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MARIA ELISA MONTIRONI*

Roberta Mullini, *Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare*, Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2018, pp. 145

Abstract

In her recent book *Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare* (*Speaking not to be Heard: The Aside in Shakespeare's Plays*) Mullini re-examines taken-for-granted definitions of 'aside' and 'aside to', questions the idea of audience as explicit addressee of these dramatic conventions, probes the claim that Shakespeare used them mainly to characterise evil figures, and offers a detailed reading and pragma-linguistic analysis of selected asides through a quantitative analysis applied to the Shakespearean dramatic corpus by means of the Ant-Conc software, especially focusing on 'asides to'. Mullini challenges previous studies on Shakespeare's use of the aside, showing its relevance with regard to the characterisation of any character in crucial moments of the plot and, in the case of 'asides to', its importance to underline also the power distance between specific *dramatis personae*.

KEYWORDS: aside; aside to; Shakespeare; digital-humanities; pragma-linguistic

Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare (*Speaking not to be Heard: The Aside in Shakespeare's Plays*) is a groundbreaking study on Shakespeare's asides, for both the originality of its approach and the results achieved. In her book Mullini re-examines taken-for-granted definitions of 'aside' and 'aside to', challenges the idea of the audience as explicit addressee of these dramatic conventions, probes the claim that Shakespeare used them mainly to characterise evil figures, and offers a detailed reading and pragma-linguistic analysis of selected asides through a quantitative analysis applied to the Shakespearean dramatic corpus by means of the Ant-Conc software, especially focusing on 'asides to'. In so doing, Roberta Mullini expands James E. Hirsh's 2003 fundamental investigation into Shakespeare's soliloquies, and adopts a perspective that cannot be found in recent works on the same topic. Indeed, Marcus Nordlund (2017) uses a digital-humanities approach as Mullini does, but offers, as suggested by the title of his book, *A Study of the Complete Soliloquies and Solo Asides* (thus excluding 'asides to'), interprets them through close reading, and considers these speeches as mostly audience-addressed; while Neil Corcoran 2018 provides readers with an insightful textual analysis of the most well-known monologues, always taking into account the play in performance (both on stage and on screen), but again disregarding 'asides to'.

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At the beginning of Mullini's book a very important point is made clear: the difficulty in defining the term 'aside' in its multifaceted aspects – as stressed also by Alan C. Dessen (1995: 49-55) – and the fluidity of the use of this word in the editorial history of the Shakespearean dramatic canon, which is not systematic and coherent, but rather inconsistent and variable, even “nearly idiosyncratic” (78). Today, the word 'aside' refers to a dramatic device by which a character addresses herself/himself, the audience or another character, 'without' being heard by those on stage. It is commonly associated with early modern English theatre, in particular with Shakespeare's plays – suffice it to mention Hamlet's “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (*Hamlet* 1.2) or Cordelia's “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” in *King Lear* (1.1). But the word 'aside' never appears in the stage directions of the first editions of Shakespeare's works, either in Quarto or in Folio, with just a couple of exceptions.

Modern editors have been adding the directions 'aside' or 'aside to' since the eighteenth century, although not uniformly. The decision editors make to include or avoid this indication depends on the numerous implied stage directions one can find in Shakespeare's texts, but inevitably also on their personal idea of performance and of *mise en page*. The aside is a quintessentially metatheatrical convention in that it connects the three main components of the performance: actor-character-audience. Hence it reminds us that Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed and acted on stage for (and to some extent even with) an audience. This topic is crucial for Mullini, who opens the book discussing the dialectical tension between dramatic text and performance, corroborating the idea that drama criticism (i.e. the study of the play as literature) cannot be relegated to textual criticism only (mainly in the case of asides), but must always contemplate what happens in performance.

Building on this principle, in order to select the plays for analysis by using methodologies borrowed from the digital humanities, such as corpora and concordance software, Mullini carefully chooses one edition of the playwright's canon, namely the digital version of *The Complete Works* (1988) edited for Oxford University Press by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, because of its overall coherent employment of the direction 'aside' and, most importantly, because of its attention in helping readers imagine a possible performance of the plays. And yet, Mullini laments inconsistencies in signalling asides even within this same edition. The author is aware of the more recent Oxford edition (2016), which however was published after she had already carried out an advanced research work on Shakespeare's canon. Through her investigation, Mullini refers to other editions of Shakespeare's texts too (mainly the digital ones, such as “Internet Shakespeare Editions”, “Folger Digital Texts”, and “Open Source Shakespeare”), compares their use of the directions 'aside' and 'aside to', and underlines that one cannot but find incongruities in the parameters used by editors for additions and omissions. The latter do not simply reflect personal choices, but reveal an inconsistent *modus operandi* even by a single editor. This first phase of Mullini's quantitative analysis aims at producing a subcorpus of plays with more cases of aside than others, as well as at pinpointing their collocation within the plot. The scrutiny and the interpretation of the data collected through digital tools allow Mullini to select the

texts to be analysed, to group them by sub-genres, and to question the data and the results of previous research, such as the frequency of asides in Shakespeare's plays, the taxonomy of different types of aside, and their dramatic function.

