

# Foreword – The Wind and the Shadows: an Intersection of Archetypes

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## Chapter I

1 The wordes of the Preacher, the sonne of Daud King in Ierusalém.

2 Vanitie of vanities, saith the Preacher: vanitie of vanities, all *is* vanitie.

3 What remaineth unto man in all his travail, which he suffreth under the sunne?

4 *One* generacion passeth, and *another* generacion succedeth: but the earth remaineth for ever.

5 The sunne riseth, & the sunne goeth downe, & draweth to his place, where he riseth.

14 I haue considered all the workes that are done under the sunne; and beholde, all *is* vanitie, and vexacion of the spirit.

[...]

17 And I gaue mine heart to knowe wisdom & knowledge, madnes & foolishnes: I knewe also this is a vexacion of the spirit.

18 For in the multitude wisdom *is* muche grief: & he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorowe.

## Chapter VIII

1 Who is the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?

17 [...] Man can not finde out the work that is wrought under the sunne: for the which man laboreth to seke it, and can not finde *it*; yea, and though the wise man thinke to knowe it, he can not finde it.

## Chapter XII

7 And dust returne to the earth as it was [...]

8 Vanitie of vanities, saith the Preacher; all *is* vanitie.

(*Qoheleth/ Ecclesiastes*, Chapters I-XII)<sup>1</sup>

“Picture human beings living in some sort of underground cave dwelling [...] Do you think that prisoners of that sort have ever seen anything more of themselves and of one another than the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave in front of them? [...] What about the objects? Wouldn’t they see only shadows of these also? [...] All in all, then, what people in this situation would take for truth would be nothing more than shadows.”

(Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII)<sup>2</sup>

The verses herewith borrowed from *Qoheleth*, together with a passage on the myth of the cave quoted from Plato’s *Republic*, are meant to serve as a Prelude to *Memoria di Shakespeare’s* current investigation into Shakespeare’s attitude towards the early modern imaginary, rhetoric and treatment of *vanitas*. The *vanitas* theme is here considered to be a crucial *topos* in the modern crisis of language as conveyor of truth in the field of aesthetics, following a twofold perspective: the first built on a profound awareness of the transience and mortality of the human condition (a theme strongly reassessed by the Reformation culture, as Hamlet would have learned in Wittenberg); and the second founded on a disowning of outward modes of representation, conceived as hollow shapes. The vacuity of knowledge drawn from visible appearances, in life as well as on stage, is omnipresent<sup>3</sup>. In Hamlet’s words, not only does drama provide – as a mirror of life – “abstracts and brief chronicles of the time”; the play is also “the thing” needed to question the performing shadows that make up its own unsubstantial frame:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 edition, with an introduction by Lloyd E. Berry*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari and trans. Tom Griffith, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 220-221.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the topical statement “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” in *The Tempest*, IV.i.156-58.

from images of pictures and *in* pictures, to the fleeting identity of the *dramatis personae*. “Mirror imaging” – which in this issue B. J. Sokol’s essay looks into, analyzing two kinds of ‘mirror use’ according to a physiology of visual perception supported by some revolutionary optical principles of the New Science – is a passage of paramount importance in the Renaissance epistemological shift of representation from mimetic codes to a distorted, asymmetrical, practice<sup>4</sup>: the stage itself as “vanitie of vanities”.

In the Middle Ages the *vanitas* motif connoted desire as a paradigm of mortality in the guise of a *Danse macabre*, with variations on Death as the great jester, on figures of female agency reminiscent of the Fall and in a close imaginative connection with folly through the empty language – mere wind – of the ‘natural’ fool<sup>5</sup>. With Erasmus (see Claudia Corti’s “Shakespeare contra Erasmus”, highlighting cross references between *The Praise of Folly* and Shakespeare’s vision), other symbols fostered a Renaissance anamorphic gaze on ‘vanitas’, assigning the fool a disturbing, liminal role in the making of meaning, which Shakespeare was to explore within the framework of knowledge as illusion, a crucial one in tragedy, particularly in *King Lear* (see Michael Neill’s essay, “‘This is nothing, fool’: Shakespeare’s Vanities”). A climax in such a representation was reached thanks to a renewed consciousness of the irrevocable waste of time in the *memento mori* imagery of later Renaissance – for example the skulls, hourglasses, candles and withering flowers here analysed by Alessia Palmieri (“Vanitas Iconography as a Dramatic Device in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*”). *Vanitas* as an issue of meaning, both in its semantic and semiotic implications, informed a complex theoretical debate on the classical analogy between literature and painting, challenging their relation as “sister arts”, and of course it was at the core of the quest into

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<sup>4</sup> Drawing from the multiple perspective in the mirror iconography, B. J. Sokol’s “An Image of Vanitas: Geometrical Optics and Shakespearean Points of View” offers an interesting contribution to the interpretation of *Titus Andronicus* and of *Troilus and Cressida*, focused on scenes performing the characters’ distorted vision.

