

Shakespeare contra Erasmus

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Vanitas as illusion

A last deep breath, and Moria gives out her definitive, explosive conclusions:

Salomon the Ecclesiaste writeth in his fyrste chapitre, that the noubre of fooles is infinite. [...] What ment he (trow ye) by his protestacion, when he lowdely cried out so, *Vanitee of vanitees, and all is vanitee?* what? but (as afore I saied) that this humaine life is naught but a certaine great plaie of Folie? [...] Moreouer, where the other wyse Ecclesiasticus saied, *A foole changeth like the moone, but a wiseman abydeth in one state as the sonne*, what signified he els hereby? but that mankynd is altogethers foolissh.¹

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folie*, trans. Sir Thomas Chaloner, ed. Clarence Miller, London-New York, Oxford University Press, The Early English Text Society, 1965, pp. 107-8. All the references are to this edition, and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text. The *Ecclesiastes* (Hebrew *Qohelet*, 'preacher') is the Old Testament Book of Wisdom. The *Ecclesiasticus* (The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach) is a deuterocanonical text accepted in the Roman Catholic canon. Both

There are two aspects in Moria's considerations of the *vanitas* riddle². One is the capacity to fictitiously represent parts of the real world; the other is that of giving instructions as to how to deal with these representations, which more often than not correspond to illusions and falsifications. Moria's strategy – a highly theatrical one, by the way – consists in inserting herself into the emotional structures of fictional characters and, by so doing, bringing the characters themselves into our minds as *real beings*³. Thus, she fulfils the endeavour of breathing life into fiction, in a pathemic way, either by empathy with or dislike of the characters. This procedure is what our contemporary philosophy would name 'simulation'⁴. As Moria runs simulations in our minds, she makes us not only 'imagine' her characters but urges us to share the urgency of their fluctuations and doubts, thus enabling us to reflect on these emotions in such a way as to create and determine mental models of ourselves.

It goes without saying that for Shakespeare – no less than for Erasmus – the very idea of ontological illusion coincides with their shared conception of theatricality as the utmost and most effective

Ecclesiastes and *Ecclesiasticus* contain practical rules and moral exhortations. Erasmus' intercultural bias underlines their mutual dependence.

- ² Although Ernst Gombrich makes no explicit reference to Erasmus, he never avoids claims to his debts to what he calls more generally "humanist behaviour". I here draw upon his fundamental theses of *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London, Phaidon Press, 1960, to interpret the true Erasmian sense of illusion itself.
- ³ See in particular Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979. His discussion of "word-things" relationship in Erasmus has provided more than one point of reference throughout this article.
- ⁴ 'Simulation', according to analytic philosophy, is a way of modelling and re-modelling emotions and simulating their effects on social order. In literary texts – say, Shakespeare's or Erasmus' – a cognitive approach can help to better understand the characters' values, ideas and emotions; running them as simulations in his/her mind, a reader can identify the real relations between substance (inner experience) and shadow (outer behaviour). See the outstanding Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009; and Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

simulation of the world⁵. The transformations of substances into fallacies, that Moria so cunningly yet passionately denounced, were accomplished by Shakespeare in the ever transforming, appearing/disappearing *vanities* on the illusory space of the stage. Nevertheless, the playwright overcomes the philosopher (notwithstanding the latter's dramatic orientation) in exploiting the physical, material resources of the stage properties. Iago cleverly converts a banal handkerchief into a metaphysical instrument to transform Othello's perception of reality and ultimately reforms his very sense of himself (*Othello*, III.iv; IV.i). When Titania, after having "the juice of a little western flower" dripped into her eyes (*A Midsummer's Night Dream*, II.i.172), wakes up, she falls in love with Bottom, who has been reshaped in the guise of a donkey (III.i). When Cassius affirms that he will be the mirror (one of the stock devices of emblematic literature) for Brutus (*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.70-73), he does more than initiating his recruitment to plot Caesar's assassination. Indeed, in the second scene of Act I, we find embodied many of the elements of the modern literary and dramatic idea of character as a compound of emotion-based perspectives from which action flows: a flux of generative relations of shadows from substances, illusions from realities. Not to mention Hamlet, who, in his perhaps ambiguously 'feigned' madness, reaches the summit of his depiction of substantial interiority, as well as of its exterior, shifting manifestations, or *vanities*.

