sì e uno no, le sue sottili deduzioni per darsi all'immaginazione?

PROSPERO. Figuriamoci! Quello lo conosco bene, o meglio è venuto a vedermi a teatro e gli sono piaciuto anche, e si è congratulato con me, in un bell'inglese, tondo tondo. Si vede com'è lucido, ma fantasticare lui...

Well, He wanted you to be a wizard, ambiguous, devious, the inventor and creator of a great show that should have finished with the punishment of the guilty, the traitors... and then...

But now, excuse me, I would like to know from you who saw him, knew Him...

*(He is sure that it is not true, as he will soon demonstrate.)*

Because you knew Him, didn't you?

*(Prospero looks at him, challenging his obvious mistrust, and goes on with a condescending tone and increasing self-confidence.)*

PROSPERO. Eh? Ah... Yes...Eh... Well, sure.

ALESSANDRO. So, who was He? He, in the flesh, I mean.

PROSPERO. What do you mean, who was He?

ALESSANDRO. First of all, do you think He was really the author of all those works? Prospero – may I call you Prospero? – you should know it if it was really that one, Shakespeare, who created you, the great genius who's supposed to have written all that stuff.

*(Pause.)*

And He left no trace? Why?

Why after less than five centuries, which are nothing, we only have jumbled information about Him? Was He an outlaw, had He to go into hiding?

*(Prospero becomes more and more credible.)*

PROSPERO. No, no. He was kind, did not put on airs, and the theatre was everything to Him, or nearly so. At the pub it was another story – He was ready to gulp down tankards of beer and joke with his friends, with stagehands, sometimes even in his own dialect mixed with the London one.

And then hours on the stage saying: do it this way, remember what I wrote and don't overdo it. Don't move your hands around too much as if you had to saw the air.

ALESSANDRO. And what about those who say that the real author was Bacon, that philosopher of the *Novum Organum*, who every other day would put aside his subtle deductions to devote himself to imagination?

PROSPERO. You're joking! I know him well, or better, he came to see me at the theatre, and he liked me, too, and congratulated me in a beautiful, well-rounded English. A lucid mind all right, but as for imagination...



- ALESSANDRO. E quell'altro drammaturgo, Marlowe, prima di lui a teatro, quello che aveva scritto il *Dottor Faust*, quel mago che scommise con Mefistofele...
- PROSPERO. Quello non l'ho mai visto, è morto prima che mi mettessi a recitare, ma il suo era un mago un po' dubbio, mica come me. Comunque bravo, ma...
- ALESSANDRO. Ma dicono che forse non fu ucciso – Marlowe, dico – in una rissa d'osteria, scappò all'estero, forse era anche una spia oltre che uno scrittore, ma dopo qualche anno tornò a farsi vivo a Londra e scrisse tutti quei drammi a firma del tuo autore per restare in incognito.
- PROSPERO. Se ne dicono tante! Che era il conte di Oxford, dicono, travestito da guitto.  
Beh, aveva talento quello, conosceva a memoria la Bibbia, metteva qua e là versi o battute nei drammi, che sarebbero suoi, e scriveva pure poesie, mica male. E perfino gli somigliava un po', al mio autore. Solo che, solo che morì all'inizio del secolo, e quindi non avrebbe potuto scrivere gli ultimi drammi, compresa la mia *Tempesta* e quindi inventare me. Capisce? Non sarei mai nato. Ma poi, che cosa poteva saperne lui di teatro: quando c'è da mettere in scena tutto e soprattutto quello che non c'è?
- ALESSANDRO. E quel mezzo italiano, l'ultimo arrivato, che si chiamava John Florio e aveva scritto un vocabolario italiano-inglese, a *World of Words*, una faticaccia che da sola doveva avergli preso anni, e conosceva bene il Conte di Rutland e il Conte di Southampton e la Contessa di Bedford, e anche la Regina, e poi tradusse i *Saggi* di Montaigne, dove, guarda caso, si parla bene – pensa un po'! – dei cannibali, e il tuo autore se ne ispirò per certo. E allora...?
- PROSPERO. Con Willy erano amici; lui l'aveva letto quel libro tradotto dal francese, ma, a parte tutto, dei cannibali lui non ne parla poi tanto bene! Pensa al mio Calibano, che sono stato costretto, sull'isola, a farlo schiavo perché – ed è terribile, mi fa venire la pelle d'oca! – aveva cercato di violentare Miranda, la mia bambina cresciuta con me su quella specie di scoglio in mezzo al mare... No, e poi che ne sapeva anche lui, quel Florio, di che cosa è davvero il teatro, di come si scrivono le battute che poi devono dire gli attori, nelle azioni, coi movimenti, i toni, dentro intrecci che solo chi ha anche recitato sa come funzionano...
- ALESSANDRO. E che ne dici di...
- PROSPERO. Basta Professore! Che ne dico di chi altro? Se andiamo avanti con le ipotesi non la finiamo più. Il Moro di Venezia? Il principe di Danimarca? Un Capuleti o un Montecchi?  
Beh, Era Lui! Sempre la sua vita! Sempre a cercare. Come lo conosco io, che devo dirle? Giornate affollate, attori, amici (e nemici) in scena, macchinisti, scrivani che mettevano in bella copia, si

ALESSANDRO. And that other playwright, Marlowe, who was in the theatre before Him, he who had written *Doctor Faustus*, that wizard who bet with Mephistopheles...

PROSPERO. I never saw him, he died before I started acting, but his wizard was sort of dubious, nothing like me. Good, anyway, but...

ALESSANDRO. But they say that maybe he was not killed – Marlowe, I mean – in a tavern brawl, but fled abroad, maybe he was a spy too, as well as a writer, and after a few years he reappeared in London and wrote all those plays, having them signed by *your* author to stay incognito.

PROSPERO. So much has been said about Him! That he was the Earl of Oxford, disguised as a ham actor. Well, he had talent, that one, he knew the Bible by heart, he put some cues or verses in the plays, that would be his, and wrote some poems too, not half bad. He even looked a bit like my author. But... but he died at the beginning of the century, and therefore he could not have written the last plays, my *Tempest* included, nor could have he invented me. Do you see? I would never have been born. But then, what could he know about theatre, where all is to be played out, especially what is not there?

ALESSANDRO. And that half-Italian, that mere nobody who was called John Florio and had written an Italian-English dictionary, a *World of Words*, a hard work indeed that alone must have kept him busy for years, and knew the Earl of Rutland well, and the Earl of Southampton and the Countess of Bedford, and the Queen, too, and then translated Montaigne's *Essays*, where – coincidentally – cannibals – guess what! – are mentioned favourably, and your author surely got some inspiration from it. So...?

PROSPERO. They were friends, he and Willy; Willy had read that book translated from French, but, after all, of cannibals He does not speak that well! Think of my Caliban, whom I was forced to enslave on the island because – it's terrible, I get goose pimples! – he had attempted to rape Miranda, my child, brought up by me on that sort of cliff in the midst of the sea... No, and then what did he, that Florio, know of what theatre really is, of how one should write the lines the actors must say when they act, through gestures and tones, in plots whose functioning only someone who has played can understand...

ALESSANDRO. And what do you say about...

PROSPERO. Enough, Professor! What do I say about whom else? If we go on with hypotheses, we will never end. The Moor of Venice? The Prince of Denmark? A Capulet or a Montague?

Well, it was He. It was always his life! Always on a quest. This is how I know Him, what am I to say? Crowded days, actors, friends (and enemies) on the stage, stagehands, scribes who turned his jumbled and revised sheets into, so to speak, fair cop-

fa per dire, i suoi fogli confusi e corretti, colleghi drammaturghi... Cambi di scena. Risate e pianti. Per popolani e per nobili. Alle volte perfino a corte coi suoi guitti. Aveva conosciuto la grande Regina, e poi, con me, il nuovo Re, non una gran cosa quello, mentre il potente Lord ciambellano e il Conte di questo e il Conte di quello, loro sì che...

E lui li stimava e li frequentava. Anche se più che altro, amava la strada e l'osteria, a parlare un po' con tutti, a scherzare con doppi, tripli, sensi! Quelli che vi fanno impazzire quando lo traducete.

ALESSANDRO.

Era un buontempone?

PROSPERO.

Anche! A tratti, ma gentile di natura. E la notte al lume di candela, a leggere storie e cronache da mettere sulla scena in carne e ossa, scontri, incontri, amori trascinanti, amorazzi, strane passioni, e il potere, il potere *dovunque*. Tra desideri e paure, fantasmi in scena e nella mente. La sua vita? Quella!

Le vite di altri le tirava fuori dal pozzo del tempo, ed erano la sua. Testimonio che sta tutto lì il mistero della sua esistenza. Era, come dirlo? Molteplice. Era tutti i personaggi che immaginava. Ma all'origine, e qui sta il bello, non erano suoi, non li aveva inventati lui, li prendeva da vicino e da lontano: dai greci, dai latini, dagli italiani, dai francesi e certamente anche dagli inglesi. E, una volta presi, erano soltanto suoi, così come la lingua spesso se la reinventava per far dire cose che nessuno mai...