<sup>5</sup> Vanna Gentili, *La recita della follia. Funzioni dell’insania nel teatro dell’età di Shakespeare*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997.

other issues of death typical of the early modern imaginary<sup>6</sup>. However, *vanitas* fantasies will continue to haunt the ‘Age of Reason’ and some later styles of modernity, in defiance of conventional cultural modes – one could make a list of them, from Samuel Johnson to Samuel Beckett<sup>7</sup>. Johnson’s obsession with the vanity of human wishes, explored by Robert DeMaria in this volume, explicitly took its cue from *Ecclesiastes* (still attributed in Johnsons’ time to King Solomon<sup>8</sup>) in connection with the Latin etymology of the term “vanity” from the Latin *vanus*: a term the editors of this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare* have made a point of referring to as the signifier of an existential hollow rather than expressing an ontology of nothingness<sup>9</sup>; one challenging – precisely because of its indeterminacy – the very foundations of human knowledge.

As in Holbein’s motivations in the *Ambassadors* for revealing a skull behind a scenario of wealth – we are all familiar with this painting as an iconic one in the genre – so that we may “see the skull beneath the skin” (in T. S. Eliot’s definition of Webster), the *vanitas* theme bears witness to the emptiness of human life<sup>10</sup>, to its lack of purpose and meaning or *telos*, thus connoting tragedy as philosophy<sup>11</sup>. It also concerns the vacuous statute of theatre and drama and of its shadows, doomed to vanish into thin air. A case

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<sup>6</sup> See Michael Neill, *Issues of Death. Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997. I am indebted to Michael Neill for reminding me that he drew the title of this seminal study from John Donne.

<sup>7</sup> Rosy Colombo, “My Johnson Fantasy”: *Samuel Johnson nello specchio di Samuel Beckett*, in *Mélanges en l’honneur de Mariella di Maio*, ed. Valentina Fortunato, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2019, pp. 191-201.

<sup>8</sup> The original name of the title, in fact a pseudonym (as a feminine singular participle *Qoheleth* identifies the author with the function of a professional speaker) was superseded by the Greek translation *Ecclesiastes*, and as such adopted in the course of all English translations of the Bible. The only historical person who fits the description of both son of David and king over Israel is King Solomon, to whom Samuel Johnson refers in an important sermon on *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. See in this issue the essay by Robert DeMaria.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Michael Neill: “Although we nowadays associate the word with self-conceit [...] its root lies in the Latin *vanus*, meaning ‘empty’ or ‘void’” (p. 40).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “Thou hast nor youth nor age, / But, as it were, an after-dinner sleep, / Dreaming of both” (*Measure for Measure*, III.i.31-33).

<sup>11</sup> Russ Leo, *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

in point is *Antony and Cleopatra*: at the heart of his loss Antony, like an imperfect actor, contemplates his identity dissolving in the mirror of the sky: a replica, among others in Shakespeare's exploration of identity, of the splendid mirror scene in *Richard II*, the climax of the king undoing of himself:

Give me that glass, and therein I will read.

[...]

O, flattering glass,

Like to my followers in prosperity,

Thou dost beguile me.

[...] As brittle as the glory is the face, (*he throws the glass down*)

For there it is, cracked in hundred shivers.

(*Richard II*, II.iv.276-88)

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,

A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,

A towered citadel, a pendant rock,

A forked mountain, or blue promontory

With trees upon't that nod unto the world

And mock our eyes with air.

[...]

That which is now a horse, even with a thought

The rack dislims, and makes it indistinct

As water in water.

[...]