And here comes to the fore Erasmus' connection between simulation and theatre. Both in active and passive senses: because Moria's encomium is a 'praise of folly' pronounced on a stage by a character named Folly herself. Dramatic art – implies Erasmus – is actively an illusion, a simulation of reality. But its deep, innate,

⁵ See: Claudia Corti, ed., *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, Pisa, Pacini, 1998; Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963; James McConica, *Erasmus*, Oxford-New York-Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1991; Marc Fumaroli, "L'éloquence de la Folie", in *Dix conférences sur Érasme. Éloge de la folie – Colloques. Actes des journées organisées par l'Université de Bâle et le Centre Culturel Suisse, à Paris les 11 et 12 avril 1986*, Paris-Genève, Champion et Slatkine, 1998; Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Arthur F. Kinney, *Continental Humanistic Poetics: Studies in Erasmus, Castiglione, Marguerite de Navarre, Rabelais, and Cervantes*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

congenial falsity cannot run the risk of being disrupted by any 'wise', well-meaning – let us say – 'revisionist' who approaches the stage to denounce its constitutive passive vanity. On stage the parts are often miscast, this is undeniable, but Moria tries to picture what disaster would follow if someone who intends to shed light upon the miscasting were to interrupt the scene, stripping the disguises from the players. And life presents an analogue. Suppose some 'wise man' from the 'sky' (both in a metaphysical and theatrical sense, the sky also being the canvas pending onto the stage) should descend into the theatre of life and try to wring from the characters the roles for which they have been engaged. The result would be that the actors are not passively miscast, merely on account of the producer's miscasting, but have actively concurred to obtain their roles. Thus, the supposed intruder is not simply censuring what cannot be helped, but also exposing the intentional folly of the masquers.

Long and well known as it is, this passage is worth almost full quotation, being central to my whole *argumentum* here:

If one at a solemne stage plaie, woulde take upon hym to plucke of the plaiers garmentes, whiles they were saiyng theyr partes, and so disciphre unto the lokers on, the true and natiue faces of eche of the plaiers, shoulde he not (trowe ye) marre all the mattier? [...] ye shoulde see yet straightwaies a new transmutation in thynges: that who before plaied the woman, shoulde than appeare to be a man: who seemed youth, should shew his hore heares: who countrefaited the kynge, shulde tourne to a rascall, and who plaiede god almightie, shulde become a cobler as he was before.

Yet [...] (pp. 37-38)

"Yet", precisely "yet". For here comes Moria's revenge:

Yet take awaie this errour, and as soone take awaie all togethers, in as muche as the feignyng and counterfaiyng is it, that so delighteth the beholders. (p. 38)

The parallel to life seems inevitable:

So likewise, all this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certayne kynde of stage plaie? Wheras men come foorthe disguised one in one

arraie, an other in an other, eche plaiyng his parte, till at last the maker of the plaie, or bokebearer causeth them to auoyde the skaffolde, and yet sometyme maketh one man come in, two or three tymes, with sundrie partes and apparaile, as who before represented a kynge, beyng clothed all in purpre, hauing no more but shyfted hym selfe a little, shoulde shew hym selfe againe lyke an woobegone myser. And all this is dooen under a certaine veile or shadow, whiche taken awaie ones, the plaie can no more be plaied. (p. 38)

Which means: take away any falsification, illusion, allurements, vanity itself, and there is no play; much worse, there is actually no life at all!