ALESSANDRO.

D'accordo, ma torniamo al punto. Tu lo sai chi era davvero, per forza lo devi sapere.

PROSPERO.

Un mago.

ALESSANDRO.

Eccoci, Prospero, la tua controfigura! O meglio tu la sua!

PROSPERO.

Sì e no, io mi ero dato alle arti magiche per cercare di scoprire i segreti della natura. Ero Duca di Milano. La politica e tutte le mene dell'amministrazione non m'interessavano affatto e avevo affidato il potere a mio fratello Antonio.

E quello che fa? All'inizio, tutto bene, ma poi inganna la sua stessa memoria raccontandosi – pensi un po'! – di *essere lui* il Duca di Milano a tutti gli effetti.

Così confonde la sua parte di *attore*, che *interpreta* chi esercita il potere, con il ruolo del *personaggio*, il Duca che legittimamente lo detiene, che ero io, Prospero!

E così, da Duca di Milano che ero mi fa fuori, e via su una barca fradicia per farmi annegare insieme con mia figlia Miranda, piccolina, di tre anni.

Ecco, Lui mi ha pensato così e mi ha messo in un intreccio magico.

Era lui il mago in un modo tutto suo.

Che gli spettatori cercassero di capire. Lui lasciava in sospeso...

ies, fellow playwrights... Scene changes. Laughter and tears. For commoners and nobles. Sometimes even at Court with his ham actors. He had met the great Queen and then, with me, the new King, nothing special that one, while the powerful Lord Chamberlain and the Earl of this and the Earl of that, they really were... And He prized them and kept company with them. Yet what He loved more than anything were the streets and the taverns, where He talked to almost everybody, and made jokes out of double or triple meanings! The ones that drive you crazy when you translate Him.

ALESSANDRO. Was He a jovial fellow?

PROSPERO. That too, yes. At times, but of a kind disposition. And at night, by candlelight, He read stories and chronicles that could be put on stage in the flesh: conflicts, encounters, enthralling loves, sordid affairs, strange passions and power, power *everywhere*. Between desires and fears, ghosts on stage and in his mind. *His life?* There it was! As for the others' lives, He drew them from the well of time, and they were his own. I can testify that the whole mystery of his existence lied there. He was, how can I say? Many-sided. He was all the characters He imagined. But originally, and that's the beauty of it, they were not his, He did not invent them, He took them from near and far: from the Greeks, the Latins, the Italians, the French, and certainly from the English, too. And, once caught, they became just his, just like the language He often reinvented to say things that no-one had ever...

ALESSANDRO. All right, but let us go back to the point. You know who He was for real, you must know.

PROSPERO. A wizard.

ALESSANDRO. There we are, Prospero, He was your double! Or better, you were his!

PROSPERO. Well, yes and no, I had devoted myself to magical arts to try and disclose the secrets of nature. I was the Duke of Milan. Politics and all the administrative business did not interest me in the least, and I had entrusted the power to my brother Antonio. And what does he do? At the beginning everything goes fine but then he deceives his own memory by telling himself – how about that? – that *he* is the Duke of Milan in his own right. So he confuses his role as an *actor*, who *interprets* he who exercises power, with the role of the *character*, the Duke, who legitimately holds it, and who was me, Prospero! And so he got rid of me, the former Duke of Milan, and away he sent me on a rotting boat to make me drown with my little Miranda, three years old then.

That's it, He conceived me this way and put me into a magic plot. He was the wizard, in his own very special way.

Let the spectators try and understand. He left it hanging in mid-air...

- ALESSANDRO. Certo che di maghi ce ne sono stati, eccome, nella tua epoca. Pensa solo a Pico e alla sua Cabala, a Cornelio Agrippa e alla sua *De occulta philosophia*, e naturalmente a John Dee che lui deve aver avuto tempo e modo di conoscere piuttosto bene: matematico, astrologo, alchimista, mago cristiano, eccetera, eccetera. Che poi tutti dicono sia stato la figura a cui si era ispirato per crearti.
- PROSPERO. E condivido, anche se – anche se io sono molto più contraddittorio, per quanto riesco a capirmi.
- ALESSANDRO. Qual è l'inciampo?
- PROSPERO. Non mi parli di inciampo, Professore! Mi fa andare all'indietro, a quando Lui inventò il suo Amleto e gli dette una battuta terribile che avrebbe potuto contagiare anche me. Nella disperazione.
- ALESSANDRO. Un inciampo?
- PROSPERO. Ma certo! A rub! The rub! L'inciampo, lo scoglio, l'ostacolo, quello che blocca la nostra volontà. Sì, quello che dà alla sventura una così lunga vita.  
That makes calamity of so long life. La domanda se sia più nobile to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune o prendere le armi contro un mare di affanni and by opposing end them? Morire, dormire nient'altro; e col sonno mettere fine ai dolori del cuore e ai mille mali naturali che eredita la carne: that flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. Morire, dormire. Dormire, forse sognare... Perchance to dream, ay there's the rub, Eccolo!! Questo è the rub, l'inciampo, quello che ci ferma: quali sogni possono venire, – diceva lui – in quel sonno di morte. Dopo che ci siamo tolti di dosso questo this mortal coil questo groviglio mortale.  
(E con uno scatto imprevedibile.)  
ma non l'avrebbe potuta dare a me, questa perla!?  
(Di nuovo calmo ripete:)  
Ecco il motivo che dà alla sventura una così lunga vita.  
That makes calamity of so long life.
- ALESSANDRO. (Meravigliato dallo strano scatto di Prospero e intuendone forse la pretesa assurda.)  
Avrebbe dovuto darla a te? E in quale occasione?
- PROSPERO. Uuuh!  
(Fa un gesto fantasioso per criticare la poca fantasia del Professore.)  
Per esempio quando devo decidere se lasciare in vita l'usurpatore e chi l'ha sostenuto! Quando devo decidere se perdonare, oppure farli morire tutti! Se devo farlo o no.
- ALESSANDRO. Ah.

ALESSANDRO. There were a lot of wizards in your age, for sure. Only think of Pico and his Kabbalah, Cornelius Agrippa and his *De occulta philosophia* and, of course, John Dee, whom He must have had the time and means to know quite well: a mathematician, astrologer, alchemist, a Christian wizard, and so on.

Besides, everyone says that he was the figure who inspired Him in creating you.

PROSPERO. And I agree, even if – even if I am much more contradictory, at least as far as I can understand of me.

ALESSANDRO. Where's the rub?

PROSPERO. Don't talk of rub, Professor! You make me go back to the time He invented his Hamlet and gave him the dreadful cue that could have infected me, too. In despair.

ALESSANDRO. A rub?

PROSPERO. Yes, sure! A rub! The rub! The rub, the hurdle, the obstacle that blocks our will. Yes, what makes calamity of so long life. The question whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them? To die, to sleep, no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to: that flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream... Perchance to dream, ay, there's the rub, there it is!! This is the rub, the rub, what stops us: what dreams may come – he said – in that sleep of death. When we have shuffled off this mortal coil... this mortal coil.

*(With an unexpected burst.)*

But why didn't He give me this jewel?!

*(Calm again, he repeats:)* There's the respect that makes calamity of so long life. That makes calamity of so long life.

ALESSANDRO. *(Surprised by Prospero's strange outburst and perhaps realizing his absurd pretension.)*

He should have given it to you? On which occasion?

PROSPERO. Uh-huh!...

*(He makes a fantastic gesture to criticize the Professor's meagre fantasy)*

For example when I have to decide whether to spare the usurper and his followers! When I have to decide whether to forgive or have them all die. If I must do it or not.

ALESSANDRO. Ah.

*(Incuriosito dalla vanità di Prospero, Alessandro lo guarda in silenzio quasi invitandolo a proseguire.)*

PROSPERO. To do, or not to do, – avrei potuto dire io – that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...

ALESSANDRO. *(Lo ferma divertito.)* Non ti sembra di esagerare?

PROSPERO. *(Tornando in sé e poi infastidito dal suo essersi lasciato andare.)*

Ma sì, sì, sì, sì...

Sì, è come dice lei, certo

*(Una pausa.)*

ALESSANDRO. Doveva essere proprio disperato.

PROSPERO. Certo, e non il solo, affatto. Lui era così. Ma anche l'opposto! Quello che davvero lo ossessionava era il tempo, la fuga del tempo! Ma sapeva anche riempirlo, eccome, con gli intrecci più vari: equivoci, sogni, amori, e soprattutto bisticci amorosi, o meglio piccanti, o addirittura osceni, che l'amore lo rendevano sempre più gustoso, vario, imprevedibile. Amore e morte...

ALESSANDRO. E soprattutto il Potere, no?

