

Memoria di Shakespeare

A Journal of Shakespearean Studies

12/2025

General Editor

Rosy Colombo (Sapienza Università di Roma)

Direttore Responsabile

Donatella Montini (Sapienza Università di Roma)

Editors

Nadia Fusini (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa), Iolanda Plescia (Sapienza Università di Roma),

Maria Valentini (Università di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale)

Editorial Staff

Tommaso Continisio, *Editorial Staff Coordinator*

Claudia Damiani, *Production Editor, Cover Design*

Giulia Drago, Valerio Monticelli, Francesca Paola Natale, *Copy Editors*

Advisory Board

Silvia Bigliazzi (Università di Verona), Piero Boitani (Sapienza Università di Roma), Stefano Bronzini (Università di Bari), Maurizio Calbi (Università di Salerno), Jonathan Culpeper (University of Lancaster), Maria Del Sapio Garbero (Università di Roma Tre), Michael Dobson (Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham), Lynn Enterline (Vanderbilt University, Nashville), David Hillman (University of Cambridge), Jonathan Hope (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow), Giovanni Iamartino (Università di Milano), Alessandra Marzola (Università di Bergamo), Gordon McMullan (King's College, London), Alessandra Petrina (Università di Padova), Gary Taylor (Florida State University).

Issues of Evil

edited by
Alessandra Marzola



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

2025

Copyright © 2025

Sapienza Università Editrice

Piazzale Aldo Moro 5 – 00185 Roma

www.editricesapienza.it

edizioni.sapienza@uniroma1.it

ISSN 2283-8759

Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies

https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/memoria_di_shakespeare

memoriadishakespeare@uniroma1.it

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons on
Commercial – No Derivs 4.0 International license.

La presente opera è rilasciata nei termini della licenza Creative Commons
on Commerciale – Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale.

Table of contents

Introduction <i>Alessandra Marzola</i>	VII
Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings <i>Claire McEachern</i>	1
Shakespeare and the Conscience of Aaron <i>Maria Del Sapio Garbero</i>	23
Shakespeare and the Boundaries of Human Kindness <i>Silvia Bigliazzi</i>	55
"Nothing is but what is not": the Creative Evil of <i>Macbeth</i> <i>Nicholas Luke</i>	85
Negative Empathy in Shakespeare's and Verdi's <i>Macbeth</i> <i>Stefano Ercolino, Massimo Fusillo</i>	115
The Mind's Eye. Seeing Things in Shakespeare <i>Roger Holdsworth</i>	135
Touched by Evil: Performing Theodicy in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Adaptations <i>Anthony Guneratne</i>	163
"Some women are odd feeders": Male Fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th-Century English Tragedy <i>Joel Elliot Slotkin</i>	201

“This it is when men are ruled by women”: the Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare <i>Elisabeth Bronfen</i>	231
Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare’s Last Plays <i>Davide Del Bello</i>	253
Melville’s Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: <i>The Confidence-Man</i> <i>Paolo Simonetti</i>	289
Metamorphoses of Evil in Contemporary Adaptations of <i>The Tempest</i> <i>Michela Compagnoni</i>	319
“Hell’s black intelligencer”: Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz and Richard Gloucester <i>Carlo Pagetti</i>	345
Miscellany	
Shakespeare and Social Crime: Legality and the People’s Justice <i>Paola Pugliatti</i>	373
On the Rigorous Writing of Evil in Beckett and Sade <i>Davide Crosara</i>	403
Reviews	
Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies	423
Abstracts	453
Contributors	463

Introduction

Alessandra Marzola

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.
(William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.iii.70-71)

We have a sense of evil, but no longer the religious
or philosophical language to talk intelligibly about evil.
(Sontag 1978, 82)

The pervasiveness of evil today is matched by the evanescence of the very word that names it in common usage. Over the past four centuries the formidable enigma of ontological evil has been seldom confronted – let alone explored – outside the precincts of theology and moral philosophy. Its metaphysical reach has been eclipsed both by catalogues of its natural or human manifestations and by the bewildering range of its disparate agencies, whether embodied in individual perpetrators, collective mobs, or the impersonal machinery of bureaucracy. In Susan Sontag's words "we have a sense of evil, but no longer the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligibly about evil." (1978, 82). What seems to matter is circumstantial evidence: how, where, on whom evil works, who does it, on what grounds, to what effects. In other words, evil has been parcelled out and dispersed, taken over by the social sciences – from psychology to criminology – so much so that the concept of Evil is almost unrecognizable. In Romance languages the word "male" or "mal" and its cognate terms apply indifferently to body and soul (Montale's poetic "male di vivere" sounds the same as a prosaic "mal di denti" – "toothache"). Not so in the case of the English language. English has preserved the unique semantic range of the noun "Evil" as "anything that causes harm or mischief, physical or moral" (*OED*, sense II.4). Evil looms large as a sovereign agent of ruin, semantically overriding

a vast array of more common labels that serve to cover multiple manifestations of evil either inflicted or suffered (calamity, catastrophe, corruption, crime, harm, hatred, ill, wrong) or nuances of physical, moral or mental suffering inflicted or suffered (ache, pain, anguish, grief, sorrow, and so forth).

Evil's lingering presence, rooted deeply in the history of Anglophone countries, imparts an emphasis on 'what is unaccountable' that has never gone unrepressed and has known a momentous revival in the 20th Century in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In Hannah Arendt's celebrated *Eichmann in Jerusalem. The Banality of Evil* (1963), the concept of evil – used as a broad and self-evident term – qualifies the uniqueness of crimes against humanity for which any more specific synonym would be inadequate (Chignell 2019). And yet, Arendt's daily scrutiny of Alfred Eichmann's behaviour during the Jerusalem Trial led her famously to observe that the exceptionality of the crimes imputed to one of those chiefly responsible for the Auschwitz mass exterminations clashed with the anonymously dull and bureaucratic profile of the defendant, an Everyman, whose zealous meanness appeared disquietingly common. Anything but Mephistophelean or even tragic, dehumanizing evil emerges as the banal substance of our own dispirited existence, the "by-product of inadequate moral, political or legal structures" (Corbett 2018, 28)¹. Despite its philosophical influence Arendt's provocative focus on the coexistence of banality and exceptionality, as well as on collective responsibilities, has been ignored in practice. Quite to the contrary, the word "evil" devoid of its meanings, instrumentally politicized and wielded as a verbal weapon to target the enemy, has morphed into an umbrella term charged with the clichéd violence of self-righteousness: in his 1983 speech to the American people, and in the aftermath of the Cold War, then-president Ronald Reagan inaugurated the formula "The Evil Empire" to describe Soviet Communism. Later rephrased as "the axis of Evil" by President Bush after the events of September 11, 2001,

1 Subsequently, in *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978) Arendt qualified her notion of banality as thoughtlessness, that is, the failure to conduct an inner dialogue with one's conscience. The incipit of a renowned wartime essay by George Orwell with its flashing picture of 'thoughtless' German airmen, offers a pointed example: "As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me." (Orwell [1940] 1957, 63)

the label was applied to Iraq, Iran and North Korea as allegedly involved in international terrorism and engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction (see Bernstein 2013). As I write, two years after Hamas's brutal attack on Israel's helpless civilians, and amidst a retaliatory war whose relentless escalation has only now paused in a fragile ceasefire, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has revived the Evil Empire rhetoric to denounce Iran's alliance with Hamas and the Hezbollahs and to justify the continuation of military operations. Iran's reciprocal label of "the Zionist entity" as Satan's Empire further entrenches a war of anathemas whose fixation on generic Evil dramatically signals a blind and destructive course for politics. Unlike the Evil keenly problematized by Hannah Arendt, the Evil vociferously amplified in this wartime rhetoric serves as a blunt instrument to categorically demonize the enemy, under a Manichean culture rooted in American Evangelical Christianity, the radical Calvinist Protestantism of the Pilgrim Fathers, or Jewish biblical and Muslim fanatical Qur'anic appropriations. Holy Texts are invoked openly or by covert implication to legitimate the salvation of allegedly elect or chosen peoples, a divine warrant that empowers national identities and sanctifies supremacist claims. Holy and 'just' wars are being waged on all sides in the name of God, Allah or Yahweh, while blood is once again shed against an externalized Evil.

Everywhere such blind belligerence resonates with the vengeful edge of the closing line of Shylock's most celebrated monologue in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instructions" (III.i.59-60)².

Religio Laici

No matter how weaponised, the term evil, once it resurfaces from linguistic latency in Anglophone countries, betrays the deep and lasting imprint left on English culture by the momentous epistemic and religious shift that followed the Reformation. It could be argued – in fact – that its persistence bears witness to the exceptional rootedness

2 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Shakespeare are taken from Shakespeare 2016 and are cited parenthetically in the text.

of the radical cultural revision associated with the onset of modernity, the formation of national identity and the genesis of imperialism. This is not the place to retrace the complex entanglement of religious and political questions in and around Shakespeare's time. It is worth recalling, however, the unprecedented amalgam of religion and politics in the theology of both Luther and Calvin, the most influential architects of the new Protestant Christianity, whose premises rested firmly on a scathing critique of what they denounced as the blasphemous greed of Popish Catholicism. The matrix of what would become the new "religio laici" of early capitalists (see Weber [1904] 2005), as well as the professed faith of reformed protestants, is to be found in the well-known paradox of predestination and free will. While, in theory, it binds humankind to an unknowable fate – whether election or reprobation – in practice and over the long-term belief in predestination did not prevent the empowerment of free will (Hill 1974; Streete 2009). Epistemic convulsions – scientific, medical and religious – actually lay the ground for a repositioning of subjects in light of the dreadful yet exhilarating prospect of expanded freedom: without ecclesiastic mediation, the individual stands alone with a newly awakened conscience, wrestling with guilt, understood as internalized sin, before a God revealed solely by Scriptures. And with the semiotic apparatus of the Catholic Church removed – sacraments, saints, altars, stigmata, icons etc. – the stark mystery of the word of God, vividly rearticulated by Luther in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1545) where he portrays the postlapsarian world as a cesspool, lies open to the fervent scrutiny of Protestant preachers. More specifically, exegesis centres on the Adamic myth of original Sin and the Fall as narrated in the first three books of Genesis. The story of Adam's and Eve's transgression, expulsion and reprobation becomes the most popular subject of visual, theatrical and cultural representations (Belsey 1999), an archetypal narrative that lays bare the reach of Evil and of its effects on mankind. It is a frightening tale hardly softened by the redemptive mediation of Jesus Christ and by God's inscrutable grace granting salvation to the elect. The prevailing frame is that of the Old Testament, where the serpent incarnating evil beguiles Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, triggering increasing fatal sins in an endless chain. As Luther observes, "Since Adam all things degenerated by degree; self-justification and excuses took the place

of contrition, renewing the very essence of original sin which lies in unbelief" (Luther 1554, n.p). That the object of temptation should be the tree of knowledge, eating whereof, as the serpent promises, human "eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3)³, strikes a sensitive chord in the century of the new sciences. Our progenitors' fatal disobedience is impelled by a desire for knowledge which, in departing from God, poses a challenge to the great Artificer. Such defiance, the core of a long-standing cultural pattern – from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the Faustian figures of Marlowe and Goethe – overlaps free will with the inauguration of sin: as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, man knows Evil only as that which he inaugurates (Ricoeur 1967)⁴.

Luther's re-reading of Genesis dramatizes the theological question of the nature of evil (*quid est malum?*) and the reasons for doing evil (*unde malum faciamus?*) in ways which revive and complicate the scholastic view that evil is privation, or the opposite of good, perpetrated whenever there occurs a "perversion of will which turns to lowest matters and, capsizing inside, swells outside" (Augustine of Hippo [410 CE] 1912, 7:16). It is no accident that Augustine's tormented inquiry into his own sins should enjoy renewed popularity in Shakespeare's time, given its relentless search for the nature and origin of evil⁵. Luther, himself an Augustinian monk, mesmerizingly dwells on repeated breaches of the covenant and on its catastrophic consequences – death, shame, toil in tilling the earth and in childbirth, murder, deluge and disease. He depicts a morbidly infected cosmos which only God's inscrutable grace can redeem through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the great mediator. Nonetheless, the horizons of the new Lutheran Protestants remain gloomy. As Luther warns, free will, forever tainted by the fall, will never counter reprobation: the choice has already been made for good, and the event of the Fall becomes the enduring condition of the Fallen. Nor does the premise that rests

3 Quotations from the Bible are taken from Norton 2006.

4 For the relevance of Ricoeur's philosophy to debates around Evil in Early Modern England see Bigliuzzi 2017.

5 The relevance of Augustine's thought is amply discussed in Maria Del Sapio Garbero's contribution in this issue. For insightful remarks on the religious and social debates on conscience and free will that aptly complement this introduction, see also Silvia Bigliuzzi's essay in this volume.

on salvation through faith in Jesus Christ entail that those who have faith will be saved. Still less that salvation will come as a reward for good works. The inscrutability of grace within an existence marred by sin discloses the “disconcerting prospect posed by predestination, namely, that God knows something about us that we may hope to discover”. The pursuit of signs of grace is both the condition for finding them, and already a sign of grace itself (McEachern 2018, 96). The harshness of Luther’s view, which Calvin’s meditations did not soften, was by necessity mitigated by most preachers in their sermons, encouraged by Elizabethan or Jacobean policy which aimed to repress or restrain clerical debates about predestination for fear too much emphasis on this subject “could lead vulnerable souls to despair of their salvation” (Streete 2019, 125). In popular, softer versions of Lutheran teaching the postlapsarian subject, whom the Book of Common Prayer bluntly states to be “conceived and born in sin” (Cummings ed. 2013, 141) merely suffers from inclinations, proneness or disposition to evil, while resistance remains possible (Landis 2018). Influential though they were, neither Luther’s nor Calvin’s uncompromising theologies halted to the entrepreneurial drive of the new Protestants: over time the core paradox of their faith intensified it. As Christopher Hill notes:

The sense of sin was also now a sense of potential freedom. No magician, or priest, or saint could help, but God could. His promises were free and sure. The Puritan remained terribly conscious of his own sinful nature even whilst he tried, by careful scrutiny of motive, to identify his will and the will of God. (Hill 1974, 102)

Inspired and justified by theology, the search for signs of grace gradually led the middle-class members of a new mercantile culture to live in hope of salvation and to conduct themselves as if elected, relegating evil and sin into the background through repression, while guilt acted as the driving force of daily labour directed toward profit. Good works turned into potential signs – albeit not instruments – of election, and money-making came to appear as a God-blessed vocation with Matthew’s parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) serving as divine warrant. The classic theses of R. H. Tawney and Christopher Hill which trace the role of Protestantism in the rise of capitalist entrepreneurship and later imperial formations account for this unprecedented conver-

gence of religious, economic and political motives, and remain influential (Tawney 1926; Hill [1964] 1995; 1974)⁶.

Steeped in a contentious religious milieu, bustling with scientific ferments, mundane experience, mercantile endeavours and political turmoil, verging on the future while clinging on to the past, the early modern world was made for the stage, and for the worldly William Shakespeare. The trauma of the Fall, the threat of evil, the trials of conscience under a new sense of possible freedom, the corruptions of guilt, became both the stuff of drama and the business of everyday existence. To Elizabethan audiences Shakespeare's theatre served as a site of political and religious self-recognition, an occasion to witness the characters' public exposures of many forms of evil in denouements that promised cathartic relief. As Claire McEachern remarks in her essay in this issue – "Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings" – in an age when anguished self-examination sought signs of election or reprobation Shakespeare's "crystalline moments [...] designed to arrest and illuminate moral calibre" offered a familiar solace. Seen against early modern debates on salvation, McEachern's Shakespearian examples – from *Titus Andronicus*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear* – ultimately shed light both on the dramatic force of the suspense which precedes disclosures and on the ambiguous status of the evil disclosed in relation to reprobation or salvation. Revelation, however cathartic, is not decisive: it restarts the search, all the more so among spectators who know that even such arch villains as Iago or Edmund might, in theory at least, belong to the elect in God's inscrutable will.

6 Cautionary warnings against identifying Early Modern English culture too readily with the rise of capitalism are frequent in recent scholarship. See for example Scott (2020). The scattered examples of proto-capitalist entrepreneurship within a largely agrarian economy, of course, do not warrant a simple equivalence. Yet, both Tawney and Hill, I would argue, were pointing to the emergence of a *capitalist ethos* – what I would call a capitalist imaginary – arising from the religious and political implications of the Reformation. For this Shakespeare's theatre offers evidence more compelling than any strictly economic inquiry. In the same vein, we owe to the post-Freudian American psychoanalyst Norman O. Brown a still partly convincing exploration of the historical unconscious of Protestant culture, and of capitalism (see in particular Christopher Lasch's *Introduction* to Brown [2010]).

McEachern's essay shows the extent to which theological debates saturated theatre and shaped dramatic forms: playwrights dramatized what the clergy preached staging the many and often contradictory effects of Reformed Religion on human life. The refashioning of beliefs, emotions, passions and perceptions across domestic, public, economic and political spheres cast a striking new light onto the vertigo of modernity. In his grasp of the age Shakespeare saw beyond his moment how questions of evil interlock across history: past and future seem to coalesce as if ignited by the disruptive crisis of the present in a vision that recalls Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin [1955] 2019, 201). The symptoms of that collision function as a standing warning to every age.

Fallenness

At the beginning was the Fall. Much of Shakespeare turns on falling: from the fall of kings, emperors and commoners to the fall of birds, stars and other celestial bodies – all adumbrate the calamitous event that punishes original transgression, stirs conscience and breeds guilt. The recurrence of the word “fall” and its cognates across the canon is so pervasive that even Open Source Shakespeare resists a neat tally. The vast semantic field of downward motion that emblemizes the expulsion from Eden seems woven into the language itself proliferating into myriads of phrasal verbs and marking physical, moral and metaphorical collapse. Yet in Shakespeare the central concern is less the event of falling than the ensuing state of fallenness: wonder, awe and despair, inquiry, recurrent lapses and desire. The narrative of the Fall, as Heather Herschfeld writes, “assumes the psychological position and function of a primal and therefore traumatic scene [...], that *predicts, indeed demands its own recurrence*” (2003, 430-31; emphasis mine). It is no accident that Herschfeld should pinpoint *Hamlet* as the play where the unhealed trauma of the fall is most acute. In Shakespeare's most Lutheran tragedy, the biblical narrative of the Fall aligns with the Ghost's traumatic account of his poisoning by Claudius in the orchard. A conflation of Adam's and Eve's trespass with Cain's fratricide, the scene of treason and murder summoned here blends all the ingredients of Luther's retroactive reading of Genesis (a garden, a poisonous serpent, the treacherous murder of a

brother) into a scene of guilt in which, having both *already* fallen, both murderer and victim stand *already* as sinners (Neill 1997; Marzola 2014). With its minute detailing of the many consequences of poisoning, the Ghost's narrative frames Claudius's crime less as a taking of life, than as a sudden disclosure of the plague-like effects of original sin on the King's body, the traumatic discovery of what fallenness looks and feels like. The sudden thickening of "thin and wholesome blood", the abrupt blockage of the body's gates and alleys, the "vile and loathsome" encrusting of the skin with an instant tetter (*Hamlet*, I.5.60-73, *passim*) conjure a vision of instantaneous solidification and enclosure as if the sin into which all humans are born had suddenly become tangible and visible on the former King's body sealing off his earlier osmosis with the outer world. "Cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sins, / unhusel'd, disappointed, unanel'd, / No reck'ning made [...]" (I.v.76-78) the Ghost demands of his son revenge from the questionable position of a father king steeped in sin, condemned to fast in a purgatorial nowhere. What is most disquieting is not only the self-contradictory plea for revenge or the dubious "shape" of the Ghost ("HAMLET: Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee [...]" I.iv.43-44), but also the magnified image of the King's guilty diseased and sequestered body, a foreshadowing of the 'corpus clausus' of the early modern man. The Ghost thus marks the troublesome onset of "an emergent psychology of somatic inwardness" (Hillman 2007, 2), dominated by the contraposition between privacy and secrecy on the one hand, and the perceived threat of outward invasion through permeability and contagion on the other. No less relevant is the resulting view of disease and death as brutal attacks on the body's defensive barriers whose care demands discipline, control and mastery. In the sobering words of Helkiah Crooke, among the best-known physicians of the time: "To death and disease we lie open on every side" (Crooke 1615, 60). In *Hamlet* as in much of Shakespeare images of foul sickness and contagious disease affecting the "sallied flesh" (I.ii.129) of the body and the "unweeded garden" (I.ii.135) of the world proliferate pointing again and again to an infection of the time – a widespread symptomatology of cankerous evil – whose most harrowing contemporary manifestation was the disfiguring plague in its recurrent waves. "The sickening smell of evil" – observes Caroline Spurgeon in her seminal study on Shakespearean

imagery – “is the natural outcome of its being thought as dirt and foul disease” (Spurgeon [1935] 2001, 171).

Sickness is poignantly announced by Francisco at the outset of the play as a pervasive condition, rooted in the heart – the seat of body and soul: “[...] ‘Tis bitter cold and I am sick at heart” (*Hamlet*, I.i.6-7). The line signals the entanglement of mental and physical malaise that infects the ‘rotten’ state of Denmark. This interweaving runs through Shakespeare’s drama and poetry where the human body – the hinge between microcosm and macrocosm – appears both physically and emotionally disordered when its mediating function falters. Melancholy, the so-called ‘English disease’, that Galenic humoral theory construed as an excess of black bile to be purged, becomes an elusive symptom that provokes continual attempts to probe its substance, generates innumerable interpretations⁷ and is deemed to underlie a number of moral and physical defects including impairments of the eye (see Holdsworth in this volume). The rage of melancholic Hamlet at Gertrude’s faulty sight – and senses – as the cause of her “fall” from the “fair mountain” of King Hamlet to the “moor” of his brother (III.iv.62-76) is the pointed indicator of a sensory “apoplexy” (73), which is the bodily signature of guilt. Beyond *Hamlet*, visual derangements – from minor defects to literal and metaphoric blindness – are strategically dramatized in Shakespeare and elsewhere where they figure as affections deeply unsettling at a time of competing visual regimes (Clark 2007). More in general, Shakespeare abounds in examples where pathological symptoms are taken as countersigns of alleged guilts: Julius Caesar’s “falling sickness” (I.ii.251); Othello’s

7 A telling instance of this interpretive frenzy appears in the tentative diagnoses proposed for the mysterious sadness that Antonio confesses at the opening of *The Merchant of Venice* – a melancholy whose phrasing unmistakably echoes contemporary symptom lists:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you,
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff ‘tis made of, whereof ‘tis born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.
(*The Merchant of Venice*: I.i.1-7)

convulsive fit of epilepsy; Richard III's disfiguring monstrosity – the climactic emblem of depravity in the *Henriads* crowded with images of sick kings and diseased armies; Leontes's infected affection in *The Winter's Tale* and Lady Macbeth's fatal illness. No less telling is Shylock's clipped exit in *The Merchant of Venice* ("I pray you, give me leave to go from hence; / I am not well..." (IV.i.407-08). Shylock's understated withdrawal from Venice's final scene of scapegoating stands out in its stark humanity – an enduring bodily token of the mercantile guilt imposed on him⁸.

Shakespeare's densely material language exposes all the parts of the body as speaking sites of passions and emotions (see Paster 2004), as well as symptomatic loci of the unnatural disease of evil and sin. Illness is therefore charged with guilt and becomes culturally overdetermined, a burden which persists in the present. From antiquity onward, the habit of treating sickness as the badge of predestined evil co-existed with the belief that bodily failure was the consequence of freely chosen wrongdoing (Vaught 2010, 5). Hence scientific enquiry into the origin and nature of the disease – through attention to body, mind and conscience – eventually coincided with an often frustrated search for the evidence of sin, for signs of reprobation or salvation. What lies within becomes the object of inquiry, piercing, and penetration, emblemized by the flourishing science of anatomy, whose cultural ramifications extend well beyond medicine to shape an entire episteme (see Sadway 1995; Del Sapio Garbero 2022).

Penetrability becomes the very condition for accessing what lies beyond the body's boundary, and its many moral or physical corruptions, whether the root of illness or the mystery of good and evil lodged in conscience. "And let me wring your heart, for so I shall, / If it be made of *penetrable* stuff, / If damnèd custom have not brazed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense" (III.iv.34-38; *emphasis mine*): Hamlet's threatening address to Gertrude gives stark voice to the violent urge to pierce all defences and expose the inner mystery of her heart. Nothing, in the end, answers to such probing except the ineradicable "black and grievèd spots / as will leave [there] their tinct" (III.iv.90-1) on Gertrude's conscience. Analogous to Lady

8 On scapegoating in *The Merchant of Venice* see Girard (1991). See also Marzola (2018, 220-35).

Macbeth's permanently blood stained hands, these marks only reveal the symptoms of a deed which remains unnameable except for its desecrating effects: the blurring of modesty, the blistering of innocent love, the falsification of marriage vows, the corruption of pure love and the sickening of the earth (III.iv.40-52).

Like most Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* offers no firm metaphysics of good and evil. Its "triumphant undecidability" (Belsey 1999) and sustained entanglement with early modern English discourses of evil make it a paradigmatic case for this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare*. From the Ghost's confinement within and behind the thick crust of his body onward, the play stages a striking array of cultural symptoms linked to a newly intensified perception of Evil, symptoms that constellate the whole canon and foreshadow many of the moral and psychological syndromes of the Western world to come. Seclusion yields a revolting vision of endemic corruption ("Tis an unweeded garden / that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely. [...] I.ii.135-37); it defaces the purity of love while exposing the traffic between economic and sexual appetites, and between life and death ("Thrift, thrift, Horatio: the funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." I.ii.180-81); it nourishes secrecy and treachery, fosters defensiveness and aggressiveness; and produces a disjointed experience of time felt as either too short or too long. The play's only compensation, its limited catharsis common to Shakespeare's tragedies, lies in its language of desire. The unfulfilled desire to know what lies beyond and within, the seduction of unfathomed evil, and the irresistible allure of free agency against moral law, are among the tokens of Shakespeare's aesthetics of evil, a signature that marks much of his canon.

Conscience

Hamlet, the 'hero' of a play that is a case of conscience in itself (Belsey 2008), repeatedly and contradictorily muses upon his own conscience – treating it now as a hindrance to action – "the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (III.i.84) – now as a spur to revenge – "[...] is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?" (V.ii.67-68). The result is a convoluted, pathological self-inquiry that exposes the new unreliability of the very faculty meant to distinguish between good and evil. Here like elsewhere in Shake-

speare, conscience is “an imperfect and ongoing experience” (Stoll 2017, 22) which theatre dramatizes in real time. And, as the extensive theological literature of the period shows – William Perkins’s writings serving as a touchstone (Perkins 1606) – conscience, “the location in which takes place the Reformation ideal of private relations with the divine” (Stoll, 9), appears as a dark abyss and a ghostly presence inhabited by the lure of free will and by the horror of its consequences. The topicality of this elusive conscience in Protestant England underlies Maria Del Sapio Garbero’s essay on “The Conscience of Aaron”. Her analysis of the endgame between Aaron, the devilish Moor, and Lucius in *Titus Andronicus* (V.i *passim*) brings to light a provocative contest about evil and conscience that unsettles the very predicates of evil itself standing as a “provocation to think more, or to think differently about it” (Ricoeur 1985, quoted in Del Sapio Garbero). It is striking that in a tragedy set against the backdrop of a ruinous war and saturated with the gory violence of barbarity, the word ‘conscience’ should appear only in Aaron’s address to Lucius where he appeals to the divine faculty his enemy is presumed to possess, and which he himself ostentatiously disclaims. That Aaron should barter the life of his child for a remorseless confession of his own murderous deeds adds to the odd profanity of the plea. Can one so emphatically alien to God and virtue claim authority to summon another to the practice of conscience? And how does that plea sound when it is grounded in ransom? Pursuing these yet unformulated questions with a subtle reading of the scene Del Sapio Garbero shows how Aaron’s meta theatrical villainy, his “hyperbolic textual awareness”, his ultimate “overdoing of the Moor’s stereotype” “problematicize his own role as a villain”.

Shakespeare’s meta theatrical confrontation with the dilemmas of conscience and the enigma of evil in *Titus Andronicus*, at the outset of his theatrical career, foreshadows a sustained anatomical inquiry into the meanders of guilt and the manifold responses to its apprehension. However much it is sneered by Iago (“But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.” (I.i.64-65)) or dismissed by Richard III (“Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls; / Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe” (V.iii.311-13))⁹, conscience endures

9 Quotations from *Richard III* are from Shakespeare 2007.

as the benchmark of human choice, a standard to which only Aaron remains impervious even as he transfers the burden of its operation onto his Christian adversaries.

Nowhere more than in *Macbeth* does Shakespeare probe the implications of such concern. Nowhere does he trace with equal precision the tortuous workings of conscience through the visual detail of a slow-motion descent into hell as the dizzying fantasy of super human power gives way to the felt reality of guilt. Although traditionally labelled the tragedy of its eponymous hero, *Macbeth* is also the tragedy and fall of a couple, whose connivance – unwavering to the end – refashions the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve in strikingly modern terms (Bloom 1994; Greenblatt 2017). Just as *Hamlet* unravels the condition of being fallen, *Macbeth* dramatizes the gradations of falling, visualizing its hero's emotional responses to the inaugural and ambiguous prophecies of the Weird Sisters. Macbeth's crooked progress along the enigmatic path of evil continually tests the limits of the human, or, to borrow the title of Silvia Bigliazzi's essay "The Boundaries of Human Kindness". The experience of horror – Macbeth's petrified and powerless response to the fantastic vision of his own inhuman guilt – emerges as one of the main keys to the play's withheld catharsis and to the enduring co-existence of "fair and foul". Bigliazzi's in-depth reading of key scenes retraces the germination of violence against the Symbolic itself, showing how it is nurtured by the falling couple's confrontation over defining ethical boundaries (I.vii.30-82). The dramatic dispute addressing the play's central question – "What is it to be human?" – arrives at the threshold of a parable where the condition of being human is redefined as the paradoxical "founding of a symbolic order that excludes all others – an order rooted in himself [Macbeth], secured through absolute negation".

That the final reinstatement of "order" should set the time free in Macbeth's Scotland is, at the very least, dubious. As Nicholas Luke observes in his essay "The Creative Evil of Macbeth", the gory profiles of the good restorers of order, ready to renew the warlike cycles of ritual violence which mark the tragedy's onset, leave little room for the prospect of a regenerative freedom ostensibly secured by the play's closure. Luke's emphasis falls on the exceptional creative potential of Macbeth's fatal encounter with the Weird Sisters which quite literally brings him to theatrical life. The semiotic richness of

such irruption is highlighted through Luke's dazzling display of theological, poetic and philosophical analogues, ranging from early modern negative theology and poetry to modern and contemporary philosophy. In every instance the energizing impact of "what is not" on the creative mind points toward flashing imaginative intuitions that disclose revolutionary vistas. By shifting the discussion onto an aesthetic terrain, Luke reads Macbeth's movement into the unknown less as the wavering of a tortured conscience than as the perilous process of poetic creation: a hazardous confrontation with the negative and with the ambivalent nature of poetic imagination open both to the vortex of life and to the pitfalls of nothingness.

Luke's turn to the aesthetic and emotional lure of evil sheds light on an issue which, in his ruthless self-inspection, Augustine of Hippo had already confronted. Augustine knew to his cost that – as Milton's Satan later teaches – the harsh ways of evil can be more compelling than the smooth paths of good. Devilish heroes thus elicit the kind of negative empathy which Shakespeare so masterfully arouses in his audiences whenever his deranged or fractured villains – epitomized by Macbeth – are shown ensnared with the tangles of conscience. Verdi's musical rendering of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is not coincidentally the case study through which Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo reassess negative empathy as "an aesthetic experience characterized by cathartic emotional engagement with morally ambiguous or violent figures, performances, objects, compositions or environments" (see also Ercolino and Fusillo 2022). What stands out is *Macbeth's* capacity to inspire Verdi's revolutionary ruptures of melodramatic conventions, all designed to render the oscillations of Macbeth's conscience in tune with the Romantic aesthetic of ugliness and fascination with the negative powers of the supernatural. Contemporary melodramatic adaptations of the play – the authors stress – bear witness to the standing impact of Verdi's negative empathy while increasingly emphasizing the nihilistic implications of Shakespeare's tragedy in line with the renowned film versions of Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski and Justin Kurzel. *Macbeth's* ongoing journey across media and centuries thus amplifies the challenge originally posited by Shakespeare's play, sustaining audiences' complex engagement with "the negative" in defiance of moralizing sanitization.

Faulty visions

Like the debris of conscience, Macbeth's hallucinations – the floating image of the bloody dagger doomed to murder Duncan, or the harrowing ghost of murdered Banquo – exemplify the displacement of Macbeth's intolerable inner contents onto an external screen where images unfold like frames in a horror film: shocking, bewildering and devoid of cathartic relief. Hallucinations, symptomatically deployed here and elsewhere as projections often in ghostly apparitions, are the ultimate psychic derivatives of an impressive range of sight distortions. Their deranging effects play a crucial dramatic role in a world where ocularcentrism is challenged by the flourishing of the new sciences and baroque atmospheres seep through English culture¹⁰. Anatomy defies the belief in the omnipotence of the "sovereign sense" associated with the watchful presence of the divine just as perspectival techniques question one-dimensional visions, and anamorphic imagery, with its combination of two visual orders in one image, becomes the object of scientific curiosity (Clark 2007, 92; Del Sapio Garbero 2011). "Give me the ocular proof!" (III.iii.362)¹¹ demands Othello of Iago, craving for the optical evidence of Desdemona's betrayal. That he should trust so blindly in the power of eyesight at the very moment Iago is breeding monsters in his mind, crystallizes the dramatic ironies in a tragedy shaped by conflicting visual regimes – a tragedy of optics par excellence. Othello's fixation on the surface evidence of exteriority is overthrown by Iago's relish in visual projections through which he makes Venetians, and most fatefully Othello, see not what lies outside, but what festers within (see Marzola 2015). Iago's cinematic eagerness is uniquely parasitic: it feeds on the evil latent in the collective imagination of Venice – its misogyny, patriarchy and incipient racism – which he readily captures, magnifies and stages as the improvising director of a pliable cast¹². More than an arch-villain, elusive Iago, the man

10 Martin Jay describes such infiltrations as "the subterranean presence of what might be called the baroque ocular regime as the uncanny double of what we might call the dominant scientific or "rationalized" visual order" (Jay 1993, 158).

11 Quotations from *Othello* are from Shakespeare 2006.

12 The subtitle of Alessandro Serpieri's seminal study of *Othello* (1978): *Psicoanalisi di una proiezione distruttiva* (*Psychoanalysis of a destructive projection*) – is indicative of the major role played by projection (Serpieri 1978).

who by his own account, is not what he is (I.i.65), is the ventriloquist voice of evil and guilt, the phantasmagorical film-maker of early modern horrors. Iago's thriving on optical delusions is the fittest example of how sight can turn (or be made to turn) inwards. As Messala laments in *Julius Caesar* sight shows "the things that are not" to "the apt thoughts of men" (*Julius Caesar* V.iii.70-73). Contrary to what Brutus tends to believe, Caesar's ghost is not an apparition shaped by the weakness of his eyes (IV.ii.365-6), but, as the Ghost himself proclaims, his "evil spirit" (IV.ii.372), the haunting projection of the conspirators' guilt and the cause of their "thick" sight that will fatally misconstrue events at Philippi.

The vastness of visual issues in Shakespeare along with the intricacy of their evil implications defies compact accounts. Yet, Roger Holdsworth's essay "The Mind's Eye. Seeing Things in Shakespeare" aptly addresses the problem by charting the progression of visual distortions in light of the epoch's most popular studies in optics: from comic and conscious forgeries to "the loss of the mind's ability to distinguish what is real from what is not" in tragic unconscious projections. Here, in Shakespeare's "dramas of character" – *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* – Holdsworth retraces the ways inner torments are spectacularly dramatized in hallucinations despite the mystifying obstacles posed by the imperative of visibility on the Elizabethan stage.

Cinema, the projecting medium by definition, will get rid of such hindrance and amplify Shakespeare's visual potential in endless adaptations. Some of its most memorable framings – such as the bear cage which entraps an inscrutable Iago suspended in the sky above the funeral of Othello and Desdemona in the opening scene of Orson Welles's eponymous film – have become emblematic cultural signifiers of one of Shakespeare's most cinematic plays. Unsurprisingly, *Othello* figures as a masterful example of Welles's Shakespearean adaptations in Anthony Guneratne's multilayered, highly documented essay "'Touched by Evil': Performing Theodicy in Orson Welles's Shakespeare adaptations" on the exploration of Shakespeare performed by the most renowned twentieth-century American film-maker and actor. In Guneratne's comprehensive survey, *Othello* also stands as the telling paradigm of a peculiar theodicy and of an idiosyncratic treatment of good and evil: a fatal en-

tanglement for which the fable of the frog and the scorpion, tinged with Machiavellian hues and enriched by Jungian inflections, becomes a telling reference.

Projections

Shakespeare's theatre itself can be viewed as a site of projections, where still unspoken fantasies intercept the audiences' anxieties, and the roots of evils to come are x-rayed in the fault lines of history. The scenes we see, however, do not merely stage projected contents; they enact the actual displacing of evil onto the culturally ousted subjects – that is, onto figures through whom modernity defines itself by alienating its most threatening others. In this emphasis on the fantasies that sustain projection lies Shakespeare's enduring power to expose the germinal seeds of evils across time. Among these are the recurrent embryos of a millennial patriarchal misogyny which, in the Elizabethan period, was triggered by the contentious, iconic and unsettling presence of the Virgin Queen (see Frye 1993, Montrose 2006). Her ambiguous authority stirred male anxieties and incited new projections stemming from the need to domesticate the unruly spread of desire, ambition and power in the 'new women' of early modernity.

Albeit from different perspectives and with distinct aims, both Joel Slotkin and Elizabeth Bronfen address the persistence of male fantasies in which women – blamed, stigmatized and contained – become the repositories of the guilty prerogatives experienced by men. The lens through which Slotkin's essay, "'Some Women are odd Feeders': Male fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th Century English Tragedy", examines the misogynist roots of these projections is that of the non – normative "sinister aesthetics" (see Slotkin 2017) which thrived on the morally disturbing seductiveness of ugliness and evil against the canonical alignment of beauty and virtue. In the crucial case of female sexual desire discussed in the essay, projection emerges as the means by which male characters negotiate "the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want", on the one hand, and on the other, their own perverted impulses oscillating between incest, lasciviousness and lust: in every instance, women are made to enact the transgressing sexuality that in fact belongs to their male aggressors – and

are blamed for it. In all the tragedies discussed (Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and William Rowley's *The Changeling*) the issue is the wavering – both for the male protagonists and for the audience – between disgust and perverse pleasure – an oscillation which discloses the sinister allure of misogynistic fantasies. That fascination gestures simultaneously toward the patriarchal roots of the pornography to come and to the future appeal of Sadian aesthetics.

Elizabeth Bronfen's reading of male prejudiced projections in Shakespeare takes a different slant and a distinct focus. In "This it is when men are ruled by women': The Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare" Bronfen draws on her expertise in visual and serial studies (Bronfen 2020, 2025) to offer a dazzling palette of queens reputed to be evil on account of their "strident will to rule". Her sweeping analysis highlights the remarkable diversity of "evil" poses and gestures embodied by Shakespeare's queens – the corresponding range of threats they appear to pose to the fragile masculinity of a patriarchal culture – and the many forms of chastisement, public humiliation, haunting remorse, or demise they endure in order to domesticate their unruliness. Through Bronfen's lens, the range of pains inflicted looks impressively vast: from the constraint of married life for Hypolita's and Titania's independence to the dehumanizing sacrifice of Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*; from the vilification of Cymbeline's nameless queen to the downfall of Lear's daughters; from the inducement to self-annihilation in Lady Macbeth to the arduousness of Hermione's path towards rehabilitation in *The Winter's Tale*, and to the de-traction of Catherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII*. Bronfen's spotlight on these symptomatic female figures reveals, on the one hand, how they serve as projections of patriarchal anxieties surrounding the threat of feminine power emblemized by the Virgin Queen. On the other hand, they expose the 'counterpower' which these silhouettes of potential female rebels attempt to act out, as a critique of the very culture that condemns them.

From the false perceptions of the eye and from their malignant manipulations, to the psychic substance of hallucinations and to its strategic organization into cultural projections, early modern theatre charts the internalization of faulty sight and its transformation into views, perceptions and fantasies of the inner mind, a visual world

where evil, just like evidence, appears to reside, more than ever, “in the eye of the beholder” (Eisaman Maus 1995, 125) or in the literal and metaphorical blindness of tragic heroes¹³.

Enduring Evil

‘Enduring evil’ – a phrase drawn from the title of Davide Del Bello’s contribution on Shakespeare’s late plays (“Things of Darkness. Enduring Evil in Shakespeare’s Late Plays”) – aptly captures the condition often ascribed to Shakespeare’s so-called afterlives. One might argue that Shakespeare’s muted gaze in his romances paves the way for the gradual diminution of evil’s metaphysical grandeur and for the increasing evanescence of the word ‘evil’ itself as anticipated at the outset of this introduction. What Del Bello identifies as the hallmark of Shakespeare’s altered stance – a “stealthier, more insidious seepage of evil into human affairs” – points to a diffusion of evil nuances refracted into unacknowledged or silenced minor faults that will resurface in later adaptations “preposterously” illuminating what came before¹⁴. Nimble opportunism, detached estrangement, the dilution of consciousness into forgetful manipulation, exploitation and voracity – each of them presented here as the muted preludes to cosmic evil – reappear in Melville’s Shakespearean meditation on evil in *The Confidence-Man* (as discussed by Paolo Simonetti) and in the four contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest* examined by Michela Compagnoni. Del Bello aptly adopts Hannah Arendt’s notion of “banality of evil” (1963) as a key with which to probe the implications of Shakespeare’s “dull ethical failures as the breeding ground for evil”. Banality, embodied in the bureaucratic, almost automated mind that fails to “engage in genuine dialogue with itself” (Arendt 1978), yet also in the paradoxical “shallow depth” of radical evil, forms the thread uniting the late plays explored here (*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*). It binds together their multifarious manifestations which Del Bello traces with sophisticated close readings. As he repeatedly underscores, this systematic

13 See particularly Agostino Lombardo’s remarks on blindness as a key motif in *King Lear* (Lombardo 2010).

14 For the notion of “preposterous history”, see Bahl 1999.

debunking of evil's magniloquence never obliterates its endurance. Even in the folds of restored institutions the *mysterium iniquitatis* lingers, continuing to test the limits of human understanding. From his comprehensive perspective the author reads Shakespeare's late plays as the site of both collision and kindling – of mystification and demystification – and as a summons to a double vision: disenchanted and enchanted alike, where cultural critique joins moral imagination in perceiving, rather than explaining away, the numinous.