Vanitas as fancy

When Bassanio, choosing among his three caskets, ponders the location of *fancy*, he cannot determine if it is either heart or mind, finally coming to the choice of *eye* (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.ii). In the late sixteenth century, ‘fancy’ is often indistinctly used with ‘fantasy’ or ‘imagination’, in reference to the mental/visual faculty, the one that can transform intelligible data into psychological ‘phantasms’. Starting from Aristotle’s *De anima*, through Aquinas and many mostly relevant medieval thinkers, the image-making faculty, as distinguished from sense and memory, came to invade the field of questioning the true realm of *phantasmatic* apprehension, triggered as it was by the ontological concern about supposed visual supremacy. Renaissance theoretical discussions offer different versions of fancy as a mentally unobjectionable function and of its inconsistent definitions as well. Either ‘fantasy’ is “what taketh all the formes or ordinances that be disposed of the fiue Wittes”, or ‘imagination’ is “what apprehends the fourme or shape of sensible things”⁶. A third variation lists three fundamental faculties as “imaginacion or common sense”, “reason or phantasie”, and “memory”⁷. Such “confusion” perplexed, for example, the neo-Platonic poet John Davies:

⁶ Thomas Vicary, *The English-mans Treasure: with the true Anatomie of Mans bodie*, London, George Robinson, 1587, pp. 15-16.

⁷ Philip Moore, *The Hope of Health*, London, John Kingston, 1565, p. 8.

Imagination, Fancie, Common-sence,
 In nature brooketh oddes or union,
 Some makes them one, and some makes difference,
 But wee will use them with distinction.
 With sense to shunne the Sence confusion.⁸

However, locations of fancy or imagination had to be reconciled with the rapid advances of human anatomy, as exemplified by Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), which nevertheless did not calm down the author's own anxieties about the mysteries of cognition: "I am unable to understand how the brain can perform its office of imagining, meditating, thinking, and remembering"⁹.

In part because of its positional instability, fancy and/or imagination provided a conceptual space to analyse the relations between body and mind. Even before Descartes, the idea that "light is a percussion made by the illuminant that stricketh our sense in the part of the braine which we suppose to be the fantasie"¹⁰ inaugurated in England the connection between light, sight... and *vision*. Inward images can be created that influence or shape or alter our perceptions, leading to our aesthetic conceptions. Imaginative, fantastic or phantasmal theories (either honestly derived or strategically absorbed from 'the famous clark Erasmus') were arousing examinations of particular aspects of mental disarrangement, chiefly due to abnormal functioning of either heart or eye. The meaning of 'phantasm' was also on the move, its traditional neutral sense of 'image' or 'appearance' giving way to 'illusory' or 'fictive' representations: appropriately the vanities of the eye!¹¹

⁸ John Davies, *Mirum in Modum: A Glimpse of Gods Glorie and the Soules Shape*, London, William Aspley, 1602, p. 1.

⁹ Andreas Vesalius, *Vesalius on the Human Brain*, trans. Charles Singer, London, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 4.

¹⁰ Kenelm Digby, *Two Treatises, in the One of Which, the Nature of Bodies; in the Other, the Nature of Mans Soule; is Looked Into*, Paris, Gilles Blaizot, 1544, pp. 275-76.

¹¹ I owe many suggestions to: Ernest B. Gilman, *The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Wit in the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978; Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1983; Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1986; David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1993; Christopher

Although either fancy or imagination are never explicitly mentioned in the Shakespeare sonnet sequence, the recurring dialogues among eye, heart and mind envisage issues of perception, cognition and interpretation. I mean exactly a sonnet *sequence*, and as such I intend to pursue my interpretative evaluation.

The relation eye-object-desire-phantasm starts in *Sonnet 2*:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
 And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
 Thy youth's proud livery *so gazed on* now
 Will be a tottered weed of small worth held:
 Then being asked, where all thy beauty lies,
 Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
 To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes
 Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise. (ll. 1-8, my emphasis)¹²

The longest foresight of the future consists in beauty's destruction, a motive introduced by images of war ("besiege", "trenches", "battle-field"), admitting that such things as beauty itself, lusty days and material treasures only exist as long as youthful eyes can visualise them; a theme most cherished by Erasmus, also responsible for the war imagery. See *Enchiridion*:

The life of mortal men is nothing but a certain perpetual exercise of war [...]. The most part of men be overmuch deceived, whose minds this world as a juggler holdeth occupied with delicious and flattering pleasures, which [...] make holidays out of season [...]. It is a marvellous thing to behold how without care and circumspection we