PROSPERO. E sì, il potere di controllare la vita, e quindi, in qualche modo, dominare il tempo. Ma il potere del Tempo era invincibile!

ALESSANDRO. Il tempo-tempo? Passato, presente e futuro? Tutte le dimensioni? Aveva letto Sant'Agostino?

PROSPERO. Forse, chissà, ma credo di sì, perché a lui il tempo, come, credo, a Sant'Agostino, gli sfuggiva da tutte le parti. E lui quindi a combatterlo. Insomma, a farci qualcosa. Non tanto con la fede. In fondo, lui ci credeva e non ci credeva. Poteva essere cattolico, protestante, puritano, assolutamente scettico, ateo. Dipendeva da cosa stava inventando.

ALESSANDRO. Ma che cosa imputava in particolare al tempo?

PROSPERO. Con la maiuscola, prego! Il delitto di non stare mai fermo, come invece fermo poteva presentarsi lo spazio. Intollerabile perché andava, va, sempre in una sola direzione – avanti, avanti, avanti, senza badare un istante a quante morti si lascia dietro avanzando...

ALESSANDRO. Questo era l'insopportabile che denunciava già nel suo poemetto *Lo stupro di Lucrezia*. Dove racconta la vicenda di Sesto Tarquinio – figlio di Tarquinio il Superbo, l'ultimo re di Roma –, il quale viene preso da una passione sconsiderata per Lucrezia.

PROSPERO. Più che passione direi da una grande eccitazione.

ALESSANDRO. La sua castità e la bellezza di Lucrezia gli è stata magnificata dal marito Collatino.

PROSPERO. L'imbecille! E allora lui lascia l'accampamento e con un pretesto va a farle visita, si fa ospitare, e la notte si reca furtivamente nella sua camera e la stupra. Ma con una violenza....



*(Intrigued by Prospero's vanity, he watches him silently, almost encouraging him to go on.)*

PROSPERO To do or not to do – I could have said – that is the question  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...

ALESSANDRO. *(He interrupts him, amused.)* Don't you think you are going too far?

PROSPERO. *(Coming to his senses, and then annoyed for having lost it.)*

But yes, yes, yes...

Yes, as you say, sure.

*(Pause.)*

ALESSANDRO. He must have been really desperate.

PROSPERO. Sure, and He was not the only one, not at all. This was the way He was. But the opposite too! What really obsessed Him was time, the running away of time! But He could also fill it up all right, with the most varied plots: misunderstandings, dreams, loves, and, above all, amorous bickerings or, even better, juicy or even bawdy ones that made love more and more luscious, varied, unpredictable. Love and death...

ALESSANDRO. And Power above all, right?

PROSPERO. Oh yes, the power to control life and therefore, somehow, to dominate time. But Time's power was invincible!

ALESSANDRO. Time-time? Past, present and future? All dimensions? Had He read St Augustine?

PROSPERO. Who knows, maybe, but yes, I think so, because time eluded Him everywhere, as it happened, I think, to St Augustine. And therefore He was constantly fighting it. Or, better, trying to. Not so much with faith. After all, He was and wasn't a believer. He could have been a Catholic, a Protestant, a Puritan, an absolute agnostic, an atheist. It depended on what He was creating.

ALESSANDRO. But what in particular did He blame time for?

PROSPERO. Capital T, please! The crime of never staying still, while space could actually appear so. It was unbearable, because it went by, it goes by, in one direction only – forward, forward, forward, paying no mind to the deaths he leaves behind as he progresses...

ALESSANDRO. This was the unbearable fact that He had already denounced in his poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, in which He tells the story of Sextus Tarquinius – the son of Tarquinius Superbus, Rome's last king – who is seized by an insane passion for Lucrece.

PROSPERO. Lust rather than passion, I would say.

ALESSANDRO. Lucrece's beauty and chastity have been exalted to him by her husband Collatinus.

PROSPERO. The fool! And so he leaves the camp and, on a pretext, goes and visits her, stays for the night and, during the night, sneaks into her room and rapes her with such a violence...

E lei, lei, disperata, lamenta, piangendo torturandosi gridando, il Caso maligno, la Notte complice e soprattutto il Tempo frenetico, con queste parole in particolare:

*(Il Professore capisce divertito che Prospero avrebbe voluto per sé anche la battuta di Lucrezia, nella sua Tempesta.)*

Perché crei tanti male nel tuo andare  
se non puoi ritornare a rimediare?  
Un sol secondo in una vita intera  
ti darebbe d'amici immensa schiera

...

Di un'ora, arretra notte di terrore  
risparmiarmi tempesta e disonore!  
Tu servitor d'eternità fidato...

ALESSANDRO. *(Lo interrompe.)* A meno, dice, che non *ritorni*, ma il Tempo crudele è un fante che corre all'impazzata sul suo campo di battaglia, la vita, e i suoi misfatti non possono essere cancellati. Allora è più distruttore che creatore. Irreversibile, quindi irredimibile: il crimine più grande. Con la domanda di fondo. Perché Dio, o *un* dio, non poteva immaginare un tempo *in avanti*, ma anche, almeno qualche volta, *all'indietro*, senza una regola fissa, per dare una opportunità, non imporre l'inevitabile?

PROSPERO. Noi torniamo indietro per tante cose, anche inutili. Il tempo, mai!

ALESSANDRO. Comunque il tuo autore poteva inventare subito te, un mago, e quindi uno capace di dominarlo il tempo.

PROSPERO. Eh sì, è proprio vero. Ma di questo non mi va di parlarne adesso.

ALESSANDRO. D'accordo, ma con quali altre armi lui avrebbe potuto combatterlo?

PROSPERO. Mi ci faccia pensare. Ci sono dei modi... Ci arrivo. Intanto, questo per certo: fin da giovane, e forse influenzato dalle sue letture – soprattutto quelle classiche, Ovidio e le *Metamorfosi* in particolare – lui pensava, così credo, pensava, da una parte, che la vita può ingannare il tempo trasmigrando da un essere a un altro in una catena infinita di trasformazioni. Una volta, uomo, un'altra, donna, o anche albero, o fiore, o cavallo, o rana, o topo...

ALESSANDRO. Insomma, sia bello che brutto, per punizione o per merito. Ma altri modi?

PROSPERO. Beh, anche l'individuo migliore, il più bello, il più nobile è destinato alla decadenza e alla fine. Ragion per cui l'unico mezzo che ha per compensare tutto questo è l'appuntamento, alla giusta giovane età, con la procreazione che potrà riproporre l'immagine e il carattere nel prossimo futuro. Dunque, la prole, un figlio.

ALESSANDRO. Il tempo non concede licenze, mai, *ma* è costretto a sua volta, per vivere a sua volta, cioè *continuare* a essere Tempo, è costretto a non arrestare l'infinito ripetersi delle generazioni.

PROSPERO. Già, non ci sono altri modi.

And she, she, desperate, hopelessly wails and, crying and tormenting herself, bemoans the malignant Fate, the conniving Night and above all the frantic Time, with these words in particular:

*(The Professor amusedly realizes that Prospero would have fancied Lucrece's lines for himself too.)*

Why work'st thou mischief in thy pilgrimage,  
Unless thou could'st return to make amends?  
One poor retiring minute in an age  
Would purchase thee a thousand thousand friends,

...

O this dread night, would'st thou one hour come back,  
I could prevent this storm and shun thy wrack!  
Thou ceaseless lackey to eternity . . .

ALESSANDRO. *(He interrupts him.)* Unless, she says, thou could'st *return*, but cruel Time is a lackey ceaselessly running on the battlefield, life, and his mischiefs cannot be erased. Therefore, he is more of a destroyer than a creator. Irreversible, and so irredeemable: the greatest of crimes. With an underlying question: why could not God, or a god, imagine time going *forward* but also, sometimes at least, *backwards*, with no fixed rule – to give a chance without imposing the inevitable?

PROSPERO. We go back for many a reason, futile too. Time never does!

ALESSANDRO. Still your author could have created you right away, a wizard, and therefore one able to dominate him, Time I mean.

PROSPERO. Yes, yes, that's really true. But I don't feel like talking about it now.

ALESSANDRO. Fine, but what other weapons could He have fought him with?

PROSPERO. Let me think about it. There are ways... I am coming to it. For now, one thing for sure: since He was a young man, perhaps influenced by what He read – mostly the Classics, Ovid and his *Metamorphoses*, in particular – He believed, or so I think, He believed that in some way life could deceive time by transmigrating from one being to another in an endless chain of transformations. Now a man, now a woman, or even a tree, or a flower, or a horse, or a frog, or a mouse...

ALESSANDRO. In short, both the beautiful and the ugly, as a punishment or as a reward. But are there other ways?

PROSPERO. Well, even the best, the most beautiful, the noblest individual is destined to suffer decay and death. That's why the only means he has to compensate for all this is an appointment, at a rightful young age, with procreation that can reproduce his image and personality in the near future. That is, his progeny, a son.