"There appears to be a certain – what shall I call it – hidden sun, say, about him, at once enlightening and mystifying" (Melville 171, quoted in Simonetti, this volume). This quotation – strikingly attuned with Del Bello's final remarks – comes from Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*; the "him" in question is Shakespeare himself and the speaker is the cosmopolitan protagonist engaged in one of his metafictional exchanges about Shakespeare with Charlie Noble. This passage is one of the many through which Paolo Simonetti's extensive essay ("Melville's Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: *The Confidence-Man*") weaves the threads of Melville's life-long engagement with Shakespeare's ambiguous conception of evil, eventually tying them in the knot of his last fragmented, dialogic novel. Simonetti's insights are nourished by a detailed exploration of Melville's head-to-head enthralling confrontation with the instructive figure of "the philosopher's Shakespeare" (De Battista 2021, xvii). Like Shakespeare in the romances and comedies Melville too appears to be sceptical of evil's grandeur, and more intrigued by its diminished roguish manifestations. Deflationary scepticism, understated irony and comic subversion become his demystifying weapons against such "masquerades" of evil, which rest precisely upon the paradox of evil as the absence of good theorized by theology. For nothingness, after all, can be endlessly masqueraded, as in *The Confidence-Man*, through so many affable, "truth-seeking" faces of the same elusive figure. For Melville, who ultimately embraces the ambiguous opacity of inner evil, Shakespeare remains both a revered source of inspiration and a "figure perpetually *en parole*": a roguish devil-god who challenges American bardolatry while flowing with the rough currents of American culture.

A matrix of patterns and a generator of adaptive intelligence, rather than the author of a crystallized corpus, the contemporary Shakespeare has lost the direct appeal of interlocution he once held

for Melville, and has gained instead the power of dissemination through its original malleability. Shakespeare's traces – dispersed across media and cultures – occasionally coalesce into clusters through purposeful re-creation: adaptations, rewritings or reinventions which, once cross-mapped, release the energy contained and restrained in the plays (see Bronfen 2020), and, in turn, illuminate the past that sheds light upon them. Cross-mapping and preposterous history are the lenses through which Michela Compagnoni engages with three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest* exploring how Shakespeare's enduring evil metamorphoses within the disruptive technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence and escalating economic voracity. At issue are the malign drifts of Shakespeare's Prospero whose quivering between the overpowering control of an embryonic colonial mind and the repentant abjuration of his "potent Art" collapses into the obduracy of a narcissistic egotism bent on domination and violence. Thus, the moments in Shakespeare's *Tempest* when "ingenuity warps into cunning, and the pursuit of knowledge slips towards ruthlessness" (Del Bello, this volume) appear as prescient flashes of contemporary extremities. In the three instances that Compagnoni discusses – Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed*, Nolan's and Joy's sci-fi series *Westworld* and Jeanette Winterson's short story "The Ghost in the Machine" – Prospero is recast as an overreaching god-like master whose grandiose inventiveness entails the exploitation, control and domination of unwitting test subjects desultorily confined in futuristic or virtual spaces. In each case the manipulative reach of Prospero's art, amplified by technology, threatens to trespass into systems of control which, regardless of destructive effects, gain autonomy over their creators "ruling over our very sense of reality".

Zones of Interest

In *The Zone of Interest* (2023) directed by Jonathan Glazer, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" resurfaces as a central lens. Loosely based on Martin Amis's eponymous novel (2014) and set in Auschwitz in 1943, the film depicts the peaceful bourgeois family life of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp whose elegant villa borders its walls. Impervious to the gunshots, shouts,

and billowing smoke that rise beyond their garden, the Höss family inhabits a state of oblivious sensory paralysis indifferent to the hammering sounds of the horror next door and to the provenance of gold teeth, lipsticks and jewels that now figure among their sinister belongings. Only in one of the final sequences does Rudolf Höss seem to glimpse the abyss when, descending the stairs of his new office at Oranienburg, he stares blankly into the camera and cannot suppress the urge to retch.

"How human can you make someone who is clearly inhuman?" asks a reviewer (Daniels 2023). The question recalls the dull zeal of Arendt's Eichmann whose bureaucratic rigour mirrors that of the historical Höss. Glazer's film poses questions that transcend its historical frame. It points to the many *zones of interest*¹⁵ – those borderlands where horror coexists with indifference or forgetfulness. It asks whether post-Shoah humanity can remain unaffected by the inhuman evil perpetrated in concentration camps and whether art can still lay bare, through its enduring humanness, the nightmares of the non-human that persist along the margins of history. "Can the Shakespearean invention of the human be reversed into the imagination of the non-human?" asks Carlo Pagetti in his essay "'Hell's black intelligencer': Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz and Richard Gloucester". His answer is affirmative. Reading Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester through the prism of the Shoah, Pagetti shows how the figure discloses the inhuman lurking within the human. Pagetti's post-Holocaust rereading of Richard Gloucester's story – from *1 King Henry VI* to *Richard III* – traces the disturbing resonances with the Shoah which become visible in light of our history, burdened by the albatross of unnameable atrocities. Richard's own "fascination for the excess" and for annihilation, his double standard relying on the histrionic performance of seduction, his slow evolution into the evil King of *Richard III*, and above all his conscience frozen with cynicism, all combine to form "a polymorphic villain" nurtured amidst the barbarity of civil wars. Shakespeare's Richard becomes the pliable matrix for theatrical or cinematic re-

15 The phrase "zone of interest" is the translation of the German euphemism "Interessengebiet" coined by SS bureaucrats to describe both the area of the concentration camps and the surrounding forty-square-kilometre region.

incarnations, his “grinning mask” speaking in the “hysterical and screeching voice” of Hitler (Harris 1994 quoted in Pagetti) while the chaotic Weimar years offer the temporal drop for the young Richard’s first movements in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, of course, could not possibly foresee horrors that remain unimaginable. The point is not his capacity to anticipate the future, but his gift for endowing theatre with a transformative power that allows the same stories to be re-enacted differently at each historical juncture. His metamorphic potential lies in his ability to address the “zones of interest” of both his time and the past. Much like the author of this essay, Shakespeare did not anatomize his many sources, but absorbed their gist into the texture of his days. He was not in pursuit of undiscovered truths, but sensed the moments when the violence of the past encroached upon the traumas of his time. He did what Walter Benjamin later professed a historian should do:

[he] ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like beads of a rosary. He records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. (Benjamin [1955] 2019, 209)

Whether grandiosely tragic or petty and trivial, Shakespeare’s evil blows across space and time. It rages in the whirlwinds of different histories and amidst the thousand natural shocks of many lives. It unfailingly urges us against indifference, yet never solves the riddle of its origin. It is an unhealed and ever open wound, staring into our eyes (Fusini 2010, 450).

In front of Iago’s baffling rebuttal of explanations – “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know; / From this time forth I never will speak word.” (*Othello*, V.ii.301-02) – we are left, as ever, with endless questions and renewed desire.

References

- Amis, Martin. 2014. *The Zone of Interest*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Arendt, Hannah. [1963] 1994. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin Books.
- . 1978. *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic.

- Augustine of Hippo. [410 CE] 1912. *The Confessions*. Translated by William Watts (1631). London: Heinemann.
- Bahl, Mike. 1999. *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Belsey, Catherine. 1999. *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden. The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2008. *Shakespeare in Theory and Practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. [1955] 2019. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*. Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bernstein, Richard J. 2013. *The Abuse of Evil. The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bigliuzzi, Silvia. 2017. "Coscienza e piacere del male sulla scena inglese del primo Seicento." In *Il piacere del male: le rappresentazioni letterarie di un'antinomia morale*, a cura di Paolo Amalfitano, 331-54. Pisa: Pacini Editore.
- Bloom, Harold. 1994. *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. 2020. *Serial Shakespeare. An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth, and Christina Wald, eds. 2025. *Shakespeare and Seriality. Page, Stage, Screen*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, Norman. [1959] 2010. *Life against Death. The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Chignell, Andrew, ed. 2019. *Evil. A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, Stuart. 2007. *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Corbett, Lionel. 2018. *Understanding Evil*. London: Routledge.
- Crooke, Eliah. 1615. *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man*. London: William Jaggard.
- Cummings, Brian, ed. 2013. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daniels, Robert. 2023. *Online Review of "The Zone of Interest"*. Accessed December 9th, 2025. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-zone-of-interest-film-review-2023>.

- Del Sapio Garbero, Maria. 2011. "Troubled Metaphors: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Anatomy of the Eye." In *Dialoge zwischen Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in der Renaissance*, edited by Klaus Bergdolt and Manfred Pfinster, 43-71. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- . 2022. *Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome*. London: Routledge.
- Di Battista, Maria. "Introduction. American Shakespeare." *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* no. 8 (December 2021): vii-xxxiii. <https://doi.org/10.13133/2283-8759/17609>.
- Eisaman Maus, Katherine. 1995. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ercolino, Stefano, and Massimo Fusillo. 2022. *Empatia negativa. Il punto di vista del male*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Frye, Susan. 1993. *Elizabeth I. The Competition for Representation*. New York, London: Oxford University Press.
- Fusini, Nadia. 2010. *Di vita si muore. Lo spettacolo delle passioni nel teatro di Shakespeare*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Girard, René. [1990] 1991. *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glazer, Jonathan dir. 2023. *The Zone of Interest*. United Kingdom, Poland, United States: produced by JW Films, Extreme Emotions.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2017. *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*. New York: Random House.
- Herschfeld, Heather. 2003. "'Hamlet's First Corse': Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Theology." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (Winter): 424-48.
- Hill, Christopher. [1964] 1995. *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Hill, Christopher. 1974. *Change and Continuity in 17th Century England*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Hillman, David. 2007. *Shakespeare's Entrails. Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jay, Martin. 1993. *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*. Berkely: University of California Press.
- Landis, Claire. 2018. "Shakespeare and Evil." In *The History of Evil in Early Modern England*, edited by Daniel Robinson, 139-69. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Lombardo, Agostino, a cura di. 2010. William Shakespeare. *Re Lear*. Milano: Feltrinelli. vii-xvii.

- Luther, Martin. [1545] 1958. "Lectures on Genesis." Translated by George Shick. In *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1. St. Louis, MO: Concordia.
- . [1554] 1904. *Commentary on Genesis*, edited and translated by John Nicholas Lenker, vol. 1. Minneapolis: Lutheran in All Lands.
- Marzola, Alessandra. "Hamlet and the Passion of Knowledge." *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakesperean Studies*, no 1 (January 2014): 203-20.
- . 2015. *Otello. Passioni*. Milano: Mimesis.
- . "Pity Silenced: Economies of Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*." 2018. *Critical Survey* 30 (3, Autumn): 20-35.
- McEachern, Claire. 2018. *Believing in Shakespeare. Studies in Longing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Montrose, Louis. 2006. *The Subject of Elizabeth. Authority, Gender and Representation*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Neill, Michael. 1997. *Issues of Death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norton, David, ed. 2006. *The Bible. King James Version with the Apocrypha*. London: Penguin.
- Orwell, George. [1940] 1957. "England your England." In *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Paster, Gail Kern. 2004. *Humoring the Body. Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Perkins, William. 1606. *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*. Cambridge: John Legate.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1967. *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Sadway, Jonathan. 1995. *The Body Emblazoned. Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Scott, Helen. 2020. *Shakespeare's Tempest and Capitalism. The Storm of History*. London: Routledge.
- Serpieri, Alessandro. 1978. *Otello. L'Eros Negato: Psicoanalisi di una proiezione distruttiva*. Perugia: Il Formichiere.
- Shakespeare, William. 2007. *Richard III*. The RSC Shakespeare Complete Works. Edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. New York: Modern Library.
- Shakespeare, William. 2006. *Othello*. Neill, Michael ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

All other quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the following edition:

- Shakespeare, William. 2016. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Third Edition. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Slotkin, Joel. 2017. *Sinister Aesthetics. The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature*. London: Palgrave.
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Spurgeon, Caroline. [1935] 2001. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stoll, Abraham. 2017. *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Streete, Adrian. 2009. *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2019. "Sin and Evil." In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Annibal Hamlin, 118-33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tawney, R. H. 1926. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. A Historical Study*. London: John Murray.
- Vaught, Jennifer, ed. 2010. *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England*. London: Ashgate.
- Weber, Max. [1904] 2005. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge.

Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings

Claire McEachern

This essay argues that those of Shakespeare's plays in which perpetrators of wrongdoing are initially unknown to fellow characters and then conclusively exposed – which is to say plays in which evils are spectacularly made known not only to an audience but to the characters within a play – would have provided a cathartic release for Reformation audiences newly confronted with the dismayingly two-steps forward one-step back nature of soteriological inquiry and identity. The increased prominence and Calvinist torque of theories of predestination and original sin, along with the corresponding prevalence of the notion of reprobacy, and in combination with the waning of pre-Reformation protocols of mitigating sin (e.g., “works”), rendered the naming of sin a peculiarly satisfying experience. In a culture in which one's salvation or damnation was a secret ultimately known only to the deity, the revelation to characters of information known to an audience in advance of said characters would have made its theatrical dénouement a particularly charged dramatic moment.

Keywords: Shakespeare's endings, disclosure of sin, soteriology, suspense, catharsis

In pondering an essay on the possible subjects designated by the topic “Issues of evil” my initial thought was to study Shakespeare's discovery scenes that reveal the perpetrators of ill-doing – how they are structured and how such exposure may have provided a form of emotional satisfaction to a Reformation culture awash in epistemological dubiety with respect to the question of salvation. This is to say, a culture in which ethical identities were somewhat more muddled and miasmic than in an earlier confessional dispensation, and hence one in which the satisfactions pertaining to the apprehension of wrongdoing might go beyond mere poetic justice to comprehend a taxonomy of sin and salvation (that is, I am less interested in the punitive comeuppances for perpetrators than the antecedent fact of their discovery). The working hypothesis was that, in Reforma-

tion England, with the increased prominence and Calvinist torque of theories of predestination and original sin, along with the corresponding prevalence of the notion of reprobacy, and in combination with the waning of pre-Reformation protocols of mitigating sin (e.g., “works”), plays in which perpetrators of wrongdoing are initially unknown to fellow characters and then conclusively exposed – which is to say plays in which evils are spectacularly made known not only to an audience but to the characters within a play – would have provided a cathartic release for audiences newly confronted with the dismayingly two-steps forward one-step back nature of soteriological inquiry and identity. As I have written elsewhere, in a culture in which one’s salvation or damnation was a secret ultimately known only to the deity, the revelation to characters of information known to an audience in advance of said characters would have made its theatrical *dénouement* a particularly charged and satisfying dramatic moment¹. Soteriology was an undertaking of recognition, in which one sought to identify signs that one was recognized by God as elect (or not); for an audience member, the recognition of information by characters is the very substance of Reformation catharsis.

Reformation Contexts of Evil

In proceeding to think about this issue the first qualifier I encountered is that instances of such apprehension are somewhat rare. A list of such perpetrators is relatively short: in (roughly) chronological order, we have Chiron, Demetrius and Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*; Richard III; Don John and Borachio of *Much Ado about Nothing*; Bertram of *All’s Well That Ends Well*; Angelo of *Measure for Measure*; *Hamlet’s* Claudius; Iago; Edmund; and Iachimo. Of these villains, only a handful are what we might call exorbitantly unrepentant, Aaron and Iago being the chief instances of such². More frequently we find

1 See McEachern 2018, esp. 37-76 for an account of the prevalence of experimentalist thought in Reformation England. For studies of the discrepancies between an audience and characters’ knowledges, see Evans 1960 and 1979. The end of a life, much like the end of a play, was a charged site of revelation for Puritan experimentalists. See Houlbrooke 1998.

2 There is also of course Antonio, in *The Tempest*, who does not repent, although as in the cases of Iago or Aaron little attention is drawn to this fact.

instances of conflicted villains, like Claudius, or eleventh-hour penitents, like Edmund ("Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my own nature"; *King Lear*, V.iii.247-48)³. Some we never actually see caught red-handed (Don John). Some – Bertram and Angelo – may intend but do not actually accomplish the full extent of their sins due to the operations of comic providence. Just as if not more frequently, the source of trouble in a play can seem systemic rather than initiated by an individual – the feuding and haste of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, or the pervasive male anxiety about female fidelity in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In such latter cases, individual action seems more of a flint that lights a supply of tinder rather than a major propeller of the action.

Related to this scarcity perhaps is the nature of the evils perpetrated. I say 'evils' as opposed to 'Evil' as the more I thought about it the more it seemed to me that 'Evil' as a quantity both unrepentant and inexplicable except, perhaps, by supernatural means is not really a category that Shakespeare traffics in with any consistency. With the exception of Iago, and the villains of *Titus Andronicus*, and maybe Cornwall (who is not really incognito), most of Shakespeare's villains seem upon examination to be legible if not entirely sympathetic figures, Macbeth probably being the epitome thereof – that is, their failings can be explained as a mundane function of some combination of the seven deadly sins, and tend to be on the order of a failing or weakness (yielding to sin) rather than a proactive will to it. There are few cackling cartoon-type villains in his plays, that is to say villains beyond our comprehension, whose evil is utterly 'othered' and entrepreneurial (Aaron is perhaps the epitome here: "Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly, / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / But that I cannot do ten thousand more"; V.i.141-44). But even Richard III ventures a few stabs at self-explanation in terms of his deformity that could, depending on the actor, humanize him: "since I am cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (*Richard III*, I.i.28-31). Iago's motives are shifting – Cassio, cuckoldry, etc. – but the repeated attempts to explain himself bespeak a compulsion to do

3 All Shakespeare references are to Bevington 1980.

so that at least gives the sense that he may be a mystery to himself as well as to us – a species of self-confounding that few of us are spared⁴.

This legibility is to a large extent a by-product of Shakespeare's extremely nuanced characterizations, which tend to explain if not excuse human sinfulness in terms of a complex intentionality that invites understanding if not always identification from a witness. As Claire Landis has written, "it seems necessary to re-assert the role of personal agency in Shakespearean evil, since the plays themselves engage with the issue of choice, even while they dramatize the impact of potent influences" (2018, 140). This may be only to say that, in the Reformation, evil was more quotidian than it is for us in a modern world; we now tend to designate behaviors as 'Evil' only when they seem to derive from somewhere beyond the pale of psychological causation (e.g., terrible childhoods, or mental illness). By contrast, in an early modern culture in which it was more generally accepted that humanity's fallen nature was ubiquitous and inescapable, garden-variety evil, in the sense of the simple human will to sin, would have been both unsurprising and intelligible⁵.

This does not mean, of course, that the exposure of even lower case "e" evils wouldn't have been able to provide audiences with some epistemological relief, a relief that I would argue is related to the ambiguous nature of reprobacy in the Reformation but that lingers in our experience of the plays today. While much discussion of Puritan experimentalism focuses on the elusive nature of election, with the quest for soteriological knowledge being framed as a matter of prospecting for grace, the obverse side of the quest for assurance was the need to plumb the depths of one's fallenness, a fallenness that was as obscurantist as it was statistically pervasive. That is, certainty of election may have been the chief and utopian goal of self-examination, but conversely, certainty of damnation may have possessed some of the same blessed and decisive clarity in a universe where moral

4 The failure to adequately pursue self-reflection was in fact considered a mark of the reprobate: "He is counted a Christian by the children of God, and so he takes himself to be, no doubt because through the fulness of his heart he cannot try and examine himself, and therefore truly cannot discern of his estate, whether he is in Chris or not [John 2:23-35]" (Perkins [1595] 2019, 459).

5 For a discussion that lays out many of the theological parameters of Reformation evil, see Streete 2020, 104-27.

muddle and mystery were default and exceedingly suspenseful conditions. As William Perkins writes in his 1595 preface to *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration whether a Man is in the Estate of Damnation or the State of Grace* (even the title of which is prevaricating), "a man may seem both unto himself and to the church of God to be a true professor of the gospel, and yet indeed be none". False positives, as it were, are legion: "A reprobate has in his mind a certain knowledge of God, ...of common equity among men, of the difference of good from bad". "The reprobate has oftentimes fear and terror of conscience"; "a reprobate, before he commits a sin, is often vexed within himself, and fears to commit it"; "After he has committed a sin, he sorrows and repents"; the wicked in their distress may pray to God, and God may hear their prayers and grant their request"; "he may show a liking to God's ministers. He may reverence them and fear to displease them"; "he may have the gift of working miracles, casting forth devils, healing, and such like" (Perkins 1595, 447-59). Similarly, Nicholas Byfield, in his *Signs of The Wicked Man* (1619), promises "thirty signs of an open wicked man" (6), but many of these can also pass as signs of goodness: "they have certain general confused apprehensions of mercy" (10); "they think that assurance would breed security, and that it is a better way to keep their own hearts humble, to be somewhat doubtful" (Byfield 1619, 6-10).

Given such illusory mirages of virtue amongst the demographic of the damned, there might well have been thought something as happily declarative about evidence of damnation as there was of salvation (as Byfield put it in his dedication, "if things shine more clearly when their contraries are set by them; then may this description of the estate of a wicked man by Signes, serve much to establish the godly in the point of assurance, when he sees himself freed from those fearful and forlorn marks"). For Perkins, for example, despite all the false positives, reprobacy is ultimately – or at least ideally – unmistakable. Sin is, in the end, unequivocal and thoroughgoing: "the reprobate, though he is amended in many of his faults, yet some fault or other he cannot abide to have reformed, and by that, in a vile manner, the devil wholly possesses him" (1595, 458). Sin is public: "After a certain time, God in his just judgement hardens their hearts, blinds the eyes of their minds, make their heads giddy with a spiritual drunkenness, and by the strength of their inward lusts, as also by the effectual op-

eration of Satan, they fall to open infidelity and contempt of God's word, and so run headlong to their own damnation" (461). And, lastly, sin is spectacular: for instance, in distinguishing between a mere melancholic passion and true sorrow for sin, Perkins emphasizes the startling, even decisive quality of the latter:

Sorrow for sin rises from the anger of God that wounds and pierces the Conscience; but melancholic passions rise only from mere imaginations strongly conceived in the brain. Lastly, these passions are long in breeding, and come by little and little, but the sorrow for sin usually comes on a sudden as lightning into a house. (472)

"As sudden as lightning into a house"; "wounds and pierces the Conscience": here is the evidence for the link I would like to draw with some of Shakespeare's dénouements of error: they are built as structures of slow-burning suspense that build to a crystalline moment, a moment that is designed to arrest, and illuminate moral caliber (there is no lightning without a looming storm, so to speak). This does not mean that all of Shakespeare's villains are decisively reprobates; God's prerogative meant that his dispensation of salvation or damnation remained mysterious until the very end (or beyond it – this is why deathbeds were such tantalizing sites of potential discovery for Puritan experimentalists). Any of Shakespeare's villains could, technically, be candidates for election as well as damnation; self-examination was an exercise in probability rather than certainty. Nor does it mean that exposure necessarily results in penitence. But it does mean that there is a premium on disclosure.

Shakespeare's earliest exposures and thoroughgoing villains

The earliest and to some degree most protracted (even sensationalist) instance of revelation comes in *Titus Andronicus*, which indicates that Shakespeare employs this structure of suspended disclosure from early on in his career. Infamously, Chiron and Demetrius rape and dismember Lavinia, then taunt her with the clandestine nature of their deeds:

DEMETRIUS

So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON

Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.
(*Titus Andronicus* II.iv.1-4)

Her uncle Marcus immediately finds her and, contrary to the villains' confidence of their security, promptly identifies at least the source of her injury: "But sure, some Tereus hath deflow'ed thee, / And, lest thou shouldst detect them, cut thy tongue" (II.iv.26-27). Marcus makes much of her silence, as Shakespeare dwells on the fact that she is so immured:

O that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast,
That I might rail at him, to ease my mind.
Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopp'd
Doth burn the heart to cinder where it is.
Fair Philomela, why, she but lost her tongue
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind;
But niece, that mean is cut from thee.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II.iv.32-40)

The partial identification sets us on the path for full. So too when Titus sees Lavinia he swiftly begins to parse her silence as proof of her brothers' innocence of Bassanius' murder: "Ah, son Lucius, look on her! / When I did name her brothers, then fresh tears / Stood upon her cheeks... / No, no, they would not do so foul a deed; / Witness the sorrow that their sister makes" (III.i.110-19). Lucius similarly hazards a (mistaken) guess at her perpetrators at the end of the scene: "If Lucius live, he will requite your wrongs, / And make proud Saturnine and his emperess / Beg at the gates, like Tarquin and his queen" (III.i.296-98). In the following scene, Titus again vows to gloss all of Lavinia's motions:

I can interpret all her martyr'd signs.
She says she drinks no other drink but tears,
Brew'd with her sorrow, mesh'd upon her cheeks.
Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought;
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
As begging hermits in their holy prayers.
Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
But I of these will wrest an alphabet
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.
(*Titus Andronicus*, III.ii.36-45)

Finally, in IV.i (the next scene), Lavinia herself pursues her nephew's copy of the *Metamorphoses*, opening it to the tale of Philomel, at which point Marcus proposes that she write her violators' names in the sand with a stick⁶.

This protracted address to the mystery of Lavinia's injuries is quite unlike the process of Shakespeare's sources; in all of them that represent the incident, Lavinia is promptly provided with sand and a stick by her male relatives upon their first glimpse of her wounds⁷. Shakespeare, by contrast, worries the question of disclosure over the course of several successive scenes, building suspense while providing multiple occasions for poetic riffs on the question of signs and their interpretation (III.ii is in fact absent from the quarto, which may indicate that early performances considered the extra measure of suspense it provides superfluous to efficient action).

Richard III is another early play where Shakespeare frets the question of disclosure early on in the action. Richard's villainy is of course disclosed to the audience in the opening soliloquy, and it is no secret from many other of the characters. Lady Anne, for instance, greets Richard as a "black magician", a "dreadful minister of hell" and a "Foul devil" immediately upon encountering him next to her husband's bier (I.ii.34; 36; 50); Queen Elizabeth also knows him as "A man that loves not me, nor none of you" (I.iii.13). Clarence, however, naively believes his brother loyal to him, despite an ominous dream in which Richard knocks him overboard a ship to drown, and the double-spoken insinuations of the First murderer: "Thy brother's love, our duty, and thy faults / Provoke us hither now to slaughter thee" (I.iv.227-28). In this incident, the suspense over when Clarence will twig is compounded by the darkly humorous wavering of the second murderer over whether his conscience will prevent him from carrying through with his mission – a debate ultimately resolved in favor of doing the deed: "I am strong-fram'd; he [Conscience] cannot prevail with me" (I.iv.152-53).

Shakespeare revisits the scenario of a thoroughgoing villain only once more, in *Othello*. Here the suspense is crafted differently,

6 Ovid of course provides multiple instances of humans silenced by their transformations, Actaeon being the paradigmatic case. See McEachern 2018, 115-56.

7 See Bullough 1966, vol. 6, 3-79.

as Othello's inner disturbance does not become evident to the surrounding characters until well into III.iv, when he presses Desdemona on the whereabouts of the handkerchief. As in *Richard III*, it is a woman who first senses something is amiss, as Emilia questions, "Is not this man jealous" (III.iv.100)?

EMILIA

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man.

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full

They belch us.

(*Othello* III.iv.104-07)

Prior to this moment, the audience has been confined in the claustrophobia of their private knowledge of Iago's dastardly plot, wincing at Desdemona's unwitting attempts to intervene on Cassio's behalf. In the following scene, however, after much private agonizing, Othello's distress starts to become public, and he strikes Desdemona, an action which alerts Lodovico to the fact that something is amiss: "My lord, this would not be believ'd in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw it" (IV.i.243-44). In the following scene, after Othello has "bewhored" Desdemona, Emilia comes even closer to intuiting what's amiss, and speaks to her husband: "The Moor's abus'd by some most villainous knave, / Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow... Some such squire he was / That turn'd your wit the seamy side without, / And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (IV.ii.141-49). Tellingly, this revelation begins to rattle Iago, who dismisses her with "Speak within door" and "You are a fool; go to" (IV.ii.146; 150). Finally, and famously, in the last scene of the play, Emilia puts all the puzzle pieces together, as she accuses Iago: "You told a lie, an odious, damned lie! ... / My mistress here lies murdered in her bed - ... / And your reports have set the murder on" (V.ii.187-94).

The corroborating evidence of Emilia's handling of the handkerchief, and maybe even more decisively, Iago's murder of Emilia, finally brings everything out on to the open (meaning that not just her murder corroborates his villainy but the fact that he feels the need to murder her also corroborates the truth of her statement about the handkerchief). Signally, it is not merely Iago's culpability that is confirmed and exposed here, but Emilia's own ethical standing as an un-

witting passive accomplice to his deeds, albeit one who is studiously, even willfully so (“What he will do with it, / Heaven knows, not I; / I nothing but to please his fantasy” (III.iii.303-05). Though the closing moments of the play provide no moment of self-reflection for Emilia, in which she might grapple with the nature of her participation, the fact that she has, finally, to acknowledge something that Iago has earlier urged her to be “not acknown” on provides the lightning-like catharsis for which we, at least, have been long awaiting (III.iii.324).

Ethically complex villains and the problem plays

The complexity of Emilia’s ethical identity here – neither particularly virtuous nor downright malevolent – is telling, for it is around this turn-of-the-century juncture in Shakespeare’s career that we see him begin to explore the possibilities of revelation that concern more morally complex culprits, which is to say those for whom the possibility of regeneration might yet exist (though again, in a soteriological scheme, it is totally within the bounds of divine prerogative that even someone so villainous as Iago might be among the elect). In both *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare treats with the case of a bad actor whose public exposure as such potentially reclaims them for Christian community (if not necessarily salvation) rather than exiles them from it.

Young Bertram, for instance, appears in at least the opening scenes of *All’s Well that Ends Well* in a potentially sympathetic light; though his dedication to the braggart soldier Parolles seems misplaced, it is hard to disagree with his opinion that a forced marriage to Helena ought to take into account his own preferences: “My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your Highness, / In such a business give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes” (II.iii.106-08). His lying to Helena and running away to the Italian wars are admittedly underhanded actions – his own mother declares “his sword can never win / The honor that he loses” (III.ii.92-93), but he nevertheless distinguishes himself in those wars once arrived, which bespeaks a certain courageous willingness to disregard life and limb. Even his lustful suit to the chaste Diana, like his other flaws, might have been written off as the lapses of youth and impulsivity: “Natural rebellion done I’ th’ blade of youth; / When oil and fire, too strong for reason’s

force, / O'erbears it and burns on" (V.iii.6-7). Our own judgment is helped along by the fact that Bertram himself seems to operate largely without compunction; we are not prompted to think of him as self-reflecting or conflicted. The first hint of any tweaks of conscience are reported second-hand in a conversation between the two Lords Du-maine, when they report his reaction to his mother's letter: "There is something in't that stings his nature; for on the reading it he changed almost into another man" (IV.iii.2-4). The transformation does not take hold, however; that very night Bertram intends to "fles[h] his will in the spoil of [Diana's] honor" (IV.iii.15).

Signally, the second lord comments here on the necessity of public discovery to staunch sin: "as in the common course of all treasons we still see them reveal themselves, till they attain to their abhorr'd ends, so he that in this action contrives against his own nobility in his proper stream overflow's himself" (IV.iii.20-24). The syntax of this statement is admittedly difficult to parse, but the gist seems to be that revelation of sin commonly accompanies its full accomplishment. The two lords pin their hopes of Bertram's reformation on the exposure of Parolles, in whom he has, in their opinion, invested over much confidence: "I would gladly have him see [Parolles'] company anatomiz'd, that he might take a measure of his own judgments wherein so curiously he had set this counterfeit" (IV.iii.30-33). In other words, they hope that in finding himself wrong about his estimate of Parolles, Bertram will realize the fallibility of his own capacity to judge in other matters.

That this is a less than effective solution to the problem of Bertram's moral obtuseness is perhaps indicated by the fact that such exposure does nothing to correct Parolles' own behavior. Though the latter pleads with his captors for his life on the grounds that he could use the time for repentance ("my offenses being many, I would repent out the remainder of nature"; IV.iii.246-47), upon discovery he does not intend to reform so much as openly play the fool rather than a hypocrite pretending to be a valiant captain: "Cool, blushes! And, Parolles, live / Safest in shame! Being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive!" (IV.iii.339-40)⁸. Despite such pessimism about the

8 For discussions of the function of shame in early modern culture, see Fernie 2022 and Jewett ed. 2011.

possibility of amendment, however, the play's concluding moments teeter on the prospect of Bertram's own exposure as a liar and a would-be debaucher. The process is fairly excruciating in its convolution: first, Bertram demonstrates his remorse over Helena's demise, is forgiven by the king and then pledged to Lafew's daughter Maudlin. Lafew asks for a token to deliver to his daughter, and Bertram offers the ring that was given him abed by Helena (whom he had thought Diana), who originally had it herself of the king. The king suspects Bertram of foul play in Helena's death; then Diana enters, recounts Bertram's suit to her, and produces his own family ring in support of her story. Bertram at this point has begun to lie in earnest, claiming that Diana was a camp follower and a tease: "She knew her distance and did angle for me, / Madding my eagerness with her restraint [...] She got the ring; / And I had that which any inferior might / At market price have bought" (V.iii.211-17). Diana then riddles about the provenance of her original ring (now on the king's finger) and Bertram's own culpability: "Because he's guilty, and he is not guilty. / He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't; / I'll swear I am a maid, and he knows not" (V.iii.287-89). At this point, all of the characters on stage except Diana (and perhaps even the audience) are thoroughly bewildered. Finally, the visibly pregnant Helena appears and clarifies matters. Bertram is duly stunned into the motions of repentance: "O pardon!" (V.iii.306).

Any sympathy we might have for the fact that Bertram is being manipulated here (as previously) by both Diana and Helena has little chance against the fact that in duress he compounds his earlier intended transgressions with yet further lies and prevarications. Though he has not, technically, sinned in debauching Diana, but merely been hoist by the petard of his own challenge to Helena to get the family ring off his finger and get herself with his child, his innocence of those sins is due solely to the operations of comic providence and his wife's ingenuity; left to his own devices there is not much to work with, ethically-speaking – or as the First Lord puts it, "As we are ourselves, what things are we!" (IV.iii.18-19). Bertram's recognition or at least acknowledgement of his own will to sin may be slow to dawn upon him, but when it comes it brings him (perhaps literally) to his knees. His conscience is, finally, wounded and pierced, and we are satisfied that evil has (for the moment, anyways) been stopped

in its tracks. The fact that he did not, in fact, debauch Diana is small consolation when weighed against his propensity to lie and slander in order to try to extricate himself from the supposed crime.

Angelo in *Measure for Measure* is another malefactor who compounds his own villainy throughout the course of the play. Unlike Bertram, he demonstrates an awareness of his own sinfulness from the outset of his attraction to Isabella: "[...] but it is I / That, lying by the violet in the sun / Do as the carrion does, not as the flow'r / Corrupt with virtuous season" (II.ii.170-73). This awareness of his own failings does nothing to dissuade him, however, and as soon as he propositions her (II.iv.), Isabella vows disclosure: "I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for't! / Sign me a present pardon for my brother, / Or with an outstretch'd throat I'll tell the world aloud / What man thou art" (II.iv.151-54). From this point on such disclosure is an imperative for us as well as Isabella, and our desire for it is only exacerbated by Angelo's reneging on his promise to pardon Claudio after he has (as he thinks) enjoyed Isabella, for now not only is he a would-be debaucher but a habitual promise-breaker (and a slanderer to boot), having earlier reneged on his promise to marry Mariana: "left her in her tears, and dried not one of them with his comfort; swallow'd his vows whole, pretending in her discoveries of dishonor" (III.i.223-25). The fact that the superintendent Duke hears of Angelo's lapse almost immediately, in the succeeding scene, provides us some relief, for sure, but Isabella's desire that Angelo find his faults exposed to the world remains. Even the Duke (ironically) decries his hypocrisy: "O what may man within him hide, / Though angel on the outward side" (III.ii.264-65).

That such exposure is not the custom of Vienna creates additional narrative pressure. The Duke, according to Lucio, "would have dark deeds darkly answer'd; he would never bring them to light" (III. ii.170-71); he himself admits a loathing for public display: "I love the people / But do not like to stage me to their eyes; / Though it do well, I do not relish well / Their loud applause and aves vehement; / Nor do I think the man of safe discretion / That does affect it" (I.i.67-72). As Craig Bernthal has written, "The first act, therefore, sets up the problem of a duke who understands ...the value of ceremony and theatricality in government, ...but still cannot make himself engage in the necessary public relations work" (2003, 133). The fact that An-

gelo is not technically guilty of all the charges Isabella levies against him does little to mitigate the satisfaction her accounting provides us when it comes out in full cry:

ISABELLA

That Angelo's forsworn, is it not strange?
 That Angelo's a murderer, is 't not strange?
 That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
 An hypocrite, a virgin-violator,
 Is it not strange, and strange? [...]
 Even so may Angelo,
 In all his dressings, characts, titles, forms
 Be an arch-villain.
 (*Measure for Measure*, V.i.39-60)

The pleasures of having even this exaggerated evil called out are considerable, and as far as Isabella is concerned at this point in the action (when she still believes her brother to have been executed in contravention of the bargain she struck) Angelo is arch-villain enough even though he has not actually violated 'her' virginity (Mariana's is a different matter). While his "act did not o'ertake his bad intent" as regards her chastity, and the Duke's intervention (along with Ragozine's head) prevents Claudio's execution, the fact that Angelo himself thought himself acting upon his bad intentions is guilt enough for us (V.i.456). That is, if he is not as bad a man as Isabella proclaims him to be, it is not for lack of trying. And while Angelo does come to wish he had not reneged on his promise and had not had Claudio killed – "Would yet he had liv'd!" (IV.iv.32), he never repents of having raped anyone.

Robert N. Watson has written that the play's ending is "packed with climactic moments. [...] On the stage, the play offers multiple revelations of identity that are *coups de théâtre* within the play world. [...] It is hard for audiences to know where to focus their sympathetic imaginations, with so many characters suddenly compelled to recall and re-evaluate – often mortifyingly – events and encounters earlier in the play" (2020, 41). We wish to see Angelo discover that he has neither violated an unwilling woman nor executed her brother, and also that he has fornicated with his former fiancée; Isabella needs to know that Claudio has been spared; and everyone concerned needs to know that the Duke has been orchestrating events all along in the guise of a friar. It is an incredibly protracted scene of disclosure,

made more complicated by the repeated interruptions of Lucio, who may or may not be a slanderer of the Duke. First he inserts himself into the interview of Isabella; then he pipes up with his opinion of Friar Lodowick; then he comments sardonically on Mariana's sexual status – "My lord, she may be a punk, for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife" (V.i.185-86) – then he levies a similar swipe at Isabella ("That's the way, for women are light at midnight", V.i.285), and then he parries with the Duke-as-Friar. Though the allegorical significance of his name and his ultimate role in discovering the identity of the Duke point to his instrumentality as an agent of discovery, the effect of all these slanderous interruptions aggravates our ability to experience the process of discovery as a smooth and unfurling thing (as the Duke himself acknowledges in attempting to repeatedly silence him)⁹. Shakespeare uses his interruptions to intensify the suspense here. Though Lucio's own sins are public knowledge throughout – and, as of III.ii.194, our own – even the reduced punishment the Duke declares for him (marriage for debauchery rather than hanging for slander) comes as a species of relief for us, a fitting riposte to the nuisance he has posed to the process of clarifying fault.

An objection to the claim that these two problem plays provide us with the satisfactions of incrimination might be that neither Bertram nor Angelo are as culpable as they believe themselves to be, and thus that Shakespeare, instead of providing us with the pleasures of having sin stridently called out, is in fact confronting us with the intractable murkiness of reprobacy – the way in which sin inevitably comes attended with marks of virtue (or, conversely, the similarly frustrating way in which the best instances of human virtue are inevitably trammelled with marks of human failings). In other words, these two conclusions are not as conclusive with respect to naming evil *qua* evil as, say, *Othello* or *Titus Andronicus* or *Richard III* are. The counter to that might be simply statistical; even if Bertram and Angelo

9 There is an interesting similarity between Lucio and Parolles in that it is difficult to judge the truth value of their statements; Parolles, for instance, reports accurately the strength of the Italian forces, and accurately describes Bertram's character – "I knew the Count to be a dangerous and lascivious boy" (IV.iii.223-24) – but is probably slandering the characters of the Lords Dumaine; Lucio also mingles truth with falsehood in his descriptions of the Duke (which may speak to the liabilities of the Duke's aversion to public display).

are provided places within Christian community on earth (both being saved through the love of a good woman), the likelihoods of their attaining salvation are probably slim. That is, Christian community may be more elastic than Protestant soteriology. Certainly our tendency is to imagine gentle Shakespeare's sensibility as less draconian than that; the fact that Angelo's grievous self-estimate is ultimately overblown (indeed, as rigid as his earlier lack of mercy for Claudio) suggests that Shakespeare urges skepticism of a flagrant sense of sinfulness: "so deep it sticks in my penitent heart / That I crave death more willingly than mercy; / 'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it" (V.i.80-82). In other words, given that Angelo, like Bertram, is not as vicious as he believes himself to be there is some question here as to whether Shakespeare's investment is in exposing him as a sinner or in confronting us, rather, with the ethics of our desire to have him so exposed (i.e., with the thin line between vindication and vindictiveness, for instance). Yet I would argue that it is nonetheless important to us that these two men suffer the experience of being discovered, if simply for their intentions (for as far as they know, these are intentions that they have acted upon). The fact that Angelo is not actually guilty of violating Isabella or executing Claudio does little to mitigate our pleasure in having him exposed as having had the intention to do so. He may not have been as bad a person as he meant to be, but he did so mean to be. Knowledge of sin matters, as the Duke's closing words make clear: "So, bring us to our palace, where we'll show / What's yet behind, that's meet you all should know" (V.i.543-44).