Pye, *The Vanishing: Shakespeare, the Subject, and Early Modern Culture*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2000; Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2002; Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1996, p. 33. All quotations of the *Sonnets* are from this edition, and lines numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

live, how idly we sleep [...] when without ceasing we are besieged with so great a number of armed vices.¹³

It is worth noting that Erasmus' presence also reverberates in the phrase "thrifless *praise*" (my emphasis): everyone loses his/her beauty, and, for the youthful, to trust that there will still be some shine in his/her eyes is of no value, being as unreliable as a shameful lie.

Among the *vanitas* paintings of the Renaissance, one is particularly suggestive and pertinent here. The subject is the notorious Death and the Maiden theme (Fig. 1, Fig. 2), which sums up the emblems mostly derived from Erasmus and both his continental and British counterparts, starting with his best friend Thomas More¹⁴. In the first illustration, a young lady dressed in a very elegant costume, plays a lute, a common epochal symbol of harmony, learning and pleasure. Next to her, an elderly man (a usual representation of Time) holds up two ominous objects: a skull and a convex mirror; as he keeps the mirror elevated for the young lady to gaze into (the first line of *Sonnet 3* is "Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest"), we perceive that her own reflection is in turn a reflected image of death, which comes to the fore in the second Maid and Death illustration here, where the maiden, who admires her own face's reflection in a convex decorative mirror, looks unaware of the passage of time, as engraved in the blurred surface of her former beauty.

Sonnet 24 directly confronts the problem of the clash between the object and the subject of physical sight (as well as of exterior and inner vision) that informs the Silenos argument in the *Praise of Folly*. The dissonance between what appears and what it is, the chasm between phantasm and reality, is abundantly exploited by

¹³ Desiderius Erasmus, *A Book Called in Latin Enchiridion Militis Christiani, and in English The Manual of the Christian Knight*, London, Methuen, 1905, p. 42.

¹⁴ Criticism on this subject is limitless. I personally shall limit myself to what I have found both profitable and up-to-date with regard to my argument here: Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; Marion A. Wells, *The Secret Wound: Love-Melancholy and Early Modern Romance*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007; Peter Sherlock, *Monuments and Memory in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford-London, Ashgate, 2008.

Erasmus, both in the *Encomium* and the *Adagia*¹⁵. The typical Erasmian image for the distortions of representation is precisely the figure of the Silenos (Fig. 3), the double-faced optical illusion, the fake outward show of what is not real, which is everywhere central to Erasmus' polemics. Let us consider Moria's dispute here:

All humaine thynges like the *Silenes or double images of Alcibiades*, haue two faces muche unlyke and dissemblable, that what outwardly seemed death, yet lokyng within ye shulde fynde it lyfe: and on the other side what seemed life, to be death: what fayre, to be foule: what riche, beggerly: what cunnyng, rude: what stronge, feable: what noble, vile: what gladsome, sadde: what happie, unlucky: what friendly, unfriendly: what healthsome, noysome. Briefly the Silene ones beyng undone and disclosed, ye shall fynde all thynges tourned into new semblance. (p. 37)

Shakespeare's personal adaptation of this famous humanist *locus* is the connection he establishes between poetry and painting, in dealing with the object of (his) love, having himself become the artist set in front of his easel: "Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled / Thy beauty's form in table of my heart" (ll. 1-2). Then he invites the beloved to look inside him, to put himself to the test of verity: "Through the painter must you see his skill / To find where your true image lies" (ll. 5-6). The view is blurred or distorted, though, due to the false perspective of having been encapsulated within the poet/artist's "bosom" (l. 7), which alters the eye's discrimination and falsifies the mind's knowledge: "Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done" (l. 9); "They draw but what they see, know not the heart" (l. 14).