ALESSANDRO. Time grants no licence, never, *but* in his turn he is forced, in order himself to live, that is, to *go on* being Time, he is forced not to stop the endless repeat of generations.

PROSPERO. Yes, there is no other way.

ALESSANDRO. E invece sì: l'Arte. Se l'individuo non c'è più, può restare, chissà, per sempre, la sua immagine, la sua essenza. E Lui lo ha fatto coi *Sonetti* per immortalare il giovane nobile, il suo amico del cuore. Insomma, tutto con le forme dell'arte. Il Tempo può passare veloce come gli pare, ma in quelle cose lì inciampa e si ferma per guardarsi allo specchio.

Se l'Arte può riprodurre ciò che è effimero, quello stesso effimero che è per antonomasia il Tempo, non fa che *ripetere* se stesso. Fino alla noia!

PROSPERO. È vero! Questo lo faceva addirittura arrabbiare. Pensi, una volta scrisse:

Se nulla è nuovo e tutto è già successo,  
Perché la mente ad ingannarsi insiste  
E cerca di inventar dell'altro, adesso  
Nutrendo in seno un figlio che già esiste!

È il sonetto 59, mi pare.

Insomma, il tempo non inventa, sostanzialmente, e quindi nemmeno chi è nel tempo può inventare niente, sostanzialmente. Una volta glielo dice proprio in faccia al Tempo, che lui non ci sta, lui sta fermo, *intoccabile* in mezzo a tutta questa vanità di ripetizioni:

Tempo, tu non vedrai il mio cambiamento:  
Le stele erette da nuovi potenti  
Non creano in me stupore o turbamento;  
Col nuovo, veston forme già esistenti.

ALESSANDRO. Ma allora che cosa era per lui il Tempo? Una illusione? Una delusione? Una falsa promessa?

PROSPERO. Già, tutto questo. Ed ecco perché il teatro!

ALESSANDRO. Il contenitore più appropriato del tempo gli diventò, in scala minima e pregnanza massima, il palcoscenico come mondo in miniatura nella cornice limitata di uno spettacolo. Il tempo si faceva teatro, entrava a teatro, terminava a teatro. Le infinite storie, che rappresentava nel suo spazio limitato-illimitato, scherzavano col tempo, litigavano col tempo, inciampavano nel tempo.

Insomma, rappresentavano quanto più possibile quel mondo, "reale" tra virgolette, che si contrae, si offre, si fa guardare da infiniti spettatori altrimenti illusi della piena realtà delle loro vite fuori dal teatro.

PROSPERO. All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...

ALESSANDRO. Tutto il mondo è un palcoscenico e tutti gli uomini e le donne sono solamente attori, lo fa dire a Jaques nella foresta di Arden

PROSPERO. Alcuni dei suoi drammi precedenti li conosco a memoria. Le parti più importanti soprattutto, e le ho sentite anche prima e dopo le mie recite. Al Globe e anche nel nostro teatro al chiuso, il

ALESSANDRO. On the contrary, there is: Art. If the individual is no more, his image, his essence can stay, perhaps forever. And He did this with the *Sonnets* in order to immortalize the young nobleman, his best friend.

In short, everything through art forms. Time can go by as fast as he wants, but he will stumble on those things and stop to look at himself in the mirror.

If Art can reproduce the ephemeral, that same ephemeral which by definition is Time only repeats itself, to the point of boredom!

PROSPERO. It's true! This even made Him angry. Just think, He once wrote:

If there be nothing new, but that which is  
Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,  
Which labouring for invention, bear amiss  
The second burden of a former child!

This is Sonnet 59, I think.

In short, time basically doesn't invent anything, nor can anyone who lives in time invent anything, basically. He once tells Time, right to his face, that He isn't having any of it, that He is staying put, *untouchable* in the middle of all this vanity of repetitions:

No, Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change!  
Thy pyramids built up with newer might  
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;  
They are but dressings of a former sight.

ALESSANDRO. But then, what was Time for Him? An illusion? A disappointment? A false promise?

PROSPERO. Yes, all this. And that's why theatre.

ALESSANDRO. For Him the most appropriate container of time became, on a minimum scale and with utmost significance, the stage, as a miniature world in the limited frame of one show. Time turned into theatre, entered theatre, ended in theatre. The endless stories that he represented in its limited-limitless space, played around with time, quarrelled with time, stumbled on time.

In short, they portrayed as much as possible that 'real' (inverted commas) world that shrinks, offers itself, makes itself conspicuous to innumerable spectators otherwise deluded by the full reality of their lives outside the theatre.

PROSPERO. All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...

ALESSANDRO. All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, He makes Jaques say it in the forest of Arden.

PROSPERO. I know by heart some of his previous plays. Mainly the most important parts, and I heard them also before and after my performances. They returned, every now and then, at the Globe and

Blackfriars, ogni tanto ritornavano; e nel pubblico c'era sempre qualcuno che le avrebbe sapute pure recitare...

ALESSANDRO. Ma chi ti affascina, è Amleto!

PROSPERO. Beh, sì.

ALESSANDRO. Perché?

PROSPERO. Perché è tanti in una sola persona: principe, figlio fedele al padre, figlio edipico, malinconico, lunatico, innamorato disilluso, vendicatore, aspirante re, attore, drammaturgo, filosofo...

ALESSANDRO. Secondo te è credente?

PROSPERO. Sì, o forse. Non si suicida già all'inizio, o quasi, del dramma perché non lo permette Dio.

ALESSANDRO. Ma l'intenzione è già in sé blasfema. E poi è cattolico o protestante?

PROSPERO. Cattolico, sembra, perché il padre ucciso si sta mondando dei suoi peccati nel Purgatorio, e come sa, quello per i protestanti non esiste, è un'invenzione papista, per loro o di qua o di là, e soprattutto di là per i puritani! Amleto ha in schifo sia la terra – uno “sterile promontorio” nel cosmo – sia la volta celeste, nient'altro che “una immonda e pestilenziale congregazione di vapori”. Nell'ultimo atto, presentando la sua fine imminente, quasi annulla con un sospiro l'inutile estensione del suo tempo futuro e dice all'amico Orazio:

“Non puoi immaginare, Orazio, quale peso ho nel cuore - ma è una sciocchezza, uno di quei presentimenti che turbano le donne”.

“Sfidiamo i presagi. Anche nella caduta di un passero c'è la mano della Provvidenza. Se è ora, non sarà dopo. Se non è dopo, sarà ora. Se non è ora, prima o poi accadrà. Basta essere preparati. Dato che nessuno uomo sa nulla di quel che lascia, che importanza ha se lascia prima o dopo? Sia come sia.

La vita di un uomo non è che il tempo di dire uno”.

ALESSANDRO. Ecco! Il Tempo, con la maiuscola, a martellare... Allora è forse quasi meglio andar via *prima* del tempo – che comunque ha durata minima, quasi illusoria: *u-n-o*, ciac! Lo prevengo, prima ancora di scandire *u-n-o*...

Quindi la resa, quasi una tentazione al suicidio!

E a contrasto, ci scommetto che ti affascina anche Macbeth, il nichilista, uno che il Tempo, che l'ha ingannato dal principio alla fine, lo straccia, lo fa a pezzi, tutti uguali e tutti inutili, perché la sua narrazione è un grande inganno, non è dovuta a un dio, ma a un i-dio-ta!

(Pausa.)

PROSPERO. Certo che lei lo conosce proprio bene il mio autore.

ALESSANDRO. E Macbeth, ma diversamente da te, anche lui ebbe a che fare con la magia, con le tre streghe che gli vaticinarono l'imminente ascesa a re.

also at our indoor theatre, the Blackfriars; and in the audience there was always someone who could have recited them...

ALESSANDRO. But the one who fascinates you is Hamlet!

PROSPERO. Well, yes.

ALESSANDRO. Why?

PROSPERO. Because he is many in just one person: a prince, a loyal son to his father, an Oedipal son, a melancholic, a moody, disillusioned lover, an avenger, an aspiring king, an actor, a playwright, a philosopher...

ALESSANDRO. He is a believer, do you think?

PROSPERO. Yes, or maybe. He does not commit suicide at the beginning or so of the play because God does not allow it.

ALESSANDRO. But the intention is blasphemous in itself. Besides, is he a Catholic or a Protestant?

PROSPERO. A Catholic, it seems, since his father is purging his sins in Purgatory and, as you know, that does not exist for Protestants, it is a Papist invention; according to them it is either on one side or on the other, and mostly on the other for Puritans. Hamlet loathes both the Earth – a “sterile promontory” in the universe – and the vault of the sky, “nothing but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours”. In the last act, foreboding his imminent end, he almost obliterates with a sigh the useless extension of his future time, and tells his friend Horatio: “thou wouldst not think how ill all’s here about my heart; . . . It is but foolery, it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman”. I will fight. “We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be. And a man’s life’s no more than to say ‘one’”.