Disclosure in tragedy

My last two examples of disclosure are unlike these two previous ones, in that they do not occur in the closing scene of their respective plays, and they do not, I argue, provide the audience with the same sense of relief and release. It is not because the villains in question aren't thoroughly villainous, but because in both *Hamlet* and *King Lear* Shakespeare subordinates their discovery to a larger action.

Let us take *Hamlet* first. The supposition of Claudius' guilt is first floated by the ghost, of course, hinted at in III.i ("How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!"; III.iii.50-53), and is confirmed for us by Claudius himself in III.iii, in the prayer scene: "O my of-

fense is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't / A brother's murder" (III.iii.37-39). Unlike Bertram, and more like Angelo, Claudius is under no illusions about his own moral character – although as he confesses, his sense of his own sinfulness is not thoroughgoing enough as to make him renounce "my crown, my own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.55). His sin may pierce here, but not deeply enough (and his subsequent malign actions – the writ of execution on Hamlet's life; suborning Laertes; the poisoned goblet – suggest further repentance is off the table). Hamlet, for his part, has been strengthened in his belief in the ghost's word by Claudius' reaction to the play within a play, and suspects that what he is witnessing in Claudio's prayer is an act of repentance for a crime. However, it is only after his return from the voyage to England where he had discovered the letters requesting his own execution at England's hands that he possesses proof positive of Claudius' perfidy:

HAMLET

I found, Horatio

Ah, royal knavery! – an exact command,

Larded with many several sorts of reasons

Importing Denmark's health and England's too

With, ho, such bugs and goblins in my life,

That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,

No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,

My head should be struck off. [...]

Is't not perfect conscience

To quit him with this arm?

(*Hamlet*, 5.ii.18-67)¹⁰

As the responses of generations of commentators have registered, the overweening care Hamlet takes to confirm a suspicion we have long had certain knowledge of risks our patience with him. So while Hamlet may be experiencing the pleasure and triumph of having his suspicions confirmed here, we have long since been weary of waiting for him to arrive at this point (suggesting that there is a point at which suspense turns into ennui). There is also the fact that in the ethical world of the tragedy, all parties of note are ethically compromised; while it may be 'perfect conscience' to kill Claudius for having

10 Lines 68 (through 80) only appear in the Folio.

killed his brother, the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Polonius (and maybe even Ophelia's) can be laid at Hamlet's own door. (What would be truly arresting in such a world is the possibility of goodness.) This is not to say that in a comedy, even a problem comedy, all the characters besides the villain are virtuous; Shakespeare's default setting for almost all characters is 'fallen'. Indeed, it is precisely 'because' all the characters are flawed to some degree that the revelation of a compoundedly culpable person is so palate-cleansing.

King Lear is another play in which we find ourselves parsing the difference between the sinning and the more sinned against. There is a surfeit of villains, for sure; but of these, only Edmund's identity is a secret from those he would harm; Goneril, Regan and Cornwall do not exert themselves to disguise their plots. While Edgar suspects foul play from the beginning – "some villain hath done me wrong" (I.ii.168) – Gloucester believes Edmund's calumny without hesitation, as do Regan and Cornwall. Albany does discover his betrayal of Gloucester in IV.iii, after he hears about the latter's blinding. Yet, while Edgar discovers Goneril's designs upon Edmund in IV.vi, upon reading the letter Oswald carries from her to him, we never witness any interaction where Edgar hears of Edmund's betrayal of him or Gloucester. We can infer, if we wish, that Gloucester has recounted his discovery on the journey to Dover; before the battle, a disguised Edgar delivers a letter to Albany that may accuse Edmund of 'capital treason', as that is what Albany arrests him for, and when he enters as the unknown knight he seems to have pieced together the sum of Edmund's perfidy: "I protest [...] thou art a traitor – False to the gods, thy brother, and thy father, / Conspirant against this high-illustrious prince, / And, from th' extremest upward of thy head / To the descent and dust below thy foot / A most toad-spotted traitor" (V.iii.133-45)¹¹. But Shakespeare decides against providing a scene where Edgar specifically discovers the nature of Edmund's treachery, from Gloucester or anyone else.

As for the satisfactions of Edmund coming to confront his own moral nature, this is also anticlimactic. After the duel, when Edmund lies vanquished, he admits the truth of Edgar's charges and hints at fur-

¹¹ It is not clear, actually, how treason applies to the case of having deceived Gloucester, unless it concerns Edmund's being party to Goneril's plot to enjoy him.

ther crimes: "What you have charg'd me with, that have I done, / And more, much more" (V.iii.165-66). Edmund has commissioned the slaughter of Lear and Cordelia at the beginning of this scene, and Albany enters promptly asking him to deliver his prisoners, a point at which there might have been some hope of rescuing them. But then the characters are distracted by the by-play between Goneril and Regan and the subsequent duel between Edgar and Edmund, which is followed by the two of them proceeding to get caught up in what Edgar at least seems to think is the play's dénouement "Let's exchange charity" (V.iii.169). Edmund's reaction to Edgar's tale of how he has spent the play, including an account of Gloucester's death, injects a note of contrition and perhaps suspense – if, that is (and contrary to Stephen Booth's brilliant account of why this scene is so devastating) we have even been able to keep in mind the fact that Edmund had earlier charged the captain with a mysterious task: "This speech of yours hath mov'd me, / And shall perchance do good. But speak you on; / You look as you had something more to say" (V.iii.200-02). This invitation to speak – Booth calls it a "limp little speech" (1983, 11) – leads Edgar, at least in Q, to launch into a further account of his meeting with Kent – yet further protracting the process. The gentleman then enters with the false alarm of the bloody knife – "O – she's dead!" – that has slain Goneril, prompting Edmund to repent his former action:

EDMUND

Some good I mean to do
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
Be brief in it, to th' castle, for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.
Nay, send in time.

ALBANY

Run, run, O run!

EDGAR

To who, my lord? Who has the office? Send
Thy token of reprieve.

EDMUND

Well thought on. Take my sword,
Give it the captain.
(*King Lear*, V.iii.248-56)

Edmund's change of heart is more desultory than piercing here; he reverses course only after finding he was "belov'd" of both Goneril and Regan, when he finally confesses to the full extent of his crimes. And there is no sense that the "good" he means to do can change his "nature". But Shakespeare does take a belated opportunity here to intensify suspense: the clause "Be brief in it" ironically interrupts the brevity of the order to send to the castle swiftly, and Edgar's further punctiliousness about sending a token, while perhaps an accurate and necessary instruction, compounds the delay. Of course, given that the next action is Lear's entry, no amount of running, nor the omission of any of these hesitations, was likely to have prevented Edmund's order from being carried out. Shakespeare thus creates superfluous suspense after the fact. It is both too much and too late.

As Booth (1983, 13) has written, "the impossibility of finality permeates the play", and part of that impossibility lies in its refusal to definitively condemn Edmund; not only do his final inclinations towards good fail to accomplish their goal, but they may even rob us of the mental pleasure of thinking him a thoroughgoing villain. The experiences of both are frustrating, and if the ending of *King Lear* perhaps comes closest of all his plays to feeling like a lightning strike for us, it is because Shakespeare denies us, among other things, the satisfaction of clear ethical labels (that said, I doubt that Edmund's final wobbles would be sufficient to remove him from the category of the reprobate). Decisive virtue is also missing from this play, and others: for instance, despite the kinds of readings that detect a Christ-like symbolism in characters such as Cordelia or Desdemona, Shakespeare seems far more interested in the dramatic possibility of the way a "mingled yarn" of moral fiber creates a craving for clarity than he is in providing any.

References

- Bernthal, Craig. 2003. *The Trial of Man: Christianity and Judgment in the World of Shakespeare*. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books.
- Booth, Stephen. 1983. *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Braunmuller, A. R., and Robert N. Watson, eds. 2020. *Measure for Measure*, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd edition. London: Bloomsbury.

- Bullough, Geoffrey. 1966. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. 6. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Byfield, Nicholas. 1619. *The Signs of a Wicked Man*. London.
- Evans, Bertrand. 1960. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1979. *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fernie, Ewan. 2002. *Shame in Shakespeare*. London: Routledge.
- Houlbrooke, Ralph. 1998. *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jewett, Robert, ed. 2011. *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.
- Landis, Claire. 2018. "Shakespeare and Evil." In *The History of Evil in the Early Modern Age, 1450-1700 CE*, edited by Daniel N. Robertson et. al, 139-67. Vol. III. London: Routledge.
- McEachern, Claire. 2018. *Believing in Shakespeare: Studies in Longing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perkins, William. [1595] 2019. "A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration whether a Man is in the Estate of Damnation or the State of Grace." In *The Works of William Perkins*, edited by J. Stephen Yuille, vol. 8. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books.
- Shakespeare William. 1980. *The Complete Works by Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co.
- Streete, Adrian. 2020. "Othello and the Grammar of Evil." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 71 (2): 104-27.

Shakespeare and the Conscience of Aaron

Maria Del Sapio Garbero

Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's first Roman play, stages the story of a city which quickly and relentlessly slips from a victorious and Roman 'pious' scenario into one of revengeful horror. Evil, however, emerges as a question, as the play is heading to its closure: when the butchery of a total war seems to have exhausted the possibilities of horror and a disgraced humanity – like Walter Benjamin's angel – is violently propelled into the future with its "face turned to the wreckage it leaves behind" (Benjamin 1999, 249). This is epitomized by the displacing space of a ruined monastery, the place where the surviving heir of the Andronici's (the general Lucius) and the Moor following the Goths (Aaron) are strategically summoned by Shakespeare as if to an endgame: a challenging dispute on evil and conscience. This essay foregrounds the tangle of issues (religious, theological, philosophical, cultural, racial) triggered by Act 5 and the provocative role this scene assumes within the framework of the play as well as in Shakespeare's tragic canon.

Keywords: *Acte gratuit*, conscience, homeopathic tragedy, performed evil, spectrality

Endgame

Even though performed as *the* matter of the play, evil in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's Roman "most lamentable tragedy", emerges as a question, as the play is heading towards its closure: when the butchery of a total war seems to have exhausted the possibilities of horror and a disgraced humanity, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, is violently propelled into the future with its "face turned to the past" and the wreckage it leaves behind. "The pile of debris" has grown "skyward", as we might well say inspired by the same philosopher (Benjamin 1999, 249). And the metallic roar of war fades, visually, on an image of history as a silent view of ruins, abandoned by the gods.

When the play begins we are in the aftermath of Titus's triumph. The general, "surnamed the Pius" (I.i.23), has hardly returned to

Rome from his victorious ten-year war against the Goths, when hostilities resume in the “irreligious” (I.i.133) redoubled cruel form of a vindictive crescendo, a bloody showdown under a sky of indifferent gods. “O, heavens, can you hear a good man groan / And not relent or not compassion him?” (IV.i.123-24). Meaningfully, it is Astrea, the goddess of moral justice, who first deserts the human beings. Shakespeare devotes the entire scene three of act Four to the theme of departing gods and delayed, disturbed communication between earth and heaven (IV.iii.1-120). “*Terra Astrea reliquit*: be you remembered, Marcus / She is gone, she is fled” (IV.iii.4), Titus laments, in a landscape which foretells the “wrathful skies” which scourge – unconcerned – Lear’s body in the later eponymous play (*King Lear*, III.ii.42).

TITUS

[...] Marcus, we are but shrubs, no cedars we,
 No big-boned men framed of the Cyclops’ size,
 But metal, Marcus, steel to the very back,
 Yet wrung with wrongs more than our backs can bear.
 And sith there is no justice in earth nor hell,
 We will solicit heaven and solicit and move the gods.
 (IV.iii.46-51)

Titus weeps, sighs, prays, he shoots messages to the gods with an arch, he vomits, he is run mad, and all in vain. As I have argued elsewhere, Titus’s humoral characterization introduces us to Shakespeare’s tragedy as a world marked by the unheroic and earthbound mournful manner: the *Trauerspiel* as defined by Benjamin (see Del Sapiro Garbero 2022, 105-12). This has a bearing on the way evil is distributed and experienced in this play. Shakespeare assigns mainly to Titus what Ricoeur would call the “lament” of suffered evil, and assigns mostly to Aaron, the Moor, the “blame” of committed evil: “evil as wrongdoing and evil as suffering belong to two heterogeneous categories”, the philosopher observes, “that of blame and that of lament” (Ricoeur 1985, 636). To the miscreant Aaron, as I want to argue in these pages, Shakespeare also unexpectedly assigns the task of bringing the issue of conscience to the fore.

Titus, the steely Roman soldier, has by now turned into “the woefull’st man that ever lived in Rome” (III.i.290). We might discern

in him a biblical lamenting Job: the upright and just man put to the test by his God who, pathetically in Shakespeare's play, experiences his relation with his gods in the terms of a Derridean dysfunctional postal space (see Derrida 1987, 5). The effect searched for by the playwright is deliberately anti-tragic as is often the case in this first Roman play: letters are foolishly shot up to heaven by Titus and his makeshift group of archers – "There's not a god left unsolicited" (IV.iii.61) –, despite being aware that their dispatches are destined to return unanswered (IV.iii.66-75). So much is Titus "wrung with wrongs" (IV.iii.47), and so immensely blinded by the thread of vindictive logic is he, that he feels he has a right to lament injustice and plead for piety and sympathy. His eyes cannot see that in the prevailing disowned humanity around him everything has acquired the hardness of stone, a pervading imagery in the *finis imperii* Rome of *Titus Andronicus*. "Pray to the devils", the demonized Moor echoes in scorn from afar, "the gods have given us over" (IV.ii.48). And yet starting by Tamora's son Alarbus sacrificed to the Roman gods, soon reciprocated by equal ferocity (the murder of Bassianus, Lavinia's rape) on the part of the Goths, Titus (differently from the biblical Job) has played no minor part in the ongoing activity of relentless butchery. After Alarbus, burned to appease the groan of the dead, Titus has slaughtered Mutius, his own son, for disobeying the rules of *romanitas*, and he is meditating Lavinia's killing, his own dishonoured and dishonouring daughter, which he pursues warranted, he argues with himself, by the law of the "precedent" (V.iii.43).

It is at this point, in the first scene of the fifth act, as the play is moving towards its end with its heavy load of evil, death, and grief, that Shakespeare makes us hear a child's cry coming from "a ruinous monastery" (V.i.21), which soon turns into the setting of Aaron's execution and what we might call an endgame: a fairly underrated dispute on evil and conscience between Aaron, the Queen Tamora's attendant and lover, and the Roman general Lucius, Titus's only surviving son. What fuels it and what is at stake is a child's life, the newborn offspring of Aaron and Tamora, who is destined to be hanged with his father.

My questions. How is it that Shakespeare assigns to Aaron, a recognized agent of evil in the play, an "incarnate devil" (V.i.40), the task of defending a child's life? How is it that he leaves in his hands

the only occurrence of the word “conscience” in the play (V.i.75), and in such a crucial circumstance: at the end of the play and almost in parallel with Titus’s slaughter of his beloved daughter? And how could all this be a matter of concern in the resumed post Reformist debate on moral issues, in the way it problematizes categories as well as Aaron’s character as a villain?

Titus Andronicus is a play on woe and revenge, more than on evil and guilty conscience. Differently from the almost coeval and yet unpublished *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus* releases none of the metaphors which gesture towards a self-inspecting and judicial interiority. The play narrates the story of a city that quickly and relentlessly slips from a victorious and ‘pious’ scenario into one of revengeful horror and tragic quiescence dried up of any upheaval of the soul: a corroding “worm of conscience”, a “tormenting dream”, visions of “hell of ugly devils”, such as those profusely evoked by Margaret in her cursing tirades against Richard (*Richard III*, I.iii.222-27); or a Richard-like, guilt-ridden conscience (“My conscience hath a thousand several tongues”, V.I.iii.191), or even a terrorizing and chastising spectrality like the one that burdens Richard’s heart on the night of the battle (V.1.iii.116-220).

When we come to this in *Titus Andronicus* – namely the troublesome awareness of evil – Shakespeare seems to rely upon Aaron, the Moor, an all-encompassing evildoer who easily takes upon himself all the evil in the world, however impartially evil may have been distributed between Romans and Goths. Aaron though, starting with his name is also constructed as a figure of ambiguity. Is he a Jew? Is he Muslim? Perhaps he is both if we consider that both Jews and Muslims were figures of otherness in Shakespeare’s time (see Fiedler 1974, 148; Griffin 2017, 296-99; Bartels 1990, 433-54). Further, his appeal to conscience arrives late, and only as the instrumental argument of blackmail. In fact he disclaims having a conscience. And he enjoys showcasing this lack. Faced with Aaron’s many crimes, critics tend to see the defence of his child as the manifestation of a “basic human bond or instinct” (Lake 2018, 175) unaffected by morality. But can Aaron be taken at face value?

What I am mainly concerned with foregrounding in the following pages is the tangle of issues (religious, theological, ethical, racial) iconically represented in Act 5, scene one, and – retroactively gesturing back towards the play’s beginning – the provocative role such a scene assumes in relation to the play as well as Shakespeare’s tragedy.

"Lucius, save the child"

Evil and conscience are pervasively dealt with in Shakespeare's plays, and not less engagingly, I contend, than in *Titus Andronicus*, his layered and hybridized Roman play, where the moral world of the classical culture coalesces, archaeologically, with that of the Judaic-Christian tradition and the revision brought about by the Reformation. This is epitomized by the spectral historicity of ruins – a "ruinous monastery" – from whose crevices a child's cry unexpectedly reaches us as the "echo of a 'lament' from history", we might say borrowing from Benjamin's "Paralipomena to 'The Concept of History'" (2003, 401). *Titus Andronicus*'s de-situated monastery, a site of discontinuity, presses on the onlookers' gaze with the same uniqueness and unavoidability which define Benjamin's 'image of the past'. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1999, 247). In a way that the playwright of *Titus Andronicus* might have made eagerly his own, Benjamin provides a concept of history which is one with memory; one which is characterized by moments of empathic, intensified acknowledgement, when history urges shockingly upon the present "as one of its own concerns" (*Idem*). Meaningfully Benjamin's image of the past prefigures a "dialectical constellation" of meanings, rather than homogeneous and normalising continuity (Benjamin 2003b, 401; 1999, 255). "The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers" (Benjamin 1999, 247).

GOth

Renowned Lucius, from our troops I strayed
To gaze upon a ruinous monastery,
And as I earnestly did fix mine eye
Upon the wasted building, suddenly
I heard a child cry underneath a wall.
(V.i.20-24)

The unexpected apparition of the "ruinous monastery" – a displacing view in the Roman landscape of the play – which Shakespeare unveils in a moment of danger, urges on the spectator as a broken and confusing temporality; or in other words, as a site full of time: an overdetermined site. It confronts us at once with the past and the

‘now’, and with a sight which is catastrophic and Messianic, as we might say following Benjamin.

But who comes here [...]?

[SI] *Enter a Goth, leading AARON with his child in his arms.*

(V.i.19)

Ruins could be a matter of anxiety in Shakespeare’s England. Indeed, they foregrounded a site of mixed and disturbing memory (see Del Sapiro Garbero 2022). Suddenly the ruinous Roman matter of the play was brought home in Shakespeare’s post-Reformation time, when the view of dissolved monasteries and fierce iconoclasm was not all that distant. And yet this was not the topic to deal with in Elizabethan England. William Camden, the chorographer of the old ‘Britannia’, which in many aspects can be considered a proto-archaeological ‘restorer’ of a historical as well as affect-charged landscape in Shakespeare’s times, was one of those who, going against the grain, felt compelled to overtly take on the responsibility of their memory, however unsettling that task could be for some of his readers. He took pain to underline this in his address “To the Reader”: “There are certaine, as I heare who take impatiently that I have mentioned some of the most famous Monasteries and their founders. I am sorry to heare it, and with their good favour will say thus much” (Camden 1610, n.p.). Tangible and spectral, the defaced silhouette of monasteries, when still extant, gestured towards the groans of a ruinous past and effaced memory. It also brought forth a territory of both sacred and sacrilegious deeds: an overdetermined if aporetic site, which attracted poets, travelers, antiquarians, and playwrights.

The threatened murder of a father and his child found crying among the silent ruins of a monastery depicts the story of repetitive and indiscriminate evil, in *Titus Andronicus*, its umpteenth monstrosity in the increased cruelty of an endless war. “There’s meed for meed, death for a deadly deed” (V.iii.65), the general Lucius reasserts *per* alliteration. We are outside of Rome’s walls where news arrives of the imperial city being held in the grip of the retaliating logic of revenge and where the general Lucius is quartered at the head of an army of Goths: a foreign army ready to invade the “ingrateful” city in the name of a disputable promise of peace – like Coriolanus, the playwright reminds us (IV.iv.67), predicting a play of contradictory

honour and treachery still to be written. "Therefore, great lords" – thus the general spurs his Gothic lieutenants –, "wherein Rome hath done you any scathe / Let him make treble satisfaction" (V.i.5-8).

Meanwhile preparations are being made for Aaron's execution: the "incarnate devil" (V.i.40; V.i.145-50ff), a figure of pure evil in the general opinion, but also an icon of fatherly care. The air is imbued with agonizing suspense in what might be imagined as a sort of momentous ceasefire. As for the SI, Q1 (at Lucius order) *Goth brings a ladder, which Aaron is made to climb; another Goth takes the child.*

LUCIUS

Too like the sire for ever being good.

First hang the child, that he may see it sprawl:

A sight to vex the father's soul withal.

Get me a ladder.

(V.i.50-53)

The scene is accurately staged and pictorially devised. It spans from V.i.1 to V.i.151. And it is only at V.i.145, at Lucius's order, that "*Aaron is made to climb down*" [SI] from his ladder with the promise of a death which is only postponed: "Bring down the devil, for he must not die / So sweet a death as hanging presently" (V.i.145-46). The playwright has seemingly taken all the time needed to stage his 'spectacle of the scaffold' (see Foucault 1991, 32ff) as a locus defined by the symbology of overwhelming evil and exemplary retribution. Sight and speech are attentively orchestrated, and space is emotionally dense with its underwritten religious discourse of law and guilt; but also with an expectancy which dilates the moment in which, uncannily, evil converses with the sacred. "If the crowd gathered round the scaffold, it was not simply to witness the sufferings of the condemned man or to excite the anger of the executioner" as Foucault wrote in his book devoted to the penal system in early modern times. "It was also to hear an individual who had nothing more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion", he points out underlining the witting theatricalized transformation of punishment into a cathartic place of sharing: "The public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish", and one could watch the condemned person accusing "heaven for the misery that brought him to the crime, reproach his judges for their

barbarity, curse the minister of the altars who accompanies them and blaspheme against the God whose organ he is" (Foucault 1991, 60-61). Indeed, the scaffold was also the place where the condemned could turn into a puzzling "reversible figure" to the sight of the onlookers (*Idem*, 67ff). He was a criminal and a hero: the martyred protagonist of a painful and lamentable story; what in *Titus Andronicus* we are referred to, through Aaron, meta-theatrically, as evil "Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed" (V.i.66). The playwright could not renounce such a spectacular death, or deprive his villain of his momentous sacrificial protagonism, but he was aware of its ennobling if ambivalent meanings, when he interrupted his hanging to be replaced by a second, demeaning death: a shameful "breast-deep in earth" ending (V.iii.178).

Marked by the insisting figure of the oxymoron, *Titus Andronicus* is a play imbued with ambivalent signification; an ambivalence which characterizes the rituality of piety and violence throughout the play (see Moschovakis 2002, 463-64; but see also Waitt 1957, 39-49). This is pivotal in Aaron's first annulled death. Stopped halfway up the ladder Aaron establishes a verticality which interacts with the silent skeleton of the monastery – a memory of offended sacredness –, with a contradictory sense of greatness and desolation. Public executions by hanging were a familiar view in Tudor times. Many of them, and increasingly in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, were for offences against the faith. In some of the spectators this might elicit comparison with one of those Renaissance paintings in which ruined classical arches and architectures were absorbed as a recurrent backdrop of sacrificial subject matters. It can also be interesting in this instance to mention the Renaissance anatomical tables where medical and pictorial knowledge of the human is often illustrated by making recourse to the imagery of martyrs, saints, and the condemned.

It is however from such an elevated and unsuitable position that the so far silent Aaron utters his injunction:

AARON

Lucius, save the child,
And bear it from me to the empress.
If thou do this, I'll show thee wondrous things
That highly may advantage thee to hear
If thou wit not, befall what may befall,
I'll speak no more but 'Vengeance rot you all'
(V.i.54-58)

The underlined uncomfortable verticality of the scaffold forces the beholders to keep their eyes pointed upwards on Aaron's bleak ladder. Are we summoned, as spectators, to share with Aaron the same awkward position, as he transforms his rickety ladder into a challenging space of negotiation, and himself – the child in his arms – into a controversial 'reversible figure'? (Foucault 1991, 67). Shakespeare leads our emotions and judgement astray as the play heads towards its no less problematic ending: Aaron unexpectedly looks like a nursing, Madonna-like image while performing his role of devilish scheming. We might call it a figure of scandal. Certainly it is all contrived in a way aimed at capturing the audience in a space of impervious imagining and reasoning, or what we might call provocative ethics.

Attention is high as we witness from below, in great discomfort, Aaron's beseeching if towering and intimidating cry: "Lucius, save the child". An injunction which in the ruinous wartime landscape of the play, underwritten by Aaron's ambivalent figure, spreads into the air resonating, we might feel, with the authoritative and interiorized biblical commandment of the *Tablets of Law* – "Thou shall not kill" –, if not the obligation of the written or unwritten natural Law. In return for this request Aaron barter the confession of his own crimes, what he peddles as "wondrous things" – an unheard-of bulk of evil, "That highly may advantage thee to hear" (V.i.57), he underlines, well aware of how much his narrative can bear upon Lucius's military career. But that will be not before Lucius has sworn by his god – "what god soe'er it be" – that he will stick to the pact:

LUCIUS

Say on, and if it please me which thou speak'st,
Thy child shall live and I will see it nourished.

AARON

And if it please thee? Why, assure thee, Lucius,
'Twill vex thy soul to hear what shall I speak:
For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres,
Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
Complots of mischief, treasons, villainies,
Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed,
And this shall all be buried in my death
Unless thou swear to me my child shall live.
(V.i.59-68, my emphasis)

If Lucius orders the hanging of the child that this may “vex” the father’s sight (V.i.51-52), Aaron responds, with equal wickedness, by promising a “vex/ing” narrative of real and unimaginable evil – whatever the price. This subtly assimilates linguistically the two contenders as they confront each other on the tight rope of perilous words and signs. At a time when everything is under scrutiny in Reformed England – words, signs, images, rituals – it comes as no surprise that language is overcharged with the anxiety of a meaning devilishly inoculated – “For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres”, V.i.63) – and alert to the risky rhetorical skirmish of sight and speech. A dynamic which foretells in important ways *Hamlet’s* play of silent and spoken language at the arrival of the Players at Elsinore (III.ii.SI, 133), in Lukacher’s view, an “extraordinary allegory of conscience” (1994, 131).

As the two most stimulated senses at the theatre, sight and hearing are profusely scattered in Shakespeare’s canon whether to simply draw attention to what is happening on stage or to refer us to their important cognitive role. But eyes and ears were no neutral matter in Shakespeare’s times. They had come to be terms of problematized meaning: “The emperor’s court is like the house of Fame / The palace full of tongues, of eyes and ears” (I.i.627), Aaron warns. They were imbued with the uneasy fear that the auricular might turn, subversively, into the inoculated: in a way that might dig deep into the abyss of the human soul. As later in *Hamlet*, *The Winter’s Tale*, or *King Lear*, to say the least, they gestured towards the reformist iconoclastic dispute on sight as an organ of infective and perilous knowledge and attendant anxiety about permeable body parts: sight as well as ears (see Del Sapiro Garbero, 2010).

The antanaclastic juggling of the verb ‘to vex’ between Aaron and Lucius is not accidental. Antanaclosis – asserting by inverting – was one of Shakespeare’s favourite tropes, especially in *Hamlet*, where it underscores linguistically moments of particular risk: “QUEEN: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. / HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended” (III.iv.8-9). In Aaron’s ‘dispute’ such a figure of speech also highlights the underwritten mirroring shift of one character into the other and vice versa, unveiling the play of conscience.

Aaron's call for conscience

As Leslie Fiedler has put it, Aaron is “a kind of Iago in blackface” (Fiedler 1974, 148).

Aaron is, however, by no means directly responsible for most of the horrors he recounts, only somehow, *symbolic* of them all, an embodiment of the psychic blackness they figure forth, as if the play were not merely one more projection upon blacks of intolerable white guilt, but an analysis of the mechanism itself. (149)

In my view language is that mechanism: it is the way Shakespeare makes Aaron subtly deconstruct, at the end of the play, the limits of himself as a stereotype to address questions which cast him forth towards the unsettling secular subjectivity of a new episteme. Aaron's unexpected appeal to conscience to prevail on Lucius and save his son is compelling. It moves the discussion to the level of morality and legitimation.

LUCIUS

Tell on thy mind, I say thy child shall live.

AARON

Swear that he shall and then I will begin.

LUCIUS

Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god.

That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?

AARON

What if I do not? – as indeed I do not –

Yet for I know that you art religious

And hast a thing within thee called *conscience*,

With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies

Which I have seen thee careful to observe,

Therefore I urge thy oath; for that I know

An idiot holds his bauble for a god,

And keeps the oath which by that god he swears,

To that I'll urge him, therefore thou shalt vow

By that same god, what godsoe'er it be

That thou adorest and hast in reverence,

To save my boy, to nurse and bring him up,

Or else I will discover nought to thee.

(V.i.69-85, my emphasis)

In the context of a play marked by repetitive and indiscriminate slaughter, a violence which has brought Romans and Goths alike well beyond the rules of war (III.i.272-74), the word 'conscience' occurs only here, in V.1.75. But it breaks in with the impetus of something which has been hindered so far. It appears in a form syntactically evocative of its evangelic source: "the light within you" (Matthew 6-23; see Wilks 1990, 2). However, it deviates from the sacred text by substituting "light" with "thing": "I know you art religious / And hast a thing within thee called conscience" (V.i.74-75). But what gives it special prominence is Aaron's fearless claim that he doesn't hold the "thing" in name of which he is pleading pardon for his child. He has neither conscience nor gods, he proclaims (VI.i.71-74), defiantly boasting his deprivation.

He does have a soul, though, ever since considered the seat of conscience and the human. Indeed, if we pay attention we discover that Shakespeare makes his villain summon it more than once, and not accidentally. Aaron showcases it first ironically in the guise of a melancholic and lustful sonneteer (II.ii.40); then, disproving the appellative of "inhuman dog" (V.iii.14), as a defender of a racially proud self, when the moral meaning of conscience emerges as self-conscience. "Let fools do good and fair men call for grace; / Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (III.i.205-06); and then ultimately and most crucially just before his dreadful execution, by no means a small moment, when he uses it as an endorsement, a guarantee of his unrepentant statement of free will: his very last word.

Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb?
 I am no baby, I, that with base prayers
 I should repent the evils I have done.
 Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did
 Would I perform if I might have my will.
 If one good deed in all my life I did
 I do repent it from my very soul.
 (V.3.183-99)

In light of the questions all this raises, Aaron's confessional tirade doesn't seem to merely be the irreverent piece of a villain's stock repertoire, I argue. It brings in, on stage, the topicality of conscience in the new centrality it had come to acquire in the redefined discursivity of Luther and Calvin: one which problematized the Scholastic role it

had played for centuries in assuring the reasoned analogical order between man, Natural Law and God. Hence the certainty of its being a reliable faculty in apprehending the good and in avoiding the evil. As John S. Wilkshas it:

In the Middle Ages, conscience came to be regarded as a volitional ability of the soul (*synderesis*), unimpaired after the fall, and related to the Natural Law, through which it was capable of inclining man to God. This Thomist conception, a synergism of reason and revelation sustained within a comprehensive world-view, was to last over 300 years. (Wilks 1990, 2-3)

But such an orderly postulate was conspicuously shaken in Reformist Europe: "If the alliance of faith and reason had been the harmonious diapason of scholasticism, their utter discord formed the primary doctrine of the reformers and challenged the entire Catholic system" (3). What was at stake in the ensuing English plethora of controversies between Anglicans and Calvinists was the doctrinal certainty of conscience, the very idea of an unimpaired conscience after the fall, whose integrity, especially to Calvinist thought, remained as only a shadowy reminder much more exposed to the turmoil of passions and evil (see Wilks 1990, 3-4). The controversy was settled with a practical reassertion of the classical-Christian tradition, authoritatively resumed, through the Scholastics, by the Anglican Richard Hooker whose *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (see 2025, Book I) was published in 1594 – the same year in which Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* was first performed (written 1589-1593). However, the question of conscience continued to inspire an impressive amount of literature painstakingly marked by the knowledge of anatomy and its defining dissecting metaphors. Meaningfully, the questioning discursivity of anatomy in this period provided a shared lexicon for science, art, poetry, and theology, acting as the key which led, theologically or secularly, to the complexity of the soul and the discovery of the body¹.

¹ See the following: Immanuel Bourne, *The Anatomy of Conscience* (1623); Ephraim Huit, *The Anatomy of Conscience* (1626); John Woolton, Bishop of Exeter, *A Newe Anatomie of Whole Man, as well of his Body, as of his Soule* (1576); Robert Fill[e], *The Anatomie of the Soule* (1590); Anon., *The Anatomie of Sinne* (1603); Robert Anton, *Vice's Anatomy* (1617); Charles Pierse, *Vertue's Anatomie* (1618); and Bartholomew Robertson, *The Anatomie of a Distressed Soule* (1619).

Theatre largely contributed to the history of conscience. Shakespeare's *Richard III* thrives on it. What instead Shakespeare stages with Aaron in the preceding *Titus Andronicus* is its boasted deprivation, a lack of God and conscience, which allows for both sarcasm and epistemic concern, one which drastically refers us to a historic rupture, a discord. Indeed, Shakespeare's Aaron blatantly proclaims his evil-doing as an act of free will, a much-debated concern in Reformist England. In this the Moor seems to anticipate a new secular subjectivity which Shakespeare will explore in his later personifications of evil (I am thinking mostly of *King Lear*'s Edmund, *Lear*'s daughters, *Julius Caesar*'s Cassius). And yet, Aaron needs Lucius's faith, in order that he may test the terms of his negotiating strategy (for "Thou art religious / and hast a thing within thee called conscience", Vi.74-75) and force on the Roman general the responsibility and obligations of his oath. In the way he stands up to religious matters, he has much of the Nietzschean 'scientist' of *The Gay Science* – the man to come, the fearless man "stretched in the contradiction of today and tomorrow", to whom the philosopher devotes aphorism 344 entitled "In what way we, too, are still pious" (Nietzsche 2013, 194-95b). Nietzsche will catalyse such an epistemic issue of overlapping world-views by means of his suggestive crepuscular gods, the "shadows of gods", which are to him the gods of "necessity" (118).

In turn, before being executed, Aaron promises not a repenting confession, but the "show" of his "wondrous things": "Swear that he shall [live], and then I will begin" (Vi.70). But you cannot ask for god's warrant – "what god soe'er it be" as Aaron settles the matter – if you are a miscreant. Lucius retorts: "Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god. / That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?" (Vi.70-72). Faced with necessity, Shakespeare's atheist Aaron doesn't hesitate to conjure up strategically the inner juridical scene of conscience. He seems to know how it works. In fact he makes the most to 'catch' – before Hamlet – Lucius's false conscience. The point is that Lucius doesn't acknowledge him as a subject endowed with the prerogatives which makes him fit for a pact. Aaron is an outsider to Law and the Covenant, out of the order of the civil society conceptualized by Hooker in his *Laws* (see Hooker 2025, Book 1). He is unfit. For Lucius the disavowal of both god and conscience

invalidates the legitimacy of the pact, whose validity in fact depends on the worth of both the contractors: on their reckoning the same laws and obligations. There is no responsible pact, no legitimacy, if one of the parts disclaims one of its founding tenets.

This may have sounded intriguing to those familiar with an ongoing forty-year period of religious disputes in the secularized scaffolds of the theatre. It raised issues that more than one theatregoer might bring home. Was it in Aaron's faculty to plead for his child's life while rejecting whatever dot of conscience or faith? Or better: was he in any way entitled to call for conscience from outside the rules which framed the interconnecting relation between the Natural Law and God's Law? But also: isn't the summoning of conscience as such, no matter how disdainfully this maybe done, an attestation of conscience? Conscience as care: "Lucius, save the child". And further, interrogating one's relation with unanswering divinities: why all this evil, this wrong?

By proclaiming his deprivation, Shakespeare's Aaron, I argue, unhooks the Scholastic reasoning – namely the holistic and ordered universe of symmetries providentially sanctioned by God –, prospecting a fractured and discontinuous scenario: a world in which theology is being replaced, secularly, by history and necessity. Indeed it is theatre in Reformist England that, as powerfully as in *Titus Andronicus*, takes on the task of gathering ruins and taking on care: the legacy of troubled bodies, wounds, ghosts, and problematized interiority.

Aaron is indeed the villain who, ahead of any other overt or under cover villain in Shakespeare's theatre, forces us to think on conscience "otherwise" (Ricoeur 1985, 635), namely by challenging our capacity of bearing contradictions. He is the villain who together with his black baby, – "the tempest whirling in the court" (IV.ii.161) as he puts it –, defiantly breaks up the Covenant, the world of ordered analogies between earth and heaven. And yet unreasoningly, he invokes the 'natural' obligations which can save his child – "the fruit of bastardy" (V.i.48), "the offspring of so foul a fiend", a "base", abominable "hue" to both Goths and Romans – which they perceive, physically, as a discordant and disturbing anomaly to be eliminated. "The mother wills it so", the Nurse reports. "He shall not live", Chiron (the white half-brother) advises in the grip of fear. "He shall not die", Aaron retorts, whatever it takes (IV.ii.73-83).

As earlier mentioned, Aaron is also the villain who foreruns the fearless characters of *Lear*'s Edmund – bound to Aaron by his villainy and the appellatives of “base” and “bastard” – as well as *Lear*'s sulphurous daughters and *Caesar*'s Cassius, the agonistic generation of youths who in different ways announce a fearless and secularized idea of nature: the protagonists of both change and tragedy. Edmund – Gloucester's ‘illegitimate’ son in *King Lear*, a villain and a “counterfeit” (Neill 2000, 128) – is the one who, from the very start of the play, makes the audience know that this is what tragedy is all about, when in the first act he breaks in blatantly with his unsettling ‘ode’ to Nature (I.ii.1-22): a disordering if vital acceptance of nature which disavows the old Natural Law as a heap of ridiculed analogies (I.ii.104-120). Not differently from Cassius's and Casca's dispute on catastrophic meteorology, on the threatening night of the conspiracy (*Julius Caesar*, I.iii.41ff), the villain and evildoer are often made to gesture, overtly or not, towards an epistemic turn in Shakespeare's tragedy, a world of pressing if bemusing knowledge: “LEAR: Then let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (III.vi.34-36). We don't know whether *Lear* will unravel the enigma. But we do know that Titus, another father, has used that same knife against Lavinia's shameful sight. The playwright Heiner Müller, in his highly dissecting theatrical remake of Shakespeare's *Titus*, which he renames *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome*, intuitively here common elements of barbaric modernity: a tragic will to know which associates Shakespeare's fathers – and hence Lavinia and echoes of Regan: “THE GENERAL IN PEACETIME... BURROWS IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE BOWELS / LOOKING FOR THE SEAT OF SOULS WITH HIS KNIFE” (Müller 1985, 138-39).

In the Renaissance, an era marked by a succession of epistemic fractures, which redefine with equal violence earth and heavens, the human body – the joint – which articulates the system of pacifying analogies between microcosm and macrocosm, the Natural Law and the Law of God, can only be envisaged as a battlefield teeming with competing knowledge and troubled metaphors (Del Sapiro Garbero 2011). Such a world of collapsing specularity will be staged in *King Lear* where it explodes in all its dramatic immanent and cosmic relevance. And where subjects find themselves alone with an illness which makes them the prey of a storm of conflicting forces: “Contending

with the fretful elements; / Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea, / Or swell the curlèd waters 'bove the main" (III.i.4-6).

It is no coincidence that *King Lear* is pervasively haunted by the semantics of "nature", "natural", "unnatural" striving for meaning (some fifty occurrences, with "unnatural" more than "natural", more frequent than in any other play). 'Nature' is a lemma run mad like the King. Rather, it is as if natural philosophy itself were yearning to be readjusted in the shattered world of the play.

LEAR

How, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I would use them so
That heaven's vault should crack!
(V.iii.253-55)

But the heavens, as anticipated in *Titus Andronicus*, do not answer.

As pointed out by Ned Lukacher in *Daemonic Figures. Shakespeare and the Question of Conscience*:

The Protestant Reformation challenged the ecclesiastical administration of conscience and sought to recover the individual experience of inwardness of the Pauline epistles. The challenge was not so much to the certainty of conscience as to the manner of achieving such certainty. It is at this point that Shakespeare entered the scene. Shakespeare is the crucial figure in this history, for he calls conscience into question both as a matter of natural law and as a matter of theological or intellectual certainty. (Lukacher 1994, 32)

"By the gate of suspicion" (Ricoeur)

Starting from the crux denounced by Augustine of Hippo in respect to the difficulty of explaining evil's existence in light of God, evil remains a theological and philosophical unresolved question. For if it is sure that God is the Master of heaven and earth, the creator of all things visible and invisible, how can we presume, Augustine argues conversing with God, that evil is also the work of God's? "I strained to see for myself the truth of an explanation I had heard", he expounds, "that the cause of evil is the free decision of our will, in consequence of which we act wrongly and suffer your righteous judgement; but I could not see it clearly", he confesses in the grip of a search which wears him out and makes him feel guilty, "choked", the prey of error (Augustine 1817 [410 CE]. VII:3.5, 161).