Now thy captain is

Even such a body.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xv.2-13)

A short distance lies between Hamlet's puritan resistance to a false language of truth based on the conventions of "seeming"—a resistance later enforced by Edgar's challenge to "what we ought to say" in *Lear*—and Prospero's acknowledgement of the limits of his art as illusion<sup>12</sup>. Besides partaking of Montaigne's skepticism about the vanity of writing of *vanitie*<sup>13</sup>, as Michael Neill reminds us, in

<sup>12</sup> "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep". (*The Tempest*, IV.i.156-58).

<sup>13</sup> Montaigne's essay "Of Vanitie" is particularly relevant to these notes as a radical deconstruction of the sign-referent relationship in the language/truth issue.

Prospero's cave the act of disowning knowledge founded in the shadows of the imagination bears unmistakable traces of Plato's myth of the cave.

As a *memento mori* archetype, *Qoheleth* has played a subversive role both in Judaism and Christianity, a role emphasizing the absence rather than the presence of God, a sort of 'biblical unconscious' which persisted from the Middle Ages into early modern culture, in compliance with the claims of the Reformation. In this process, however, representations of mortality underwent an important shift, as Catherine Belsey demonstrates in this issue ("In Defiance of Death: Shakespeare and Tomb Sculpture"). In her critical survey of an early modern double-decker tomb, Belsey illuminates an intersection between two distinct versions of *vanitas*: on the one hand, medieval asceticism shows death triumphant in the humiliation of the body's mortality, while on the other hand, humanism celebrates death as a gateway to immortality, allowing the dying self to defy finitude. *Antony and Cleopatra* gives evidence of Shakespeare's drawing imagery and action from both traditions: Antony's botched suicide performs dying as a humiliating experience, whereas for Cleopatra death involves the agency of a free will, leading to transcendence of the mortal frame of the body. Although Shakespeare has little use for the word *vanity* itself (it occurs only 21 times in the entire corpus), he has obviously dramatized the *vanitas* tradition with a shift towards issues of *meaning*, thus retrieving – in keeping with *Qoheleth*'s musings about a world without God – fantasies that will stretch out into Giacomo Leopardi's rhetoric of "l'infinita vanità del tutto"<sup>14</sup>, as well as into Beckett's repeated exploration of the failure of human wishes as a key note of his personal disavowal of the deceits of "literature", the "sugar plums" of the bourgeois false consciousness, supposed to make up for a humiliated human condition<sup>15</sup>.

Over the past few decades critical practice, in the wake of Catherine Belsey's postmodern approach, has reassessed the conventional relation between Shakespeare and visual culture –

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<sup>14</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *A se stesso*, in *Canti*, 1835.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hamm to Nagg: "There are no more sugar-plums" (Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *Samuel Beckett. The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber & Faber, 2006, p. 119).

expanding from the theoretical *Paragone* debate to the intersection of mimetic and diegetic paradigms, to an analysis of the chiaroscuro technique deployed by Shakespeare and Caravaggio in their overlapping careers, of such stylistic modes as ekphrasis and anamorphosis, above all of imagery as a dramatic device<sup>16</sup>. However, with regard to the theme of *vanitas* in drama, this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare* has explicitly taken its cue from Keir Elam's investigation into *Shakespeare's Pictures: Visual Objects in the Drama* (Arden, 2017): a study with an original focus on pictures, not as stage props with a decorative role, but as objects with a performing agency – imbued with a symbolic power to enter

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<sup>16</sup> See: Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, New York, Routledge, 2002; Armelle Sabatier, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture: A Dictionary*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, a research recently shared with Camilla Caporicci in their joint editing of *The Art of Picturing in Early Modern English Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2019; Rocco Coronato, *Shakespeare, Caravaggio and the Indinstinct Regard*, New York, Routledge, 2017; Michele Marrapodi, ed., *Shakespeare and the Visual Arts, The Italian Influence*, New York, Routledge, 2017; B. J. Sokol, *Shakespeare's Artists*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, also in Caporicci and Sabatier, in continuation of the essay exploring in this issue the theme of Mirrors from the scientific multiple point of view in Optics; Claudia Corti's lifelong research in this field leading up to Shakespeare and Erasmus in this volume, from her *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, Pisa, Pacini, 1998, and *Shakespeare e gli emblemi*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2002. See, among others, Anna Anzi, *Shakespeare e le arti figurative*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1998. An important related title to the topic of literature and the visual arts with reference to Shakespeare is Milena Romero Allué, *Immagini della mente. Scrittura e percezione visiva nella letteratura inglese del Rinascimento*, Venezia, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2016. On the intersection of mimesis/diegesis in early modern drama explored in a theoretical/epistemological light, see Silvia Bigliazzi's forthcoming essay "Focalizing Drama: Notes on Point of View in Shakespeare", *Fictions*, 20 (2020), a sequel to "Diegesis and Mimesis", *Skenè*, 2:2 (2016).

directly into the action of the play, and into a relationship with the *dramatis personae*.