ALESSANDRO. There! Time, with a capital T, always at work, hammering! Maybe it’s almost better to leave *before* time, – which is short-termed, however, almost illusory: O-N-E, snap! I avert it, even before I can articulate O-N-E...

So we surrender, we are almost induced to commit suicide!

And, on the contrary, I bet that you are fascinated by Macbeth, too: the nihilist, one who’s tricked by Time from the beginning to the end, who tears him into pieces, all equal and equally useless, because his narrative is a big trick, not due to a god, but to an id-iot!

(Pause.)

PROSPERO. For sure you know my author well indeed.

ALESSANDRO. And Macbeth, yet differently from you, also dealt with sorcery, with the three witches who prophesied his imminent ascent to the throne.



- PROSPERO. E l'ingannarono, e lui si fece prendere nella rete, anche o soprattutto perché spinto da quell'altra strega non ufficiale che era sua moglie, la Lady Macbeth: Sì, uccidilo, uccidiamolo, questo re santo! Santo, unto dal Signore. Inetto! Noi avremo il potere, il Po-te-re!
- ALESSANDRO. Ma poi non se lo godettero il po-te-re.
- PROSPERO. Infatti! Quasi appena saliti al trono, lei a lamentarsi, lui a tremare di paura di perderlo, perché – l'avevano avvertito le streghe – da lui non sarebbe derivata nessuna discendenza regale. Si muoveva stralunato nell'inganno...
- ALESSANDRO. ... del tem-po, come lo pronunci tu, naturalmente.
- PROSPERO. Più di così...! La moglie si suicida, lui è assediato nel castello, ormai sa di perdere; le damigelle della regina piangono e urlano fuori scena, e lui come la prende? She should have died hereafter. Avrebbe dovuto morire, di qui in avanti! O prima o poi. Qui, oppure laggiù a Inverness? Che cosa cambia? Gli è indifferente.
- ALESSANDRO. No, la sua è la disperazione dell'ineluttabile e, insieme, la noia dell'ineluttabile, che poi è l'inconclusione del Tem-po che vanamente si ripete. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...
- PROSPERO. Creeps in this petty pace
- ALESSANDRO. Striscia a piccoli passi
- PROSPERO. From day to day
- ALESSANDRO. giorno dopo giorno,
- PROSPERO. To the last syllable of recorded time
- ALESSANDRO. Fino all'ultima sillaba del tempo prescritto,
- PROSPERO. And all our yesterdays
- ALESSANDRO. E tutti i nostri ieri
- PROSPERO. Have lighted fools the way to dusty death
- ALESSANDRO. Hanno illuminato folli la via alla morte che riduce in polvere.
- PROSPERO. Out, out, brief candle
- ALESSANDRO. Spegniti, spegniti breve candela
- PROSPERO. Life's but a walking shadow,
- ALESSANDRO. La vita non è che un'ombra vagante
- PROSPERO. A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage
- ALESSANDRO. Un triste attore che si pavoneggia e s'agita per un'ora sulla scena
- PROSPERO. And then is heard no more
- ALESSANDRO. E poi non si sente più
- PROSPERO. It is a tale told by an idiot
- ALESSANDRO. È una storia raccontata da un demente
- PROSPERO. Full of sound and fury
- ALESSANDRO. Piena di suoni e di furore
- PROSPERO. Signifying nothing.
- ALESSANDRO. Che non significa niente. *(Pausa.)*

- PROSPERO. And they deceived him, and he let himself be caught in their net, also or maybe especially because he was urged by that other unofficial witch who was his wife, Lady Macbeth. Yes, kill him, let's kill him, this saintly king. A saint, anointed by the Lord. A bungler! We will have the power, the Pow-er.<sup>1</sup>
- ALESSANDRO. But they did not enjoy the pow-er afterwards.
- PROSPERO. Indeed! They had just barely ascended the throne that she started to moan and he to tremble at the idea of losing it, because – the witches had warned him – he would not beget a royal lineage. He proceeded completely beside himself in deceit...
- ALESSANDRO. Of Time, as you pronounce it, of course.
- PROSPERO. What more? His wife commits suicide, he is under siege in the castle, and knows he is going to be defeated. The queen's maids wail and cry offstage, and how does he react? She should have died hereafter! Sooner or later. Here, or there in Inverness? What's this to him? He is untouched.
- ALESSANDRO. No, his despair is for the ineluctability and the ennui of ineluctability too, which, after all, is the inconclusiveness of Time vainly repeating himself. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...
- PROSPERO. Creeps in this petty pace
- ALESSANDRO. *Striscia a piccoli passi*
- PROSPERO. From day to day
- ALESSANDRO. *Giorno dopo giorno,*
- PROSPERO. To the last syllable of recorded time
- ALESSANDRO. *Fino all'ultima sillaba del tempo prescritto,*
- PROSPERO. And all our yesterdays
- ALESSANDRO. *E tutti i nostri ieri*
- PROSPERO. Have lighted fools the way to dusty death
- ALESSANDRO. *Hanno illuminato folli la via alla morte che riduce in polvere.*
- PROSPERO. Out, out, brief candle
- ALESSANDRO. *Spegniti, spegniti breve candela*
- PROSPERO. Life's but a walking shadow,
- ALESSANDRO. *La vita non è che un'ombra vagante,*
- PROSPERO. A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage
- ALESSANDRO. *Un triste attore che si pavoneggia e s'agita per un'ora sulla scena*
- PROSPERO. And then is heard no more
- ALESSANDRO. *E poi non si sente più*
- PROSPERO. It is a tale told by an idiot
- ALESSANDRO. *È una storia raccontata da un demente.*
- PROSPERO. Full of sound and fury
- ALESSANDRO. *Piena di suoni e di furore*
- PROSPERO. Signifying nothing.
- ALESSANDRO. *Che non significa niente. (Pause.)*

<sup>1</sup> This is not a Shakespearean cue pronounced by Lady Macbeth; Prospero sums up Scenes 5 and 7 of Act 1.

Il Tem-po gli è diventato un monotono susseguirsi di giorni e, nell'originale, il verso che apre tutto questo, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow", ha una suggestione ben più forte che in altre lingue. Pensaci. In italiano, come hai detto, non si può rendere che con "Domani, e domani, e domani" (dove, tranne la prima, le altre vocali sono una aperta e l'altra acuta); in francese, con "Demain, et demain, et demain", vocali sempre aperte; in spagnolo apertissime, "mañana, y mañana, y mañana", sempre con la stessa derivazione dal latino "de mane" ("di mattina"). Ma anche il tedesco "am morgen" o "bis morgen" presenta vocali soprattutto aperte. Tutte queste lingue, compreso l'inglese "tomorrow" (dall'antico inglese "to morgenne"), rappresentano il futuro prossimo come un passaggio da un *oggi* a un *domani*.

In inglese, dunque, il verso "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" rappresenta l'inane avanzare del Tempo a più livelli: quello fonico, sonoro, nella iterazione oscura delle /u/, delle /o/ e dei dittonghi /ou/; ritmico nella ripetizione degli stessi accenti (una breve, una lunga, una breve: *tumòrrou* per tre volte); e figurativo, iconico, perché trasmette un'avanzata quasi lugubre e comunque bassa, come ci dice l'apertura del verso successivo, dove *tomorrow* striscia (*creeps*) in avanti, come un animale inferiore, un millepiedi, un bruco che procede a stento e sempre uguale verso il baratro della "polverosa morte" (*dusty death*, dirà subito dopo). Procede sempre uguale, questo Tem-po umiliato, per trasmettere una storia (*a tale*, dice l'originale), quella della vita umana, narrata (*told*), da chi? Da un idiota (*idiot*): una storia piena di rumore e di furore, che non significa nulla (*Signifying nothing*)! Insomma, che cosa è la vita? Un teatro di vane ombre, per un copione insensato.

(Pausa.)

(*Prospero guarda Alessandro sinceramente ammirato: gli ha fatto capire in modo più profondo quello che ha spesso recitato – e si spe-  
ra non male – è commosso.*)

PROSPERO. Da rabbrivire!

ALESSANDRO. Dio, un qualsiasi dio, un idiota? Neppure un malvagio! No, un idiota... meno male che poi arrivi tu.

PROSPERO. Arrivano i nostri! Come dite voi in quel cinema che avete inventato, e ha tolto tanto pubblico al mio teatro...

ALESSANDRO. Andiamo... alla tua *Tempesta* ci vengono ancora in tanti...

PROSPERO. Beh, effettivamente... si fa quel che si può...

ALESSANDRO. Ora non metterti a fare il modesto. Un mago è un mago. Quel-li di una volta! Ce ne sono anche ora a vantarsene, e sono una tragedia...