But then I was forced to ask more, 'Who made me? Was it not my God, who is not merely good, but Goodness itself? Whence, then, did I derive this ability to will evil and refuse good? Is it in me simply so that I should deserve the punishment I suffer? Who established that ability in me, who planted in me this bitter cutting, when my whole being is from my most sweet God. If the devil is responsible, where did the devil come from? If he was a good angel who was transformed into a devil by his own perverted will, what was the origin of this evil will in him that turned him into a devil, when an angel is made entirely by the supremely good creator?' I was pushed down again by these thoughts and nearly choked; but never was I sucked into that pit of error where no one confesses to you, because people would rather hold that you suffer evil than that we commit it. (VII: 3-5,161-162)

Shakespeare seems to have Augustine in mind when depicting Titus's suffered evil, but also the unanswered interrogative manner, and the blurring between angel and devil, good and evil. Augustine doesn't find an answer to his questions as he pursues his spiritual *Bildung*: a self-fashioning journey which is tantamount to the transferring of the morality of the classical world into that of Christianity. But he doesn't abandon his search in his Catholic way to truth, a search which lays bare his contention with a faith which is still "in many ways unformed", he says, "wavering and at variance with the norm" (VII:5,164). "And suppose that evil doesn't exist", he asks?

Where, then, is evil; where does it come from and how did it creep in? What is its root, its seed? Or does it not exist at all? But in that case, why do we fear and avoid something that has no reality? [...] Either the evil we fear exists, or our fear itself is the evil. (VII:5,163)

Written in 410 CE and first translated into English in 1679, Augustine's extolled spiritual journey, together with his renowned *The City of God* (413-426 CE), continued to be recognized as a landmark in post Reformist England. Shakespeare may have been inspired by his speculations on 'evil' and 'devil', as well as the reflections of the City's Book III on abandoning pagan gods, when writing his archaeologically layered and hybrid *Titus Andronicus*. Further, it may be not irrelevant to note that Shakespeare's *finis imperii* Roman play is set in the same troubled times as the Church Fathers: namely in the span of time encompassing the 4th and the 5th centuries CE, on the eve of the deflagration of the Roman Empire, culminating in the ruinous repetitive sacks inflicted by the Goths in 410-450.

Fostered by the renewed concern for the evil's 'Why', 'Whence from', and 'Why me' in his own times, Shakespeare relies on the secularized motif of a nature made in the image of hostile gods in his first Roman play. One which, echoing Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, he symbolizes tragically as a swallowing "den":

Titus

Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt –
 O, had we never, never hunted there! –
 Patterned by that the poet here describes,
 By nature made for murders and for rape.
 MARCUS O, why should nature build so foul a den,
 Unless the gods delight in tragedies
 (IV.i.56-60)

We still feel echoes of Augustine's difficulty to cope with evil – and its relation with free will – in our contemporary philosophy. As widely argued by Paul Ricoeur in his lifelong philosophical confrontation with evil, any interrogation of such a hard rock of morality – is inescapably a failure to both philosophy and theology: a confrontation with an aporia which can be met with, he suggests, only "with the help of a phenomenology of the experience of evil" (Ricoeur 1985, 635), or better by addressing it as a hermeneutics: an exploration of its "symbolic function – that is to say, its power of discovering and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred" (Ricoeur 1969, 5). And yet, intertwined as it is with sin and suffering, of which it represents "a sensitive point", the point of "crisis" (Ibidem), evil is never completely demythologized, the philosopher observes: for – even in our secularized forms of civilization – evil remains an inaccessible enigma. Can this sound as an "invitation to think less", the philosopher wonders, "or a provocation to think more, or to think differently about it?" (Ricoeur 1985, 635; 644)

Titus Andronicus invites us to enter the inner world of evil, woe, and conscience, "by the gate of *suspicion*": with the same unanswered interrogations, petrified as we are, together with its characters, by repetitive inundating violence, a pervasive metaphor in the play, which sweeps away any motivation. "If there were reason for these miseries, / Then into limits I could bind my woes" (III.ii.220-21), Titus laments in front of the enormity of his tragedy cruelly made visible

and allegorized by Lavinia's amputated body and her disarticulated language: no more than a naked surviving lament, a spectral bloodthirsty "groan", for most of the play. It is from such a sense of repetitiveness and colossal purposelessness that Titus's irrepressible and disturbing laughter originates (III.i.265). Evil has already been carved on Lavinia's fragmented body, tongue, voice, and gestuality when, as if springing from the catastrophe – or perhaps providence – another cry calls for attention, a child's cry: one which provokingly brings forth the question of conscience, of what it means to have a conscience.

Conscience is an "attestation of *self*" for the philosophers. "To hold conscience – in the sense of the German *Gewissen* – to be the place of an original form of the dialectic between selfhood and otherness is an enterprise fraught with difficulties", in Ricoeur's expounding of the concept. It is also an "assignment of responsibility". Because it means to put to the test "a surplus of meaning necessarily concretized in notions as *suspect* as 'bad' and 'good' conscience", and because it involves more than a challenge "to enter the problematic of conscience by the gate of *suspicion*" (Ricoeur 1994, 340; 341). Ever since conceptualized by both nonmoral classical and Christian moral thought as an internalized natural law (sanctioned by God in the Christian doctrine), conscience was a concept thoroughly re-interrogated and redefined in reformed England, as shown by the copious doctrinal literature on the argument and, most famously, by William Perkins, the theologian and author of *A Discourse of Conscience* (1597) and *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (1611) who, together with Richard Hooker, can be considered as the founder of the Anglican school of moral theology (see Wilks 1990, 5).

Was conscience a "concept in transition" in reformed Europe? (Stone 2009, 423-44). Certainly the sacred had come to be addressed and experienced as an unstable issue in the face of the whirling shifts from a confessional faith to another, and vice versa, which characterized the Tudor's re-formation, its moral/theological thought as well as its religious practices: what has come to be seen as a "traumatic event" (see Anderson 2006, 21-25), a story of fiery religious controversies and 'martyred' bodies (*Titus Andronicus*, III.i.108). One in which the interpretation of the Letter (signs / doctrine) could easily turn into a perilous test for your life, as witnessed by Foxe's popular *Acts & Monuments*. Indeed, trauma

was part of the Reformist reshuffled knowledge which together with the secularizing drive of the 'new science' brought about a redefinition of the human.

Arguably Shakespeare's "wicked" Rome (V.ii.99) – constantly addressed in its moments of crisis and change – could be felt as utterly contemporary in Tudor post-reformist England, when instability and overlapping temporalities had been made architectonically visible (as earlier mentioned) by the dissolution of monasteries and their libraries (1535), both of them significantly figuring in *Titus Andronicus* as ruins and signs of a disquieting sense of discontinuity and problematized memory and heritage (see Del Sapio Garbero, 2022, 11; 84-94).

Aaron's spying of Lucius's ways of praying ("I know that you art religious / And hast a thing within thee called conscience, / With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies / Which I have seen thee careful to observe" (V.i.74-77)), referred Shakespeare's audience to a story of re-editing, overlapping, effacements, substitutions, transformations, and policed implementation by law, parish after parish, of the reformed faith, textbooks, and ceremonies. This was tangible in everyday life. Instructions to the reader in the new *Elizabethan Book of Prayer* (1559) helped people cope with the change by explaining, soon after the Preface, "Why some [ceremonies] be abolished, and some retayned"². Moral concepts, evil, sin, conscience, memory, seemed to undergo the same epistemic mobility and readjustments. They were in the hands of the prince (see Duffy 58 *et passim*; 565-93 and Targoff 2001). But this also meant, as Shakespeare put on record in his theatre – often and blatantly through his ambiguous agents of evil –, that you could claim your own way to knowledge or morality.

Nietzsche would say that morality and moral concepts were in the hands of history. Conscience is the offspring of a "terrible necessity" to the philosopher. It is one with the origins of language, he suggests, and the necessity of our ancestors to communicate with each other: a premise by which conscience – which he defines as a developing consciousness of our actions, thoughts and emotions in relation to the others – is inscribed in the time of history (see

2 <https://archive.org/details/prayerbookofqueoochur/page/18/mode/2up?q=ceremonies>

Nietzsche 2013, paragraph 354). The connections of conscience with moralities, theodicies – the sacred, as well as the secular, institutions, laws, language, myths, good and evil – are part of such a history (see Nietzsche 2003, aphorism 199).

Ned Lukacher's psychoanalytic approach to Shakespeare's conscience takes pains to assess a similar postulate when he writes how the poet:

questions both the Christian ontotheological interpretation of conscience, which regards it as the residue of a divine spiritual fire, and the classical interpretation of the *daimon*, which regards it as a principal of natural law, an indwelling presence that watches over the soul but is neither of divine origin nor of human making. Shakespeare unsettles both interpretations while nevertheless insisting on the necessity of posing the question of conscience again and again". (Lukacher 1994, 1-2)

The question of conscience, the critic argues, "is the unanswered and unanswerable". Indeed, "All we will ever know are the figures of conscience, its language and arguments" (30). But what defines its existing is its ghostliness, Lukacher points out, "the uncertainty of its Being"; what, summoning Kant and a Freud-Heideggerian scenario, he highlights in its inner "pathological character", its "need to appeal": the Hamlet-like mode of melancholy that "keeps examining the ground of its own functioning" (54). "Again and again". Which doesn't mean for the critic that he is escaping history: for, he says, "The question of time is invariably the undoing of the certainty of conscience. [...] Conscience is the name of the shadow" (31). And it is exactly such an interaction of 'time' and 'functioning' that defines its historicity, or 'historicality', as Lukacher prefers to rephrase it.

Lukacher doesn't deal with *Titus Andronicus* in his engaging theoretical examination of conscience in Shakespeare, nor does Ricoeur, but both provide great reflection which helps us approach the play's concealed conscience, its obliterated argument: a conscience overwhelmed by the necessity of vengeance, until it explodes provocatively with the words of the Other and the force of omission in Act 5.

In Shakespeare's times, a period of religious turmoil, doctrinal disputes, reframed notions of moral categories, as well as secular redefinitions of the self championed in the name of the retrieved Greek

motto “Nosce te ipsum”, the abysmal darkness of the conscience – and consciousness – move on to the space of theatre. Conscience in its Judaic-Christian relation with evil, sin and guilt, was a matter widely addressed and anatomized in Reformist England. As mentioned above, it was speculated upon as a moral and doctrinal argument, as well as performed on the scaffolds of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, where the homiletic allegorical figures of the medieval moral plays and interludes developed decisively into the profundity of inspecting and self-inspecting characters provided with situated flesh, blood, passions.

Interestingly however, Shakespeare’s representations of interiority retained part of their allegorical potentiality, in the capacity the new theatre had of allowing the maximum of truth through the maximum of disguise and fictionality. Suffice it to mention Shakespeare’s emblematic – “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (*Hamlet*, II.ii.523-24), and the allegorizing if objectifying role played by the language of dumb shows – from *Hamlet* to *The Tempest* –: namely the way they produced inner and problematized meaning through theatrical redoubling.

In the hallucinatory ending of *Titus Andronicus*, evil comes spectrally on the chariot of Revenge, uncannily resumed by Tamora and her two sons Demetrio and Chiron disguised as ‘Rape’ and ‘Murder’: her ‘ministers’ (V.ii.60): “Knock at [Titus’s] study”, she orders, “where they say he keeps / To ruminate strange plots of dire revenge; / Tell him Revenge is come to join with him / And work confusion on his enemies” (V.ii.5-8). Horror is redoubled with the “habiliment” (V.ii.1) of a pageant; just like the horror which Titus devises in the suspended temporality of his library, the storage of a memory gone wild and acting with the malignant agency of a killer: “And what is written shall be executed” (V.ii.15). Theatre allows for the same and the Other, with characters – Tamora, Titus, Chiron, Demetrius – knowingly playing the game for some 150 verses (V.ii.1-150) as both agents and allegories of Revenge: each of them producing reciprocating and menacing spectrality, and each of them reciprocally aware of their split sameness. “I knew them all, though they supposed me mad / and will ‘o’erreach them in their own devices” (V.ii.142-43), Titus remarks before moving on to “play the cook” (V.iii.204) in his final self-annihilating *coup de theatre*.

Interestingly, in Tamora's pageant, they are all in disguise – and so is Titus “like a cook”, SI (V.iii). Apart from Aaron who has just delivered the remorseless confession of his crimes and is heading fettered – but undisguised – towards his (un)“sweet” death.

Rehearsing D-Evil: “Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed”

As stated by Nietzsche in one of the aphorisms of *Beyond Good and Evil* (chapter IV, aphorism 129), the devil is “the oldest friend of Knowledge”³. Shakespeare's Aaron, I think, largely substantiates such an axiom. In fact he is a knowledgeable and knowing personification of evil: a ‘devil’ aware of the role he is performing in the play. The endgame between Aaron and Lucius in Act 5 is shaped by its symbolism (V.i.147-50 / V.iii.110-13). Insistently interpellated as a ‘devil’, Aaron is the one who astutely forces on Lucius the obligation of ‘thinking of evil and conscience’ in its interiorized relations with divinity, prohibition and guilt. Used to speak in the marginal dim-light of the asides, Aaron though is also the one who, when asked to speak, speaks too much and excruciatingly.

That Aaron is a “reversible figure”, earlier discussed in the theatrical view provided by Foucault is fairly agreed. Moors at theatre, it has been said, stood for Jews, bastardy, deformity, ungrateful and monstrous sons and daughters in the Elizabethan perception. But there is one role which Aaron performs increasingly knowingly in the course of the play: that of the devil. This is meta-theatrically foregrounded by Aaron himself when in delivering his promised if remorseless public confession he summarizes it, ambiguously, as something “Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed” (V.i.66). Is Aaron commenting on his “abominal deeds” (V.i.64), whose “plots” and whose list can be hardly pitiful, or is he ventriloquising the playwright's idea of tragedy as a complex oxymoronic chemistry of horror, sorrow and pity? In this I think, *Titus Andronicus* seems to confirm Orgel's assessment of the Renaissance theory of tragedy and catharsis as a kind of corporeal “homeopathic” tempering of the emotions, a socially desirable “physical mimesis” (Orgel 2002, 138).

3 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm#link2HCH0004>

Placed in the last act of the play, Aaron's confession – or the release of his "wondrous things" as he has it – , seems to function, wittingly, as a sort of *pharmakon*: a "ruthful" medicine which he inoculates, devil like, as a venom, in Lucius' ears and in the onlookers' by concomitantly appealing "piteously" to their reaction. But his is not the much invoked reaction – the "sympathy of woe [...] / As far from help as limbo is from bliss" (III.i.149) –, which Titus insistently implores all for naught in his Benjaminean *Trauerspiel*. Aaron's confession aims at making 'ruthful yet piteously' the fearful mixed heap of limbs and sorrow which we see piling to the sky throughout the play, by taking it all on his shoulders, namely by offering an image of himself as a device: a *deus ex machina* of evil, as well as a meta-theatrically conscious scapegoat. We might compare it to Edgar's overtly fictional representation of abjection in *King Lear*, and the way it functions alike as a "physic" in Lear's experience of evil (III.iv.34).

Altogether Aaron's confession gestures towards a converging and meta-theatrical juxtaposition of author and character (see Lombardo 1999, viii) which allows for Aaron's overdetermined final and spectacular performance as an agent of evil. A performance, though, needed by both Aaron and Lucius: the former to save his child, the latter to boast a good tale in his imminent entering Rome as a conqueror and would-be peacemaker. "Indeed, I was their tutor to instruct them", Aaron says in sealing his role as a deviser, instructor, and supervising onlooker of the barbarity perpetrated in the "abhorred pit" (II.ii.98).

Well, let my deeds be witness of my worth:
 I trained thy brethren to that guileful hole [...]
 I wrote the letter that thy father found [...]
 And what not done that thou hast cause to rue
 Wherein I had no stroke of mischief in it?
 I played the cheater for thy father's hand,
 And when I had it, drew myself apart
 And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter.
 (V.i.103-13)

Evil has already been "performed" in the previous acts (mostly in Act 2) when Aaron announces its "ruthful" auricular repetition (V.i.66): all in all imagined as a linguistic performance.

Why, assure thee, Lucius,
 'T will vex thy soul to hear what shall I speak:
For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres
 Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
 Complots of mischief, treasons, villainies,
Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed,
 And this shall all be buried in my death
 Unless thou swear to me my child shall live.
 (V.i.61-67, my emphasis)

Thus he explains, obliquely pleading for the compassion of the audience ("For I must talk of"). And indeed for his onlookers Aaron's final linguistic performance provides all the emotional release which comes together – 'piteously' – from insufferable ill and no less retribution. However, such a hyperbolic textual awareness of the character, as I would like to call it, also deflates the enormity of evil by causing – as Titus's unreasonable laughter or the paranoia about hands, or flies – a disturbance in the flow of the tragic emotion. A Brechtian interrupting interference, which as suggested earlier in this essay, we might phrase with Ricoeur "a provocation to think more, or to think differently about [evil]" (Ricoeur 1985, 635).

Astutely imbued with performative idiom, Aaron's final remorseless confession seems to have no end in conveying ill 'done' and 'to be done', imaginable and unimaginable – "Ay, that I had not done a thousand more" (V.i.124-40) – determining an excess, I argue, which in overdoing the Moor's stereotype problematizes him as a villain. Indeed it fulfils what the play tends to construct theatrically as a racialized confessing and unredeemable agent of evil. The coeval *Richard III* comes to mind, with his slightly parodic conscience:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.
 [...]
 All several sins, all used in each degree
 Throng to the bar, crying all, "Guilty, guilty!"
 (*Richard III*, V.iii.191-97)

But let us stay with the hellish "bitter tongue" boasted by the unrepenting Aaron (V.1.150):

AARON

Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
And willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

(V.i.141-49)

The effect is that of a never-ending enumeration of evils, which together with its intertwined hammering assertion of free will, seems to want to ironically exhaust all the possibilities of horror. Aaron is a voice, the voice of a perilous devil: "Sirs, stop his mouth, and let him speak no more", Lucius orders to his soldiers in the grip of an excruciating crescendo: a "torment" to his conscience which can be silenced only by the Moor's execution. Because you "hast a thing within thee called conscience", Lucius seems to ruminate, and as if aware that he cannot get the tale – "That highly may advantage thee to hear" (V.i.56) – without being inundated by an evil which is discovered as the guilt of many in the play. Shakespeare makes his audience participate bathetically to this by reducing the enormity of the evil Aaron is confessing: "a thousand dreadful things" which he boasts he has perpetrated "willingly as one would kill a fly". A figure of speech (amplification through diminution) which provocatively downgrades the violence of Aaron's deeds into normality: a normality which invites consideration in light of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'.

But this is not the only occurrence. For Shakespeare had contrived a longer scene, in which the fly symbolism turns into uncanny and moralized theatrical action, but which is absent in the three Quarto editions of the play and was included later in the first Folio (III. ii.52-82). Here tyranny toward flies is shown, interestingly, as the Andronici's pastime, Marcus's and Titus's as they sit at a banquet.

SI [*Marcus strikes the dish with a knife*]

TITUS

What thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?

MARCUS

At that that I have killed, my lord – a fly.

TITUS

Out on thee, murderer. Thou killest my heart.

(III.ii.52-54)

"How if that fly had a father and a mother?

(III.ii.61).

The perception of Titus's deranged mind is comically one of dismay and disproportionate similitudes. "He takes false shadows for true substances", Marcus observes. But Titus promptly changes his mind as soon as he is told that the insect "was a black ill-favoured fly, / Like the empress' Moor. Therefore I killed him" (ii.52-71). And Titus: "Give me thy knife, I will insult on him" (III.ii,.72).

[...] we are not brought so low
 But that between us we can kill a fly
 That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor.
 (III.ii.77)

Foreseeing Titus's banquet of human bodies in Act Five, the scene disturbingly reproduces the logic of a violence, which develops as an everyday job in *Titus Andronicus*. It also shows the way the *acte gratuit* articulates its own spectrality. Substituting enormity with triviality – and vice versa – is not just a figure of speech in "wicked" Rome. It can disclose tragi-comically the horror of reality, the reality being first of all, as incisively observed by Charlotte Scott, the fly's material disclosure "that there is food on the Andronici's table and that there is blood on their hands" (Scott 2014, 264). Mockingly if disquietingly, conscience is interrogated by means of a customary fly, in a way that comments sarcastically on the repetitive butchery of the play.

Aaron is the racialized community's bad conscience, he who appears spectrally as "a fly / That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor" (III.ii.78-79). He is a "hue" (IV.ii.73). He is a devil and a fly, reality and spectrality, an overdetermined character as well as an anthropomorphized trifle. He is voice and nuisance, an enduring "bitter tongue" (V.i.150) and the fly's "pretty buzzing" (III.ii.65).

He is a character as well as the author of himself, a task which he performs in devil-like fashion, with the maximum of proficiency, but without being a devil: "If there be devil, would I were a devil" (V.i.147), Shakespeare makes him say in his last words, as he leads his onlookers towards the play's end. Grounding on what I am calling his textual awareness Aaron ironically cooperates with his 'author', in constructing as well as deconstructing, or resisting, the process of his 'Othering', namely the fictionality of his displayed hyperbolic stereotype (but see also Bartels, 442-43).

As noticed by Lukacher, speaking of Shylock, Shakespeare's engagement with the conscience is often tainted with something parodic (see Lukacher 1994, 115). In *Titus Andronicus* conscience finds a derogatory size by means of Titus's and Aaron's fly. Morality (and law) provide no comfortable ethics in Shakespeare's first Roman play. Meaningfully Aaron boasts he hasn't got a conscience and yet, provocatively, he makes his audience hear its voice – its unsettling inaudible language–, as well as its buzzing. He also makes his audience hear a child's cry.

"Of this was Tamora delivered, / The issue of an irreligious Moor, / Chief architect and plotter of these woes", Marcus says at the end of the play (V.iii.119-21) asking for Rome's compassion. Through the Moor's child Shakespeare grafts onto the heart of evil the possibility of the good, whatsoever the law his character is obeying, and whatsoever the conscience he may acknowledge as his own. Be that as it may, Aaron, and his legacy as a villain, do a lot to add to the 'wonderous things' of theatre, to its wonderful performance of the wounds of Shakespeare's age and of ours.

References

- Anderson, P. Thomas. 2006. *Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate.
- Augustine of Hippo. [410 CE] 1817. *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. *The Works of Sainte Augustine*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Libraries.
- Augustine of Hippo. [413-426 CE] 2003. *The City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books.
- Bartels, Emily C. 1990. "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashioning of Race." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (4, Winter): 433-54.
- Bate, Jonathan. 2003. "Introduction." In *Titus Andronicus*. The Arden Edition. Edited by Jonathan Bate. London: Thomson Learning.
- Benjamin, Walter. [1955] 1999. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2003a. "Paralipomena on the Concept of History." In *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940. Translated by Edmund

- Jephcott et al. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. [1963] 2003b. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London and New York: Verso.
- Book of Common Prayer*. 1559. The Elizabethan Book. <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/>, <https://archive.org/details/prayerbookofqueoochur/page/18/mode/2up?q=ceremonies>.
- Camden, William. 1610. *BRITANNIA: A Chorographicall Description of the Most flourishing Kingdomes, ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, and IRELAND, and the Ilands Adioyning, out of the depth of ANTIQUITIE*. Written first in Latine by William Camden. Translated newly into English by Philémon Holland. London: Georgii Bishop and Ioannis Norton.
- Del Sapiro Garbero, Maria. 2010. "A Spider in the Eye/I: The Hallucinatory Staging of the Self in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*." In *Solo Performances: Staging the Early Modern Self in England*, edited by Ute Berns, 116-33. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- . 2011. "Troubled Metaphors: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Anatomy of the Eye." In *Dialoge zwischen Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in der Renaissance*, edited by K. Bergdolt and M. Pfister, vol. 27, 43-70. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- . 2018. "The Illness of Shakespeare's Rome: An Introduction." In *Rome in Shakespeare's World*, edited by Maria Del Sapiro Garbero, vii-xxii. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.
- . 2022. *Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. [1980] 1987. *The Postcard*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Duffy, Eamon. [1992] 2005. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Fiedler, Leslie. 1974. *The Stranger in Shakespeare*. Frogmore: Paladin.
- Foucault, Michel. [1975] 1991. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books.
- Griffin, Benjamin. 2017. "Aaron's Name." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 68 (3, Fall): 295-99.
- Hooker, Richard. [1594] 2025. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Books I-IV (Book I)*. Edited by Arthur Stephen McGrade. Oxford: Oxford

- Scholarly Editions Online. <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/display/10.1093/actrade/9780199604913.book.1/actrade-9780199604913-work-1>
- Lake, Peter. 2018. "Tragedy and Religion: Religion and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk, 167-83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lombardo, Agostino. 1999. "Introduzione." In William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, V-VIII. A cura di Agostino Lombardo. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Lukacher, Ned. 1994. *Daemonic Figures. Shakespeare and the Question of Conscience*. Cornell University: Ithaca and London.
- Moschovakis, Nicholas R. 2002. "'Irreligious Piety' and Christian History: Persecution as Pagan Anachronism in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (4, Winter): 460-86.
- Müller, Heiner. [1985] 2012. *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome*. Translated by Carl Weber and Paul David Young. In *Heiner Müller after Shakespeare: Macbeth and Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome*, 77-171. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Neill, Michael. [1983] 2000. *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2003. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm#link2HCH0004>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1883-85] 2013. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Orgel, Stephen. 2002. *The Authentic Shakespeare*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, Paul. [1967] 1969. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1985. "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology." Translated by David Pellauer. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (4): 635-48.
- . [1990] 1994. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

- Scott, Charlotte. 2014. "Still Life? Anthropocentrism and the Fly in *Titus Andronicus* and *Volpone*." In *Shakespeare, Sound and Screen*, edited by Peter Holland. *Shakespeare Survey* 61: 256-68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 2003. *Titus Andronicus*. Edited by Jonathan Bate. London: Thomson Learning.
- . 2015. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Third Edition. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Stone, M. W. F. 2009. "Conscience in Renaissance Moral Thought: A Concept in Transition?" In *The Renaissance Conscience*, edited by Harald E. Braun and Edward Vallance. *Renaissance Studies* 23 (4): 423-44.
- Targoff, Ramie. 2001. *The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Waith, M. Eugene. 1957. "The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*." *Shakespeare Survey* 10: 39-49.
- Wilks, J. S. 1990. *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Shakespeare and the Boundaries of Human Kindness

Silvia Bigliuzzi

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, ideas of predetermination and divine election constitute, especially in the gradual establishment of Puritan culture, the main frame of reference of the theology and ethics of evil, which, on principle, removes from the self any potential source of pleasure or seduction by excluding free will and, therefore, individual choice. Yet the experience of evil doing does not end in this closure of the subject within a fideistic perspective. Contemporary theatrical culture problematises the question by exploring in tragic play and participation in theatrical gameplay the limits and potential of freedom as an act of will recognisable in the assumption of guilt-as-doing as the foundation of one's being. Shakespeare explores a whole range of possibilities of doing evil as cases of conscience as well as in relation to the reactions to evil done (or being done), from fear to terror and horror. It has been noted that the experience of horror threatens not just individual human lives, but the very essence of what it means to be human – rooted in the singular vulnerability of each embodied person. This encompasses the full range of violence, from overt atrocities like massacres and torture to more subtle, insidious forms of harm. In this sense, violence on the body has been interpreted as a violation of the human condition. This article explores how Shakespeare probes the boundaries of the human condition through the experiences of horror in *Macbeth* – distinct from fear and terror – focusing on the psychological, ethical, and symbolic dimensions at the outer limits of tragic catharsis.

Keywords: Shakespeare, evil, horror, catharsis, *Macbeth*

Strictly speaking, I do not know and cannot know what I would be today if I had not been in a concentration camp: no man knows his future, and here it would precisely be a matter of describing a future that never happened. It has some meaning to attempt predictions (which are always crude, after all) about the behaviour of a population, but it is very difficult, or impossible, to predict the behaviour of an individual, even on the scale of days.
(Primo Levi, from 1976 "Appendix" to *If This is a Man* [1947])¹

1 Levi 2014, 211. My translation.

The great tragedy of the Jewish people is no Greek tragedy; it can rouse neither terror nor pity, for both of these arise only out of the fate which follows from the inevitable slip of a beautiful character; it can arouse horror alone. The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth who stepped out of nature itself, clung to alien Beings, and so in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature, had at last to be forsaken by his gods (since these were objects and he their slave) and be dashed to pieces on his faith itself. (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, from *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, 1798)²

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?
(T. S. Eliot, *Gerontion*, 1920)

If This is a Man

When one reaches a crossroads, declining one path might seem to imply the simple choice of its opposite. But in reality, decisions rarely offer such clarity or symmetry. Every act of choice unfurls into a web of branching possibilities – some visible, many hidden. The trajectory of a life is not shaped solely by conscious will, but is also sculpted by external contingencies and internal ambivalences. Thus, both the shape of the future and the contours of any imagined past remain elusive – beyond prediction and ultimately beyond reconstruction. Yet the very act of choosing – of engaging with this irreducible complexity – defines something essential about being human. To decide is not merely to select an option, but to take responsibility for its consequences, including those that were never fully foreseeable. In this way, decision-making becomes not just a pragmatic function but an ethical burden, situating the human at the intersection of possibility, accountability, and vulnerability. To be human, then, is not simply to act, but to bear the weight of one's actions – especially when they entail harm, complicity, or the failure to choose otherwise.

The difficulty of imagining a different future from a changed past – or, more precisely, of envisioning an alternative present as the outcome of different choices – was powerfully expressed by Primo Levi when he was asked whether his life would have been different had he not endured the horrors of the concentration camp. His response was clear: no one

² In Kottman 2009, 47.

can say what their past would have been “if” (2014, 211). For Levi, this impossibility of retroactive speculation touches something deeper than individual fate. It raises a fundamental question about what it means to be human – and, more urgently, how one may cease to be human in the face of radical dehumanisation as in Levi’s experience. The ethical stakes of Levi’s reflection are profound: to be human is to inhabit a space where the possibility of evil is internal, where responsibility endures even when agency breaks down. This tension – between vulnerability and responsibility, between dehumanisation and moral choice – finds a contemporary philosophical counterpart in positions that see humanity not anchored in biological survival or existential fragility, but in fidelity to an ethical truth that transcends instinct: “An animal whose resistance, unlike that of a horse, lies not in his fragile body”, writes Alain Badiou, “but in his stubborn determination to remain what he is – that is to say, precisely something other than a victim, other than a being-for-death, and thus: something other than a mortal being” (2001, 11-12). Here, Badiou reframes ethics not as a reactive moralism or a system of prohibitions, but as an affirmative stance (2011, 16). It is this capacity – this ethical possibility in the face of contingency – that here appears as constitutive of the properly human.

Badiou’s claim applies primarily to the victim. Yet what defines “the human”, depending on different cultural and historical contexts as well as from the perspective of the agent, is far from self-evident. Is being human simply the possession of rights deemed inalienable by liberal modernity, such as the right to life, freedom from harm, and liberty of thought? More precisely, humanity might depend not only on recognising those rights in oneself but also in others as responsible agents. One might then ask to what extent a persecutor retains their own humanity while violating these rights. Does the failure to respect the humanity of others mean forfeiting one’s own, or does a corrupted and distorted humanity persist even amid acts of atrocity? Moreover, atrocity and horror are not confined solely to physical violence; atrocious actions also belong to the spheres of psychology and emotion – in the violation of trust, the shattering of one’s internal world, or the slow erosion of personhood through fear, coercion, or the shattering of memory. In this sense, horror extends beyond what is done to the body to encompass what is inflicted upon the self – upon memory, perception, and meaning.

While such questions and principles shape contemporary norms, they have received different responses contingent on historical periods, insufficient to account for the deeper ruptures Levi and Badiou point to: the moment when humanness itself is challenged or called into doubt by action – or inaction. Shakespeare's engagement with similar concerns about the human condition amid moral collapse is deeply rooted in the historical context of his time – a period marked by intense religious tensions and the profound influence of the Reformation in its various forms, including Anglicanism as well as more radical movements like Calvinism and Puritanism. These religious debates problematised the concept of guilt, elevating it to a central role in the understanding of sin, particularly original sin. This climate underpins Shakespeare's tragedies, where evil is portrayed not merely as the violation of rights or laws, but as a profound destabilisation of what it means to be human, opening a space for reflection on how we navigate knowledge, belief, and self-awareness. In his tragedies, evil may erupt in direct confrontation with the law, but it also manifests in subtler, more intimate ways. It forces us to reckon not only with the suffering endured but also with the transformations we undergo as both victims and perpetrators. To be human, in this tragic framework, is to stand exposed to the heights of moral greatness and the depths of moral collapse: to be both the agent of action and the one who must answer for it.

Macbeth is possibly the play that engages more extensively and deeply with an explicit interrogation of what being human means. "Human kindness" is the phrase Lady Macbeth uses in I.v, when musing upon her husband's too tender nature to infringe the law: "yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (I.v.15-18)³. Lady Macbeth critiques her husband for being too compassionate to seize power through ruthless means; but at a deeper level, "kindness" resounds as something intrinsic to the human condition tout court, as essential and natural as milk itself for a baby. It suggests that compassion is not merely a personal trait, but a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. In scorning this quality, Lady Macbeth rejects not just mercy, but humanity itself, marking the beginning of a moral unravelling that will run throughout the play.

3 All quotations are from Shakespeare 2015.

This is the point of departure for my inquiry into how similar questions are dramatised in *Macbeth*, and the response this play elicits at particular junctures. What is it that is fitting for a man? What are the boundaries that can be crossed? Macbeth's explicit questioning is famously embedded in a painful interrogation of human responsibility in choice, staging a peculiar experience of the horror inherent in murder in ways that affect the articulation of the tragic catharsis. This raises the question whether the interrelation between good and evil is incapable of resolving the unstable ethical terrain upon which human identity is formed. To what extent is the sense of the human tested by challenging the relation between freedom and guilt and the various ways in which the tragic event affects traditional concepts of emotional purgation? Does tragedy become not a resolution, but a lens through which the human is disclosed – both to itself and to its limits?

One could reply that Hegel's reflections on Shakespeare's tragedy, especially as developed by A. C. Bradley (esp. 1904), offer answers to similar questions from a perspective that valorises dialectical reconciliation and ethical closure – despite an inherent sense of final loss and waste, as Bradley notably emphasised (“There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good”; 1965, 106)⁴. But the impression remains that, rooted in a historical moment when the sense of a singular overarching order was profoundly challenged, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* escapes such understanding insofar as the tragic moment often surpasses catharsis, preventing a genuine restoration of moral order. Hegel himself – towards the end of the first section of *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* – noted a shift from fear to horror in *Macbeth*, identifying a suggestive parallel with the fate of the Jewish people and a fundamental withholding of tragic purgation. However, this insight remained underdeveloped with regard to Shakespeare's play. Bradley, though he inherited much from Hegel, did not pursue what this substitution entailed.

4 Bradley further claimed: “What we feel corresponds quite as much to the idea that they [Shakespeare's tragic characters such as Hamlet or Macbeth] are *its* parts [of the moral system or order which shows itself omnipotent against individuals], expressions, products; that in their defect or evil *it* is untrue to its soul of goodness, and falls into conflict and collision with itself; that, in making them suffer and waste themselves, *it* suffers and wastes itself” (1965, 106).

One question that arises, therefore, is whether interpretative frameworks grounded in a Hegelian dialectic – which presuppose a morally coherent world in which tragedy unfolds as part of a meaningful order – can adequately account for the challenges Shakespeare's tragedies pose to the rational necessities of history and ethics (e.g., in the ethical life, *Sittlichkeit*). This becomes particularly pressing when the re-establishment of order at a play's end does not fully repair or reconcile the fractures it sought to mend. For Bradley, a sense of justice (not to be confused with poetic justice) would inhere in the spectacle that does not leave us rebellious or despairing because we sense – however faintly – that the tragedy arises not from blind fate, but from a moral force, one deeply connected to the very virtues we admire in the characters. But if this sense of justice is compatible with an idea of catharsis, how can we reconcile the experience of horror with the lack of both? In Hegel's passage from *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* mentioned above, Macbeth serves as the paradigm for a tragic figure whose fall evokes not fear and pity but horror – a response rooted in his radical estrangement from the moral order. Having severed himself from nature and aligned with alien powers (albeit deeply seated in himself), Macbeth becomes a slave to forces he cannot master, ultimately destroying everything sacred within and around him. This is the historical fate of the Jewish people, Hegel claims, whom he portrays as similarly alienated: bound to an abstract, external law, they respond to threats with a desperate, fanatical energy that mirrors Macbeth's impious fury. In both cases, the tragedy lies not in a noble flaw, in the conflict between two valid but opposing ethical principles as in Greek tragedy (notably Antigone *versus* Creon), but in a spiritual self-betrayal so extreme that it precludes pity or fear, leaving only the bleak clarity of horror. Following this logic, can Macbeth's total estrangement from moral order be resolved in his final punishment? Or, better said, is his punishment capable of re-establishing the moral system, although with a waste, in Bradley's terms?

The question this article raises is how we can explain the fragility of meaning articulated in this tragedy through an experience of evil presented as the tragic trespassing of the boundaries of human kindness, and how this experience evokes the evil-horror nexus in place of the traditional pity and fear. The human and its relation to

language and the symbolic order are central to this discussion. It is precisely this breakdown – of moral coherence and redemptive closure – that my approach seeks to address, exploring what Hegel has left unsaid. It will imply the question whether a post-Hegelian approach, cautious about resolutions inscribed in a dialectical dynamic, can foreground not only the historical and existential singularity of evil but also the fragility of meaning itself. It will also ask whether the interrogation of human kindness illustrates not merely a logical problem, but also what Paul Ricoeur referred to as the scandal of suffering and reason: a rupture that resists synthesis yet demands interpretation (1985; 2007). I will discuss a few central steps in Macbeth's encounter with evil outside and in himself, and how this horror appears to be the driving force from I.iii, through I.vii, II, iii, III.ii and V.v, and will consider the language that says and unsays the murder of Duncan and Banquo. My starting point is the beginning of Macbeth's tragic arc.

I.iii: The Seeds of Horror

Following his encounter with the witches in I.iii, Macbeth is rapt with the disquieting meaning of their mysterious prediction, which opens for him an insoluble problem: "[*aside*] If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (I.iii.146-47). His conditional "if" raises profound interrogations about himself as an ethical subject within a universe that wavers between deterministic beliefs – according to which chance should crown him – and his own agency. Macbeth does not refer to God or heavenly forces, but instead uses the ambiguous term "chance" – a word that evokes a range of meanings from random accident to fortune or even divine providence. This ambiguity recalls the classical notion of *tyche*, the Greek concept of fortune, suggesting that outcomes may arise from forces beyond an individual's intention. "Chance" implies that seemingly random actions might still form part of a larger, perhaps divinely ordered, design – a view compatible with Christian ideas of providence. However, this remains deeply uncertain. Macbeth's use of "may" underscores this ambiguity: it implies that the nature of the event's origin – whether random, chaotic, or meaningful – is itself unknowable. There is no assurance of any particular interpretation.

This uncertainty contrasts sharply with the account found in *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), Shakespeare's primary historical source. There, Macbeth and Banquo show no such hesitation. They regard the three women as "some vaine fantastick illusion", and jokingly address each other according to the witches' predictions – Macbeth as king, Banquo as father of kings (1973, 495). Once the prophecies begin to come true and "euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken", they fully credit the witches. Holinshed refers to them unequivocally as "weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie", suggesting a clear link to a predetermined design beyond human control.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, by contrast, begins to question their nature almost immediately after their disappearance, introducing a scepticism that was absent in Holinshed. This marks a significant shift: from a narrative of fixed destiny to one riddled with doubt, ambiguity, and the unsettling possibility that no clear design governs human affairs. This represents a pivotal moment: Macbeth's suspension of thinking, waiting for "chance" to crown him, as he says, follows another famous aside where he interrogates the ethical value of the prophecy:

This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill: cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
 If good, why do I yield to *that suggestion*
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? Present *fears*
 Are less than *horrible imaginings*.
 My thought, whose *murder* yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man
 That function is smothered in surmise,
 And nothing is but what is not. (I.iii.132-44; emphasis mine)

The negative form of Macbeth's reasoning ("Cannot ... cannot"), in which he first attempts to reassure himself that the witches' prophecy is favourable ("Cannot be ill"), only immediately to reverse this assessment ("Cannot be good"), reveals his deep ambivalence and resistance to trusting the moral reliability of the witches' message.

He is already interpreting their words not as a neutral foretelling of Duncan's natural death, but as an implicit suggestion of murder. This is an appalling realisation – one that momentarily severs his connection to ordinary time and space. Notably, Macbeth is not afraid of the witches themselves; had he been, he might have fled. Nor is he yet afraid of the consequences of the murder. Instead, what truly unsettles him are the “horrid image” and the “horrible imaginings” that invade his mind. These words matter greatly: they mark the beginning of his psychological unravelling, as imagination – initially a source of horror – gradually becomes the driving force behind his moral descent and ultimate loss of self.

Opposite to trembling and agitation typical of fear, the experience of horror evokes stillness, paralysis, and a stunned astonishment that halts movement – manifesting in a rigid body and bristling hair, as captured in the word “horripilating”, meaning “hair-raising” (from the Latin *horripilare*, composed of *horrere* (to bristle, to become stiff) and *pilus* (hair) = literally, “causing the hairs to stand on end”). Where terror is linked to the instinct for survival, horror arises from a visceral response of revulsion, often provoked by that which no longer appears recognisably human. This becomes especially acute in the traumatic experience of witnessing a human corpse – particularly that of a loved one – which forces a confrontation with the horrifying reality of mortality⁵. As Julia Kristeva puts it, “The corpse, perceived devoid of divine context and beyond scientific understanding, represents the pinnacle of abjection. It embodies death permeating life. Abject” (2024, 4). Horror is also what we feel in front of the degradation of the human form: the dismembered, tortured, or defiled body that resists recognition as a singular, vulnerable human being. In such moments, what is violated is not only the body but the very basis of our shared humanity, grounded in the irreducibility and exposure of each individual life (Cavarero 2008). We feel this kind of horror in a play like *Titus Andronicus*; but in *Macbeth*, this is not the case. The corpse itself will be occluded from view; no dismembered body is shown or commented on. Macbeth is imagining only. So what is it that makes Macbeth's hair unfix?