Two chapters are particularly compelling with regard to the theme of *Vanitas, or Memento mori*: Chapter 3, on *The Merchant of Venice*, and Chapter 4, on *Hamlet as portrait: A Shadow's shadow*. *The Merchant of Venice* – writes Elam, and I wholeheartedly agree with him – is “a play dominated by the shadow of death” (p. 200). The *memento mori* imagery is thematically linked with the casket plot – the casket resulting in a dramatization of the coffin, the conventional *locus* of the vanity of desire of which Portia is the object, cunningly displaced into her picture as a metaphor of mimetic desire<sup>17</sup>; but it also “contaminates the bond plot”, in which Shylock, stripped of his identity, eventually turns into a *vanitas* figure. Elam’s comment expands at large on the central role played at the time by portraits (and miniatures). Moreover he argues that in the casket scene words and images underlie the *vanitas* theme, in a dialectical relationship between what is only an illusory identification of an image with the true person (as in Plato’s parable of the cave)<sup>18</sup>, and the picture as an uncanny mirror image of the viewer him/herself: “Portia is imagined as a femme fatale associated with death” (p. 181), along with the *vanitas* symbols of the skull (Morocco), the fool’s head (Aragon), and the lead encoding Bassanio’s death drive<sup>19</sup>. This reading of the casket scene in terms of Plato’s philosophy of knowledge has of course raised the question of Shakespeare’s familiarity with Qoheleth’s desperate vision: words, words, words...

And yet, to conclude with Elam’s chapter on Hamlet’s portrait as a shadow’s shadow, there is a paradoxical disproportion between Hamlet’s distrust of the airy vacuity of signifiers (starting from his resistance to whatever “seems” in I.ii.76) and his

<sup>17</sup> For an interpretation of the casket scene in terms of mimetic desire see the classic René Girard, *Shakespeare: Les feux de l’envie*, Paris, Grasset, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Elam, p. 210: “Hamlet can be read as a dramatization of the allegory of the cave, even if Shakespeare had probably never read Plato”. Another reference to Plato, *The Republic*, Book IX, is also in Elam, p. 209.

<sup>19</sup> The reference is of course to Freud’s interpretation of this scene in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press, 1958, 24 vols, vol. XII. Shakespeare will deploy the symbolic power of “lead” also in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in Antony’s humiliating representation – and self-representation – as a dying heavy body (Act IV).



enormous emotional and cognitive investment in shadows, assuming a play within the play as vehicle of truth (II.ii). Precisely this disproportion is the character's – and Shakespeare's – main problem in the tragedy.

## Post Scriptum

As of the current issue, the Advisory Board of *Memoria di Shakespeare* will be the poorer, for the loss of Harold Bloom, of Yale University, and of Remo Bodei, last based in UCLA, after holding a chair in aesthetics at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa. Since 2013, when the open access, online version of the journal was launched, they had been leading supporters and mentors in two of its privileged foci: Shakespeare as *Sprachschöpfer* (in Wittgenstein's definition), and Shakespearean insight into philosophical questions of knowledge and representation. Harold Bloom's contribution to our journal was given in continuity with Samuel Johnson's critical freedom from academic fashions – a legacy he claimed as did his Italian brother in trade, Agostino Lombardo, founder of *Memoria di Shakespeare*. In the philosophical insight of Remo Bodei, our journal found its legitimization in approaching Shakespeare as an active performer and thinker on issues constitutive of early modernity, such as time and identity. For both of them, Shakespeare was at the core of passionate research into the mystery of things, each, of course, with his own instruments: for Bloom he was *The "Inventor" of the Human* (1998), for Bodei a challenging explorer of the rise of modern consciousness in terms of the performing self (*Immaginare altre vite*, 2018). We will miss them as radical readers of Shakespeare, precisely for their inexhaustible digging into the roots of literary and philosophical knowledge. It is to them that the current issue, deeply engaged in thought about the existential condition of humankind, is dedicated.

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