Time has become for him a monotonous succession of days and, in the original, the line opening all this, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow”, bears a much stronger suggestion than in other languages. Think about it. In Italian, as you said, it can only be translated as “Domani, e domani, e domani” (where, except for the first vowel, the others are one open and one closed); in French, “demain, and demain, and demain”, all open vowels; in Spanish, all wide open, “mañana, y mañana, y mañana”, all deriving from the Latin ‘de mane’ (‘in the morning’). But also the German “aus morgen” or “bis morgen” has mostly open vowels. All these languages, the English “tomorrow” included (from the Old English ‘to morgenne’), represent the near future as a passage from *today* to *tomorrow*.

In English, then, the line “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” represents the inane advancing of Time at different levels: phonetic, audible through the dark iteration of the /u/, /o/, and the diphthongs /ou/; rhythmical, through the repetition of the same stresses (an unstressed-stressed-unstressed syllable pattern: tomòrrow, for three times); and figurative – iconic –, because it conveys an almost lugubrious and anyway lowly advancing, as the opening of the following line tells us, where *tomorrow* creeps forward, as an inferior animal, a millipede, a caterpillar that moves with difficulty and at fixed speed towards the abyss of “dusty death”, as he will say soon afterwards. This humiliated Time moves at fixed speed to transmit “a tale” (as is in the original text), the one of human life, told by whom? By an idiot: a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. In short, what is life? A theatre of idle shadows based on a senseless script.

(Pause.)

(Prospero looks at Alessandro with sincere admiration: he has made him understand more deeply what he has often recited, hopefully well enough. He is moved.)

PROSPERO. It makes you shiver.

ALESSANDRO. God, any god, an idiot? Not even a villain! No, an idiot... Thank goodness you arrive then.

PROSPERO. Here comes the cavalry! as you say in that cinema of yours that you invented and that took so many spectators away from my theatre...

ALESSANDRO. Come on... Many still flock to your *Tempest*...

PROSPERO. Well, yes, in fact... I do my best...

ALESSANDRO. Now don't be modest. A wizard is a wizard. The good ones of yore! There are a few today too who boast to be so, and they are a tragedy...

- PROSPERO. Vero! Ma la mia non è una tragedia in nessun senso, né come intende lei per riderne, né come la intendevamo noi; anche se poi non è neanche una commedia...
- ALESSANDRO. E come la definiresti?
- PROSPERO. Che ne so?
- ALESSANDRO. È lei quello che sa analizzare, che sa definire.
- ALESSANDRO. È un apologo, perché dice che anche il miglior mago può cambiare qualcosa, ma poi deve arrendersi.
- PROSPERO. (*Azzarda timido.*) Una... favola?
- ALESSANDRO. Che dura più o meno tre ore.
- ALESSANDRO. E quant'è il tempo della storia di cui tu sei l'inventore, il regista, e naturalmente anche l'attore principale?
- PROSPERO. Tre ore.
- ALESSANDRO. È uno tra i drammi più brevi del tuo autore.
- ALESSANDRO. Il tempo della storia è *uguale* al tempo della rappresentazione. Una coincidenza che il tuo autore non aveva mai rispettato. Anzi, la storia di certi suoi drammi dura anche diversi anni, e sempre nel tempo di tre, quattro ore a teatro. *Amleto*, chissà, forse anche cinque.
- PROSPERO. E sa anche perché?
- ALESSANDRO. È semplice! Perché il tempo dello spettacolo non è che il tempo magico che tu, mago abbandonato su un'isola praticamente deserta, puoi riuscire a creare *dentro* il corso del tempo naturale. Inventi tutto tu; ma, per forza di cose, a scadenza! Crei, diciamo, un interstizio spazio-temporale *dentro* la distesa, altrimenti anche a te sovraordinata, del Tempo che scorre secondo una invenzione cosmogonica probabilmente divina. Scateni una tempesta che fa naufragare i tuoi nemici, ed è solo la *rappresentazione* di una tempesta, anche se quelli a bordo, e poi naufraghi, credono che sia tutto vero, troppo vero, si preparano alla morte, ma poi... oplà! Li sbarchi sull'isola, e li disponi chi qua e chi là secondo un tuo disegno.
- PROSPERO. Sì certo, proprio così.
- ALESSANDRO. Devi portare a termine la tua vendetta.
- PROSPERO. Loro erano certi che quella barca sarebbe affondata e che la mia bambina e io saremmo morti. Invece finiamo su un'isola praticamente deserta, dove c'è solo Calibano, una bestia deforme figlio di una megera, e, tutt'intorno, spiriti capeggiati da Ariele, che io salvo dall'arborea prigione (le piace la finezza? 'arborea') in cui l'aveva ficcato la megera prima di morire, e lo prendo come esecutore dei miei incantesimi.
- ALESSANDRO. E poi?
- PROSPERO. E poi, come ha detto lei, un giorno, loro i traditori, si mettono in viaggio e io capisco che è arrivato il momento di vendicarmi, ma quando arriva quel momento, – ecco dove secondo me sarebbe stato giusto inserire quel monologo bello che lui ha dato ad Am-

- PROSPERO. True! But mine is not a tragedy in any sense, neither as you intend it to make fun of it, nor as we intended it; even though it isn't a comedy either.
- ALESSANDRO. And how would you define it?
- PROSPERO. How would I know?
- ALESSANDRO. You're the one who can analyse, who can define.
- ALESSANDRO. It is an apologue, because it says that even the best wizard can change something, but then he must surrender.
- PROSPERO. (*Ventures shyly.*) A... fable?
- ALESSANDRO. That lasts more or less three hours.
- PROSPERO. And how long is the story that you invented, directed, and of course starred in as protagonist?
- PROSPERO. Three hours.
- ALESSANDRO. It is one of the shortest plays of your author.
- PROSPERO. The time of the story is the *same* as the time of the performance. A coincidence your author had never abided by before.
- ALESSANDRO. In fact, the story of some of his plays can last even a few years, and is always contained in a three or four-hour span in the theatre. *Hamlet*, who knows, maybe even five.
- PROSPERO. And do you know why?
- ALESSANDRO. That's easy! Because the time of the performance is but the magic time that you, a wizard stranded on a nearly desert island, can create *within* the flow of natural time. You invent everything, but on term, by necessity. You create, so to speak, a time-space crack *within* the expanse, otherwise superordinate to you too, of Time that flows according to a probably divine cosmogonic invention. You set off a tempest that shipwrecks your enemies, and that's only the *representation* of a tempest, even if those on board, later to be shipwrecked, think that it is true, all too true, and prepare to die, but then... surprise! You put them ashore on the island, and scatter them, one here and one there, according to your design.
- PROSPERO. Yes, sure, that's right.
- ALESSANDRO. You have to carry out your revenge.
- PROSPERO. They were sure that our boat would sink and my baby daughter and I would die. Instead we end up on a nearly desert island, where there's only Caliban, a deformed beast, the son of a hag, and, all around, spirits led by Ariel, whom I free from the arboreal prison (do you like my finesse? 'arboreal'!) where he had been stuck by the hag before she died; and I make him the executor of my spells.
- ALESSANDRO. And then?
- PROSPERO. And then, as you said, one day, they, the traitors, set sail and I understand that the moment to revenge has come, but when that moment comes – here is where, I believe, it would have been good to include that beautiful monologue He gave Hamlet – I go

leto – decido per il perdono, per la riconciliazione, anche e soprattutto perché la mia Miranda, ormai grandicella, ha incontrato Ferdinando, figlio del re di Napoli...

ALESSANDRO. La tua magia quindi è aver violato il tempo, il tem-po!  
Ed essendo riuscito in questa grande opera, puoi pure rinunciare alla vendetta.

Ogni sortilegio non è che una virgola nella fuga delle infinite parole del tempo. E della rinuncia – di' la verità – te ne fai un vanto.  
PROSPERO. Voi elfi dei colli e dei ruscelli e dei laghi immobili e dei boschi, e voi che sulle sabbie con passi senza impronta inseguite il mare al suo riflusso e poi lo sfuggite quando ritorna; voi, mie marionette, che al chiaro di luna fate agri cerchi d'erba che la pecora non morde. . .

Io ho offuscato  
il sole meridiano; ho convocato gli ammutinati venti  
e scatenato una clamorosa guerra  
tra il verde mare e la volta azzurra . . .

Le tombe, al mio comando, hanno svegliato i loro dormienti,  
si sono spalancate e li hanno lasciati uscire  
per la mia tanto potente Arte . . .

ALESSANDRO. Forse qui esageri. Non avevi mai fatto resuscitare nessuno!

PROSPERO. (*Come se non avesse sentito.*) ...a questa mia magia, io ora rinuncio.

ALESSANDRO. E il dramma sta per finire.

PROSPERO. Sì, e basta spettacoli magici. Ne avevo approntato uno per Miranda e Ferdinando, un *masque* nuziale, recitato dai miei spiritelli sotto la regia di Ariele, anche attore, e l'avevo interrotto per una improvvisa irritazione, inventando per i miei spettatori un altro motivo ben poco credibile.

ALESSANDRO. E che cosa dicesti?

PROSPERO. Il nostro spettacolo è finito.