Macbeth's initial thinking in response to the witches' prophecy is blocked by contrary hypotheses, and this corresponds to the physical,

5 See Cavarero 2008, chap. 2.

uncontrolled reaction of paralysis and bristling. As A. D. Nuttall observes, the experience of horror produces a kind of emotional stoppage; it “is not carried through to its fully human condition, in pity and fear”, and the response it provokes is “arrested” rather than fulfilled (1996, 78). In this sense, horror does not function like other emotions that belong within the human condition. Instead, it imposes a kind of paralysis – freezing the subject in a state that resembles death. This reaction distances the individual from fully human feeling (such as pity and fear), placing them in a space outside ordinary emotional experience. Macbeth’s response to the witches’ prophecy in I.iii exemplifies this distinction. His horrified reaction is an experience that is neither of fear nor of compassion for the imagined death of the King, nor is it one of elation for his own promised power. Rather, it is of horror. One may wonder why, considering that, after all, he is a seasoned warrior. In Ross’s account of his remarkable courage in battle against Norway and the traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, he is referred to as “Bellona’s bridegroom” (I.ii.55). And yet, the sisters’ *unnamed* prospect of the murder of Duncan horrifies him. The horror of the prospect of such an unnamable act can only be expressed through a denial of language and rational reflection – a space where thinking is simultaneously omnipotent and unthinkable. The paradox of “nothing is / But what is not” encapsulates this duality, where “no-thing” and “not” hold together both the latent future act – already seeded in the present – and a foreclosure of coherent thought⁶.

This collapse of certainty in thought and language begins to take shape around the figure of Duncan and the idea of murder, which initially appears only as a “fantastical” notion – something unreal, imagined, and yet increasingly potent. Duncan is not any man; he embodies the Symbolic, he is the living Name of the Father, the principle of the Law and the human bond that keeps Macbeth “pale”, as he will say in III.ii.51. Killing Duncan signifies the crushing of what stands for the principle of *civil order* and *moral law* that makes man recognisably human within the community. “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (II.ii.13-15), will say Lady Macbeth after the deed is done, conveying a shift to a personal

6 For a broader discussion of the topical uses of nothing/nothingness in this play and in Shakespeare’s tragedies, see Bigliuzzi 2005.

plane that makes the sense of the Symbolic as a presence inhabiting her own private sphere of family and memory deeply disturbing.

This intrusion of the Symbolic into the intimate and unconscious space of personal memory finds a parallel in Macbeth's own response to the witches. It is this deeper disturbance, this unmaking of the human as an ethical subject – both privately and publicly – that gives rise to the imaginative disorientation he experiences in I.iii. His rapt absorption after the encounter with the weird sisters articulates a particular kind of horror – one that arises not from fear of punishment or social consequence, nor from the degradation of the individual through the vision of a corpse or its vilification; it inheres in the possibility of radical self-determination inscribed through the radical effacement of the Symbolic. At this moment, Macbeth glimpses the potential to define and establish himself freely – not as a subject within the existing order, but as its replacement: its assassin and, potentially, the founder of a new order. Whether this new order ever materialises is uncertain, but the possibility itself marks a radical shift. What emerges here is a confrontation with freedom not as liberation from constraints, but as something inseparable from guilt – the guilt of violating the very structures that once defined him.

Paul Ricoeur (1989) has drawn a subtle but significant distinction between guilt and the doctrine of original sin that captures well the sense of the conundrum Macbeth is caught in, framing guilt as an expression of free will and personal accountability rather than a predetermined moral condition. In the theological climate shaped by debates between Luther and Calvin, this shift from sin to guilt takes on particular resonance. As Robert Miola observes, *Macbeth* radicalises this conception, transforming it into a meditation on tragic selfhood⁷ – a fragmentation played out within the internal tribunal of conscience, where the self becomes both judge and accused. Within this inward space, Ricoeur claims, self-observation and self-accusation emerge as ethical acts that define the very coordinates of subjectivity. In doing so, guilt replaces sin as a broken relationship with the divine – a collective rupture – with a focus on *individual responsibility*, emphasising the subjective weight of a “burden that

7 See Miola's “Introduction”, Shakespeare 2014, xvii-xix, and selected appendices on sources and contexts.

crushes" (1989, 428), and illustrating the grip of remorse – as will soon become apparent in Lady Macbeth.

If we return to Holinshed's account of Macbeth's apprehension of his future greatness, we begin to grasp the depth of Shakespeare's intervention at this point – an intervention shaped by the religious climate of his time. In contrast to Holinshed's straightforward acceptance of prophecy, Shakespeare's Macbeth hesitates, caught between predestination and moral agency. This tension reflects the influence of Calvinist ideas, dominant in Puritan thought, which emphasised divine predestination and human depravity. At the same time, the Renaissance revival of classical humanism had renewed faith in individual will and self-determination. Macbeth's crisis – his glimpse of freedom entangled with guilt – thus stages a collision between these theological and philosophical currents. What was, in Holinshed's chronicle, a straightforward episode of prophetic fulfilment is, in Shakespeare's hands, transformed into the beginning of a tragic experience that interrogates the very nature of the human subject in relation to the Symbolic order of communal law. The horror Macbeth experiences in this scene can be linked to a sense of sin, but only insofar as it involves guilt: the internalisation of a scrutinising gaze that "watches, judges, and condemns", giving rise to a divided conscience marked by "self-observation, self-accusation, and self-condemnation" (Ricoeur 1989, 429). In this condition, the subject becomes both judge and accused. Within such a framework, the Law functions not merely as a set of prohibitions – such as the absolute imperative "do not kill" – but also as the foundational demand to be and to act ethically. Evil, then, appears as a deliberate act of self-assertion in defiance of this ethical obligation. Transgression thus becomes the origin of remorse, understood as the lived tension between freedom and duty.

In I.iii, Macbeth approaches the very threshold of such transgression. The mere thought of evil-doing estranges him from his present reality, first suspending his human feeling, then casting him into radical doubt – all within the span of just a few lines. He is not thinking about the possibility of remorse yet – Lady Macbeth's tragic arc will demonstrate it vividly through a descent into guilt-ridden at a later stage. Her anguished line, "What's done cannot be undone" (V.i.65), will echo then John Wilkinson's 1547 English translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "that which is doen can not be vndooen" (*The Ethiques, Of*

promesse, Ch. xxvii). This idea will go beyond simple regret – it reflects a deeper truth about the irreversibility of past actions, illustrating Aristotle's notion of moral choice as shaped by irrecoverable actions. But Macbeth's experience of guilt and freedom, while related, operates differently.

I.v.-I.vii: The Boundaries of Human Kindness

In I.v Lady Macbeth captures clearly the sense of evil that prevents his husband from acting, a conception deeply rooted in the *possibility* of free will as the capacity to disregard a just obligation (Ricoeur 1989, 434), the resulting responsibility of it, and the recognition, at some point, that one could have acted differently:

[...] What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (I.v.18-20)

These famous lines convey Lady Macbeth's perception of the intersections of Macbeth's various impulses in relation to the Law, emotional knots which never explicitly mention either the crown or the murder of the king. This allusiveness suggests the symbolic enormity of the crime, which necessitates reticence even when expressed in private. It is noteworthy that, whether in each other's presence or in solitude, both Macbeth and his wife never refer to the crime by its name⁸. Lady Macbeth recognises that her husband displays bravery primarily when he serves the royal authority that validates his identity as a warrior and an agent of death. However, Macbeth struggles to defy the very Law that underpins his identity. Lady Macbeth is aware of this, and in I.vii will urge him to prove his masculinity not as a loyal warrior but as a bold transgressor of the foremost prohibition: the murder of the King, the country's symbolic father.

But before their confrontation, I.vii opens on Macbeth's famous soliloquy on the possibility of 'doing the deed', where he eventually entertains the fear (no longer the horror) of divine retribution and decides to abstain from doing. Macbeth fully engages with time at

8 For a more extensive discussion of the function of taboo in *Macbeth* see Bi-gliuzzi 2018.

this point, and this is not coincidental: from the arrested moment of the initial horror, where all was stopped and the future contracted in the instant, now Macbeth weighs what *may* happen in time “if”:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
 It were done quickly. If th'assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
 With his surcease, success: that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
 We still have judgment here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
 To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
 Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
 To our own lips [...] (I.vii.1-12)

Cavell (2003, 233) has argued that Macbeth's fantasy of “deeds done in the doing, without consequence, when surcease is success” expresses a profound wish: a desire for the erasure of human action as we understand it – no separation between intention and consequence, no fulfilment of desire, no revelation of agency in what unfolds. It is, at its core, a yearning to escape a defining condition of the human – what Cavell has described as our “fatedness to significance” (233): the inescapable demand that our actions mean something, that we exist as subjects intelligible to ourselves and others. This existential condition, he further suggests, is precisely what Wittgenstein captures when he identifies the human form of life as inherently linguistic (233).

Clearly, Macbeth craves significance, and language, though a system of logic and meaning-making proves inadequate to fully contain what he experiences. It is precisely at this limit – where inherited language falters – that Macbeth reaches for new expression. His coinage of the phrase “the be-all and the end-all” (5) signals a desire to transcend language itself: an ontological rupture, a newly forged expression of a condition that should be impossible – to become the origin of Law rather than its subject. In contemplating Duncan's murder, Macbeth envisions a moment in which time is suspended, simultaneously annihilating the old order and giving birth to a new one. Seen in this light, Cavell's interpretation of “consequence” as the erasure of human action does not account for the fact that Macbeth

is not seeking to erase his own agency, nor is he thinking yet of escaping any *negative* consequences – no worldly punishment, no divine retribution; he only seeks the intended outcome. As Serpieri insightfully argued, the “trammel up” metaphor (*OED*, v.2: “to take [fish or birds] with a trammel-net”) underscores this desire: Macbeth wants to ensnare the result (Shakespeare 1996, ad loc.). Shortly afterwards, he will think about not getting entangled in consequences. What he ultimately strives for is the erasure of judgment itself in a perfect coincidence of act and effect, one unburdened by aftermath, responsibility, or moral reckoning.

By the time we reach Macbeth’s soliloquy in I.vii, the ambiguity he entertained in the possibility that “chance might crown [him] / Without [his] stir” (I.iii.141-42) – a scenario in which agency is relinquished and responsibility displaced – has sharpened into a more distinctly Christian anxiety about divine judgment (“this even-handed justice”, 10): he is “his kinsman and his subject” (13) and Duncan is such a meek and just ruler that heaven itself would revolt at the “horrid deed” and would publish and blow it “in every eye” (24). Macbeth’s graphic imagery of a Biblical exposure of his crime reveals a profound awareness of the moral and psychological consequences of Duncan’s murder. He envisions his “virtues” (18) as “plead[ing] like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off” (19-20), invoking a spiritual and cosmic reckoning that goes beyond earthly justice. Duncan’s goodness, far from protecting Macbeth from guilt, becomes the very force that will expose him. This sense of inevitable revelation culminates in the haunting image of “pity, like a naked new-born babe / Striding the blast”, alongside “heaven’s cherubim [... blowing] the horrid deed in every eye” (21-22; 24). Here, Macbeth fantasises about his crime as universally visible, emotionally resonant, and inescapably condemned – not only by divine justice but by the human capacity for empathy. His transgression will be amplified and broadcast, infecting the world with horror, and will be pity itself to do it.

This connects directly to his earlier reflection on the “even-handed justice” which “Commends the ingredients of our poison’d chalice / To our own lips” (10-12), suggesting that moral violation inevitably turns back on the violator. Macbeth’s anxiety lies not simply in being caught, but in the deeper fear that guilt is self-revealing, that the

act itself will declare him guilty. Human actions, once committed, carry with them an intrinsic demand for meaning and moral consequence. And the consequence is precisely what Macbeth does not want to think of when he speaks of the “be-all” and the “end-all” (5): he wants to think about it as a deed done, finished, over – ontologically outside time. And yet, the Law remains – “there is still judgement here” (8). This is the Law by which he can think of himself as human.

I used the word *fear* at this point because Macbeth has begun to shift from horror – a state that denies both language and action – towards the possibility of doing. And it is precisely this potential for action that gives rise to fear rather than horror: *doing* implies agency and life, whereas horror, as we have seen, is a lifeless freeze-frame that shatters language. The image of the eyes he evokes is poignantly suggestive of the gaze of the Other. And it is at this juncture in his thinking that he decides to stop. He is no longer just privately aware of his wrongdoing; he imagines himself as seen, known, and ultimately, condemned. This is where the profound discomfort of visibility lies: in being transformed from a subject who knows into an object that is known – interpreted, measured, and condemned. This is also where shame arises. Different from guilt, which may be experienced in solitude, shame originates from the painful recognition of how one is seen and judged by others, and how that judgment reshapes the self. To be caught in a shameful act – or even to imagine being caught – fractures the image we hold of ourselves and imposes an unwanted identity.

What this stigmatising identity is for Macbeth will become apparent soon. But what is immediately clear from this horrible fantasy is that he feels fixed in place, paralysed, locked in a moral standoff with himself. This exposure is catastrophic: the act is not only morally wrong, but unbearably visible, echoing the biblical tradition in which wrongdoing cries out to be seen – and once seen, can never be unseen⁹.

9 In the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:10), God declares that the blood of Abel “crieth out” from the ground, symbolising that wrongdoing, even when committed in secret, cannot remain hidden or silent. This powerful image conveys that sin possesses a voice of its own, demanding recognition and divine judgment. This theme of inevitable exposure is reinforced throughout Scripture by the belief in God’s all-seeing nature. As Luke 8:17 states, “For nothing is secret, that shall not be evident: neither anything hid, that shall not be known, and come

Thus, the shift from I.iii to I.vii charts Macbeth's movement from a speculative fatalism – where “chance” might absolve him of responsibility – to a deepening confrontation with moral agency and guilt. This progression reflects Shakespeare's characteristic syncretism, blending classical and Christian motifs drawn from his historical sources. The merging of *tyche* (fortuitous occurrence) with Christian *providence* produces a psychic and theological dissonance: Macbeth vacillates between surrendering to fate and attempting to enact violence against something sacred – the Father, the Law, the name of a meek King that makes the deed unnamable.

The extraordinary opening of I.vii, where “metaphysical discomfort [becomes] explicit”, as Garber notes (2008, 82), reveals Macbeth's fear of divine judgment. It is the voice of an internal crisis that cannot be reduced to ambition or fear, but is deeply bound up with the sense of violating a profound taboo – a crime that collapses the boundaries between regicide, parricide, and sacrilege within the Christian framework that gives it meaning. His tortured thoughts shift rapidly, subtly warping meaning and disrupting the clarity of his reasoning. This precedes his famous exchange with Lady Macbeth, which marks the logical next step in the moral questioning after Macbeth has resolved not to go through with the murder:

MACBETH

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do *more* is none.

LADY MACBETH

What *beast* was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be *more* than what you were, you would
Be so much *more* the man. [...] (I.vii.46-51; emphasis mine)

Marjory Garber has interpreted this famous accusation of cowardice and emasculation through a post-Freudian lens, connecting it to the

to light”, emphasising that no sin, no matter how concealed from human eyes, escapes divine notice and will ultimately be revealed and accounted for, either in this life or beyond. Together, these passages highlight the profound biblical principle that guilt and wrongdoing inherently seek to be uncovered and judged (quotations are from the Geneva Bible).

figure of Medusa. For Garber, Medusa serves here as a symbol that simultaneously embodies both the feminine and the masculine, represented in the terrifying visage of the woman and her phallic serpent hair. This would reflect a disquieting aspect of gender fluidity within the ongoing construction and deconstruction of masculinity and femininity. In response to the question of what Macbeth's 'more than a man' entails ("Who dares do more, is none"), Garber counters with further questions, suggesting that it may be the experience of being a woman, or perhaps the continuous transgression of gender boundaries. This could be exemplified by Medusa's androgyny, precisely as the androgynous figures of the bearded witches or Lady Macbeth, who pictures herself as 'unsexed' by the spirits of the night (I.v.38-41; Garber 2008, 95). In turn, Cavell has read in this exchange an "anxiety about *human* identity" tout court, the "human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman of limitlessness of monstrosity" (2003, 229).

But apart from gender anxieties (that Cavell dismisses) and references to Lady Macbeth's concern about human identity in her "sexual taunt" (a concern I find hardly perceivable at this point), the question remains: what does become a man? For Lady Macbeth, it was Macbeth's "break[ing] that enterprise to [her]"; for Macbeth, it is not pursuing that enterprise. For her, it means keeping the promise made and refusing to betray her aroused desire for power; for him, it means stifling his own desire and abandoning any plan to breach the Law. This is not merely a matter of refraining from killing a particular individual – whether an enemy, an anonymous soldier, or a perceived threat – but of upholding the ontological foundation of human community: the bond that binds one human being to another. To violate it is to shatter the communal pact of cohabitation – either by regressing into a bestial state that knows no symbolic order, or by disowning it in a consciously transgressive, almost diabolical act.

This confrontation between husband and wife establishes a principle of uncertainty around what it means to "become a man": whether it lies in loyalty to one's word and intentions, even in defiance of the Law, or conversely, in betraying one's word out of respect for the Law. Lady Macbeth ultimately imposes her vision by 'unsexing' herself and invoking the horrendous image of infanticide as the

extreme expression of her radical fidelity to her word – a paradoxical image of assumed super-masculinity and (devilish) superhumanity. This mirroring confrontation, where each partner inverts the other's values, is underscored rhetorically by the figure of *antanaclasis*, in which the repetition of "more" oscillates between Macbeth's fear of becoming no-man – a beast or a devil – and Lady Macbeth's vision of becoming "more" of a man: that is, super-loyal and super-brave, even at the cost of becoming (diabolically) superhuman. In her claim that to be a man one must be more than a man, there is a clear paradox – a short circuit in meaning – where the 'fullest' sense of manhood coincides with the transcendence, or even the abandonment, of humanity itself. She becomes a mirror in which Macbeth sees the image of manhood as it 'should' be – if he chooses to enter the short circuit of her paradoxical logic – as eventually he does. "If we should fail" (I.vii.59), he asks her, then – and his "if" is the linguistic mark of a possibility which in fact implies an already broached futurity where the confrontation with the Symbolic suddenly becomes practical and calculative, and is weighed in terms of its risks and rewards. Fear now supersedes horror.

But what Lady Macbeth offers him is a mirror not of fear, but of what it would mean to act without fear, to become "more than a man" – a being beyond moral constraint. In this sense, she functions as a reverse Medusa: not one which petrifies through horror, but which unlocks action by covering up (while in fact reflecting back) a terrifying possibility: the annihilation of conscience, of human limits, of the symbolic law. Yet the cost is the same: just as Medusa's gaze kills, Lady Macbeth's reflection of monstrous will ultimately destroys Macbeth's humanity. He will act – but in doing so, he will become the very thing he fears to see.

II.iii: The Dead Body, Medusa's Face

The encounter with a Medusa figure will recur soon, when, in II.iii, still unknowingly, Macduff sees Macbeth's own horrifying face: the lifeless body of Duncan. It is a horror that is explicitly reminiscent of the Gorgon in Macduff's imaginary, and paralyses at the sight, serving as both a figure and embodiment of death, as well as a degradation of the sacred body of the King:

MACDUFF

Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight
With a new Gorgon. Do not bid me speak –
See, and then speak yourselves.

Exeunt MACBETH and LENNOX

Awake, awake!

Ring the alarum-bell! Murder and treason.
Banquo and Donalbain, Malcolm, awake,
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,
And look on death itself. Up, up, and see
The great doom's image! Malcolm, Banquo,
As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites
To countenance this horror. Ring the bell! (II.iii.71-80)

This horrid experience does not reside within the phantasmagoria of a repressed desire suddenly awakened in Macbeth by the weird sisters; rather, it represents the experience of witnessing the event itself, the completed act that coincides with the annihilation of the Symbolic and the tangible, visible event represented by the lying body. The murdered king evokes the shattering of the Law, revealing its inherent fragility in Kristeva's sense¹⁰. The dead body of the King, significantly screened off from view, is displaced for Macduff onto the plane of the Real in a Lacanian perspective, resisting its symbolisation except through the annihilating image of the Gorgon; a mythical figure conjuring Ricoeur's notion of the scandal of evil recalled earlier: an experience that can be perceived only within a symbolic system of narratives and interpretation.

The lifeless body of the King is the figure of the disintegration of the culturalised construction of the human in its regulated order based on norm; it is a lifeless body that resists symbolisation and

10 "The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior [...] Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law – rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (2024, 4).

takes on the horrifying face of the Gorgon; it arrests meaning and stands for the impossibility of expressing the shattering of the human through the crushing of the prime symbol of culture. The civil frame of human cohabitation has been annihilated in the disfigured and desemanticised body lying on the ground.

III.ii: The Great Bond

The question Macbeth poses to Lady Macbeth – “*If we should fail?*” (I.vii.59) – signals not only his fear of being exposed, but also a return to the practical realm of consequences and the ethical space of responsibility, after the suspensive and uncanny dimension of horror he has previously inhabited. This shared anxiety between them persists until III.i, when Macbeth resolves to have Banquo murdered – this time without consulting his wife. At this point, he begins a solitary descent, deeper into horror and further beyond the limits of what he once understood to define a “man” (I.vii.45).

And yet, it is striking that it is Banquo – not Duncan – who returns to haunt Macbeth, and that it is only now, after Banquo’s murder, that Macbeth begins to reflect on the nature of the civil bond. Banquo is not a king; he is a friend and a fellow soldier. But he will also be, crucially, the father of kings – a bearer of futurity in ways Macbeth can never be. Where Duncan represented the past and present – legitimacy inherited and enacted – Banquo comes to embody the future: a future from which Macbeth is radically excluded. In this sense, Banquo’s ghost signifies more than guilt; it marks the collapse of Macbeth’s self-fashioned temporality – one that exists paradoxically outside time, severed from both a legitimate past (he is unrooted in descent) and a viable future (he is sterile). The bond Banquo silently embodies in III.ii – the “great bond” (III.ii.50) – is the civil pact, the shared humanity that binds generations and legitimises succession. It is this presence that makes Macbeth “pale”: Banquo returns as the horrific manifestation of Macbeth’s ontological vanity and estrangement from the human. In this way, Banquo comes to articulate what had been silently embedded in Duncan’s royal presence: his function as the embodiment of Human Law. But unlike Duncan, whose authority could once be displaced, silenced, or repressed, Banquo becomes a Medusa-like figure, confronting

Macbeth with the unbearable truth of his own inhumanity – one from which he can no longer avert his gaze.

Revealingly, before committing the murder (which Macbeth calls a “deed of dreadful note”, III.ii.45, significantly mirroring the “terrible feat” of Duncan’s murder, I.vii.81) Macbeth invokes the “seeling night” to prepare himself to unsee the civil bond and to shatter his own fears which keep him “pale” (51).

[...] Come, seeling night,
 Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day
 And with thy bloody and invisible hand
 Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
 Which keeps me pale [...] (III.ii.47-51)

The term “bond” can signify what keeps Banquo alive (his life), as well as, especially, the civil and moral contract¹¹. Interestingly, the word “deed”, which aligns with a taboo logic and the prohibition against pronouncing the word ‘murder’, appears in the sources solely in relation to this particular homicide, rather than that of Duncan. This usage is found exclusively in Holinshed, whose narrative bears the closest resemblance to the plot of the tragedy (“certain murderers, whom he hired to execute that deed”; 1973, 498). The third central act is specifically dedicated to this “deed”, not to the assassination of the King, which occurs relatively early in the drama, thereby granting Banquo an unexpected prominence:

Blood hath been shed ere now, I’ th’olden time,
 Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal;
 Ay, and since too, murders have been performed
 Too terrible for the ear. The times have been,
 That when the brains were out, the man would die,
 And there an end. But now they rise again
 With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
 And push us from our stools. This is more strange
 Than such a murder is. (III.iv.73-81)

The codified law inscribed in what Macbeth calls the “great bond” (III.ii.50), and later referred to as the “gentle weal” (III.iv.74), establishes

¹¹ See Bigliazzi 2018 and Wofford 2018.

the symbolic framework that underpins civil society. This framework defines the ethical limits of individual action within a community, instituting prohibitions – most fundamentally, against killing – that mark the threshold between barbarity and civility. Crucially, the taboo intensifies when the transgression involves the symbolic origin of that very prohibition: the sovereign, the father, the representative of the Law itself. The uncanny resurrection of the dead, as in Banquo's ghost, signals the return of what this symbolic repression cannot fully contain – a return that is both juridical and psychological.

Thus, Macbeth's second murder, unlike the first, unexpectedly marks a deeper rupture. It stages the symbolic passage from a primitive, mythic temporality – where death was absolute – to the historical time of civility, in which death is no longer final but haunted by law, guilt, and consequence. As Macbeth himself implies, in a world untouched by such a symbolic structure, the dead would stay dead. But the formation of a legal-moral order brings with it the internalisation of guilt, the persistence of remorse, and the spectral return of the violated Other. The concealment of Duncan's murder – the removal of the scene from view – is thus not merely tactical at the level of drama; it signals the beginning of Macbeth's descent into a solipsistic transgression, one that rejects the symbolic pact of human coexistence. This withdrawal from the shared order aligns with a return to a pre-symbolic state, where horror is experienced not as fear of punishment for a specific breach, but as a confrontation with absolute violation – violence against the Symbolic itself.

In targeting Banquo, Macbeth attempts to annihilate not just a threat to his reign, but the very possibility for a different future to replace his present that would render his kingship null and expose his ontological vacuity. Banquo's murder marks a turning point at the heart of the play: in accepting the full weight of his actions, Macbeth crosses into a mode of being that is no longer recognisably human. His invocation to the "sealing night" that may "scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (III.ii.47-48) initiates his descent into the *space of taboo* – into a realm where transgression is no longer measured by moral categories, but becomes indistinct, limitless. Here, horror no longer arises from guilt but from the dissolution of all boundaries: between law and lawlessness, man and monster, day and night. Macbeth's desire becomes superhuman insofar as it is also underhuman; it no

longer contemplates any communal sharing, it is entirely autarchic: it is a refusal of the human condition altogether. What he seeks is not power alone, but the paradoxical founding of a symbolic order that excludes all others – an order rooted in himself, secured through absolute negation.

V.v: Forgetfulness

It is precisely the end of meaning as a consequence of the “deed” and the horrors ensuing it that Macbeth expresses immediately before the announcement of his wife’s death with the cry of the women in V.v:

MACBETH

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been, my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in’t. I have supped full with horrors;
Direness familiar to my slaughterous thoughts
Cannot once start me [...] (V.v.9-15)

Macbeth refers to the “taste of fear” through a vivid oral metaphor that evokes an idea of terror rooted in the infancy of humanity; it reflects a developing human condition that draws from fears as dialectical counterparts to desires. These belong to a growing human being building on its own humanity. When Macbeth was still acquainted with fear, he imagined divine retribution and felt guilt and shame. But now he is beyond feeling and all that pertains to it. He fully inhabits the time of horror, which transforms the timeless paralysis experienced in the face of the imagined brutality of murder in I.iii, into the timelessness of “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” following the news of his wife’s death – a sequence that dissolves temporal boundaries into an entropy of meaning (“Signifying nothing”, V.v.28).

The phrase “I have supped full with horrors” (V.v.13) employs a striking gustatory metaphor, evoking the image of Macbeth as one who has consumed horror to the point of saturation, as if filled with a noxious liquid. This image stands in stark contrast to the nourishing metaphor of the infant in I.v, where Lady Macbeth invoked her husband’s “milk of human kindness” as a sign of his

innate humanity. As we have seen, at that point “kindness” carried a double resonance: both as moral goodness and as the essential quality of being human (“Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way,” I.v.17-19). This opposition – between the consumed horrors of Act V and the rejected milk of Act I – frames the arc of Macbeth’s moral unravelling: from an experience of horror to one of fears and remorse, finally to the shattering of fears and an irredeemable forgetfulness of what being human means in the erasure of both time and meaning.

By Way of Conclusion: Medusa

Recently, Allison P. Hobgood has revisited the long-discussed question of fear in this play, emphasising that the aesthetic dimension fails to contain and control it; rather, it renders fear virulent and contagious in its manifestation (2014, 59), and connects fear and hope as a reflection of what could also be found in a passage of Timothy Bright’s 1586 *Treatise on Melancholy*: “The memory being thus fraught with perils past [...] causeth fantasie out of such records, to forge new maters of sadness and feare [...]: to these fansies the heart answering with like melancholic affection, turneth all hope into feare” (39). It is not difficult to perceive in this pairing the tragic experience of Macbeth and his wife.

And yet, I believe that there is more to it and that the question of *what a man is* challenging the definition of what it means to be a man, as presented by Macbeth in I.vii, cannot be limited to the dichotomy of fear and desire. As we have seen, a third element must be included as the stumbling block of the dialectic: the experience of horror, which, as I have argued, articulates the tragedy of Macbeth in ways that prompt a profound reflection on human kindness and its disintegration in relation to the foundation itself of the symbolic order, in a wavering balance between predestination and guilt. As Derrida noted about Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, “We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is to say, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death” (2008, 68). Derrida’s ethical responsibility possesses an inherently ‘tragic’ and ‘guilty’ character, highlighting the deadlock due to being bound to obligations that are

both impossibly burdensome and incommensurable – a deadlock that is intensified by any efforts to rationalise an ethical choice¹². This is also Oedipus' question at Colonus, when he finally, at the threshold of death, raises the terrible question about how a man can inhabit guilt without being guilty:

Tell me now: if, by the voice of an oracle, some divine doom was coming on my father, [970] that he should die by a son's hand, how could you justly reproach me with this, when I was then unborn, when no father had yet begotten me, no mother's womb conceived me? But if, having been born to misery – as I was born – I came to blows with my father and slew him, ignorant of what [975] I was doing and to whom, how could you reasonably blame the unwitting deed? (Sophocles 1889, 969-77)

Macbeth raises the same question at the beginning of his tragic parable – an issue that, however, he does not approach from Abraham's fideistic perspective but from a deeply inquisitive and challenging standpoint that interrogates the very meaning of humankind. Following the witches' soliciting, his question is likewise paradoxical: if fate or circumstance desires me to be king, then let fate crown me, he says; why should I take action myself?

In a post-Hegelian, Christian-existential perspective – which now appears to align more appropriately with the troubled transitions of the early modern period – the focus shifts from tragic necessity to ethical exposure. The human being, in this framework, is defined not by their role in the unfolding of Spirit or history, but by their response to the abyss of freedom. Macbeth's collapse is not the fulfilment of a metaphysical logic, but the enactment of a moral and ontological crisis: a rupture that refuses closure, and in doing so, redefines what it means to be human.

Medusa stands for fixity, arrest, the crystallisation of the moment of horror before an encounter with lifelessness and the blockage of passion as the natural component of what can be defined human: the capacity to "feel for" and to refrain from annihilating the other through the shattering of the symbolic order commanding not to murder, and the dissolution of the bond that makes us human

¹² For a discussion of Derrida's position *vis-à-vis* Badiou's, see Peter Hallward's "Introduction", in Badiou 2001, xxv-xxvi.

through a sense of belongingness to a shared community. In the face of Medusa, nothing moves. In her presence, everything freezes; death becomes indistinguishable from life. The raging heartbeat of Macbeth at the fantastical prospect of shattering the gentle weal through the annihilation of the body of the King is a sign of the incipient conflict between fear and desire marking Macbeth's entrance into the space of radical choice: where good and evil are not circumstantial, although encountered circumstantially, but absolute insofar as they inhere the foundational principle of humankind itself – the cleansing of barbarity, the humane statute installing civility. It is also the space where language is silenced under the logic of taboo. The horror that Macbeth experiences before falling prey to a turmoil of passions, making for his humanity at the moment of his absolute choice of evil, is the precondition for his decision-making, negatively affecting his own freedom. The horror that the audience experiences through Macbeth is the same horror that we are left with by Iago's silence. He is, in many respects, the dark, inscrutable mirror to Macbeth's tormented soul¹³. To what extent catharsis may occur in *Macbeth* depends on the degree of psychological depth the audience is able – at least theoretically – to access, thereby enabling a form of negative empathy with him (Ercolino and Fusillo 2022, 88-89). Such empathy is scarcely imaginable in the case of Iago; but with, and through, Macbeth, we encounter the boundaries of the human, beginning with his first confrontation with the horror of gazing into the collapse of symbolisation itself. His horror at the violence he is about to inflict on the King transcends the physicality of Duncan's body: this is not just *any* body, but the embodiment of the abstract principle of the Law. Banquo's body, similarly, comes to represent the locus of origin for a new Law – one that refuses to align with Macbeth's autarchic temporality. In this regard, the horror Macbeth experiences belongs to both a pre-symbolic state and a post-symbolic state, to the under- and the super-human: it precedes the Law and outlives it. It is a horror at the very possibility of violating the essence of humanity – what is recognisable in the communal pact – and stepping beyond it. His tragedy is not that he fails to remain human, but that he no longer knows what that means.

13 See Bigliazzi, forthcoming.

References

- Aristotle. 1547. *The Ethiques of Aristotle, that is to saye, preceptes of good behauoure and perfighte honestie, now newly translated into English*. Translated by John Wilkinson. London.
- Badiou, Alain. 2001. *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated and Introduced by Peter Hallward. London and New York: Verso.
- Bigliazzi, Silvia. 2005. *Nel prisma del nulla. L'esperienza del non-essere nella drammaturgia shakespeariana*. Napoli: Liguori.
- . 2018. "Linguistic Taboos and the 'Unscene' of Fear in *Macbeth*." *Comparative Drama* 52 (1-2; Special Issue: *The Tyrant's Fear*, edited by S. Bigliazzi) 2: 55-84.
- . Forthcoming. "Guilt, Shame, Guiltless Fault: Shakespeare and Catharsis." In *Shakespeare/Passion*, edited by Anne Sophie Refskou. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bradley, A. C. [1909] 1965. *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London, Melbourne, Toronto: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2008. *Horrorism*. Translated by William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cavell, Stanley. [1987] 2003. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Updated Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. [1995] 2008. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fusillo, Massimo, and Stefano Ercolino. 2022. *Empatia negativa: Il punto di vista del male*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Garber, Marjorie. 2008. "Macbeth: The Male Medusa." In *Profiling Shakespeare*. 76-109. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hobgood, Allison P. 2014. *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holinshed, Raphael. 1973. *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). In *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7, edited by Geoffrey Bullough. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kottman, Paul, ed. 2009. *Philosophers on Shakespeare*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Kristeva, Julia. [1982] 2024. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levi, Primo. [1958] 2014. *Se questo è un uomo*. Postfazione di Cesare Segre. Torino: Einaudi.
- Nuttall, A. D. 1996. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. [1969] 1989. "Guilt, Ethics and Religion." In *The Conflict of Interpretations*. London: The Athlone Press, 425-39.
- . 2007. *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Ricoeur, Paul, and David Pellauer. 1985. "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4: 635-68.
- Shakespeare, William. 1996. *Macbeth*. A cura di Alessandro Serpieri. Firenze: Giunti.
- . 2014. *Macbeth*. Edited by Robert S. Miola. Norton Critical Edition. New York and London: Norton.
- . 2015. *Macbeth*. Arden Shakespeare Third Series. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2016. *Othello*. Arden Shakespeare Third Series, Edited by E. A. J. Honigmann, Revised Edition, with a new Introduction by Ayanna Thompson. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sophocles. 1889. *The Oedipus at Colonus*. Edited with Introduction and Notes by Sir Richard Jebb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wofford, Susanne L. 2018. "Origin Stories of Fear and Tyranny: Blood and Dismemberment in 'Macbeth' (with a Glance at the 'Oresteia')." *Comparative Drama* 51 (4); Special Issue: *The Tyrant's Fear*, edited by S. Bigliuzzi) 2: 506-27.

“Nothing is but what is not”: The Creative Evil of Macbeth¹

Nicholas Luke

Macbeth comes to life by being summoned by the forces of evil. The weird sisters are given the dramatic force to convulse the cyclical feudal violence of Duncan’s realm and to conjure Macbeth’s imaginative consciousness. On the road to Forres, Macbeth is confronted by a radical intrusion from beyond his world, and, like a dark Saint Paul, he is irrevocably transformed by its call. I suggest that Macbeth exists at the crossroads of poetic creation, rapturous inspiration, and demonic negation of extant being. Macbeth voyages into “what is not” (I.iii.141) and that voyage brings him both to a heightened imaginative life and to deadness and closure. Blurring the boundaries between good and evil, the play opens unexpected connections between poetry, early modern theology, and more contemporary philosophy. All these modes – theology, poetry, and philosophy – take us beyond the immediate through a negation of what is. Macbeth suggests that there is something at once animating and potentially evil in the process of negating the world-that-is in favour of a vision of what is not. By giving dramatic life to Macbeth and withholding it from the ‘good’ characters, Shakespeare raises uncomfortable questions about the relationship between poetic creation and evil.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, aesthetics, demonic, negative theology, imagination

Negation and Creation

Macbeth comes to dramatic life by being summoned by the forces of evil. On the road to Forres, Macbeth is confronted by a radical intrusion from beyond his world, and, like a dark Saint Paul, he is irrevocably transformed by its call. It is the weird sisters, and not God, who

¹ Significant elements of this paper are drawn from Chapter 5 of Luke 2018. I would like to thank Cambridge University Press for allowing these passages to be reproduced here.

are given the dramatic force to convulse the dead world of Duncan's Scotland and conjure the new mode of being that is Macbeth's imaginative subjectivity. I suggest that Shakespeare draws on Pauline notions of conversion in a highly ambivalent manner that at once gives evil a generative power and pushes us to question our understandings of creativity and freedom. Macbeth may be summoned by something evil but this evil is intimately connected to the creative powers of imagination, poetry, and theatre.

According to John Donne, "the Church celebrates the Conversion of no man but [Saint Paul]" (Donne 1953-1962, 6:209), and central to that conversion is a process of creative negation. In a 1624/25 sermon, Donne describes Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as "a medicinall falling": first, "He *fell to the earth*; ... [which entailed] his humiliation, his exinanition of himself, his devesting, putting off of himself"; but second, through this fall God "re-inanimate[d] him with his spirit; rather, [...] pre-inanimate[d] him; for, indeed, no man hath a soule till he have grace" (Donne 1953-1962, 6:206, 212). The existing order was overturned by a sublime intrusion that was unjustified, unforeseen, and imposed from the outside. The experience is utterly compelling, in both the positive and negative senses of the word. The old man, Saul the pharisee, falls to the ground and dies, only to rise to a new form of life as Paul the Apostle, founder of the Christian church. Following Paul's radical break from the old law and language, there is a Western tradition that focuses on the birth of a new subject. Paul, who is dead to his old self, commands us to "put on the new man" (Ephesians 4:24). In *Macbeth*, I suggest, Shakespeare explores the dark side of this creative negation. Before coming to the play, however, I will briefly sketch why this process has a significance beyond Paul's own conversion.

Most immediately, Paul himself stresses that the initial conversion prompts an *ongoing* conversion from world to spirit, from self to other, from what is to what is not. According to Paul, we should "be not conformed to this world; but be [...] transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s]" (Romans 12:2). And part of this renewal comes from looking beyond the wisdom of "this world" to the unseen promise of the life of spirit. "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" (Romans 8:24). Rather, we are to "hope for that we see

not" (Romans 8:25). The divine is associated with what is not, with what is 'nothing' according to the world, with what is radically other than our present existence. "To us God is the Stranger, the Other", the twentieth century theologian Karl Barth writes in his *Epistle to the Romans* (Barth 1968, 318). These ideas were very much taken up in Shakespeare's era. Early modern Protestant thinkers stressed that becoming a new man was an ongoing process that works through a spirit that comes from beyond our ordinary modes of thought. It is "the Spirit, the divine grace, [that] grants strength and power to the heart; indeed, he creates a new man who takes pleasure [in obeying] God's commandments" (Luther 2005, 81). For Martin Luther, man is transformed by divine grace, and while this grace becomes part of the individual's interiority, manifest as faith, it also remains unavoidably foreign. It is an "alien righteousness", a "righteousness of another, instilled from without" (Luther 2005, 135-36). Donne, similarly, preaches of "a *forraine Righteousnes*" (Donne 1953-1962, 8:84). We have, then, a distinctive motion of the subject's emergence, which entails the interruption and estrangement of the old self and its place within the existing codes of communication. Luther elsewhere writes that "we must first believe contrary to our experience what cannot be believed humanly, and that we must feel what we do not feel" (Luther 1973, 71). One must give up one's own wisdom, to mortify one's self, and become a sort of nothing. According to Kierkegaard, "self-annihilation is the essential form for the God-relationship" (Kierkegaard 1941, 412). Donne preaches of "a good nullification of the heart, a good bringing of the heart to nothing" that creates a void for the otherness of God to enter (Donne 1953-1962, 9:177). "By faith we are what we are not" (Barth 1968, 149). I argue that Shakespeare often employs a similar process of violent negation of existing being to birth a new consciousness (Luke 2018).

At this point, we can doubtless see clouds and difficulties looming. For what guarantees that this alien spirit is divine and not diabolical? Without objective criteria, how do we distinguish the compelling call from self-delusion or a devilish trick? In more literary terms, we might question what distinguishes these religious experiences from the "shaping fantasies" of the "lunatic, the lover, and the poet", which "apprehend more / Than cool reason ever comprehends" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.5-7)? But of course, Theseus, the speaker of these

lines, is himself an “airy nothing” bodied forth by the poet’s shaping pen (Vi.i.16). The process of creative negation extends beyond the religious. Poetry brings forth “nothings” – “The forms of things unknown” (Vi.i.15) – through a temporary suspension (or negation) of our present world. “Only the poet,” Philip Sidney writes, “doth grow in effect another nature”. Transcending the existing world, the poet, “with the force of a divine breath [...] bringeth things forth far surpassing [nature’s] doings”. As a creative “maker”, the poet becomes an imitator – and potential demonic rival – to the divine creator (“the heavenly Maker”). The poet voyages into the unseen, “borrow[ing] nothing of what is”, but ranging “into the divine consideration of what may be and should be” (Sidney 2002, 216-18). More recent aesthetic theories, meanwhile, have stressed how theatre can estrange us from “this world”, in all its oppressive inequality. The Brechtian notion of theatrical alienation draws on a long philosophical tradition that stresses the need for some sort of rupture or negation to achieve genuine subjectivity.