In *Sonnet 27* (no doubt one of the most connotatively 'Erasmian' ones), images come to the fore of consciousness in the sensory void of silence and darkness, during the night where a mental as well as heartfelt journey begins "to work my mind, when body's work's expired" (ll. 1-4). Mythical implications (Love's/Cupid's blindness) and metaphysical paradoxes, reminiscent of Moria's speculative

¹⁵ Margaret Mann Phillips is still the major authority on Erasmus' *Adagia*. See her indispensable book *The 'Adages' of Erasmus: A Study with Translations*, London-New York-Ibadan, Cambridge University Press, 1964. See also Thomas Dorey, ed., *Erasmus*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

insinuating methodology, suggest the idea that, only in the deepest interiority of the mind, *sight* can finally become *vision*. Indeed:

[T]hen my thoughts [...]
 keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
 Looking on darkness which the blind do see:
 Save that my soul's imaginary sight
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view. (ll. 5, 7-10)

Sonnet 46 again modulates the eye/heart opposition by taking over the military, belligerent and legalistic metaphorical language which is so characteristic of both the *Enchiridion* and the *Praise*:

Mine eye and heart are at a *mortal war*,
 How to *divide the conquest* of thy sight:
 Mine eye my heart thy picture's sight *would bar*,
 My heart mine eye the freedom of *that right*.
 My heart *doth plead* that thou in him dost lie
 (*A closet never pierced* with crystal eyes),
 But the *defendant doth that plea deny*,
 And says in him thy fair appearance lies.
 To 'cide this *title is impanellèd*
 A *quest* of thoughts, all *tenants* to the heart,
 And by their *verdict is determinèd*
 The clear eye's *moiety* and the dear heart's *part*,
 As thus: mine eye's *due* is thy outward *part*,
 And my heart's *right* thy inward love of heart. (ll. 1-14, my emphasis)

Going back to the Death and the Maiden painting (Fig. 1). Many commentators have seen in the face of the elderly gentleman a portrait of Shakespeare, as he depicts himself in the very sad *Sonnet 62*: "beated and chopped with tanned antiquity" (l. 9)¹⁶. It is precisely with a commentary on this sonnet that I intend to conclude this section of my essay. The lyric is centred on the sin of arrogant self-love, self-adulation, self-satisfaction, when one believes he is everywhere extremely superior, either physically, spiritually or intellectually... Yes, until a mirror reveals to him his true inner self:

¹⁶ See Janet Birkett, ed., "Shakespeare in 100 Objects. Vanitas", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 67:1 (Spring 2016), pp. 159-162.

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,
 And all my soul, and all my every part;
 And for this sin there is no remedy,
 it is so grounded inward in my heart.
 Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,
 No shape so true, no truth of such account,
 And for myself mine own worth do define,
 As I all other in all worths surmount.
 But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
 Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,
 Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;
 Self so self-loving were iniquity. (ll. 1-12)

Much lighter and more cheerful appears to me Erasmus' indictment of precisely the same "sin", although no less severe than Shakespeare's:

I can not passe ouer in silence those peccokes, which [...] vnder a vaine title of nobilitie doe wondersly stand in theyr owne conceites. [...] through this sweete perswasion of *Selflykyng*, they leade a golden life: [...] as though this *Selflykyng* made not most men, manifoldly, by wonderous meanes, most happie in theyr owne opinion [...] *Selfloue* is altogethers so muche theyr alie: *Syngyng men, Sophisters, Rhetoriciens, and Poets* doo excell therein: amonges whom, the uncunnynger, the more lyketh hym selfe, and the franklier bosteth what he can dooe. (pp. 59-61)

Vanitas as royalty

The above quotation about self-love and self-liking is the most perfect introduction to my final discussion of vanity, now in relation to kingship and earthly power, which is Shakespeare's most 'Erasmian' topic. I shall be focussing on *Richard II*, where two typical Renaissance philosophical-political themes intertwine: that of *vanitas* and that of *rule and government*¹⁷. In my opinion, the

¹⁷ I have recently contributed to a new Italian edition and translation of all Shakespearean works in four volumes, supervised by Franco Marengo. My personal task has been *Richard II*, where my reader could find lots of more specific information both in the introduction and the notes. See William Shakespeare, *Riccardo II*, ed. Claudia Corti, in *Tutte le opere*, gen. ed. Franco Marengo, Milano,

“lamentable” story of Richard represents the failure of earthly power at its aesthetically best, or ethically worst, point of self-realisation. The protagonist is enslaved within the fatal destiny of the ‘death of kings’ theme, as it was culturally envisaged in the monarch’s institutional position. In this position, interrogations about the sovereign’s status coincide with the overall humanist *quaestiones* of self-knowledge and search for identity: both the classic ‘know thyself’ and ‘who am I’.