Questi nostri attori, come vi avevo detto, erano tutti spiriti,  
e si sono dissolti nell'aria, nell'aria impalpabile.

E come l'edificio senza fondamenta di questa visione,  
così le torri ammantate da nuvole, i palazzi sontuosi,  
i templi solenni, questo stesso grande globo,  
e quello che contiene, tutto si dissolverà.

E come la scena priva di sostanza ora è svanita,  
tutto svanirà senza lasciare neanche una nuvola.

Noi siamo della stessa stoffa di cui sono fatti i sogni,  
e la nostra povera vita non è che un sogno.

ALESSANDRO. Bellissimo!

PROSPERO. Bellissimo, sì.

Poi Lui alla fine aveva deciso che io dicessi nell'epilogo: "Ora non ho più spiriti da tenere, / né Arte per incantare, / e la mia fine è disperata, / non può soccorrermi che la preghiera".



- for forgiveness, for reconciliation, also and above all because my Miranda, old enough by then, has met Ferdinand, the son of the king of Naples...
- ALESSANDRO. Your magic then is that you violated time, Time!  
And having succeeded in this great task, you can even give up revenge.  
Every sorcery is but an iota in the flight of Time's endless words.  
And you brag about this renunciation, admit it.
- PROSPERO. Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,  
And ye that on the sand with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that  
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,  
Whereof the ewe not bites; . . .  
I have bedimmed  
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,  
And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault  
Set roaring war; . . .  
graves at my command  
Have waked their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth  
By my so potent art . . .
- ALESSANDRO. Maybe you exaggerate here. You never raised anyone from the dead!
- PROSPERO. (*As if he had not heard.*) This rough magic / I here abjure
- ALESSANDRO. And the play is about to end.
- PROSPERO. Yes, and enough with magic shows. I had devised one for Miranda and Ferdinand, a nuptial masque, performed by my spirits under the direction of Ariel, also an actor, and I had interrupted it out of a sudden irritation, inventing for my spectators another hardly believable reason.
- ALESSANDRO. And what did you say?
- PROSPERO. Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And – like the baseless fabric of this vision –  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yes, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.
- ALESSANDRO. Mighty beautiful!
- PROSPERO. Yes, mighty beautiful.  
And then, in the end, He decided that in the Epilogue I should say: "Now I want / Spirits to enforce, art to enchant; / And my ending is despair / Unless I be relieved by prayer".

E io naturalmente l'ho detto.

Alla fine...

ALESSANDRO. Alla fine si raccomandava al padrone del tem-po.

PROSPERO. Forse, ma si raccomandava soprattutto alla musica.

ALESSANDRO. Dicendo musica, lui che era così pieno zeppo di parole, avrà pensato a Ovidio "che aveva fatto ammaliare alberi pietre e fiumi da Orfeo. Poiché niente è così ottuso, duro e furente, che la musica non ne cambi la natura con il suo tempo". Con il *suo* tem-po! Appunto.

PROSPERO. Avrebbe dovuto darla a me quella battuta che invece, parecchi anni prima, aveva dato a Lorenzo nel *Mercante di Venezia*:

Siedi Gessica, guarda come il cielo è costellato da patène d'oro lucenti! Non c'è astro, il più piccolo nel firmamento, che non canti, nel suo moto, come un angelo nel coro eterno dei cherubini dal giovane sguardo. Quanta armonia nelle anime immortali! Ma finché siamo chiusi in questo rozzo corruttibile involucro di fango, noi non possiamo sentirla.

Sì, la doveva lasciare a me questa battuta, non a un personaggio qualsiasi.

ALESSANDRO. Non sarai un po' vanesio?

PROSPERO. Mica mago per nulla...

ALESSANDRO. Ma almeno alla fine mi garantisci che Lui era proprio l

PROSPERO. Era Lui! Era Lui! Era Lui!

Ci pensi, l'avete sommerso sotto tonnellate di carta: e Lui era questo, e Lui era quest'altro; e Lui voleva dire così e Lui voleva dire cosà...

Sulla scena, invece, era tutto chiaro, anche se in contraddizione.

Anzi proprio per questo. Perché questo è il teatro. E lui era in contraddizione anche con *chi* era lui stesso. Mi viene da ridere. Puah! Tutti a cercare di strappargli il cuore del suo mistero. Come volevano fare con Amleto e lui l'aveva scritto: credete che io sia più facile da sonare di un piffero?! L'aveva previsto. Aveva *anticipato* il Tem-po. Un formidabile balzo in avanti. Aveva aperto la porta a quello che per voi è il moderno... Lui era già tutti voi – ma tanto, tanto in meglio!

ALESSANDRO. E tu potresti garantirmi che...

PROSPERO. Beh, io adesso non posso più garantirle niente.

ALESSANDRO. Ma perché?

PROSPERO. Perché qui Professore, qui il copione finisce.

L'ha scritto lei questo copione, sì o no?

ALESSANDRO. Certo che l'ho scritto io!

PROSPERO. Lei è il Professor Serpieri, sì o no?

ALESSANDRO. Sono io, come tu sei Prospero della *Tempesta*!

And I said it, of course.

In the end...

ALESSANDRO. In the end He commended himself to the Master of Time.

PROSPERO. Maybe, but he commended himself above all to music.

ALESSANDRO. Speaking of music, He, who was so brimful with words, would have thought of Ovid, who "did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones and floods, / Since naught so stockish, hard and full of rage / But music for the time does change his nature". With *its* Time. Indeed!

PROSPERO. He should have given me that cue which, many years before, he had given to Lorenzo instead, in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Sit, Jessica; look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.  
There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;  
Such harmony is in immortal souls,  
But whilst this mortal vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Yes, He should have left this cue to me, not to an ordinary character.

ALESSANDRO. Aren't you a bit vain, by any chance?

PROSPERO. I'm not a wizard for nothing...

ALESSANDRO. But, in the end, at least, do you guarantee that He was really him?

PROSPERO. It was Him! It was Him! It was Him!  
Think of it, you inundated Him with tons of paper: He was this, He was that; and He meant one thing and He meant another...  
On the stage, though, everything was clear, even if in contradiction.  
In fact, exactly because of this. Because this is theatre. And He was also in contradiction with *who* He was himself! It makes me laugh. Pooh! Everyone trying to tear off the heart of his mystery.  
As they wanted to do with Hamlet, and He wrote this: do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?! He foresaw it. He anticipated Time. A tremendous jump forward. He had opened the door to what you call modernity... He was already all of you – only much, much better!

ALESSANDRO. And could you guarantee that...

PROSPERO. Well, now, I can no longer guarantee anything.

ALESSANDRO. But why?

PROSPERO. Because, Professor, here ends the script, here.

You wrote this script, didn't you?

ALESSANDRO. I did, sure!

PROSPERO. You are Professor Serpieri, aren't you?

ALESSANDRO. Yes, that's me, as you are Prospero from *The Tempest*.

- PROSPERO. Ma io non sono Prospero.  
Mi dispiace Professore, gliel'hanno fatto credere, le hanno detto che avrebbe incontrato Prospero, altrimenti lei questo copione non l'avrebbe mai scritto, e qui non ci sarebbe mai venuto. E io sono stato chiamato a leggere Prospero dal suo copione.
- ALESSANDRO. Tu non sei Prospero?
- PROSPERO. Ma no! Sono un attore qualsiasi. Mi dispiace deluderla Professore. Io sono uno che si è studiato tutti questi personaggi e non ne ha mai recitato nessuno. E grazie a lei stasera in diversi momenti, m'è parso d'essere davvero Prospero.
- ALESSANDRO. E tutto quel gran dolore, le angosce, la rabbia, le magie, i rancori, i ricordi!?
- PROSPERO. C'è stato un momento che ti ho visto con le lacrime agli occhi!
- PROSPERO. "Chi è Ecuba per lui, o lui per Ecuba?"
- ALESSANDRO. Già! "What's Hecuba to him, or He to Hecuba?"

Mai fidarsi di un commediante!

(E io concluderei qui, Alessandro; "È un bugiardo... che dice la verità" di Prospero, la taglierei se sei d'accordo.)

PROSPERO. But I am not Prospero.  
I'm sorry, Professor, they made you believe it, they told you that you would meet Prospero, otherwise you would never have written this script, and you would never have come here. And I have been called to read Prospero from your script.

ALESSANDRO. You are not Prospero?

PROSPERO. But no! I am just another actor. I am sorry to disappoint you, Professor. I am someone who studied all these roles and never performed one. And thanks to you, tonight in different moments I had the feeling I was really Prospero.

ALESSANDRO. And all that great pain, the anguishes, the rage, the wizardries, the rancours, the memories?! There was a moment I saw tears in your eyes!

PROSPERO. "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?"

ALESSANDRO. Yes!

"What's he to Hecuba, or Hecuba to him".

Never trust an actor!

(And I would end it here, Alessandro; I would omit Prospero's line "He is a liar... who tells the truth", if you agree.)