Alain Badiou has recently led a philosophical return to Paul, describing the road to Damascus event as “a thunderbolt, a caesura, and not a dialectical reversal. It was a conscription instituting a new subject” (Badiou 2013, 17). Paul is a model for Badiou’s radical idea that we become genuine subjects only when we break from our inherited positions and direct ourselves toward a “truth-event”, be it in the field of politics, art, science, or love. Such an event, according to Badiou, forces the void of a situation – the truth that had been ignored or repressed and which counted for nothing according to the prevailing logic – into the light (see Badiou 2005a, 55-56, 109; Badiou 2005b, 116-19). In less extreme ways, a range of modern and postmodern thinkers have suggested that we only shift from our unthinking acceptance of the status quo through a transformative encounter with the negative. According to Hegel, one must “tarry [...] with the negative” and open oneself to its “astonishing” and “magical power” in order to dismember the familiar (Hegel 1977, 18-19). “In its self-negation”, Theodor Adorno writes, “the mind transcends itself” (Adorno 1973, 392). Derridean deconstruction, meanwhile, employs a process of negation or unsaying to open us to the other and the unforeseen. According to David Newheiser, what unites the postmodern Derrida and the tradition of negative theology is that both “insist upon practices that open the individual to that which is beyond themselves” (Newheiser 2019, 63).

In Shakespeare, too, a sense of otherness, of something coming from outside the frame, is often associated with negation and the word 'nothing'². The "realm of NOTHING", Harold C. Goddard writes, incorporates "the infinitely infinite realm of what might have been but was not, of what may be but is not". "[O]ut of something nothing new ever came without the aid of 'nothing' in this high potential sense. Nothing is thus practically a synonym for creativity" (Goddard 1951, 272). In this paper, I suggest that Macbeth exists at the crossroads of poetic creation, rapturous inspiration, and demonic negation of extant being. Macbeth voyages into "what is not" (I.iii.141)³ and that voyage brings him both to a heightened imaginative life and to deadness and closure. Blurring the boundaries between good and evil, the play thereby opens unexpected connections between poetry, early modern theology, and more contemporary philosophy. My suggestion is that all these modes – theology, poetry, and philosophy – take us beyond the immediate through a negation of what is. They seek to break us from our immediate or pre-existing understandings, representations, and imaginaries, in order to lead us to something Other. *Macbeth* suggests that there is something at once animating and potentially evil – something inimical to life, care, and human connection – in the process of negating the world-that-is in favour of a vision of what is not. Ewan Fernie, in his book on the demonic, notes how, "pushed to its limits, the ethics of otherness exhibits an unsuspected diabolical tendency, where we seek to undo and depart from what we are and have in favour of what is different and ultimately uncreated, with real and deleterious consequences in terms of our responsibilities to our established selves, our intimates and the world at hand" (Fernie 2013, 32). *Macbeth*, I argue, pushes us to interrogate poetic and critical tendencies that we might rather ignore. More specifically, I explore how Macbeth's road to Forres encounter with the weird sisters works as an unjustifiable dramatic election by which he is called by the Other and ceases to conform to the old world. What calls him may be evil – in the sense of a deprivation and destruction of life and goodness – but it speaks to something at the heart of Shakespeare's creativity.

2 I explore these ideas more fully in Luke 2024.

3 References are to Shakespeare 1997.

The World and its Other

Paul establishes a foundational dichotomy between conformity to “this world” and the happening of grace that transcends the world and transforms selfhood, language, and relations. In *Macbeth*, “this world” is established in the second scene. Duncan’s world is a sort of pre-history or canvas for the creative emergence of the new man. The first key feature (or repressed truth) of this world is that individuals are rendered indistinct by the cyclical bloodshed in which roles and fortunes are reversed as a matter of course. The scene’s first line has the king asking, “What bloody man is that?” (I.ii.1), which suggests that singularity is precluded by the general slaughter. We then hear of the battle in which Macbeth turns the tide by “unseam[ing]” the rebel Macdonald “from the nave to th’ chops” (I.ii.22). There is a gleeful barbarism to the Captain’s account and to the reaction of the king, who praises Macbeth as his “valiant cousin” and “worthy gentleman” (I.ii.24) for this unseaming. This world is all far more grotesque and explicit than the weird sisters’ opening, in which the unfortunate sailor can be “tempest-tossed” but “cannot be lost” (I.iii.23-24). And it has its own gory economy: through his bloody deeds “noble Macbeth hath won” what Cawdor “hath lost” (I.ii.66). Duncan’s world here resembles the cyclical instability of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, in which Scotland veers between destruction and renewal. Amidst the perpetual upheaval, nothing new emerges in Holinshed, there is only a tidal movement of blood, now more and now less.

Such a perpetual crisis recalls Benjamin’s idea that in the “tradition of the oppressed [...] the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (Benjamin 1992, 248). In other words, the military tumult that begins *Macbeth* is not a genuine “emergency” but expresses this world’s underlying structure. We get a hint of this structure when the Captain describes the “[d]oubtful” outcome of the battle through the metaphor of “two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art” (I.ii.7-9). As Harry Berger Jr shows, the metaphoric “clinging together” of authority and rebellion “produces a dysfunctional solidarity” (Berger Jr 1997, 75). It is the weird sisters, then, that follow Benjamin’s “task” of “bring[ing] about a real state of emergency” (Benjamin 1992, 248), as opposed to this entrenched quasi-emergency. They interrupt the cyclical model of history, which

is soon overrun by Macbeth's vital presence. The weird sisters turn dead history into something living and dramatic. It is their weirdness, appearing only to vanish into air, neither fully embodied nor disembodied, – "The earth hath bubbles", Banquo tells us, "And these are of them" (I.iii.77-78) – that is able to get under the skin of this corpse-ridden feudal merry-go-round and conjure something other.

The second key feature of Duncan's world is its language, which supposes an unproblematic unity of words and events. The seemingly straightforward ability to name events is evident as the Captain reports his "knowledge of the broil" (I.ii.6): for a moment, "fortune" smiles on its "damnèd quarry" (I.ii.14) Macdonald, but "justice" (I.ii.29) promptly destroys him. Justice comes in the form of Macbeth who is justly rewarded. Not only are events capable of simple narration, but they are also susceptible to clear judgement. "Justice" is a motionless absolute that sublates everything local, vaporising all difference and singularity. Soon, however, "noble Macbeth" (I.ii.66) will be unseaming enemies not for 'justice' but for evil. The result is that 'justice' and 'rebel' become hollowed out, abstract terms. Within the language of the situation – that of Duncan, Malcolm, and Macduff – these terms are overlaid on all circumstances, so that Macbeth can replace Macdonald, and Macduff Macbeth, without any change in language or structure. With the only possibilities being complete belonging to the established order or the utter chaos of evil rebellion, the self-contained language of Duncan's Scotland annuls the possibility of creative freedom, be it personal or political.

Duncan's language cocoons him from the scandalous intrusion of evil – or otherness. He seems hermetically sealed, without the physicality or puns that are the usual lifeblood of Shakespearean speech. Everything exists in report for Duncan. He alternates between questioning others about events, "Dismayed not this our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?" (I.ii.34), and dealing out praise and courtesies, "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!" (I.ii.24). Duncan's almost contentless language neither touches the physical world nor connects images to the material, or does so only ironically and unintentionally: "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing" (I.iv.28-29). Sealed from the vital and irruptive, the only value expressed by Duncan's language is formal courtesy: "O worthiest cousin, / The sin of my ingratitude even now / Was heavy on

me!" (I.iv.14-16). The result is that the 'good' characters of *Macbeth* are strangely undramatic. They are, by and large, not with the dramatic moment. So, for instance, Duncan's first question, "What bloody man is that?" establishes that he is playing catch-up. He must ask an anonymous blood-smeared soldier for a "report [...] of the revolt" to which he was not present. We see a similar belatedness with Macbeth's nemesis, Macduff. The Porter delays opening the door to Macduff's knocking before he enters with the task of waking the king: "He did command me to call timely on him. / I have almost slipped the hour" (II.iii.45-6). But, of course, the king is already dead⁴.

Such is the world as it stands: feudal, brutal, repetitive, and strangely lacking in dramatic presence. However, there is also the world that is not: the world of desire, of the call. We are introduced to this alternative world in the play's first scene. The weird sisters *precede* and almost direct our experience of the historical world. They set the time and place for our meeting of Macbeth:

FIRST WITCH
 When shall we three meet again?
 In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
 SECOND WITCH
 When the hurly-burly's done,
 When the battle's lost and won.
 THIRD WITCH
 That will be ere the set of sun.
 FIRST WITCH
 Where the place?
 SECOND WITCH
 Upon the heath.
 THIRD WITCH
 There to meet with Macbeth.
 (*Macbeth*, I.i.1-7)

The weird sisters both call Macbeth, and call us to expect Macbeth. The call is unjustified and unexplained. There is no reason given for Macbeth's centrality. Nonetheless, Macbeth is unmistakably the object, the target, of their weirdness and conjuring. They *name* him, which has its own peculiar power. They are without identifiable history, but

4 I address Macduff's belatedness in more detail in Luke 2018, 146-48.

they are somehow entering the historical realm, altering it, and calling Macbeth out of this world in almost comic language. The 'comic', here, is language's excessive and shifting quality. It does not stay where it should but breaks the rules and inverts things. Their almost childlike rhyme, playful word-choice ("hurly-burly"), reference to legendary tales ("Grimalkin" the Scottish faery cat), and characteristic inversions ("[f]air is foul, and foul is fair"), speak to a sort of superabundant playfulness (I.i.8-11). Describing the "weird sisters" as "the heroines of the piece", Terry Eagleton writes that "[t]heir riddling, ambiguous speech [...] promises to subvert" the existing hierarchal structure and reveal "the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare" (Eagleton 1986, 2). They are heroines because they estrange the world as it is, in all its systemic violence. Their origin-less, over-spilling quality not only defies teleology, it relates to the historical world of Duncan's Scotland in a manner that recalls the disturbing intrusion of the divine summons. They introduce something *other*. Eagleton's postmodern thought here aligns with the theological idea that we need a divine disturbance to break from the way of the world. Barth writes of the "fruitful disturbance", or "divine disturbance", that opens the hearts of the faithful to a new mode of life (Barth 1968, 403; 445). More directly, Eagleton draws on Benjamin's idea that we need a real state of emergency – a messianic break – to escape the tragic history of the victor. Or as Adorno writes: "Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" (Adorno 1978, 247). Brecht expresses something similar when he writes of a "disconcerting but fruitful [...] alienat[ion of] the familiar" (Brecht 1964, 192). *Macbeth*, we shall see, both confirms the creativity, and reveals the potential evil, of such processes of other-focused negation.

"Speak, if you can" – Dark Openings

The weird sisters' second entrance is again marked by "*Thunder*" (I.iii.1sd). They then mirror their martial counterparts by recounting their recent endeavours. But while the military talk was functional and enclosing, the weird sisters' account of "tempest-toss[ing]" a hapless sailor (I.iii.3-24) is non-functional and excessive. There is something comic about their speech and its irrelevance to the main

plot; something absurd in the pre-occupation of these profound forces with a sailor's wife who refused to hand over the "chestnuts in her lap", which she "munched, and munched, and munched" (I.iii.3-4). The comic specificity of the "chestnuts" speaks to a very different sort of history than Duncan's, in which an overlying concept of "justice" overrode all particularity. Rather than such indistinct mass movements and faceless cycles, we have significance and action ("I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do" (I.iii.9) at the lowest level of detail, so that nothing is inconsequential. Spirits can come anywhere, anytime, to transform lives. Even for chestnuts. Creativeness creeps in through the rifts and crevices. The world "bubbles" (I.iii.77) with dark life.

Macbeth enters on the back of the weird sisters' account and his speech is immediately distinct from Duncan's battle talk, in which he made simple, unambiguous pronouncements – "Great happiness" (I.ii.58) – about events at which he was not present. While Duncan speaks belatedly, Macbeth is part of the day: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I.iii.36). His opening words establish a clear link between Macbeth and the weird sisters' "foul is fair" inversions, which challenge the stability and univocality of "Justice". His words also establish that Macbeth is *present* in the day. He has "seen" it. He is disorientated by its weirdness and is conscious of his own disorientation. We are no longer in a historical narrative; rather, strange things are happening right now before us. In a sense, Macbeth exits the historical tale – in which his deeds are recounted in I.ii – and begins to become something else in his very first line. He alone experiences the play as we experience it: not merely as a normative account of revolt and restoration but also as the spectral emergence of a mind.

The weird sisters of *Macbeth* are, in large part, the weird sisters of Macbeth. From the outset, it is him that they call: they go to "meet with Macbeth". What happens – the spectral that invades the structural violence – happens to him. Indeed, the fact that Macbeth enters speaking the weird sisters' "fair is foul" language, suggests that he has been *conjured* by evil. As Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern note, Macbeth's first line is cued by the weird sisters' charm:

[Charme's] [wound] up. *Enter...*
 So foule and faire a day I have not seene.
 (Palfrey and Stern 2007, 98)

It highlights the character's indebtedness to a weirdness that lies outside of him: to an "alien [un]righteousness" (to abuse Luther) that has already begun to transform and perhaps even possess the character. Banquo's mundane and functional first words, "How far is't called to Forres" (I.iii.37), immediately tell us that he is not a twin to Macbeth. He is not operating in the same dual sense:

How far is't called to Forres? – What are these,
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitantso'th'earth
And yet are on't? – Live you, or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.
(*Macbeth*, I.iii.37-45)

Banquo's long-winded questioning is plainly inadequate to this strange happening. The gap, or hyphen, between his mundane opening and his "What are these" marks the convergence of two worlds hereto separated. Banquo feels the explosiveness of the occasion, but tries to contain it by placing the weird sisters in nameable categories through a series of dichotomies: on the earth or not; alive or not; questionable or not; women or not. In this sense he is Duncan's true heir, demanding that existence fall within stable evaluations (justice or rebellion). Although his speech does attempt to get at the strangeness of the happening, the "not" in the second half of each equation suggests a bewildering beyondness with which his language cannot deal. Banquo is not open to the other's binary-blurring ("fair is foul") call, but rather seeks to define the intrusion in an all-or-nothing manner.

Macbeth is similarly eager to know what these alien figures are but he is not blocked by the need to name events as "here" or "not". Whereas Banquo creates a wall of sound that insulates him, Macbeth exposes himself to the otherness of their speech: "Speak, if you can. What are you?" (I.iii.45). After Banquo's flailing attempts to answer his own questions, Macbeth's short question and command to speak indicate a radical openness to their bubbling excess and dangerous ambiguity. He responds to a call from beyond himself. It is this sense

of risk and exposure that rebuffs the traditional idea that Macbeth is already secretly ambitious or guilty. It blunts A. C. Bradley's claim, in comparing Macbeth to Banquo, that "no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of *fear* at the mere prophecy of a crown" (Bradley 1932, 344). Rather, their differing responses stress Macbeth's opening to a dimension beyond Duncan's realm. It is a dimension that cannot be clearly categorised – the weird sisters perform "A deed without a name" (IV.i.65) – or judged: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (I.iii.129-30). Unlike Banquo, Macbeth turns to face the void from whence the summons comes. We might draw a dark parallel between the road to Forres and the road to Damascus. In both, something intrudes into existing chronicles and language, and in both the intrusion is only really addressed to one man. In Acts 9, Saul asks "Who art thou, Lord?" while, in contrast, "the men which journeyed with him stood speechless" (Acts 9:5-7). The voice speaks before others but calls forth only one new man, one "chosen vessel" (Acts 9:15). "We go to meet Macbeth". I therefore reject Hegel's characteristic argument that, despite "appear[ing] as external powers determining Macbeth's fate", the weird sisters really declare "his most secret and private wish" (Hegel 1988, 1:231). Rather, the weird sisters are given the dramatic and imaginative force to convulse the dead world and conjure Macbeth. There is no "wish", no Macbeth, before their appearance. One might here turn Hegel's master-slave dialectic against his Shakespeare criticism: it is only by encountering the weird sisters that Macbeth's "consciousness has been fearful", that his "whole being has been seized with dread, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations". For Hegel, this fearful shaking, this "absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness" (Hegel 1977, 117). It is through such a seizure or "melting-away" – "what seemed corporal / Melted as breath into the wind" (I.iii.79-80) – that Macbeth becomes an 'other' for himself. It is pure fantasy, then, to imagine that "when Macbeth heard them he was not an innocent man" (Bradley 1932, 344). For it is only through the weird sisters' invocation of the imagination that Macbeth comes to be. "Innocence" and "guilt" do not seem to pre-exist their intrusion. The weird sisters are not merely "dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has

to deal" (Bradley 1932, 343), they are the disturbing, unaccountable summons – the play's foundational happening – through which the "action bursts into wild life" (Bradley 1932, 332).

"What is not"

The centrality of Macbeth's imagination has long been recognised:

This bold ambitious man of action has, within certain limits, the imagination of a poet [...] Macbeth's better nature – to put the matter for clearness' sake too broadly – instead of speaking to him in the overt language of moral ideas, commands, and prohibitions, incorporates itself in images which alarm and horrify. His imagination is thus the best of him, something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts; and if he obeyed it he would have been safe. (Bradley 1932, 352)

Macbeth's conscience is a sort of linguistic surplus that works through poetic images rather than functional speech. It infiltrates Macbeth as "images which alarm and horrify", making Duncan's simple self-presence impossible. But while Bradley may attempt to distinguish between the "good" and "bad" aspects of this imagining, indeed, to limit Macbeth's imagination to "moral" conscience, the play does no such thing. Macbeth's imagination is not the "best" of him in a moral sense, even if it is in a dramatic sense. His entire consciousness and not just his "better nature" works through imaginings. It is his imagination that draws him to evil.

After asking them to speak, Macbeth says nothing when the weird sisters hail him as Cawdor and king. His silence is far from dumb, however, as Banquo's question indicates: "why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (I.iii.49-50). While Banquo is outwardly eager to know his prophecy, he is not transported elsewhere like Macbeth, who is envisioning something different to his ordained future within the situation; something different to life as Glamis. The weird sisters thus open the possibility of an imaginative and poetic Macbeth. That he is possessed by his vision of the future-to-come is confirmed twice more. First, Banquo again takes up the questioning because Macbeth "seems rapt withal" (I.iii.55), indicating that Macbeth's mind remains elsewhere. Second, after Ross and Angus confirm that he is Cawdor, Macbeth barely speaks to these

emissaries from the king's world but is again rapt: "Look how our partner's rapt" (I.iii.141). We might link this rapture to theatre itself. Bert O. States quotes Heidegger's observation that in "the vicinity" of a work of art "we are suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be". We experience "the sense that what is before us [...] offers a different kind of *here*" (States 1985, 4). Theatre temporarily and provisionally negates what we know – that the character is an actor, that we are sitting in a theatre watching a fiction – in order to create another form of presence. Taking up Derrida's words about the "irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage", States suggests that theatre "does not [simply] represent something *in advance* [but] becomes a blank check, an open presence; it becomes the source of something *not yet here*" (States 1985, 113). It summons something that did not before exist: the play-world but also the theatrical person, Macbeth, whose mind and presence become real for us. In his rapture, the audience and Macbeth coincide. As Macbeth is lifted out of Holinshed's time (Duncan's time) our usual sense of time is suspended. His conversion, his animation, is thus open to us: we are both transported into a new "here".

There is thus a strange tension between closedness and openness in *Macbeth*. On the one hand, we might say that Macbeth's calling is fundamentally closed off. Whereas Paul's conversion led to the preaching of good news to all, the weird sisters' conversion of Macbeth is intended to damn one man and address death to many. Whereas Paul is a universalist in his vision of the unseen, Macbeth is resolutely particular in his vision: one man wearing a crown and voiding all others. Indeed, in many ways Macbeth *repeats* the structural violence of Duncan's world in his unending murders and closure from others. In this sense, Macbeth fits with one of Badiou's three types of Evil, the "simulacrum" of a truth-event. Badiou writes: "When a radical break in a situation [...] convokes not the void but the 'full' particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a *simulacrum of truth*". Badiou's chief example of this evil is the Nazi movement, which is not a truth-event because, rather than naming "the void of the earlier situation", it sought to carry "the absolute particularity" of "a particular community, the German people, toward its true destiny, which is a destiny of universal domination". Macbeth pursues his solitary domination of the realm based

on a prophecy addressed only to him, by means "of 'voiding' what surrounds [him]" (Badiou 2001, 72-74). On the other hand, however, there is also a dramatic creativity and vitality that does not conform to Badiou's philosophical categories. Macbeth's emergence is genuinely new and irruptive, opening us to an imaginative subjectivity and language that was impossible within the existing situation. It breaks the world apart and creates a new mind. And while the old order may be resumed at the play's end, in dramatic terms, it is not resumed for us. Macbeth dominates our imaginative experience of the play and we depart the play-world with his demise. Malcolm may restore "measure, time, and place" (V.xi.39) at the play's end, but this order has itself been infected by evil, for it is only through the weird sisters' riddling 'prophecy' that the old regime is reinstated. The supposed naturalness and self-unity of order are now infiltrated by the unnatural. It, like Macbeth, ends up in league with the weird sisters, who are given the prophetic and dramatic agency to bring the wood to Dunsinane and return us to the old world of linear history.

Macbeth's rapture recalls the ambivalence of Montaigne's writing about imagination. Montaigne "fee[s] a very great conflict and power of imagination" (Montaigne 1980, 1:92). "Even from my infancie", he writes, "Poesie hath had the vertue to transpierce and transport me" (Montaigne 1980, 1:246). It lies at the heart of his empathetic and wide-ranging thought, allowing him to "insinuate [his] selfe into [the] place" of others (Montaigne 1980, 1:243). On the other hand, however, Montaigne's very sensitivity to imagination, his "want of strength to resist her" transporting power, causes him to "avoid it" (Montaigne 1980, 1:92). He withholds himself from the passionate raptures of the "vulgar sort":

[T]he principall credit of visions, of enchantments, and such extraordinary effects, proceedeth from the power of imaginations, working especially in the mindes of the vulgar sort, as the weakest and seeliest, whose conceit and beleefe is so seized upon, that they imagine to see what they see not. (Montaigne 1980, 1:94)

Such moderate and reasonable judgements are present in Shakespeare too. Banquo warns Macbeth that the "instruments of darkness" may "tell us truths" to "win us to our harm" (I.iii.121-122), and we are well aware that Macbeth will be tricked and destroyed. The

play again and again registers the terrifying and dominating power of the imagination. In the thrall of diabolic forces, Macbeth kills pretty much everyone he can, including women and children. And yet, although being the “seeliest” may open Macbeth to destruction and duplicity (to being “seized upon” by evil), imaginings are not *just* imaginings in Shakespeare. Montaigne sees no path between such fantastical visions and the everyday world, but in *Macbeth* imaginings transform the world, albeit in nightmarish fashion. As Fernie puts it: “Duncan’s murder acts as a ritualistic induction into a new existential or spiritual state, which is at once a state of death but equally and troublingly of more vivid life” (Ferne 2013, 61). Macbeth’s mind lies in “restless ecstasy” (III.ii.24), while his wife’s is ultimately overwhelmed with “thick-coming fancies” (V.iii.40). Imagination and material existence blur, as exemplified by the famous moment when the “dagger of the mind” becomes “palpable” (II.i.38-40) to the hand. “Things are *hatching*” (Ferne 2013, 63) and new forms of life are being born. Indeed, there is an almost insane escalation from words and visions to horrific reality. In an extraordinary passage, we first hear that Duncan’s horses ran “wild” after his murder, then that the horses “ate each other”, and finally that Ross, who had first told us of the horses running, actually saw this cannibalistic scene with his own “eyes” (II.iv.14-20).

Macbeth is not content to rest in the imaginary world. Even amidst his initial scepticism there is a smothered but urgent desire for his imaginings to come true: “The Thane of Cawdor lives, / A prosperous gentleman, and to be king / Stands not within the prospect of belief, / No more than to be Cawdor” (I.iii.24-27). From their arrival as fantastical figures, suddenly present on the road, the weird sisters bring the imagination to life, but what radically shifts Macbeth’s “prospect of belief” is the revelation that he has been made Thane of Cawdor. The ‘prophecy’ does not just entice Macbeth’s imaginings, it establishes their *reality*. Here we might turn to Michael Witmore’s observation that in early modern religious thought “God’s providential presence is uncovered in encounters with accidents” (Witmore 2001, 10). Understood “as occasions for storytelling and the expression of immanent forms of value” (Witmore 2001, 10), however, the “providence” revealed by such “accidents” need not be godly. For instance, for “[a] man who is ploughing a field [and] stumbles upon buried treasure”, it is “‘as if’

he were doing the ploughing to find the treasure" (Witmore 2001, 36). The accident fuses with, or activates, a narrative that inspires the imagination: buried treasure. More profoundly, accidents may strike the individual with "wonder", which "marks the moment when an individual's attention or 'regard' is suddenly detached from the concerns of the world and turned elsewhere" (Witmore 2001, 148). Macbeth is not only "hailed" by the weird sisters, he is hailed by the 'accident' of becoming Cawdor and transported 'elsewhere'. Or, as Lady Macbeth puts it: "Thy letters have transported me beyond / The ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (I.v.54-56). As with Paul, an unprecedented happening inspires the individual's hope and faith in what is not seen. A vision of the transcendent or timeless – what Paul calls "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) and Lady Macbeth "the future in the instant" – emerges through a compelling personal feeling in the present ("I feel now").

Once Macbeth's imagination is gripped by the narrative of his path to kingship, the confirmation of its happening is incredible and energising. Hence Macbeth's declaration that "[t]he greatest is behind" (I.iii.114). While this is often glossed straightforwardly as the greatest is "to come" (Shakespeare 1997, 2569)⁵, the line has another important resonance. The greatest has already happened – "is behind" – because the "accident" of becoming Cawdor reveals that the world of imagining can enter the material. Dreams can come true. Life can be transformed. The seemingly unalterable facts of the world in which Glamis is Glamis, Cawdor is Cawdor, and Duncan King are suddenly shaken. The feudal scales fall from his eyes and material facts lose their inevitability: "what seemed corporal / Melt[s] as breath into the wind" (I.iii.79-80). Imaginings become his reality:

MACBETH

Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

(*Macbeth*, I.iii.136-41)

5 I.e., the "greatest", being the kingship, lies *behind* Cawdor; lies next in line.

Contrary to the old idea that “Macbeth’s character is determined by his passion of ambition” (Hegel 1988, 1:578), “ambition” is not a stable, pre-existing trait but only becomes meaningful and powerful insofar as it is a fantastical vision whose realisation is suddenly believable. Dramatically, Macbeth emerges as a compelling consciousness not because he is already an “ambitious man” (Bradley 1932, 352), but because he becomes so urgently and rapturously conscious of the fact that something has happened to him. He is strikingly aware that the exhilarating vision enticed by the weird sisters has *changed* him: that he is “unfix[ed]” “knock[ed]”, “shake[n]”, and “smothered” by this “horrid image” (I.iii.134; 131). He is not what he was. It is by this convulsion that he gains “the imagination of a poet” (Bradley 1932, 352). Unlike in Holinshed, where Makbeth is established as a “valiant gentleman” but “somewhat cruell of nature” at the outset (Holinshed 2008-2010, 5:168)⁶, there is no Macbeth before the weird sisters. And, even if we were to infer a pre-existing Macbeth, it must be in terms of the Holinshedian world of I.ii, which is to say a flat and immediate Macbeth whose unified “single state” and “seated heart” allowed no “surmise”, contradiction, or otherness.

Macbeth’s imagination – the imaginings that constitute his so-called “ambition” – spills from the void opened by this “surmise”. He is invigorated by the realisation that visions can be made real. As such, he repeatedly describes “ambition” in the language of the imagination: “suggestion”, “horrid image”, “horrible imaginings”, “thought”, “fantastical”, “surmise”, “what is not”. There are, of course, clear signs of conscience in imagination’s “horribleness”, but the overwhelming feeling is of an irresistible, albeit awful, allure that “make[s] [his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs” (I.iii.135). It usurps the material so that “nothing is / But what is not”. The weird sisters open another “order” – “beyond / The ignorant present” – into which Macbeth, dreamlike, plunges. Fittingly, it is here, sharing a line with Macbeth’s “what is not”, that Banquo observes, “Look how our partner’s rapt” (I.iii.141). Macbeth is possessed by an imagining that is far more electric than guilty conscience: it is the opening of a new horizon of possibility. He puts his hope, his soul, into what is unseen. Whereas Banquo was caught in an anxious series of dichotomies be-

6 Whereas Duncan is “soft and gentle of nature”.

tween what is and is not, Macbeth arrives as a mind committed to the obscure power of "what is not".

We can here see the links between theology, philosophies of otherness or becoming, and the power of theatre to animate "something *not yet here*" (States). As with Paul, Shakespeare's new man emerges through his death to his old self. In Hegel's terms, Macbeth is transformed by desire. The weird sisters conjure a vision of what is not (yet) that inflames his desire for a new future and causes him to negate what is (himself, his political role, his social order). The not-yet is thus not simply an abstraction, or spiritual yearning, it enters and transforms the world. Hegelian freedom, according to his interpreter Alexandre Kojève, emerges not through "a *choice* between two *givens* [...] [but through] the *negation* of the given, both of the given which one is oneself (as animal or as "incarnated tradition") and of the given which one is not (the natural and social *World*)". Freedom of thought and action entail "overcoming the given in favor of what does not (yet) *exist*, thus realizing what was never *given*" (Kojève 1969, 222-23). Nothing is but what is not. Nothing, the not (yet), is the gateway to a new life of spirit. And there is a similar sense in Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, or Badiou, in their very different ways, that the self must be opened to what is other if it is to see beyond the narrowness of its inherited subject position.

The demonic, too, can work in this manner: "The demonic *is* evil, for sure, in its violent hostility to being. And yet, it involves a potential for creativity over against what merely is, which is something other than evil – and indeed, if we are to pay heed to contemporary philosophy and culture, may be a central component of the Good" (Ferne 2013, 10). It is here worth returning to Montaigne, who describes how the "Poeticall furies, which ravish and transport their Author beyond himselfe", must be put down to "good fortune", since the author "acknowledgeth to proceed from elsewhere, than from himselfe, and that they are not in his power" (Montaigne 1980, 1:128). Montaigne here articulates an almost miraculous view of poetry: poetry is a supernatural calling that comes from outside, from "elsewhere", through a sort of unexplained moment of grace (or inspiration) that transports the author away from "himselfe" and thereby creates something new. Sidney likewise calls poetry his "unelected vocation" (Sidney 2002, 212). Here we perhaps see why Macbeth can be said to have "the im-

agination of a poet". It is not only because his imaginings are poetic but also because the manner in which he arrives as an imaginative consciousness resembles the poetic process itself – or at least the violent ravishment of the sublime. The "sacred inspiration of the Muses [...] stir[s] up the Poet with a kinde of agitation [...] beyond himselfe" (Montaigne 1980, 1:246), and this transcendent agitation then travels like electricity or sickness from poet to actor to audience. The confronting implication of *Macbeth* is that this poetic transportation is uncontrollable. That it is beyond, or at least before, good and evil.

Indeed, Macbeth's energising excess recalls "Nietzsche's view" that "we are most ourselves when we are in this destructive, dangerous and suffering state of freedom, violating the restraints of the very history which has produced us". As Jonathan Dollimore continues, "*Macbeth* does not warn against hubris and ambition; on the contrary it affirms their attraction" (Dollimore 2004, xxxi-xxxii). *Macbeth* also rebuffs the historicist impulse, deadening the world of historical progression whilst animating the passionate, brutal action of one man. As Nietzsche poses: "imagine a man seized by a vehement passion, for a woman or for a great idea: how different the world has become to him!" Such a seizure transforms the world so that "all is so palpable, close, highly coloured, resounding, as though he apprehended it with all his senses at once" (Nietzsche 1983, 64). Far from being unproblematically liberating, however, Nietzsche's description of this experience could easily apply to Macbeth:

It is the condition in which one is least capable of being just; narrow-minded, ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf of warnings, one is a little vortex of life in a dead sea of darkness and oblivion: and yet this condition – unhistorical, anti-historical through and through – is the womb not only of the unjust but of every just deed too. (Nietzsche 1983, 64)

In a manner that ironically links with Saint Paul's conversion and Badiou's event, Nietzsche affirms that transfiguring action requires a dangerous break with history in which the present bursts with irreducible life and urgency. The passionate drive for something beyond one's existing life is enlivening and creative; it is the womb of action, both good and evil. Macbeth becomes "a little vortex of life" within the "dead seas" and "oblivion" of the Holinshedian realm. Although I.ii sets up the pattern that Macbeth will ultimately repeat by taking

up Cawdor's role of traitor, the historical narrative is quite simply "less than [Macbeth's] horrible imaginings". Nietzsche's "vortex" is the antithesis of Montaigne's quest for moderation, in which he declares that "Wee never governe that thing well, wherewith we are possessed and directed" (Montaigne 1980, 3:258). As much as Montaigne might be "right", his praise of the moderate man who "marcheth alwaies with the reines in his hand" sounds more like Malcolm than Macbeth. Shakespeare's major tragic figures seldom march "with the reines in [...] hand". Indeed, they often become themselves by letting the reins fall. They rise to a higher plane, to adapt Montaigne's words against immediate passion, through imaginative "torments" and "afflictions", through "violent" and at times "tyrannical" desires, and through the "rash motions" that "transport" them to new modes of being (Montaigne 1980, 3:258-9). They arise through negation. Montaigne values control. Duncan and Malcolm value control. By and large, criticism values control. In plays such as *Macbeth*, however, Shakespeare escapes our control. Dark things flame forth only to return to darkness: things that elude our names and categories. An imaginative excess emerges from "what is not" and crosses over, like a demonic "dagger of the mind", to transpierce the material world.

"The Eye Wink at the Hand"

While Macbeth's opening to "what is not" brings him to dramatic life, it is evil in the way that utterly closes him off from "what is". Not only are his imaginings black, Macbeth envisages shrouding the act of realising them in darkness: "Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires; / The eye wink at the hand" (I.iv.50-52). Macbeth attempts to separate what is imagined from the action that will realise it, to insulate the mind from the act. He later declares:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success: that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.
(*Macbeth*, I.vii.1-7)

The “If”, of course, is impossible. Indeed, Macbeth’s own speech immediately negates it. The done-ness is imaginatively overridden when he pre-visions how Duncan’s murder will play in the minds of others. He in fact concludes that the act is not “done”, first, because it will “teach / Bloody instructions” that “return / To plague th’inventor” (I.vii.8-10), and second, because “pity” will “blow the horrid deed in every eye” (I.vii.17-24). The explicit focus on the outward consequences of the act (particularly evident in Macbeth’s tremulous question: “If we should fail?” (I.vii.59) gives some credence to Bradley’s conclusion that Macbeth’s “conscious or reflective mind [...] moves chiefly among considerations of outward success and failure, while his inner being is convulsed by conscience” (Bradley 1932, 353). And yet, surely Macbeth *does* consciously address the moral horror of the act when he describes “pity [...] blow[ing] the horrid deed in every eye”. He is picturing the murder as others will, which is a form of shamed conscience. The trouble is – and this is the critical point Bradley misses – that Macbeth separates the “horrid deed” from the allure of “what is not”. There is thus a deeper conflict at play than Bradley’s opposition between “good” imagination and “bad” conscious thought: there is a split between the self and the act. Macbeth divorces his vision of the future from the evil action that will consummate it. Hence how Macbeth can somewhat contradictorily foresee that others will be both inspired to repeat the action (it will “teach / Bloody instructions”) and be repulsed by the “horrid deed”. What is “horrible” about his imaginings is attributed to the one-off act, while what is “enticing” about them is attributed to the vision (and future self) that the act will bring about. The separation between the two implies – or hopes – that the act will be over and “done” *for Macbeth*, even as it continues to horrify (or inspire) others. He hopes to bring about a settled state by way of a “be-all” and “end-all” blow: “The future in the instant” (I.v.56). As Stanley Cavell writes, “I hear Macbeth’s speculation of deeds done in the doing, without consequence, when surcease is success, to be a wish for there to be no human action”, a “wish for an end to time” (Cavell 2003, 233-34). Macbeth seeks to ground time’s flow “here, / But here upon this bank and shoal of time”. The double “heres” form an impossibly absolute present that annuls the world of human action and relation.

But that is not the whole story, for Macbeth’s desire to reach a final resting place fails both metaphysically and dramatically. He

is perpetually embroiled in the present that he wants to overleap. His mind is never still but moves with the phantoms that possess it. And this tortured movement births the play's peculiar form of life. In becoming "what he has done" there is, as Philip Davis notes, "almost incredibly, a sort of horrified innocence of realization. "Look at me! at what I have come to!" (Davis 1996, 25). He does not reach the envisioned future ("what is not") but becomes the evil he would overleap. And he is *amazed* at his own evil. Like us, and ultimately like Lady Macbeth herself, Macbeth cannot follow his wife's prosaic advice – "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways. So, it will make us mad" (II.ii.31-32) – but stares in appalled fascination at his own nightmare: "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep'" (II.ii.33-34). He undergoes a "torture of the mind", which writhes in "restless ecstasy" (III.ii.23-24). As Bradley writes, "the image of his own guilty heart or bloody deed [...] hold[s] him spell-bound and possess[es] him wholly, like a hypnotic trance which is at the same time the ecstasy of a poet" (Bradley 1932, 354). The "horrible imaginings" that overtook "present fears" now overrun the solid world.

Macbeth comes to apprehend everything as an imagining. "Conscience" comes to consciousness as the uninvited trespass of a foreign voice: "Sleep no more". At one level, this is a brilliant way of dramatising how conscience encroaches as an external force: "Of such marvellous-working power is the sting of conscience: which often induceth us to bewray, to accuse, and to combat our selves" (Montaigne 1980, 2:45). But it is also fundamental to Macbeth's mode of life. Not only is conscience apprehended in this manner, Macbeth apprehends all ideas and actions through traumatic visions. Fittingly, Duncan's murder, the play's central action, is not staged. It is not that sort of play. We do not see it, as we see Desdemona's murder, but apprehend it as Macbeth does: as a haunting. It disappears, along with the rest of the material world. Macbeth's mind shrinks from the material act and into "what is not", which is both the promise of the imagination (new life) and his desultory isolation (death). Macbeth hears a voice crying that he "does murder sleep". *That* is the act for Macbeth. It is an intrusion he cannot stop. He is "afraid to think what [he] has done" (II.ii.49). The act therefore becomes something else; it is translated into voices and apparitions. As strikingly conscious as

he is of his changed self, Macbeth's torturous guilt also operates, paradoxically, to *maintain* his old self. His guilty imagination insulates him from the full terror of the act, which becomes a floating, foreign vision, a haunting ghost, never fully belonging to "Macbeth". It is for this reason that Kierkegaard uses Macbeth to illustrate a demonic "[d]espair over sin", which is "an attempt to maintain oneself by sinking still deeper" into sin, reaching the point where "it is eternally decided that one will hear nothing about repentance, nothing about grace" (Kierkegaard 1970, 241). Kierkegaard points to Macbeth's lines after Duncan's murder:

from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality.
All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead.
(*Macbeth*, II.iii.88-90)

In Paul's terms, Macbeth is closed to both the world ("renown") and the new life of spirit ("grace"). Shut-off within himself, no longer really speaking to anyone living, he now dismisses the possibility of transformation. But this despair also serves a 'positive' function: it serves to maintain his demonic self-consistency. In a sense, he avoids the full terror that would come if grace and goodness were admitted – if he acknowledged that he could turn aside from his bloody course. We see this demonic consistency in Macbeth's ultimate response to his ongoing hell: "Strange things I have in head that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned" (III.iv.138-39). The most straightforward reading is that he must enact his murderous thoughts before others suspect them. He must kill Macduff. But it also implies that he refuses to scan them before they are put to hand. To some extent, acting before scanning is a continuation of the eye winking at the hand.

And yet, perhaps there is also something of a dark fidelity to the imagination here, for Macbeth now knows that the horror inevitably will follow the act: that these "[s]trange things" *will* be "scanned". Just as Banquo is only really there for Macbeth after his murder, – "Hence, horrible shadow, / Unreal mock'ry hence!" (III.iv.105-6) – these dark thoughts will only be truly felt (always through a visual scanning) once they are done. Knowing this, Macbeth's decision to put all his horror to hand is almost a demonic consecration: he push-

es "what is not" to its consummation so it can be scanned. For Kierkegaard, a thinker acutely aware of the closeness of good and evil, most people are "only momentarily conscious, conscious in the great decisions", and are therefore only "spirit (if this word may be applied to them) once a week for one hour", which "is a pretty bestial way of being spirit" (Kierkegaard 1970, 236). In contrast, Macbeth's nightmare visions speak to a mind inescapably aware of its being in sin. Macbeth thereby achieves a demonic consistency – a "continuity of sin" or "consistency in something higher" (Kierkegaard 1970, 236; 238) – which, however dark, makes him a man of "spirit". The demonic rejection of the good can thus be seen, paradoxically, as both an evasive attempt to "maintain oneself" by "sinking still deeper" into sin (Kierkegaard 1970, 241) and as a courageous pursuit of "what is not". More positively put, greatness for Kierkegaard is not essential, but is a matter of what one is attached to: "everyone became great in proportion to his *expectancy*" (Kierkegaard 1985, 50). Insofar as Macbeth expects a new horizon of life and thought, the weird sisters are a creative opening (and call) to otherness. In Badiou's terms, they are an event. Insofar as he expects to usurp the role of king, to merely reshuffle the bloody deck, the weird sisters are an evil temptation or tragic repetition of the existing order. In Badiou's terms, they are a simulacrum. Shakespeare thus creates a hero who embodies both creation and evil; a hero whose horizons of expectation are both the greatest and the lowest. We have an indication of drama's ability to rest in uncertainty, in a way that philosophy cannot. Or, to return to Bradley, "the elements in" Macbeth's "nature are so inextricably blended that the good in him, that which we admire, instead of simply opposing the evil, reinforces it" (Bradley 1926, 88-89).