One question challenged by Mullini is the so-called 'monological aside', as shown by the very title of one of her chapters – "Monological aside (?)" (54). The author demonstrates that through this label one signifies many types of speech that actually could be hardly gathered under the same umbrella-term. For example, in *Troilus and Cressida* Mullini identifies asides with a commentary function, fundamental for the information-flow, thus indirectly addressed to the audience; while in *Richard III* 1.3 Margaret's asides, who is eavesdropping on Elizabeth and Richard's dialogue, are both hidden comments, and lines rhetorically, but not 'factually', addressed to them. Developing Warren Smith's classification of asides further (1949), Mullini suggests the use of the expression "mono-dialogical asides" (67) for this type of convention.

The author also questions the label 'aside *ad spectatores*', as it should be exclusively used for monologues that contain explicit and direct references to the audience, thus breaking the so-called fourth wall. This leads Mullini to reconsider earlier studies, such as the above-mentioned 2017 volume by Nordlund or Manfred Pfister's 1988 book, where he claims that asides *ad spectatores* are frequent in Shakespeare and are mainly a prerogative of Machiavellian characters, the evil heirs of the Vice figure of earlier theatre. Both the quantitative evidence and the alleged use of asides *ad spectatores* as an element of characterisation of immoral figures are discarded in this volume.

Mullini has widely worked on the Tudor Vice, on its perlocutionary rhetoric and on its power to lead the plot, studying it in relation to the language of Shakespeare's fools and their function within the story (see 1983, 1988, 1992, 1997). On the ground of this knowledge and of the data collected on Shakespeare's asides, Mullini concludes that most of the asides *ad spectatores* only implicitly address the audience, because they do not contain evident marks of address, such as imperatives or vocatives. On the contrary, Shakespeare gives devious characters, such as Iago in *Othello* or Richard III in the homonymous play, longer monologues, not openly spoken to an audience. Mullini affirms that while Shakespeare "uses the mode privileged by the Vice, the typical character of Tudor drama till about 1580, to 'trap' the spectators in the intrigues he aims at plotting . . . he does not have his characters use [the Vice's] rhetorical means. It will be up to the director and the actor, then, to choose how to perform those monologues on stage" (72-3). Mullini shows that comic characters are instead the ones who involve the audience more frequently, but they do so, again, through longer speeches, better identifiable as monologues than as asides. To demonstrate this point she provides examples of marks of address directed to the audience taken from the monologues of Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and from those of Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

The bulk of Mullini's investigation is on the stage direction 'aside to', which she defines as signalling "hidden dialogues" (85), or "private dialogues" (91). The author accepts Pfister's definition of 'asides to' as separate dialogues, concurrent to other dialogues on stage, but identifies particular formal and contextual fea-

tures: “Dialogical asides are characterised . . . by the conciseness of the remarks, sometimes hardly more than monosyllables, and by an indefinite rhetorical nature, between verse and prose . . . And it is because of these features that the dialogical aside seems closer to natural language” (79). Moreover, Mullini singles out the peculiar circumstances in which ‘asides to’ occur: situations marked by “either extreme necessity in relation to content, or by urgency due to the action on stage, or again by the playwright’s will to show privileged relationships between some of the characters” (ibid.).

‘Asides to’ occur about four times less than monological asides, but they are extremely interesting for the author, because they both vary greatly in typology, and are quite different from the other type of aside in lexical choices and structure. The cases investigated are from *Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry VI, Part III*, *The Tempest* and *Henry VI, Part II*, and to each play an individual chapter is devoted.

These asides are studied from a pragma-linguistic perspective, an investigation Mullini started in 2016 (see Mullini 2016). The results achieved were again openly in disagreement with previous research, mainly Pfister 1988 (which, however, was not focused on Shakespearean plays, thus encompassing a more general perspective). Dialogical asides are not simply typical of petty characters and plotters, nor is it possible to see the aside as a tool for the characterisation of specific dramatic figures only. They have patterns and rhetorical strategies that replicate what happens in everyday language, particularly in situations of urgency, extreme need, or in contexts where there are confidential relationships between speakers.

In conclusion, Mullini shows that asides play an important role in Shakespeare and can be used by any type of character as an exceptionally apt device in the information flow to the audience (although not specifically addressed), particularly in crucial moments of the plot, to underline, in many different ways, the character’s fundamental stance and, in the case of ‘asides to’, also the power distance between specific *dramatis personae*.

This volume is a suitable reading for connoisseurs and university students alike. It is a valuable study that relates with the state of the art on the subject with methodological precision and extreme intellectual honesty, reaching new results and offering new interpretative models. For all this, the investigation offered by Mullini on ‘speaking not to be heard’ is definitely going ‘to be heard’, as it provides a significant contribution on the topic.

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