Translation by Carlo Vareschi

PINO COLIZZI

**Postscriptum\***

Cara Chiara,  
quando tuo Padre mi dette il manoscritto del suo *Lear* appena terminato e mi chiese se mi sarebbe piaciuto interpretarlo, gli risposi con amarezza, non per modestia ma con coscienza, che Lear avrebbe avuto una degna vita in un attore che avesse recitato Romeo e poi tanti altri personaggi che con l'età l'avrebbero fatto diventare quel re; e non ero io quell'attore che pur avendo studiato tanti testi, non ne avevo mai interpretato nessuno, se non per monologhi, e mai per intero.

Approfittai per chiedergli, se avesse voluto, di scrivere per me qualcosa su Lear o Prospero: e questa novità particolare l'avrei interpretata volentieri.

Scrisse Prospero; senza dubbio bello, ma una lezione, più che un testo per un attore, quindi adatto a lui, più che a me.

Che ne diresti se lo facessimo insieme – mi disse – io faccio il professore, e tu i monologhi del personaggio.

E fu così che ci venne l'idea di sceneggiare il testo, alleggerendolo con dialoghi meno nobili e meno colti e magari aggiungendo qualche spunto divertente.

Iniziammo uno scambio di edizioni con arricchimenti e impoverimenti, da Firenze a Roma, da Roma a Firenze: ed è questo che ora mi commuove: lavorare con tuo Padre anche per gioco, è stato bellissimo.

Tu l'hai visto: io creai soltanto il filo conduttore, anche consigliato dalla mia vita: un professore che per curiosità accademica e ludica, accetta di incontrare in un teatro una specie di reincarnazione di Prospero; e nell'incontro si appassiona a quello che gli sente dire e a quello che dice lui stesso, (tutto scritto da lui) al punto che quando gli viene detta la verità rimane deluso: Prospero non è che un vecchio attore che ha studiato tanti personaggi Shakespeariani e non e ha mai interpretato nessuno; e con questa rivelazione meno entusiasmante della fantasia, si conclude l'incontro. . . . Questo gioco ci divertì, e avevamo deciso di lavorarci su, per farlo diventare uno spettacolo vero. . . .

Pino

\* Da una lettera di Pino Colizzi a Chiara Serpieri, 11 gennaio 2018.

Il comitato editoriale ringrazia sentitamente Pino Colizzi e Chiara Serpieri per aver concesso la pubblicazione di questo materiale.

PINO COLIZZI

**Postscriptum\***

Dear Chiara,

when your father showed me the manuscript of *King Lear* he had just completed, asking me if I wished to interpret it, I sadly replied – not out of modesty but responsibly – that Lear deserved to be brought to life by an actor who had first played Romeo and also many other characters who would have helped him, with age, to become that king; I was not that actor, although I had studied many Shakespearean plays, but never interpreted one, at least never entirely, if not the odd monologues.

I seized the opportunity and asked him if he would write something new for me on Lear or Prospero: that I would have been happy to interpret.

He wrote ‘Prospero’; beautiful, no doubt, but a lecture, rather than an acting script, therefore better suited for him than for me.

What about if we did it together – he said – I’ll be the Professor and you’ll do the character’s monologues.

This is how came the idea of dramatizing the text, streamlining it with less studied and learned dialogues and maybe adding some extra funny cues.

We started to exchange versions, with additions and cuts, back and forth between Florence and Rome: and this is what still moves me: working with your Father, even for fun, was wonderful.

You have seen it: I created the central idea only, also led by my own experience: a professor who just out of scholarly and playful curiosity accepts to meet a sort of reincarnation of Prospero in a theatre, and during that meeting he gets totally involved by what he hears him say, and by what he himself is saying (all written by him), to the point that when he is told the truth he is shocked and disappointed: Prospero is just an old actor who has studied many Shakespearean characters, but has never played one on stage; and with this revelation, less exciting than fantasy, their meeting comes to a close. . . . We had great fun playing this game together, and we decided to work on it, so as to prepare it for an actual performance . . .

Pino

Translation by Silvia Bigliazzi

\* From a letter by Pino Colizzi to Chiara Serpieri, 11 January 2018.

The Editorial Board warmly thanks Pino Colizzi and Chiara Serpieri for allowing the publication of this material.





ALESSANDRO SERPIERI

## **Ouverture\***

\* “Ouverture” is the closing chapter of Alessandro Serpieri’s novel *Mare Scritto*, published in 2007 (Lecce: Manni: 213).

Michele avvertì ancora una volta il senso eccitante, per quanto illusorio, che dopo tutto la vera vita dovesse pur sempre avvenire, oppure ricominciare. Tutto il passato, un preludio. Sarebbe bastata la scossa di un dio, e la terra si sarebbe messa a girare in un'altra galassia, tra ghirlande di stelle stupefatte, inseguendo a spirale uccelli lontani, sbucati in voli azzurri dai pianeti di Andromeda. Un preludio, una fretta d'infinito, verso un altro orizzonte più blu sprofondante di tutti, clamoroso nel nascondiglio proibito.

Allora avrebbe potuto ritrarre dal vero finzioni lontane millenni o visioni di sogni futuri. E avrebbe imparato il respiro del mare aperto dal vento e il respiro dentro il mare e oltre il vento, sospendendo su ignote correnti gli stati passati presenti e futuri della mente.

Poi si ricordò la giovane luna che aveva visto in un precoce tramonto d'inverno, uno spicchio splendido e leggero in mezzo ai tetti spioventi. E fu preso da un irresistibile impulso a inventare qualcosa che anche vagamente le rassomigliasse. Quella giovane luna, con l'accento della sua curva gentile, lo chiamava a un'idea ridente. L'inizio era la festa. Quello spicchio si portava in grembo il cerchio colmo, in ombra ma percepibile, della luna matura. Ma il seguito non importava, anzi era un ingombro. Succedeva sempre così con le forme, come con le idee delle forme. Lui doveva solo fare in modo che quella sua improvvisa idea ridente, e già sul punto di tradursi in parole immagini suoni odori contatti, restasse sospesa e non conoscesse il suo seguito maturo. Solo così avrebbe potuto rispondere alla tenera luna con un sogno dal lieve arco giovane sempre.

Once again Michele had the exciting albeit illusory feeling that life, after all, was about to really begin, or to start over again. The whole past – a prelude. It would take no more than the jolt of a god, and the earth would start to whirl in another galaxy, among garlands of astonished stars, spiralling after distant birds which flocked out in sky blue flight from the planets of Andromeda. A prelude, a yearning for infinity, towards a different horizon of a sinking blue deeper than all, clamorous in the forbidden hiding place.

Then he would be able to paint from life fictions millennia away, or visions of future dreams. And he would learn the sea's breath, opened up by the wind, how to breathe under the sea and beyond the wind, suspending past, present and future states of mind upon unknown currents.

Later he remembered the young moon he had seen in an early winter sunset, a light and shining crescent between the pitched roofs. And he was seized by an irresistible impulse to invent something that might even vaguely resemble her. The young moon, with her hint of a gentle curve, called him towards a joyous idea. The beginning was the feast. That crescent shape bore in her womb the full circle of the ripe moon, shadowy and yet perceptible. But what came after did not matter, indeed it was an encumbrance. It was always like that with forms, as with the idea of forms. He had only to make sure that his sudden joyous idea, already on the point of translating itself into words images sounds odours contacts, should remain suspended, never to know its own mature aftermath. Only thus could he respond to the tender moon with a dream that was gently curved, forever young.

Translation by Silvia Bigliuzzi



## **Qualche parola per Sandro**

Per Sandro le parole più semplici:

“Come era eccezionale stare seduti insieme  
su una panchina e discutere i poeti e gli scrittori  
dalla parola più potente. Mi manca la tua sconfinata  
intelligenza e la tua gioia di discutere, intendere  
e interpretare le opere di uno Shakespeare, di un Donne.”  
Lettore accendi la tua lampada, non leggere  
le mie parole al buio. Sandro è capace  
di mutare in oro ogni istante della nostra  
conversazione. I suoi scritti focalizzano  
l’essenza della immaginazione umana.  
In questa notte senza stelle, le sue parole  
mi immergono ancora in un’atmosfera  
di luce: Sandro è vivo, è sveglio:  
è la Morte che è morta, non Lui.

## **A Few Words for Sandro**

The most simple words for Sandro:

“How wonderful it was to sit on a bench  
together and discuss the mightiest writers and poets.  
I miss your boundless intelligence  
and bursting gladness in understanding  
and commenting on Shakespeare’s works  
and Donne’s”. Reader, light your lamp,  
let you not read my words in the dark.  
Sandro is able to make all golden  
the minutes of our conversation.  
His writings do unbind the utmost lowre  
of human imagination. In this starless  
night, his words still wrap me  
in an atmosphere of light. Sandro  
lives, he is awake. It is Death  
who is dead, not He.

Tomaso Kemeny





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