Negative Creation

The play embarrasses our humanist impulses by placing the powers of imagination and poetry in the service of an attractive evil. The consciousness that *Macbeth* conjures is magnetic and alive, but it is summoned to utter alienation in a living hell. Philosophical and ethical categories, along with historical context, struggle in the face of Shakespeare's drama because its creation of presence – that Macbeth *does* come alive – almost becomes a cardinal virtue that overruns reg-

ular virtues. Shakespeare's "impartiality makes us uncomfortable", Bradley writes: "we cannot bear to see him, like the sun, lighting up everything and judging nothing" (Bradley 1926, 255). Drama is animating: it brings "what is not" to life. *Macbeth* suggests that poetic affect need have no grounding in anything ethical or emancipatory; that new horizons of possibility may turn out to be nightmares; that the "new man" may turn out to be a murderous paranoiac. Macbeth both bursts into "wild life" from a dead situation and also comes to destroy all that lives. He may (to put it mildly) tip too far into the negative, but that tipping, in all its violence and peril, is essential to creative endeavour, which necessarily breaks from "what is". Creative freedom, according to Kojève, is exercised "through the negation or transformation of the given, starting from an idea or an ideal that does *not* yet *exist*, that is still nothingness (a 'project')" (Kojève 1969, 48). Paul's rapturous calling was a destructive madness to the pharisees, a demonic delusion that threatened to destroy religious tradition. We might think, here, of Juliet's violence toward her name, family, and past joys; Desdemona's violence toward her father and place; Hamlet's murderous rashness; Cordelia's "Nothing". *Macbeth* reveals that such animating breaks are far closer to "evil", to demonic birth, than is comfortable. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare seems to extract and distil the destructive aspect of poetic creation – the "not", the break, the negative – and make *it* the subject. And he thereby pushes us to ask whether this is, at base, what creation means: is becoming "what is not", and thereby destroying the world that is, what it means to create? Is this the heart of Shakespeare's extraordinary power to conjure character?

Macbeth, in death, thus brings us face to face with something at the heart of life. And it is hard not to acquiesce. Besmeared in blood and gore, the devil yet has an attractive face. For the devil is in us, if we truly live. In the sublime raptures of poetry, religion, or passion, the lines between good and evil become hard to distinguish. The issue is an ancient one, with us since eyes "beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10:18): how to distinguish evil from the sublime? Such arresting and domineering experiences are, as Montaigne writes, "beyond rules, and above reason": "the splendor of a lightning flash" has "no communitie with our judgement; but ransacketh and ravisheth the same" (Montaigne 1980, 1:246). *Macbeth* thus

prompts us to consider Shakespeare's relation to his art. Macbeth's substitution of the world for the linguistic excess of the weird sisters' supplementary realm is a deal with the devil that both brings spirits to life and makes the world barren. The black arts, but also art, seem to be supplements that are gained at the expense of living. Macbeth's relentless course is reminiscent of Faust's fatal refusal to burn his books, but it also foreshadows how Prospero's drowning of his book leads to a recuperated (if diminished) life. Books, reading, writing, creativity, magic, illusion, and imagining are both gateways and threats to living in these tales. "What is not" threatens to usurp "what is". We might turn, here, to the double-edged writing of Derrida's "Dangerous Supplement". First, "[t]he supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence" (Derrida 1992, 83). It is, for Macbeth, energising and animating; it brings "something more" into the narrowness of Duncan's realm. But, secondly, the "supplement supplements", it "adds only to replace". The supplement "intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place of* "the thing itself" (Derrida 1992, 83). The weird sisters' realm supplants the world it supplements. Macbeth destroys his world so that "nothing is but what is not". Macbeth's "horrible imaginings" give birth to an impossible desire for a world beyond action or representation; for a world that is "done".

The play leaves us with an undecidable: do we prefer the animated evil of Macbeth or the lifeless goodness of Malcolm and Macduff? In a sense, the play does not allow us to answer, for it takes Macbeth from us even before the end. The new man, the man of spirit, collapses into a form of deadness. "[A]weary of the sun" (V.v.47), he welcomes death: "I have lived long enough. My way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf" (V.iii.23-24). Suffering an apparently providential revenge upon his sins, Macbeth seems to acknowledge his own evil and consent to his own destruction. On the other hand, by restoring "measure, time, and place" (V.xi.39), the good men of order, Macduff and Malcolm, end the drama and pull us out of the vitalising excess of Macbeth's "what is not". We have either the hollow men, never quite with the play's dramatic moment, or the man of shadows ("Life's but a walking shadow", V.v.23). By giving life to Macbeth and refusing it to others – by raising him above (and then dropping him below) the undifferentiating feudal bloodshed of Duncan's world – Shakespeare leaves us walking

among the shades of what might have been. How might Macbeth's poetic and imaginative potential have been freed from the brutal cycles of violence, the drive to individualistic power, that dominates his political world? How can one live with the negative power – the "what is not" – without it becoming all? There are no clear answers, of course, and so the play leaves us caught between poetic creation and destructive evil. It pushes us to acknowledge that our most passionate moments, intense imaginative visions, and daring leaps, may lead us well to hell as to heaven. There is a precariousness, an arbitrariness, a compulsiveness, to these creative moments and the way they may seize us. As much as the play is a teleological tale of rebellion and restoration, it is also a deeper ungrounding of personal teleology. A revelation of the fundamental tenuousness of our life, which may be seized or not, called or not, by forces outside of us. Life is at once transfigured by Macbeth's supernatural calling and returns to its old tragic cycles. The call at once means everything and collapses into "sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.v.26-27). Ultimately, perhaps, the play leaves us with the mystery and paradox of poetry, which can be both a creation and a closure, new life and deadness, without final resting place.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury.
- . 1978. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 2001. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by Peter Hallward. London: Verso.
- . 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundation for Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassie. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 2005a. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.
- . 2005b. *Metapolitics*. Translated by Jason Barker. London, New York: Verso.
- Barth, Karl. 1968. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Translated from the 6th edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London, NY, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Benjamin, Walter. 1992. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. London: Fontana.
- Berger Jr., Harry. 1997. *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bradley, A. C. 1926. *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1932. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Second Edition. London: Macmillan.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Cavell, Stanley. 2003. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Updated Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, Philip. 1996. *Sudden Shakespeare: The Shaping of Shakespeare's Creative Thought*. London: Athlone.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1992. *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. 2004. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Third Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Donne, John. [1615-1630] 1953-1962. *The Sermons of John Donne*. 10 vols. Edited by George Potter and Evelyn Simpson. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1986. *William Shakespeare*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Eckhart, Meister. 2009. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. Edited and translated by Maurice O'C. Walshe. New York: Herder.
- Fernie, Ewan. 2013. *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Goddard, Harold C. 1951. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*. 2 vols. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. [1807]1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . [1835]1988. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. 2 vols. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Holinshed, Raphael. [1587] 2008-2010. *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. 6 vols. <http://english.nsms.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/>. The Holinshed Project.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. [1846] 1941. *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- . [1843-1849] 1970. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . [1843] 1985a. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin.
- . [1844] 1985b. *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kojève, Alexandre. 1969. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Translated by James H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Luke, Nicholas. 2018. *Shakespearean Arrivals: The Birth of Character*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2024. *Shakespeare's Political Spirit: Negative Theology and the Disruption of Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luther, Martin. 1973. *Luther's Works*. Volume 28. Edited by Hilton C. Oswald. Saint Louis: Concordia.
- . 2005. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Second Edition. Edited by Timothy F. Lull. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Montaigne, Michel. [1603] 1980. *Essays*. 3 vols. Translated by John Florio. London: J. M. Dent.
- Newheiser, David. 2019. *Hope in A Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1876] 1983. *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Palfrey, Simon, and Tiffany Stern. 2007. *Shakespeare in Parts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *Macbeth*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* New York: Norton.
- Sidney, Philip. [1595] 2002. "The Defense of Poesy." In *The Major Works*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- States, Bert O. 1985. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Witmore, Michael. 2001. *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Negative Empathy in Shakespeare and Verdi's *Macbeth*¹

Stefano Ercolino, Massimo Fusillo

This essay explores the concept of negative empathy in literature, with a focus on William Shakespeare's theater and Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*. Negative empathy arises when readers or spectators engage emotionally with morally troubling characters, oscillating between identification and ethical distancing. The analysis begins with a theoretical discussion of the idea of negative empathy and then shifts to literature and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Richard III*, highlighting how characters like Iago and Richard fail to evoke genuine negative empathy due to their (almost complete) lack of inner torment. In contrast, *Macbeth* – both in Shakespeare's play and Verdi's opera – provides a compelling case study. The protagonist's psychological depth, inner conflicts, and mad descent into tyranny generate an aesthetic experience where the audience simultaneously empathizes with and recoils from his plight. Through an interdisciplinary and intermedial approach that combines aesthetic and literary theory with textual and musical analysis, the essay shows how Shakespearean theater creates a space where negative empathy emerges as a powerful, unsettling aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Negative empathy, negative literary characters, Shakespearean theater, *Macbeth* (William Shakespeare and Giuseppe Verdi), moral ambivalence

Negative Empathy, Literature, and Shakespeare

The history of the arts is populated by figures and representations characterized by moral ambiguity, violence, and negativity – charac-

¹ Stefano Ercolino authored the first part and references of this article; Massimo Fusillo authored the second part. Part One is a revised version and partial translation of Chapters 1 and 2 from Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: Il punto di vista del male* (2022), forthcoming in English as Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Negative Empathy in Literature and the Arts* (2026). Part Two is a partial translation of Chapter 3.

ters such as Medea, Macbeth, Humbert Humbert, Maximilien Aue, Walter White, and Arthur Fleck; artworks like Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, Hermann Nitsch's *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*, Anselm Kiefer's *Seven Heavenly Palaces*, and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*. These examples evoke complex emotional responses combining attraction and repulsion. This ambivalent mode of aesthetic reception is what we term "negative empathy", a concept developed from ideas originally formulated by Theodor Lipps (1903; 1906; 1909), the founding figure of the contemporary debate on empathy in philosophy and psychology.

Negative empathy represents a distinctive aesthetic phenomenon, highlighting the paradoxical capacity of art to engage audiences empathetically with morally troubling scenarios and characters. Contrary to prevailing positive connotations typically associated with empathy, recent scholarship has begun critically reassessing empathy's ethical implications. Paul Bloom, for instance, criticizes empathy for being an unreliable moral guide (Bloom 2016), while trauma and perpetrator studies emphasize the potential ethical pitfalls inherent in empathizing with victims or perpetrators naïvely (Davis and Meretoja 2020; Knittel *et al.* 2020). Our work aligns with this critical approach, emphasizing that empathy's darker manifestations are central to a deeper understanding of aesthetic experience and the moral dimension of art.

Our interest in negative empathy partly emerges from Georges Bataille's provocative assertion that literature (and, by extension, art) devoid of engagement with evil quickly loses its compelling nature (Bataille 1958, 2012). Despite contemporary cultural trends toward sanitizing art or instrumentalizing it for explicitly moral purposes, we argue that restoring attention to negative empathy recaptures art's fundamental subversive, anti-hierarchical, and cathartic capacities. Negative empathy provides a vital counterpoint to these reductive perspectives, reinstating moral ambiguity and ethical complexity at the core of aesthetic reflection.

Central to our conceptual framework of negative empathy is Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) notion of cathartic identification (177), which he defines as an aesthetic attitude enabling audiences to achieve a state of liberation through empathetic engagement with suffering characters. This form of identification relies upon maintaining a safe cognitive

and emotional distance. Aristotle's foundational insights on tragedy and catharsis similarly underscore the essential role of such distance (1996, 1449b24-b28), further developed by David Hume (1978, II, 2;7; 6) and Edmund Burke (1998, 1; 14) in their explorations of sympathy and the sublime, respectively. Burke argues explicitly that terror experienced at a safe remove can become a source of aesthetic pleasure, while Hume highlights compassion as emerging precisely from a position of experiential asymmetry.

In contemporary philosophical discourse, Peter Goldie (2011, 302-17) distinguishes between "strong" empathy (full mental immersion in another's experience, which he critiques as unattainable) and "weak" empathy (an imaginative, partial perspective-taking). The distinction between these forms parallels Alvin Goldman's (2006) differentiation between "basic" (or low-level) empathy, driven by immediate neurological responses such as mirror neurons, and "reenactive" (high-level) empathy involving sophisticated inferential processes. Adam Morton (2011, 318-30) further complicates this by addressing barriers – particularly the "barrier of decency" – that limit empathy towards real-life individuals committing morally reprehensible acts, but which are less restrictive in fictional contexts.

Fictional narratives indeed provide uniquely rich contexts for negative empathy. Unlike real-world scenarios, narratives offer comprehensive psychological, historical, and motivational frameworks that facilitate complex emotional engagements. Literature and other narrative forms can thus sustain intense empathetic relations with morally ambiguous characters – relations typically intermittent and partial rather than totalizing. For instance, Fyodor Dostoevsky's character Nikolai Stavrogin in *Demons* presents readers with morally shocking acts explained through detailed introspective narration, inviting a profound, albeit disturbing, empathetic response. However, negative empathy does not exclusively pertain to identification with fictional characters. Rita Felski's (2019, 81-122) work broadens empathy's scope, suggesting audiences also empathize with non-anthropomorphic aspects of art such as narrative style, setting, or atmospheres (*Stimmungen*). Audiences may resonate empathetically with abstract elements in artworks, including purely instrumental music or installations, thus expanding empathy's boundaries beyond strictly human or animal subjects.

The communicative dimension of cathartic identification also merits attention. Artworks do not simply mirror emotional states but actively generate affective responses, capable of prompting social, individual, or political actions. Elaborating on Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* (1982), Jauss notes that catharsis can result either in collective behaviors or personal introspection, emphasizing its fundamental ambivalence. Empathetic engagement does not predetermine altruistic outcomes; rather, it remains open-ended, reflecting varied subjective reactions.

Following this, our definition of negative empathy can now be articulated precisely. Negative empathy constitutes an aesthetic experience characterized by cathartic emotional engagement with morally ambiguous or violent figures, performances, objects, compositions, or environments. These entities provoke profound empathetic anguish coupled with moral reflection. Crucially, negative empathy does not inherently lead to prosocial behavior; it equally allows for antisocial outcomes or purely introspective reactions. It underscores the unpredictable nature of aesthetic agency, defying simplistic ethical categorizations. In conclusion, recognizing negative empathy's central role in aesthetics encourages a more comprehensive understanding of art's emotional and ethical complexity. By emphasizing the unsettling yet compelling nature of empathetic engagement with negativity, this approach preserves the subversive potential of art, confronting audiences with morally charged dilemmas that demand nuanced reflection. Such experiences remind us of art's power not merely to console or educate but also to disturb, provoke, and challenge ethical certainties, reaffirming empathy's indispensable yet ambivalent role in the humanities.

The history of literature is full of characters capable of evoking empathetic suffering of the kind we feel for Humbert, in particular starting from early modern and modern literature, when the psychology of the evildoing character begins to be defined with greater care and to assume a certain complexity, starting with the villain *par excellence*, Satan, and how he is presented in Torquato Tasso's *The Liberation of Jerusalem*, Giambattista Marino's *The Massacre of the Innocents*, and, especially, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The *psychological depth* and *full characterization* of the negative character, in fact, seems to be a key element, equal to inner torment, for sparking the

aesthetic experience of negative empathy in literature². If we consider the character of Iago in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, we see immediately how, in the first scene of the tragedy, he describes to Rodrigo one of the motives for his hatred of the Moor: the fact that he, Othello, preferred the charming Florentine Michael Cassio over him for the position of lieutenant (*Othello*, I.i.8-33). Further on, at the close of the third scene of Act I, Iago adds another reason: the suspicion that Othello may have seduced his wife, Emilia (I.iii.383-401). On this occasion, Iago thinks for the first time about Cassio and his jealousy toward him as ideal instruments for reaching the double goal of occupying the place of lieutenant and spoiling Othello's conjugal happiness. Last, in the finale of the first scene of Act II, Iago speaks of two further causes of his resentment: his love, half-way between lust and revenge, for Othello's wife, Desdemona, and his aversion to Cassio, not only because he was promoted instead of him, but also because, in the future (and entirely hypothetically) he could go on to seduce his wife (II.i.284-310). On the basis of these motives, with the complicity of the dimwitted Roderigo and the ambivalently unconscious complicity of Emilia, Iago orders the deceitful act that will cause Cassio's destitution and the destruction of Othello and Desdemona's marriage and, finally, their death. The reasons that push Iago to action seem to be clearly defined, and yet, his suspicion that the Moor pursued his wife is just that, a suspicion, whereas the hypothesis that Cassio could do the same is not just remote but downright unfounded. Furthermore, Iago's desire for Desdemona is not credible; it is a desire that never transpires – if not for some sign of appreciation for her beauty, expressed in bad faith³– and that, if anything, could be merely latent in the vivid, treacherous scenes evoked by Iago of her passionate lovemak-

2 This seems to have already struck Wayne Booth (1983) when, in *A Rhetoric of Fiction*, he wrote: "If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, *then* the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him" (377-78; emphasis in the original).

3 Alluding to Othello and Desdemona's wedding night, Iago tries to spark Cassio's erotic imagination: "she is sport for Jove. / [...] And, I'll warrant her, full of game. / [...] What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation. / [...] And when she speaks, is it not an alarum of love? / [...] Well, happiness to their sheets! [...]" (II.iii.16-28).

ing, first with Othello, then Cassio, as a way to provoke Venetian senator Brabantio, father to Desdemona, against the Moor⁴, and, in the end, to turn Othello against his wife⁵. Among all the motives for Iago's hatred, the only one that seems to have some measure of concreteness and plausibility in directing his actions is the missed nomination to lieutenant, which is a petty excuse for the vast destruction he scatters around him and to which he himself is a victim, once uncovered.

Iago reluctantly sobs his way through a reconstruction of his motives over the course of three scenes between the start of the first act and the start of the second. The "peculiar end" (I.i.60) he speaks of to Roderigo in the first scene of Act I and the reason why he does not immediately leave the Moor's service after the offense of not being promoted are not clear from the start, but they gradually grow clearer, when Iago will merge in a unique, diabolical machination his revenge against Othello, Cassio, and, in a collateral way – for reasons on which one can only speculate – Desdemona. In the last act, asked why he plotted his cruel deception, Iago explains nothing: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (V.ii.303-04). Afterwards, awaiting his judgment in the hands of Cassio – who, in the meantime, has been rehabilitated and named governor of Cyprus – Iago wraps himself in the most complete silence.

The mystery of Iago's minds is one of the most fascinating elements of *Othello* – "I am not what I am", Iago says in a famous verse (I.i.65) – which we will not attempt to decipher here. One thing, how-

4 Iago to Brabantio: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram [Othello] / Is tugging your white ewe [Desdemona]" (I.i.88-89); "[...] Because we come to / do you service and you think we are ruffians, you'll / have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, / you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have / coursers for cousins and jennets for germans" (I.i.109-13); "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter / and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs" (I.i.115-17).

5 This is what Iago says to Othello, to poison his mind with the suspicion that Desdemona and Cassio might be lovers: "And may; but, how? how satisfied, my lord? / Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on; / Behold her tupp'd?" (III.iii.394-6); "It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk [...]" (III.iii.401-04).

ever, can be said with a good measure of certainty regarding Iago's psychology: on *no* occasion does he seem to suffer from the evil that he is causing. This inevitably conditions the empathetic response of the reader and/or spectator in his regards. Perverse admiration for his cleverness and his capacity to manipulate, and the fact that he has motives (even if they are not fully decipherable) to enact vengeance against Othello, are not elements sufficient to put into place a true empathetic relation between Iago and the reader/spectator. To this end, it is necessary for the evildoing character to suffer tangibly for his actions, his thoughts, or the condition in which he finds himself, and it is equally necessary that he should also possess a psychological complexity that is in principle *legible*. In *Othello*, Iago appears, instead, to be an inscrutable force of destruction. Speaking with Desdemona, he defines himself as a critic: "[...] I am nothing if not critical" (II.i.120). This is doubtlessly one of the reasons that he seems so intriguing. To be fascinated with a character who commits evil and to feel negative empathy are, however, two different things. Iago is a Machiavellian villain incapable of involving us from an empathetic point of view, especially because he is not defined in a psychologically detailed way; it is a bit as though he were a captivating, impenetrable personification of Vice from the morality plays⁶ – something Richard (another memorably negative Shakespearean character) explicitly says about himself in *Richard III*⁷.

Even if one can be assimilated to the other, Richard's case is somewhat different from that of Iago, who does not suffer because of the crimes he commits and who is not capable of triggering negative empathy. The first scene of the chronicle play finds Richard involved in a monologue in which he affirms that he has devoted his life to evil because, due to his physical deformity, he was excluded from the pleasures and joys to which others normally have access. Here are Richard's vibrant words⁸:

6 See Spivack 1958.

7 "Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (*Richard III*, III.i.82-83).

8 "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (*Richard III*, I.i.28-31).

I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them –
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 (*Richard III*, I.i.18-27)

Establishing a fatal connection between physical deformity and moral aberration, Richard manages at first to build an empathetic bond with the reader/spectator, a bond that, however, will never cement itself, due essentially to his cold perfidy and his almost total absence of any inner conflict regarding the murders for which he is responsible. “Almost total” because, in at least one case, Richard displays anguish toward his actions. In the third scene of Act V, the night before the crucial battle of Bosworth Field, Richard is visited by the ghosts of all those he has killed, ghosts that wish death upon him the next day. Richard reacts with terror at the nocturnal visions and appears, for the first time, to be tormented by his misdeeds, claiming that he hates himself for his crimes, recognizes himself to be guilty of them, and now discovers himself to be alone⁹. However bright, this is a solitary lightning strike, an early attempt on Shakespeare’s part to confer psychological depth onto an evildoing character, an attempt that is neither fully nor uniformly developed in *Richard III* and, which, as we will see in the next section, will come to fruition only later, in *Macbeth*. Thus, Richard, like Iago, albeit for different reasons, is a villain, a type of negative character who is rarely capable of evoking

9 “O, no! alas, I rather hate myself. / For hateful deeds committed by myself! / [...] My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns me for a villain. / Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree; / Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree; / All several sins, all used in each degree, / Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty, guilty! / I shall despair. There is no creature loves me; / And if I die no soul will pity me: / Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself / Find in myself no pity to myself?” (*Richard III*, V.iii.190-204).

the empathy of the reader/spectator in a profound way and who, in different guises, has been a popular type across time: in the eighteenth century, for example, with the Marquise of Merteuil in Pierre Chardel's *Dangerous Liaisons* and with Don Giovanni in the eponymous opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte; in the nineteenth century, with Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and, in the twentieth, with Judge Holden in Cormac MacCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

A Broken, Expressionistic Song: Giuseppe Verdi's Macbeth

Across the long history of tragedy, one that has been marked by constant oscillations and transformations, Shakespeare deserves special credit for having reflected profoundly on negative empathy. His tragedies, in fact, represent a culmination in the history of this aesthetic experience; leaving aside the degree of latent identification they evoke, his negative characters are among the most extraordinary in the entire global imaginary, embodying the concept of evil par excellence (specifically, a form of evil that is subtly and inexplicably attractive), as embodied in characters such as Iago, Richard III, Lady Macbeth, and others.

Macbeth is a striking example of a tragedy centered on negative characters (the positive figures play a relatively marginal role). These characters, however, are never one-dimensional, but always complex and multifaceted¹⁰. This makes of the play a radical act, one that finds its best analogue in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons*, a choral novel with almost exclusively negative characters, one which evokes latent empathy toward an entire community that is shot through with evil and madness. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, though, negative empathy comes to intersect with a series of connected themes: dreams, the supernatural, the hallucinatory, the nocturnal unconscious. As Jan Kott (1974, 85-98) claimed, the idea of history as nightmare underlies this collection of themes. A form of latent identification, mediated by aesthetic distance, is in operation toward the protagonist in particular: the pressure exerted by the witches and their predictions for the future, his fragility, his inner conflict, and his dependence on his wife are

10 On the co-presence of good and evil see Lombardo 2010, 57-60.

all factors that serve to activate a disturbing negative empathy. This is especially true in the first phase, before the transformation into a tyrant has taken place. Lady Macbeth is a different example, since she appears as a kind of androgynous demon, a characterization that is distant from the all-too-human depiction of her husband, and she takes on empathetic depth only in the final scene of sleepwalking. This is the case even if, as is always true in theater, there have been great actresses, such as Adelaide Ristori and Sarah Bernhardt, who rooted their performances in empathy and humanity. This is a turn that occurred around 1830, before which the dominant interpretation was that of the superhuman monster embodied by Hannah Pritchard in her performance (Clausen 2005).

The reception of Shakespeare in musical theater has been and continues to be quite rich, almost as much as the reception of his work in film. The first, substantially neoclassical phase of these adaptations is shaped by French translations and re-elaborations, which tend to normalize the Shakespearian text (Vittorini 2000, ch. 5). From this point of view, Verdi's *Macbeth* marks an epochal shift: it is in fact the first lyric opera entirely and exclusively based on Shakespeare's text (in Italian translation, of course)¹¹. At the same time, it is, as Massimo Mila (1980) put it, "the keystone of Verdi's youthful output" (28), one that was understood and valued by critics for its disruptive power only relatively late. It is almost as if the encounter with one of the most disturbing tragedies by Shakespeare (with whom, as is well known, Verdi would have a profound and intense relationship over the course of his entire artistic career) had in some way forged his expressive and expressionistic power, and his abilities as a great playwright as well as a great musician.

Macbeth is an anomalous work, primarily because it is not an opera about love (at least not explicitly). This was highly unusual within the context of Romantic melodrama. Additionally, it does not follow the typical love dynamic between a male protagonist (usually a tenor) and a female protagonist (usually a soprano), with a charac-

11 In this case, the translations were the hendecasyllabic version by Michele Leone (dated 1819-1822) and the version in prose by Carlo Rusconi (1838). See Goldin (1985, 232-45), in an exhaustive chapter devoted to the genesis of the libretto and to Verdi's creative role.

ter taking on the role of the antagonist (generally a baritone). It was precisely the absence of a conventional structure, together with the direct work carried out on a text as full of expressive shades as Shakespeare's, that allowed Verdi to develop a new way of intertwining recitative and singing. This feature would still be crucial in his last two masterpieces, both of which were drawn from Shakespeare, namely *Othello* and *Falstaff*. Thanks to this intertwining, the smoothness of *bel canto* is deconstructed in favor of a continuous and irregular alternation of vocal registers, from *sottovoce* to *canto spiegato*, the choice of which is dictated by the dramatic setting (Petrobelli 2008, 46). And it is precisely this thick intertwining between word and music that allows us to enter the mind of the protagonist, to make us feel empathy.

As always, Verdi worked intensely and in direct contact with his librettists (in this case, Francesco Maria Piave, and then after a certain point Andrea Maffei), whom he requests to and sometimes imposes on specific expressive solutions. Even if, unlike Richard Wagner, Verdi never penned his own libretto, the self-consciousness that he displays in his rich correspondence could lead us to define him, with an intentional, whimsical paradox, the greatest Italian playwright of the nineteenth century. Indeed, his overall poetics centers around this interaction between verbal and musical text, leading to a performative potentiality encapsulated by the quite effective formulation "stage word [*parola scenica*]" that would come to be theorized, a century later, by semioticians of the theater. In *Macbeth*, all of this takes place through a gradual stripping away of the dramatic text, which is followed faithfully, for the most part. "Few words, few but significant", Verdi asked of Piave various times, as Paolo Gallarati has observed in an essay that brings into relief the continuity of the opera's tension, one that is powered by violent contrasts throughout¹².

Negative empathy toward the protagonist develops especially in the first two acts, starting from the first appearance of the witches and their disturbing prophecy. The witches represent an anthropological theme with a long tradition that is pregnant with symbolism: while in Shakespeare they suggest a demonic and supernatural perversion of motherhood and the natural and political order, and while to our

12 See Gallarati (2011, 91-103), an essay included in the program note on the occasion of a performance conducted by Riccardo Muti and directed by Peter Stein.

eyes today they represent a sort of underground resistance to the patriarchal world, in the nineteenth century, they had just begun to be an object of study. One need only consider the 1862 Jules Michelet text *The Sorceress*, which connects them to ancient fertility rites. Verdi himself appears to echo the interpretation of August Schlegel, for whom witches embody the inexplicable, the uncontrollable, and the disquieting¹³. Musically, a further grotesque component is added to this: the Romantic aesthetic of ugliness that Verdi knew quite well how to deploy. Verdi's *Macbeth* thus opens with a disturbing and anomalous frame for an Italian opera (which is usually not enamored with the fantastic), that is, with the image of the negative energy that will completely dominate the protagonist. Empathy in his regards is activated immediately thanks to the first aria Macbeth sings: an emotional reaction to the prophecy, in which he expresses his anguish at the murderous desire that is beginning to form (he repeats several times: "Blood-soaked thought, where did you come from?")¹⁴. Inner conflict characterizes various other moments in this first phase: the crucial decision to kill King Duncan and the duet with Lady Macbeth after the murder; and then, after the second murder, the *concertato* in which the protagonist hallucinates the ghost of Banquo during a banquet. These are all moments in which the continuity of singing is broken into fragments to follow all the moments of Macbeth's crisis, his oscillating between annihilating anguish and nostalgia for innocence lost. This oscillation, which allows us to enter his crushed psyche, is made even more concrete in monologue arias, a technique of subjectification that serves in theater as the principal vehicle of empathy. Here, for example, is the one pronounced before the hallucination of the dagger:

Is this a dagger I see, turned toward me?
 If you aren't a dream, then let me grasp you.
 You evade me...yet I see you! You run ahead
 of me along the unclear path that in my mind
 I set out to follow! What a horrible sight!
 The blade is stained with blood!
 But nothing is there. Only my bloodied

13 Clausen (2005) offers an interesting reading that puts Shakespeare and Verdi scholarship into dialogue.

14 For the Italian text, see Piave 2009, I.iii.

mind gives it form, and as reality
 presents illusion before my eyes.
 Across half of the world
 nature is now dead: now the murderer,
 like a ghost, creeps in the shadows.
 The witches now realize their mysteries.
 Unmoving earth! Hush beneath my steps...
 (*The sound of a ringing bell.*)
 It is decided...that bronze beckons!
 Hear it not, Duncan! It is an eternal knell
 Calling you toward heaven, or toward hell.
 (Piave, *Macbeth*, I.xi)

In order to represent the different modalities of Macbeth's inner conflict, the music coagulates around certain sentences and words, such as the obsession with impurity ("Oh this hand! / Not even the ocean could / wash these hands for me" [Piave, *Macbeth*, I. xiv]). In the second part (that is, in the last two acts), when the protagonist has transformed completely into a tyrant, the dramaturgical arc is ever more concentrated on the sequence of murders committed to preserve power and on Macbeth's inevitable decline. Of course, there is the decisive aria that gives expression to the remorse for the general cursedness in which the protagonist has fallen and for the pure evil toward which he has directed his life (*Pietà, rispetto, amore* [*Compassion, respect, love*]) and so also to moments of inner conflict that activate negative empathy, which returns again in the brief, famous monologue after the queen's death. It is a form of empathy that is even more pronounced in the first version, which came to the stage at Florence's Teatro della Pergola in 1847, which included an aria after the second appearance of the witches, and most importantly, the death of the protagonist on-stage, thus preserving focus on him. This differs from the second version of 1865 (the one that has continued to be staged in theater since), where a chorus in the conclusion celebrates, with a sustained rhythm, the liberation from the oppressor (this is functionally similar to the finale Mozart added to his *Don Giovanni*).

Through *Macbeth*, Verdi appears to engage in a Shakespearean experiment with music to enter systematically into the wavering mind of a negative character. However, things seem a little different when it comes to the other protagonist, Lady Macbeth, often considered to be almost a double, a specular part of her husband. In analyzing the

poetics of the stageword in relation to Shakespeare, Guido Paduano has shown how Verdi, through a series of small deviations from his dramatic source, tends to depict Lady Macbeth all the more as a demonic force, capable even of sarcasm whenever she controls her husband (Paduano 1992, 115-32). The most stunning example comes in the duet in Act I, in which Macbeth is seized by terror, whereas Lady Macbeth responds with minimal emotion and issues directions with cold pragmatism. Here is how in Shakespeare's play she reacts to her husband's pronouncements, as he obsesses over the screams that he believes himself to hear, prophesying for him a life without sleep:

Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,
 You do unbend your noble strength to think
 So brainsickly of things. Go get some water
 And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
 Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
 They must lie there. Go, carry them and smear
 The sleepy grooms with blood.
 (*Macbeth*, II.ii.58-64)

In the Piave-Verdi version, Lady Macbeth does not react to the terrible, tragic remark on the murder of sleep with these practical instructions (summarized slightly later in the opera), which partly relieve the gravity of the situation, but with an equally potent reply, which sarcastically takes up the three titles of the protagonist present in the prophecy of the witches, in order to taunt her husband's fragility:

Tell me, did you not hear another voice?
 Macbeth, you are bold, but without daring;
 Glamis, you tremble halfway and stop;
 Cawdor, you are a conceited child.
 (Piave, *Macbeth*, I.xiii)

This addition to Shakespeare's text, which actually consists of a bricolage of other passages from the tragedy, represents the culmination of a subtle and complete manipulation, a form of rewriting that amplifies the protagonist's subalternity. And it is the music itself that grounds this meaning: Lady Macbeth's lines take up the melody of Macbeth's, but in a major tonality, with the sinuous musical figure assigned to the cello and clarinet, accompanied by the strings' *piz-*

*zicato*¹⁵. The terrified, remorseful voice coming from Macbeth's self (with which we as spectators empathize), is juxtaposed to the voice representing the woman-demon's dominion, staging a relationship in-between doubling and mirroring.

Within the expressive strategy of amplification of Lady Macbeth's dominion, one also finds the aria composed for the 1865 edition, *La luce langue* [*Light is dying away*], which is focused on the principal lever of Shakespeare's tragedy, the libidinous desire for power, the "desire for the throne" exalted in the cabaletta-like finale. It is exalted with a nearly physical euphoria that is altogether foreign to Shakespeare's tragedy, even if the first part of the aria, quite free in its musical tenor (more an *arioso* than a proper aria) and suspended in a nocturnal melancholy, could be understood as a moment of uncertainty on Lady Macbeth's part, if not one of regret. (This is an attempt at humanization that was also pursued in the theatrical interpretations of Adelaide Ristori)¹⁶. The dramatic choice to make the female character participate in the planning of the third great murder, the massacre of the Macduff family, surely falls within the overall valorization of the negative and of Lady Macbeth's dominant role, which symmetrically amplifies our empathy toward Macbeth as the victim.

In Shakespeare as in Verdi, the role of the female protagonist culminates in the famous sleepwalking scene, which overturns all the traits of the first part, in a dense series of internal references, presenting Lady Macbeth as overcome with anguish. Given the amplification of her negativity in Verdi's opera, the reversal results even more pronounced, powered by the *bel canto* tradition of madness, lending to this character an absolute alterity and a disturbing spectrality. In the version of the opera directed by Mario Martone in 2015 for Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet (tending toward the abstraction of a boundless night), empathy toward Lady Macbeth is intensified by a video by the choreographer Raffaella Giordano, evoking forms of archaic possessions and rituality that could be straight out of Ernesto De Martino's anthropology. In the version directed by Emma Dante in 2017, staged in Turin, Palermo, and Macerata, and then presented

15 For a musical commentary of this passage and Verdi's *Macbeth* in general, see Budden 2001, 269-312.

16 See Baldini 2001, 129; and Clausen 2005.

at the Edinburgh Festival, we find Lady Macbeth surrounded by a set of hospital beds, a clear allusion to madness, which begins with a dance: a moment of surreal grace, enveloped in a poetic blue, as if to dilute the tragic madness of Verdi's music.

As in Euripides's *Medea*, in *Macbeth* the author seems to push the mechanism of negative empathy to the extreme; he allows the spectators to enter the mind of the character and allows them to experience all the doubts, conflicts, and motivations that push toward the negative act of murder. After this initial phase of preparation is over and the character has been transformed into an embodiment of pure evil, identification seems no longer to be very sustainable. For this reason, Shakespeare in his ending celebrates the installation of the new order and of a positive kingship. But it is no accident that the contemporary reception of the play has tended to compress or cut this part, amplifying instead the tragedy's nihilistic dimension, as we see in the filmic adaptations by Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski, and Justin Kurzel. At the same time, Verdi's final chorus, which, with its kind of ringing rhythm, celebrates the definitive triumph of the new king and of good over evil, is muffled under Dante's direction. As a result of a choice made by the conductors (Gabriele Ferro in Palermo, Gianandrea Nosedà in Turin) the endings are mounted together, a fascinating solution, especially because the direction makes them homogeneous by focusing totally on the protagonist. After the actors dressed in black have laid down their swords on the corpse, everyone leaves the stage, and they sing the finale from the proscenium stage or even offstage, while on the body of the king there rains from above the metal-grill rose window that throughout the show was meant to display regality with a kind of Baroque gesture. The image of Macbeth's corpse alone on the stage, devastated by his thirst for power, by his "desire for the throne" (the grills) imagined by Emma Dante for the finale, perfectly expresses the nihilistic vision condensed in the most famous passage of Shakespeare's play, that life is "[...] a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, V.v. 29-31).

After having been rediscovered and reevaluated, Verdi's *Macbeth* is now a stable work in the opera repertoire, one that has enjoyed legendary performances by great conductors (Thomas Schippers, Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti, and Giuseppe Sinopoli), and which continues to inspire the most creative directors, such as Damiano Michieletto.

It is not, however, the only musical version of Shakespeare's darkest tragedy: in 1910, working with a libretto by Edmond Fleg (the same librettist as George Enescu's *Cedipe*), Ernest Bloch created an oneiric and symbolist version, in which negative empathy is produced not at Verdi's burning rhythm, but on the contrary through a hypnotic flux and rarefaction. A form of stripping away also underlies *Macbeth: Tre atti senza nome* [*Macbeth: Three Acts without a Name*] (2002) by Salvatore Sciarrino, who authored the libretto as well: an opera based on the permutation of an obsessive cell ("Come, night / dressed in the blackest black" [Sciarrino 2002, I.ii, and later taken up in III.iii]) and on the text's re-elaboration through the theme of the mask. Once again, negative empathy is tied here to the destabilization of identity, the night, obsession, and a catharsis reached through music and performance.

References

- Aristotle. 1996. *Poetics*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Malcolm Heath. New York and London: Penguin.
- Baldini, Gabriele. [1971] 2001. *Abitare la battaglia: La storia di Giuseppe Verdi*. A cura di Fedele D'Amico. Milano: Garzanti.
- Bataille, Georges. 1958. "La littérature et le mal par Georges Bataille," TV interview with Pierre Dumayet, May 21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XCnGuK8CVc>.
- . [1957] 2012. *Literature and Evil*. Translated by Alastair Hamilton. London and New York: Penguin.
- Bloom, Paul. 2016. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. New York: Ecco.
- Booth, Wayne C. 1983. *A Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Budden, Julian. 2001. *The Operas of Verdi*. Revised edition. Vol. 1, *From "Oberto" to "Rigoletto"*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Burke, Edmund. [1759] 1998. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clausen, Christoph. 2005. "Macbeth" *Multiplied: Negotiating Historical and Medial Difference between Shakespeare and Verdi*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

- Davis, Colin, and Hanna Meretoja, eds. 2020. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ercolino, Stefano, and Massimo Fusillo. 2022. *Empatia negativa: Il punto di vista del male*. Milano: Bompiani.
- . Forthcoming. *Negative Empathy in Literature and the Arts*. New York: Routledge.
- Felski, Rita. 2019. "Identifying with Characters." In *Character. Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, by Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, 81-122. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Gallarati, Paolo. 2011. "'Poche, poche parole ma significanti.'" In *Macbeth*, 91-103. Roma: Teatro dell'Opera.
- Goldie, Peter. 2011. "Anti-empathy." In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 302-317. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldin, Daniela. 1985. *La vera Fenice: Librettisti e libretti fra Sette e Ottocento*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Goldman, Alvin I. 2006. *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gorgias. 1982. *Encomium of Helen*. Edited and Translated by Douglas M. MacDowell. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.
- Hume, David. [1740] 1798. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 2nd ed. Edited by Lewis Amerst Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knittel, Susanne C., and Zachary J. Goldberg, eds. 2020. *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kott, Jan. 1974. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Translated by Boleslaw Taborski. New York and London: W. W. Norton.
- Lipps, Theodor. 1903. *Ästhetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol.1: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*. Hamburg and Leipzig: Verlag von Leopold Voss, 1903.
- . 1906. "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß." *Die Zukunft* 54: 100-114.
- . 1909. *Leitfaden der Psychologie*. 3rd partially revised edition. Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann.
- Lombardo, Agostino. [1969] 2010. *Lettura del Macbeth*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Mila, Massimo. 1980. *L'arte di Verdi*. Torino: Einaudi.