However, before plunging into the lamentable, tragic recesses of one of the most disquieting Shakespearean kings, let us enjoy aesthetically (as well as intellectually ponder) Moria’s apparently joyful, ironic, histrionic meditation about the superficially happy – in fact, inwardly deprecable – royal status. Like the Silenos, kings have a double, contrasting appearance. On the one hand, a king postulates to be cheerfully rightful, honest, loyal and mindful of his own people; on the other, the same king is due to be disclosed as subject to sombre treason, gloomy hypocrisy, perfidious lust, pernicious greed and ominous flattery:

I longe sore a little now to trete of kynges and princes. [...] If they considered well what belongeth to theyr estates, now I see not what life might be more carefull than theyrs, nor less to be desyred. For suche shall neuer thinke that a kyngdome shoulde either by usurpacion, or any other wronfull title be sought for, as dooe waine with them selues, what a charge he sustaineth on his shoulders. [...] A prince is set in that place, where as if he wrie him selfe neuer so little that becometh hym, straigh waies the infection of the example crepeth contagiously to many men. How muche more the height of a princes fortune maie be a meanes to peruert hym from the right trade, either through pleasure, libertee, adulation, or delicatenesse, so muche the warelier shoulde he resist them. (pp. 92-93)

Moria’s sarcastic conclusion is: “If a prince do perpende wel, I beleue surely he shoulde take his slepe and fode with lesse gladnesse, than a farre meaner person dooeth!” (p. 93). The

Bompiani-Giunti, 2017, 4 vols, vol. III. I also treated this topic in “Scene, racconti, fantasie, fantasmii... Le immagini anomale di *Richard II*”, in *Richard II dal testo alla scena*, ed. Mariangela Tempera, Bologna, EMIL, 2015.

corollary target of Moria's attack against royalty concerns the abominable courtiers, particularly pertinent in regard to *Richard II*:

What saie you to *Courtiers*? these minion gaibeseen gentlemen beyng, who beyng for the most part as fawnyng, as seruile, as witlesse, and as abiect as can be deuised, [...] beyng contented to haue their bodies outwardly garnished with golde, with gemmes, with silkes, and with other representacions of vertue and wysedom, [...] theyr faces like visers will blusshe at nothing: [...] that in bourdyng, and in flyryng, thei can flatter pleasauntly. For these be the qualitees they holde most mete for a kynde gentliman, and rufler of the courte. (p. 94)

A Shakespearean king who, after much debauchery inoculated in him by his courtiers, surely does not eat and sleep in pleasantness is Richard II, both the deposed king and final martyr of his existential tragedy.

The renowned critic Ernst Kantorowicz was the first (giving the lead to so many followers) to note that the looking glass in the deposition scene (*Richard II*, IV.i) "has the effect of a magic mirror", thus emphasising the Erasmian, neo-Platonic disjunction between outer appearance and inner self¹⁸. As previously observed here, the magic or convex mirror is one of the central symbols of the Renaissance *vanitas* motive, and it is not by chance that Shakespeare so intensely deploys it in a tragedy centred on the theme of the death of kings. The mirror episode is in fact the culmination of a sequence of ritualistic spectacles which constitute an embedding – similar to a Silenos' construction – of apparently distinct facts: primarily the crown-holding tableau between Richard and Bolingbroke, the removal of both the crown and its related royal paraphernalia enacted by Richard himself, and the actual shattering of the mirror by Richard's hand. Although the usurper, Bolingbroke, sets up a judicial frame to convict the legitimate king of inadequacy to rule, the very setting, however 'stately', is just a parody of 'state' (one should not forget at this point Moria's bitter irony about the functioning of the judicial system, as well as her outright attacks on judges). The abyss between true and pretended authority could not be more manifest. In the ceremonial pageant of

¹⁸ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 39-40.

the handing over of the crown as a public gesture of submission and resignation, Shakespeare forces our attention on a stage property which is not only an obvious symbol of power but, in being held thus between the two competitors, is a token of possession to be seized and possibly stolen. Another sign of impermanence and fickleness, as it was anthropologically connoted in the *vanitas* portraiture (Fig. 4).

The reverse ceremony of Richard's 'undoing' – his physical, psychological, mental spoliation – functions like the convex mirror of a macabre ritual of self-effacement, where the *Danse macabre* is one of the traditional eschatological representations of Death being placed in earthly surroundings (Fig. 5). Death is – humanists say – continually thrust against Life. That is why the connivance of Fool and King (which Richard is forcefully brought to recognise in his own *persona*), tells the same humanist, Erasmian truth:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground,
And tell sad stories of the death of kings –
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,
All murdered. For within the *hollow crown*
That rounds the *mortal temples of a king*
Keeps *Death his court*; and there *the antic sits*,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene. (III.ii.151-60, my italics to
emphasise the typical Erasmian language)

Having once given away both crown and sceptre, similar symbolic gestures of renunciation accompany the king's other divestments: of "kingly sway", "balm", "sacred state" (IV.i), but also cancellations of oaths and duties. The sequence of disruptive actions culminates in the smashing of the mirror, with Richard's understanding of 'the brittleness of the glass' as supreme symbol of the fragility and vanity of life itself. In this sense, Richard's yearning for the Erasmian (and Pauline as well) "new world's crown" expressed in the prison soliloquy (V.i) gives us the complete measure of his voluntary destruction of any earthly regalia. The prison where he lives is the circumscribed content of his mind and soul, where he has desperately tried to "hammer out"

a significance for his own life (V.v). Only to discover that none can be “contented”. Heidegger said that death is not something that can be imagined once and for all but an idea that has to be constantly re-imagined¹⁹. Deleuze and Guattari argued as well (although not from an existential but a psychological viewpoint) that, in modernity, the antithesis to death is only a vacuous, vanity boasting, instance of possession²⁰. Thus, if everything in life is so fragile and brittle as the mirror that Richard has previously broken, there is no use in searching for knowledge and self-knowledge *in this world*. Like a true fool, Richard interrupts his futile questioning and encourages his own death, blandly contrasting his murderers. By way of paradox (to be sure one of Moria’s methodologies), one can say that king Richard II – narcissist, self-deceiver and destroyer of his own identity as he has proved to be – has finally understood Erasmus’ optimistic lesson about being a genuine “fool”. Not so much ‘know then yourself’, as possibly ‘let yourself go free’, even to the point of death:

How so euer suche foolisshē prānckes are thought to brede an euill name, I praie you, what mattier is that to my fooles, who eyther feele not what the inconuenience of an ill report meaneth, or if thei fele it, can so little set by it, and easely passe it ouer? If a Mylstone fall vpon thy head, that is an euill in deede: but as for shame, reproche, losse of reputacion, or euill speche, these maie do the as muche hurt as thou felist them: that and if thou felist them not, than are they no euils at all. (p. 43)

¹⁹ At least in both *Sein und Zeit* and *Holzwege*. See: William Large, *Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 125, 148, 297-300; Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, eds Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, *passim*.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, New York, Viking Press, 1977.



Fig. 1: Anon., *Death and the Maiden*, about 1570, Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.



Fig 2: Hans Baldung Grien, *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, 1511, Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.



Fig. 3: *Silenos*, terracotta, fourth century BC, The Paul Getty Trust.



Fig. 4: Anon., *Vanitas Still-Life*, 1570-75, Holyoke College Art Museum (Massachusetts).



Fig. 5: Bernt Notke, *Danse Macabre*, about 1490-95, London, The Trustees of the British Museum.