- Morton, Adam. 2011. "Empathy for the Devil." In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 318-330. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paduano, Guido. 1992. "Shakespeare e la parola scenica." In *Il giro di vite: Percorsi dell'opera lirica*, 115-132. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Petrobelli, Pierluigi. 2008. "'...una delle più grandi tragedie che vanti il teatro.'" In *Macbeth*, 41-53. Milano: Teatro della Scala.
- Piave, Francesco Maria. [1847 and 1865] 2009. "*Macbeth*." In *Tutti i libretti d'opera*, a cura di Piero Mioli; introduzione di Gustavo Marchesi. Roma: Newton Compton Editori.
- Sciarrino, Salvatore. [2002] 2012. *Macbeth: Tre atti senza nome*. Vienna: col legno.
- Spivack, Bernard. 1958. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vittorini, Fabio. 2000. *Shakespeare e il melodramma romantico*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

The Mind's Eye: Seeing Things in Shakespeare

Roger Holdsworth

This essay discusses Shakespeare's fascination with delusion, particularly the kind of stubborn self-delusion which results from the habit, famously described by Bacon, of 'submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind'. Treated initially as a subject for comedy, the rearrangements and distortions of reality this tendency precipitates, and the sense of self-entrapment it brings with them, took on darker and less tractable forms in the plays Shakespeare wrote from the late 1590s onwards, and made inevitable his switch to tragedy as the genre where this subject matter could be more searchingly treated. A late attempt, in *The Winter's Tale*, to include a self-deluded protagonist whose paranoia equals that of Othello or Macbeth, and yet to rescue him for comedy in the play's finale, is only partially successful.

Keywords: delusion, hallucination, invisibility, paranoia, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*

One of the reasons Hamlet gives for delaying his revenge is that he is perhaps being tricked by the devil into murdering an innocent man. As he explains:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy –
As he is very potent with such spirits –
Abuses me to damn me. (II.ii.575-80)¹

Hamlet is talking like an orthodox protestant here. The protestant church denied the existence of ghosts: no one came back from the dead. If you thought you saw a ghost, even if it seemed entirely unthreatening (the ghost of a loved one, for example), it was either an

1 Shakespeare quotations and references follow Greenblatt ed. 2008.

illusion created by some mental trauma of your own (grief, for instance) or, much worse, it was a demonic agent whose one purpose was to tempt you into sin. Indeed, if you were depressed, a visit by the devil was always a more likely explanation of what you saw, since the devil knew that mentally distressed people tended not to think or behave rationally, and were therefore more impressionable, and more open to entrapment. It is typical of *Hamlet*, a play which notoriously seems to cultivate uncertainty of interpretation as a deliberate strategy, that Shakespeare injects this idea of demonic manipulation into the text, and gives it some plausibility. This is, after all, a very destructive ghost, whose demand for revenge causes the deaths of eight people, including two entire families. He is also antichristian, since he urges his son to violate the biblical injunction that private revenge was wicked and must be left to God. On the other hand, he is telling the truth (something the devil never likes to do), since not much later Claudius confesses, in a soliloquy, that he has indeed murdered the king.

A related uncertainty concerns the Ghost's shifting epistemological status. Horatio and the palace guards see him, so he cannot be regarded, at least in Act 1, as a projection of Hamlet's tormented consciousness, and not objectively real at all. But only Hamlet hears him speak, and in his next appearance two acts later only Hamlet can see or hear him. Gertrude is present, but she sees and hears nothing. It is as if the Ghost's independent existence were being progressively eroded. And when Hamlet in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy describes death as an undiscovered country from whose borders no traveller returns (III.i.81-82), he may again be talking like a good protestant, but he is in a play where just such a traveller seems actually to have returned, and he has met him. For a moment it is as though the Ghost's objective existence has been eroded altogether².

Is *Hamlet* a case study in psychosis as much as, or more than, it is a revenge play? The protagonist's admission that he suffers from melancholy certainly points this way. In modern use the term signifies a gentle sadness or state of mild depression, but in Shakespeare's time it usually denoted extreme forms of neurotic disturbance, including

2 Stanley Wells (1991, 64) suggests that the Ghost in *Hamlet* becomes progressively "internalized".

madness. And note the ambiguity of "my melancholy", in which Hamlet could be confessing to a settled and permanent quality of character, rather than a temporary mood brought on by his father's death.

Why did melancholy and its symptoms exert such a strong grip on the early modern imagination? No doubt in a society where you were not free to think for yourself, or at least to express your thoughts without risking lethal consequences, a chronic condition which demonstrated the mind's ability to override what the eye saw, and to fashion a quite separate idea of what was to count as reality, offered a kind of escape. But for Shakespeare there was a more immediate source of interest. Sufferers from melancholy, as described by contemporary theorists, match the behaviour of many of the characters of both tragedy and comedy by taking fantasy for fact, and by clinging to their delusions, however much pain this causes. They are also skilled in the arts of fiction, in devising a world which is internally consistent, and centred on a single great theme, themselves. Summaries of the symptoms of melancholy regularly use the language of literary invention, as in the following, which might be descriptions of Macbeth or Timon:

The melancholic humour counterfeiteth terrible objects to the fantasy, causing it without external occasion to forge monstrous fictions. [...] Fantasy forgoeth disguised shapes, which give great terror unto the heart, delivering but fables instead of true report. (Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*, 102-05)

The melancholike man [...] maketh himselfe a terrour unto himselfe [...] suspicious, solitarie, enemie to the Sunne, and one whom nothing can please, but only discontentment, which forgeth unto it selfe a thousand false and vaine imaginations. (Du Laurens, *The Preservation of the Sight*, 82)

Shakespeare may have read these or some of the period's many other studies of melancholy, for like them he makes use of the double sense of *forge*, to counterfeit, but also to make something hard and durable, as in the forging of metal. Both senses are present when Titania dismisses Oberon's accusation that her relationship with the Indian boy is sexual: "These are the forgeries of jealousy!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.81). Jealousy gives rise to false ideas, forgeries in that sense; but these ideas tend to be powerfully forged by the mind, and therefore hard to change or dispel. Similarly, Lucrece is unable to wake up from her nightmare because it is a prod-

uct of the “forgeries” of her brain (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 459), and the Chorus in *Henry V* urges the audience to recreate the action of the play in their heads, using “the quick forge and working-house of thought” (Chor., V.23).

Forge was the standard term to describe the visual delusions caused by melancholy: it gradually gave way to *hallucinate*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* first records in 1604. But even then the word meant merely to trick or deceive; it is not found in its modern sense of “the apparent perceiving of an external object not actually present” until the 1650s. *Hallucinate* thus shifts from being a transitive verb, meaning to trick or deceive someone else, to being a reflexive one; by hallucinating you are tricking yourself, your own mind is deceiving you.

That change of meaning could have been predicted, given the Renaissance fascination with the power and autonomy of the human mind, and the interest this generated in the nature and mechanics of sight. Throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime and beyond treatise after treatise appeared which sought to combine the science of optics with studies of the workings of the mind, always with the aim of explaining the phenomenon of false perception, of seeing what is not there. The most substantial and ambitious are these:

- 1572 Ludvig Lavater, *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night*
- 1586 Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*
- 1587 Jacques Guillemeau, *A Worthy Treatise of the Eyes*
- 1594 Thomas Nashe, *The Terrors of the Night or, A Discourse of Apparitions*
- 1599 André Du Laurens, *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight*
- 1601 (expanded 1604) Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General*
- 1603 Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*
- 1605 Pierre Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters or Strange Sightes, Visions and Apparitions Appearing Sensibly unto Men*
- 1608 George Hakewill, *The Vanity of the Eye*
- 1621 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

It is surely not a coincidence that the highest concentration of these studies falls in the period 1599 to 1610, just when Shakespeare was creating a new kind of protagonist. In *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter’s Tale* he moves away from the drama of action towards the drama of character, exploring cases of obsessive, guilt-ridden, or otherwise afflicted consciousness. The altered emphasis on interiority meant finding the means by which internal trau-

ma could be dramatised. Hallucinations, sometimes made visible to the audience, sometimes not, were one of them.

Shakespeare's characters are often prey to delusions about themselves or others, but few hallucinate in the absolute sense of seeing something which to everyone else, including the audience, is invisible. Why is this? He may simply have been responding to the fact that drama is primarily a visual form: one can have a play without words, or sounds of any kind, but not one where there is nothing to see but an empty stage. In addition, he may have been reluctant to deny the audience visual involvement in a moment of high psychological tension, even when the visual phenomenon in question was to be thought of as not objectively real, but entirely generated by the excited mental state of the hallucinating character. When Shakespeare does make an hallucination visible to the audience, it is usually because the practicalities of theatre render it advisable that he does so.

The hazards of total, or all but total, invisibility are illustrated by John Philip Kemble's omission of Banquo's ghost from his *Macbeth* of 1786. The Folio's call for a physical ghost is precise: "*Enter the Ghost of Banquo, and sits in Macbeths place*" (III.iv.36). Kemble discovered that having Macbeth shout at an empty chair made him seem merely insane, while members of the audience who did not know the play were apt to the same mistake about Macbeth's behaviour as his dinner guests, who, with no instructions from the spoken text to the contrary, could assume he is talking about the murdered Duncan. Here at least, whether or not we believe we are being given private access to a mental event occurring in Macbeth's mind, it seems important that the audience share the hallucination with the protagonist, so that we are drawn to identify with him, not with his bewildered guests. We see the horror through his eyes, they do not. We also get a stronger sense of Macbeth's isolation: he is alone with his guilt; no one can share it. Kemble took note of audiences' reactions and restored a visible ghost to later performances. He was also restoring Shakespeare's original staging, for a review survives of a 1611 production of *Macbeth* at the Globe which describes the ghost's entry³.

3 On this and other aspects of Kemble's production, see Sprague 1945, 256-57, and Clark and Mason eds. 2015, 99; 104. On the original staging of Banquo, see Holdsworth 1990, 204-05.

As suggested earlier, Shakespeare's treatment of the nature, origin and consequences of delusion underwent a definite shift at the end of the 1590s, that is about half-way through his career. In the first phase he is as ready as he was later on to dramatize the mind's tendency to embrace and rationalise its own fantasies, but the line of separation between falsehood and reality is always firmly drawn. When Hippolyta remarks that "in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.21-22), she distinguishes the true image, a bush, from the false one, a bear, even as she suggests that they might be confused. (It might look like a bear, but it is really a bush.) We are similarly situated as detached observers and arbiters of truth in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Petruccio, thinking he will give Katherine a lesson in wifely obedience, insists that she agree that the object in the sky is not the sun but the moon, and a person they meet is not an old man but a young woman. She must see what he tells her she sees. She pretends to agree, asking Petruccio to pardon her "mistaking eyes" (IV.v.46), but we know she does not really accept Petruchio's instruction, any more than we do. Or to take a more substantial example which involves genuine psychological pain: everyone "wanders in illusions" in *The Comedy of Errors* (IV.iii.39), a play which is entirely composed of misinterpretations. But no one mistakes what they are looking at with more excruciating consequences than Antipholus of Ephesus, who interprets what he sees as proof that he is a cuckold, and proves endlessly resourceful in creating his own tragic drama of treachery and lust, in which every detail contributes, and everyone is assigned a role. "Are these your customers?", he demands of his wife (IV.iv.58), finding his neighbours crowding around his door but himself debarred from entry. Clearly his house is a brothel, with a queue of clients awaiting his wife's services. But we know none of this is real, any more than the other twin is being stalked by "Dark working sorcerers who change the mind" (I.ii.99). We also know exactly what is needed, and how little is needed, to sweep the illusions away, so there is no question of our being in doubt about what we are seeing, or of the characters' anxieties and perplexities being felt by us.

Shakespeare takes this relatively uncomplicated and ultimately reassuring form of visual confusion about as far as it can be taken in *1Henry IV*, a play of the late 1590s, where he makes both characters

and audience uncertain about what they are seeing, but without any suggestion of real hallucination or mental trauma. The climax of the play, the battle between the royal army and the rebels, consists of a series of one-to-one combats in which Shakespeare deliberately encourages the audience to misinterpret what they see. As the action and dialogue relevant to the present discussion are spread across V.iii and V.iv, and are interspersed with encounters, verbal and physical, between other combatants, I quote here a heavily abridged version of the two scenes which identifies the key exchanges.

Enter Douglas, and Sir Walter Blunt dressed as the King.

DOUGLAS. Some tell me that thou art a king.

BLUNT. They tell thee true.

They fight. Douglas kills Blunt. Then enter Hotspur.

DOUGLAS. Here breathless lies the King.

HOTSPUR. This, Douglas? His name was Blunt,
 Semblably furnished like the King himself.
 The King hath many marching in his coats.

DOUGLAS. I will kill all his coats!

I'll murder all his wardrobe, piece by piece,
 Until I meet the King.

Alarum. Excursions. Enter the King.

DOUGLAS. Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads. What art thou
 That counterfeit'st the person of a king?

KING HENRY. The King himself. Many of his shadows thou hast met, and
 not the very King.

DOUGLAS. I fear thou art another counterfeit;

And yet, in faith, thou bear'st thee like a king. (V.iii.1-28; V.iv.1-35)

The main point to grasp here is that the actor playing Blunt would have entered wearing a tunic in the king's colours over full armour, which would have included a metal headpiece and visor which made his face invisible. The stage direction might say "*Enter Blunt dressed as the King*", but theatre audiences do not have access to stage directions. So, until Hotspur removes Blunt's visor and identifies him, how does the audience know that this is *not* "the very King", or that they have not just watched the King being killed? And when a second royal look-alike enters, dressed as the King, how are they to tell that this is not "another counterfeit" like the last one? The visual uncertainties are not just for the sake of dramatic tension. By having Douglas say that to kill the King he needs to murder his wardrobe, or that his

second adversary might also be counterfeiting the person of a king, Shakespeare is inviting us to consider that this is exactly what “being” a king might amount to: a wardrobe of royal regalia, and skill in impersonation, the ability to “bear” oneself “like a king”. When Douglas demands “what art thou that counterfeit’st the person of a king?” note the ambiguity of Henry’s reply: “the King himself”. There is a suggestion that all kings are counterfeit kings; there is no secret (or sacred) ingredient which makes one king “the very King” and another an impostor. Appearance is everything: what is needed is the ability to construct, in the words of the future Henry V, “a fantasy that plays upon our eyesight” (5.4.132), and to make it sufficiently compelling.

Just after *1Henry IV*, at the end of the decade, there is a major change. Whether delusional, obsessive, guilt-ridden, or mentally tormented in some other way, the afflicted individual is relocated from comedy or history into tragedy, and displays symptoms, including a loss of the mind’s ability to distinguish what is real from what is not, that the theorists of melancholy would immediately have recognised. An example of the shift is the contrast between Petruccio’s forcing Katherine to say she sees the moon not the sun, and Iago’s pressuring of Roderigo into seeing proof of Desdemona’s sexual availability in *Othello*, when there is nothing to see. In the early comedy Katherine agrees she sees the moon because she wants relief from Petruccio’s bullying, not because her mind has been invaded, or her eyesight taken prisoner. In the later tragedy Roderigo’s lustful fixation has already lured him into a fantasy world where Othello’s wife is his for the taking, and his desperate need to believe his own delusion allows Iago to become Roderigo’s eyes, to do his seeing for him, as they watch Desdemona chatting innocently with Cassio:

IAGO. Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst not mark that?

RODERIGO. Yes, that I did. (II.i.245-47)

Despite the two men’s claims to the contrary, it is important that in the theatre there should be complete absence of physical contact between Cassio and Desdemona. What is then demonstrated is Roderigo’s almost pitiable hallucinatory compliance with his own clamorous desires. This little exchange then becomes a kind of dress rehearsal for Iago’s masterpiece, his reduction of Othello to the same state of

helpless suggestibility. "Make me to see it!" Othello demands of Iago, and Iago obliges, conjuring images in Othello's head of Desdemona's "stolen hours of lust" which should "satisfy" him, even though he cannot (with good reason) "Behold her topped" (III.iii.369-401).

Desdemona's supposed palm-paddling comes from *Hamlet*, where Hamlet, for whom Gertrude is the personification of lust, pictures Claudius "paddling in your neck with his damned fingers" (III.iv.169); and it is passed on to *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes sees Hermione and Polixenes "paddling palms and pinching fingers, / As now they are" (I.ii.117-18). In each of these moments the woman exists only as a fantasy object produced by the voyeurism and misogyny of a male commentator. Leontes' "As now they are" should have discouraged a critical consensus from forming which assumes that what he observes is in some measure really occurring. Why does he need to give this assurance, if the palm-stroking is visible to everyone? His four-word redundant comment is better read as an instruction to the actor: he should face out towards the audience as he speaks, while behind him we see that Leontes' wife and his friend are simply *not* doing what he describes.

In other tragedies from this period supernatural (or quasi-supernatural) elements complicate our response to the protagonist's mental turmoil. We are made to ask how much he is being coerced by external forces, and how much of what he sees has no independent existence at all, and is to be understood as a projection of his troubled consciousness. *Julius Caesar* offers a particularly problematic case. Brutus is in his tent before the battle of Philippi, his servants fall asleep, and he takes up a book and begins reading; then, according to the Folio stage direction, "*the Ghost of Caesar*" enters. Book-reading is a traditional sign of melancholy (compare *Hamlet*, II.ii.169, "look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading"), and since in Plutarch, Shakespeare's source, Brutus does not read a book but is merely 'thinking of weighty matters', it seems that with this change the play is pushing us towards melancholy as the explanation of what we see; in other words that the ghost, though visible to us as well as to Brutus, is no more than one of the horrible but insubstantial visions that melancholy persons are prone to. In the play the servants' insistence that they have seen and heard nothing supports this idea, as does Brutus's own reaction: he blames the encounter on "the weakness of mine eyes". On the other hand, there are hints that the ghost is real: the candle suddenly burns

dim, a standard announcement of a supernatural arrival, and the ghost recognises Brutus, who speaks to it, and it speaks back.

Is Brutus being haunted by a real ghost, or is the guilt he feels for his past actions causing him to haunt himself? The question is made impossible to answer, both in the source and in the play, by Plutarch's and Shakespeare's failure to say clearly who or what the visitor is. Plutarch's account in his *Life of Marcus Brutus* is this:

Casting his eye towards the door of his tent, he saw a wonderful strange and monstrous shape of a body coming towards him, [which] said never a word. So Brutus boldly asked what he was, a god or a man, and what cause brought him hither. The spirit answered him: "I am thy evil spirit, Brutus; and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippes". (Spencer 1964, 149)

And this is Shakespeare's:

BRUTUS. Let me see, let me see, is not the leaf turned down
Where I left reading? Here it is, I think.

Enter the Ghost of Caesar.

How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me. Art thou any thing?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That mak'st my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.

GHOST. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

BRUTUS. Why com'st thou?

GHOST. To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi. (IV.ii.324-35)

What did Shakespeare, who would surely have noticed the omission, expect to gain from following his source in failing to name Brutus's monstrous visitor? A Folio stage direction declares him to be Caesar's ghost, and critics go along with this, calling the identification "clear" and "unequivocal", and theatre directors support it by making the apparition not "monstrous" at all, but recognisable as the character last seen being murdered in the previous Act⁴. Such certainty seems misplaced. Audiences do not see stage directions, and those of the text of *Julius Caesar* are not wholly reliable as clues to Shakespeare's

4 For the de-monstering of the Ghost, see, for example, Jump 1970, 347-48, and Wells 1991, 57.

intentions for the acted play, as they show signs of having undergone annotation and revision some time in the 23 years between the acting of the play and its publication⁵. As it stands, the dialogue leaves open the idea that the monster who confronts Brutus is not Caesar but Brutus's vision of himself, the Brutus who is a traitor to Rome and the murderer of his adoptive father. Hence perhaps the startling claim of kinship ("*thy* evil spirit"), as though Brutus were being made to recognise a new presence in his own consciousness from which he will never be separated; and hence the ambiguity of "Let me see, let me see", which can be read as a plea for true insight, for the clarity of self-understanding which has so far eluded him.

The tragedies which follow *Julius Caesar* are marked by an increasing move into subjectivity whenever hallucinatory moments are dramatized. The first complete, unambiguous hallucination in Shakespeare occurs in his next tragedy, *Hamlet*, when the grief-stricken prince sees his dead father in his "mind's eye":

HAMLET. My father – methinks I see my father.

HORATIO. O where, my lord?

HAMLET. In my mind's eye, Horatio.

HORATIO. I saw him once. A was a goodly king.

HAMLET. A was a man. Take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again. (I.ii.183-87)

This is a private, internal moment of vision which no one else shares, and typical of a play which everywhere emphasises the subjectivity of experience, the solipsistic nature of perception. To some people, Hamlet remarks, the world is a place of wonder and beauty; to him it is a "sterile promontory", a plague-pit, "foul and pestilent" (2.2.290-93). In this play even something as apparently substantial and unsubjective as the Ghost does not fully pass the test of independence. As early as its second, wordless appearance it begins to lose solidity:

Enter the Ghost.

HORATIO. But soft, behold – lo where it comes gain!

I'll cross it though it blast me. – Stay, illusion.

It spreads his arms.

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
Speak to me. (I.i.107-10)

5 See Wells and Taylor 1987, 386-88.

If “this thing”, as Horatio calls it, is an “illusion”, there is no point in telling it to “stay”, as though it might be responsive to instructions. The confusion seems to affect the accompanying stage direction, printed thus in Q2. Is the Ghost best thought of as an “it” or a “he”?

As the play proceeds, Hamlet’s traumatised and obsessive consciousness becomes more and more its dominant focus. One consequence of this is that despite – but also because of – his frequent soliloquies, the character seems ever more remote, less knowable: as though a private play, to which we have only intermittent access, is all the time taking place in his head. A striking instance of this retreat into interiority occurs in the so-called closet scene, when Hamlet’s diatribe against his mother is interrupted by the Ghost (III.iv.8ff.). Only Hamlet sees and hears him. Gertrude, as she repeatedly points out, sees and hears nothing at all. The effect, as with Banquo’s appearance to Macbeth which mystifies everyone else, is to insist on the hero’s isolation: he is alone with his perceptions.

Only Hamlet sees the Ghost here, but what exactly does he see? The Folio and Q2 have simply “*Enter Ghost*”, but Q1, which seems to offer a garbled version of the play put together by its first actors, adds a striking visual detail: “*Enter the ghost in his night gowne*”. Is Q1’s direction a memory of the earliest staging of *Hamlet*, one which preserves Shakespeare’s desire to humanise the Ghost by dressing him in domestic attire, in contrast to his previous appearances in armour on the castle battlements? The direction, if it is authentic, would also indicate that the Ghost, however subjective it was meant to be taken to be, was visible to the play’s first audience. Why else specify what the Ghost was to wear, if no one was to see him?

Its visibility aside, interpreters have used the detail of the night-gown to push the play into more contentious territory. Post Freud there has been a tendency to eroticise Gertrude, to portray her as emitting a sexual magnetism fatal to the three men (Old Hamlet, Hamlet, Claudius) who compete for her attention. But the evidence is weak. Hamlet’s interview with his mother is repeatedly said to take place in her “closet”. The word is taken to mean “bedroom”, and on the strength of this a large double bed often occupies much of the stage, on which Hamlet lies with, and sometimes on, his mother. But “closet” did not mean this: it meant a private room in a house, used

as a study or for sewing⁶. Similarly, Q1's "nightgown" is glossed as "nightshirt", in order to imply that Old Hamlet, game to the last, and indeed beyond the last, enters undressed for bed, as though expecting to sleep with Gertrude. But at this date a nightgown was simply "an informal robe worn by men", in contrast to more formal attire worn in the day. It is not found meaning "a loose garment for wearing in bed" until 1824⁷.

The impression of mental seclusion created here by Hamlet's solitary dealing with the Ghost is prepared for earlier in the scene, when Hamlet attempts to do Gertrude's seeing for her by showing her two images, one of his father, the other of his uncle, and demanding that she acknowledge the hideous difference between them:

Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See what a grace was seated on this brow –
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten or command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
This *was* your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here *is* your husband, like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?
...what judgement
Would step from this to this? (III.iv.52-70)

How should this episode be staged? If we imagine two portraits on the theatre wall, big enough for the audience to make out the details of their subjects, should they offer a visual version of the contrast Hamlet describes, one portrait depicting a figure of godlike beauty and authority, the other a twisted, ugly creature whose evil nature is stamped on his appearance? Distinguishing the portraits in this

6 This and subsequent definitions are taken from the *OED*.

7 On the sexualising of Gertrude, see Levin 2008, 305-26.

way makes Hamlet's valuation of the two men seem objective and reasonable, but it augments the misogyny of the play by failing to explain why Gertrude has transferred her affections to such a grotesquely inferior new partner. Worse still, it could be taken to endorse the Ghost's claim that women are slaves to their own appetites and prefer garbage to healthy food (I.v.55-57).

A better solution might be to have Hamlet produce two miniatures, or even (as is sometimes done) two coins, bearing images of the last and the present king. But this, too, raises questions, as the audience will now be unable to see the versions of the two men Hamlet is showing Gertrude. With only his verbal assessments to judge from, we can suspect, if we wish to, that the violence of his hyperbole (his father is four gods in one, a mountain, his manhood underwritten by heaven; his uncle a single diseased ear of corn) points to the constructed nature of the comparison, and its rhetorical aim of justifying Hamlet's inner feelings of revulsion and betrayal. Viewed thus, each picture might indeed be called a "counterfeit presentment", given that at this date *counterfeit* could mean either simply "imitated" or, negatively, "fake". A way to match this uncertainty of effect might be to display two full-size pictures on the stage wall for us to look at while Hamlet speaks, but to make the two brothers appear equally heroic and imposing, with nothing to choose between them; so it is only Hamlet who sees the extraordinary differences he describes⁸.

Macbeth, written five years after *Hamlet*, contains Shakespeare's boldest use, at least in tragedy, of a self- or internally generated hallucination, visible to no one but the perceiver, and described to the audience but not shown to them:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but

8 The fullest survey of the use of portable versus full-length portraits on the stage at this date is by Jenkins 1982, 516-19. Jenkins complains that the choice of size has excited "much unnecessary controversy" among *Hamlet* critics, but fails to note the interpretative consequences for the acted play of choosing one size rather than the other.

A dagger of the mind, a false creation
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this which now I draw.
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
 And such an instrument I was to use. (II.i.33-43)

The vision of the spectral dagger lasts only eight lines before Macbeth matches it with a real one ("As this which now I draw"), perhaps another sign of Shakespeare's reluctance to ask a theatre audience to accept complete invisibility for more than a few moments; but the episode nevertheless powerfully renders the protagonist's fatalism and alienation. The offer of a dagger as an invitation to commit suicide was conventional: Mephostophiles offers Faustus one as he makes this suggestion in *Doctor Faustus*, and the incestuously motivated Ferdinand leaves one in his sister's bedroom in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. But no external agent, such as a demonic tempter, is needed here, as the ambiguity of 'dagger of the mind' makes clear. Macbeth's is a dagger created by the mind, by his mind, but it is also a dagger *in* the mind which will cause its destruction, since, as he will discover, in this play regicide is a form of suicide. The doubleness of meaning continues with "Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going": this applies not only to the path to Duncan's bedchamber, but to what Macbeth will later call his "way of life", the whole trajectory of his future, and the destination to which he is irrefusably drawn.

The metaphor of a journey which cannot be abandoned or turned back from is appropriate: as Macbeth notes, "I am in blood stepped in so far, / Returning were as tedious" as going on (III.iv.134-36). Yet the journey is at the same time strangely static: like Hamlet, who all the time sees his father in his mind's eye, and Othello, endlessly imagining his wife's lustful copulation with Cassio, Macbeth is in a state of mental arrest, permanently detained before the spectacle of the slaughtered Duncan, whose body acquires the fixity of a holy icon made from precious metal: "His silver skin [is] laced with his golden blood" (III.iii.113). Lady Macbeth, too, cannot free herself of the image of the dead king in the bedchamber, an image which it is important we never see (since what we might be shown could never match the destructive force of the spectacle locked in

the minds of the murderers). She thinks of Duncan and she sees her father: "he resembled my father as he slept", she remembers (II.ii.13); and in almost her last words in the play she is still picturing the corpse: "who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (V.i.40).

Shakespeare's interest in the mesmeric power of images, their ability to offer a refuge to the seer but also to unhinge him and drive him to calamity, reaches its apex in *The Winter's Tale*. Othello and Macbeth surrender to the false versions of reality that eventually destroy them, but their delusions begin, or at least take active shape, no earlier than the start of their plays. Leontes enters his play already convinced that his friend and his wife are lovers. That it is too late to save him from his suspicions is established in the opening scene, where two courtiers discuss the closeness of the two royal friends. From infancy, one courtier tells the other, "there rooted betwixt them such an affection which cannot choose but branch now" (I.i.19-21). The triple pun on *branch* is ominously predictive. The friendship may (and will) eventually "branch" (grow, flourish), but it will also "branch" by dividing, going in different directions. Worse, the division will result from a branching, a cuckolding, as one friend imagines the other has equipped him with cuckold's horns. Critics have missed this meaning, but around the date of *The Winter's Tale* it was common; among many examples, compare Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*, performed *circa* 1608: "Strumpet his wife, branch my false seeming friend" (I.i.453).

The pun is particularly important, as it not only associates Leontes with a charge of adultery before he enters the play, but hints that its origin lies in the early intimacy of the two men. As Polixenes tells Hermione in the following scene, the boys were once "twinned lambs", but when she "crossed the eyes of my young playfellow" (note the play on *cross*, pass across, but also block, frustrate) their "innocence" was lost, and "stronger blood" propelled each of them to a separate, heterosexual future (I.ii.69-81). Hermione took Leontes away from Polixenes then, and now Leontes fantasizes a version of the same separation being repeated. Hence the bitter ambiguity of his question, "Is he won yet?" (I.ii.88). His real meaning, audible only to himself, is not "Have you persuaded him yet?" but "Have you seduced him yet?", or perhaps more precisely (since his jealousy is

focused not on his wife's infidelity but the loss of his friend), "Have you stolen him from me yet?"⁹.

Leontes begins an inner monologue of hidden meanings, at once accusatory and self-tormenting, as soon as he enters. As with Othello, this draws him into coarser and coarser fantasies of misogynistic loathing, in which he figures as both victim and facilitator. He is "the allowing husband" (I.ii.184), implicated in the depravity he denounces. His first words to his friend, "Stay your thanks a while, / And pay them when you part" (I.ii.9-10) are a veiled threat. Invoking the proverb "Praise at parting", they imply, banteringly on the surface, that Polixenes should spare his expressions of gratitude until he is on the point of leaving, as he may regret being so effusive. Broad sexual innuendoes follow. To Polixenes' suggestion that he has outworn his welcome Leontes replies, "We are tougher, brother, / Than you can put us to't" (I.ii.15-16), which glances at *put to it*, "subject to sexual intercourse". When Middleton's Harebrain, for example, vowing to keep a strict eye on his wife, declares "I'll put her hard to't" (*A Mad World, My Masters*, I.ii.69), he plays inadvertently on the phrase's bawdy sense, indeed he helps to actualise it, since his jealousy drives her into an adulterous affair. Leontes gets away with his crude play on words through his apparent employment of the royal we, so he seems to be referring only to himself (though understanding him in that way makes the reference homoerotic, which has its own relevance). If we take his "we" and "us" as normal plurals the covert meaning includes Hermione: she will have sex with Polixenes as much as he likes, and still be ready for more.

Leontes then turns his fire on Hermione, abruptly demanding that she ask Polixenes to stay: "Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you" (I.ii.27). The full impact of this line will only be registered if we remember not only that Hermione has been standing silent and ignored until this moment, but her existence was suppressed in the previous opening scene as well. There we hear two male courtiers discussing two male friends and their two male offspring, and no women, wives or otherwise, are mentioned. It is as if the play were briefly restoring

9 Shakespeare is fond of this ominous use of *win*, as in *Hamlet*, I.v.45, "won to his shameful lust", and *Macbeth*, I.iii.121-23, "win us to our harm ... Win us with honest trifles". For the double sense in *The Winter's Tale* (persuade / captivate sexually), see *Measure for Measure*, II.ii.128, "Pray heaven she win him".

the all-male paradise of their boyhood which Leontes and Polixenes hanker for, as well as granting the ultimate wish – complete female absence – of misogynist thought. “Well had it been for the world if there had never been an Eve”, Richard Brathwaite (1640, 5; 1) suggested, taking further the advice of St Paul: “they that have wives be as though they had none” (Corinthians 7:29).

The play brings Hermione into existence with her entrance at the start of the next scene. It does not identify her, however, or involve her in the opening exchanges, which consist entirely of the two men speaking to and about one another. Is she the wife of one of the men? She is heavily pregnant, but if one of them is the father, which one is it? Polixenes’ opening references to his nine-month stay, the ‘burden’ of royalty, and the fact that ‘*we* have left *our* throne’ (Shakespeare is again exploiting the potential ambiguity of the royal *we*) seem to identify him as the husband and father-to-be, so for a moment we make the same mistake as Leontes as to the paternity of the child in Hermione’s womb, and share his false vision of the truth. Shakespeare then maximises the shock when she is finally included in the dialogue and her identity is established, for it is in terms which simultaneously brand her as a whore, and which do indeed link her with Polixenes, but not in the way we had supposed. Leontes’ “Tongue-tied, our queen?” establishes that she is his wife after all, and there is an innocent cover to his words, since he seems simply to be asking (though aggressively enough) “Why are you silent?” But he is again cultivating a double language. “Tongue-tied” can suggest the hiding of a guilty secret: compare, “tongue-tied in their guiltiness” in *Julius Caesar*, I.i.61. Much more than this, Leontes’ oddly formal ‘our queen’ (affectionate talk between intimates is hardly an occasion on which to employ the royal *we*) enables him to dwell privately on what he takes the situation to be: Hermione is not only Leontes’ queen but “our quean”, the treacherous whore whom he and his supposed friend are sharing. Again a crude sexual meaning is concealed behind an innocuous one. Since Polixenes and Hermione can only judge from what they hear, and *queen* and *quean* were pronounced identically, Leontes has the perfect cover¹⁰.

10 Did Shakespeare find Leontes’ jibe in John Marston? Compare *The Fawn* (circa 1605), 2.1.224-28, where Zuccone, another imaginary cuckold, insists that his wife be called “our lady”, with the same suggestion of shared sexual ownership.

There is yet more poison concealed in Leontes' question. As a quean Hermione ought not to be tongue-tied, hence his feigned surprise at her silence: queans use their tongues all the time, because they are loud and talkative, and because they are skilled at employing them as part of their trade. As Robert Tofte puts it, "Queanes of their Tongue, are most Queanes of their Taile" (Tofte 1615, sig. F2r). Richard of Gloucester means more than Mistress Shore's singing ability when he credits her with "a passing pleasing tongue" (*Richard III*, I.i.95), and note Iago's salacious joke about Emilia: "her tongue she oft bestows on me" (*Othello*, II.i.104). Leontes will later deny any double sense to the *queen/quean* homonym, hearing and intending only "quean" when he scoffingly agrees that Hermione is a "Good queen" (II.iii.59).

Although we have nominally returned to the generic conventions of comedy, Leontes' paranoia and the sex-hatred it precipitates exceed even *Othello*'s. Critics greatly underestimate the severity and duration of his symptoms, led, one suspects, by their knowledge that he is due to regain his sanity in the play's second half, admit his mistake, and be restored to family life. If he can be thought of as not wholly responsible for the murderous jealousy which grips him – seen instead as the victim of an illness, for example, or as being goaded into jealousy by the careless actions of someone else – the more likely we are to accept and approve his second-half redemption. Accordingly, we learn that Leontes' culpability is no greater than that of "people doomed by voodoo or black magic" (Barton 1980, 133); that he is "diseased as if by a plague-bearing planet" (Kermode 1963, xxix); that his delusions are the result of "a fatal short circuit between bowels and eye" (Del Sapio 2010, 136-37); that his jealousy "is like the god-sent lunacies of Greek drama [...] Its nature is that of an earthquake or the loss of the Titanic" (Tillyard 1938, 41). If explanations along these lines – Leontes is ill, or his madness comes out of the blue, and has no source – is not convincing (and the melodramatic nature of these comparisons suggests that at some level their authors suspect they may not be on the right track), a further solution is offered by commentators who look disapprovingly at Hermione's efforts to persuade Polixenes to prolong his stay. The manoeuvre adopted here is to claim that she does it in a tactlessly flirtatious way. We learn that "the unguarded freedom of her chatter [...] poisons Leontes' sense of

her motives" (Draper 1985, 16); that she is guilty of "insistence" and "overzealousness" (Wells 2010, 193); even of "a touch of sexual openness" (Pitcher 2010, 33), caused by the fact that she is "pregnant and charged with sensual energy" (Frey 1980, 122). In 1767 arguments opting for this approach could martial visual support, for in that year Edward Capell's edition of Shakespeare's plays supplemented Hermione's spoken attempts to persuade Leontes' friend to extend his visit by adding the stage direction "*giving her hand to Polixenes*" (I.ii.110), a shockingly indecorous action not directed by the Folio, not required by the context, and with nothing to match it in Shakespeare or elsewhere, but inserted in every edition of *The Winter's Tale* ever since. Capell creates an origin for Leontes' jealousy which at least partly exonerates him: the wife "gives" something of herself to a man other than her husband in a way the husband does not like. R. A. Foakes tells us what we must imagine: "Hermione takes Polixenes' hand and then his arm and leads him offstage to the garden. Her actions here provoke a sudden, shocking change in Leontes" (Foakes 2003, 261). So it turns out to be the woman's fault after all.

These claims are vulnerable even on their own terms. Capell's direction is a flagrant sophistication of the text which threatens to reduce *The Winter's Tale* to a problem drama about marital etiquette. It has also licensed a lazy tendency to build on it rather than examine its plausibility. Notice, for example, how Foakes casually turns Capell's "giving" into "takes" then "leads", endowing Hermione with an Eve-like boldness as she and Polixenes depart for their garden stroll. Some sharing of Leontes' misogyny is also apparent. Does Hermione noticeably "chatter", or is it just that chattering is what women do? Are pregnant women "charged with sensual energy" more than non-pregnant ones? In the play it is Leontes who says so: "'tis Polixenes / Has made thee swell thus", he tells Hermione (II.i.63-64). His merging of several senses of *swell*, "be visibly pregnant", but also "swell with pride or arrogance", "get above yourself", and "swell with sexual passion" (a favourite Shakespearean usage denoting female arousal) implies that it is Hermione's physical state, the unmissable fact of her femaleness, by which he feels most threatened¹¹.

11 On Shakespeare's distinctive use of *swell*, see Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen eds. 2007, 271.

As with Othello, whose language becomes more turbulent and obscure as he veers between revulsion, self-pity, and vindictive rage, Leontes' increasingly lurid images say more about him than he intends or understands. An example is his memory of courting Hermione: "Three crabbed months had soured themselves to death / Ere I could make thee open thy white hand / And clap thyself my love" (I.ii.104-106). This is obviously alienated and embittered, to the point where it seems odd that Leontes' hearers do not react; but what is the force of "clap thyself my love"? Leontes is again disguising his meaning. Outwardly he seems to be using *clap* in the sense of *OED*, v.1.7.a, "To strike hands reciprocally in token of a bargain" (as in *Henry V*, V.ii.128, "clap hands and a bargain", also said of a betrothal), although his phrasing is odd, and cannot be matched elsewhere. Alternatively, he may want his hearers to understand *clap*, v.1.17.a, "to name or call" (by confusion with *clepe*), which is less strained, but was not a common usage. Either way, Leontes is putting up a smokescreen. He is relieving (and aggravating) his feelings with a further sense of *clap*, designed for his ears only, "To infect with venereal disease" (v.2). *OED* cites no example before 1658, but in fact there are many from early in the previous century onwards¹². Leontes' pun contrives to make bonding in marriage synonymous with pollution. Is the charge specifically against Hermione, who "clapped herself" when she accepted him because, having a whorish disposition, she was bound to betray her marriage vow? Or was the "clapping" inevitable because Leontes is already coming to the view that all sex is base and contaminating, and the moral probity of either partner is irrelevant? Later he will describe the penis, which the "gates" of the vagina will "let in and out", as "the enemy" (I.ii.206). He is thinking primarily of the penis of Polixenes, but "the enemy" (rather than "my enemy") extends the reference to all owners of a penis, including Leontes, whose aroused member has propelled him irrefusably towards the sin of sex. He will also lament that the effect of Hermione's adultery has been to "Sully the purity and whiteness of my sheets, / Which to pre-

12 See Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515, 2273-74): "Ye shall be clapt with a collop [prostitute] / That will make you halt and hop". Lording Barry plays on venereal versus matrimonial "clappings" in *Ram Alley*, performed in the same year as *The Winter's Tale* (Barry 1611, F2v).

serve is sleep, which being spotted / Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps" (I.ii.329-31). The only way to preserve the "pure" whiteness and unspottedness of sheets is to ensure that they play host to no sex at all, married, adulterous, or otherwise¹³.

Rescuing Leontes from his delusions and making him fit for comedy raises questions about his emotional alignment which are not fully resolved, partly because Shakespeare sets himself challenges which his source avoids. In Robert Greene's novel *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* Pandosto (Leontes) becomes jealous within the story, and his jealousy is accounted for: after a happy prelude, he begins to suspect his wife's frequent, though innocent, visits to his friend's bedchamber, and is racked by a "melancholy passion" and "doubtful thoughts". Though he later admits his mistake, he is the same violent and volatile figure at the end, succumbing to "sudden passion", "a melancholy fit", and "desperate thoughts" before killing himself (*Pandosto*, 408, 444-45). Leontes is less easily brought into focus. He enters already gripped by his jealous mania, and no clear explanation of what has caused it is provided; and since we have no prior acquaintance with a sane Leontes to whom we can feel the mad one could return, we seem invited to regard his paranoia as a permanent personality trait, rather than a passing fit amenable to cure. On top of this, Shakespeare has reconceived Greene's tragic tale as a comedy, so a transformed Leontes is needed in order to make credible the joyful reconciliations the new genre requires.

The play works hard to counter the idea that Leontes is displaying a fixed condition of mind. He is said to be "in rebellion with himself" (I.ii.351), as though an unauthorised, disorderly self were seeking to supplant the legitimate one. A medical explanation is also offered. Leontes' jealousy is a disease (I.ii.299; 386), a sickness (I.ii.384; 398).

13 On the penis as enemy, see Sharpham, *Cupid's Whirligig* (1607), where the jealous Sir Timothy "doubts most lest the gates should be opened, and his enemy let in" (I.iv.26-27). On its malign hold over its owner, see Montaigne 1603, 516: "The Gods (saith *Plato*) have furnished man with a disobedient, skittish, and tyrannicall member; which like an untamed furious beast, attempteth by the violence of his appetite, to bring all things under his beck [command]". For further discussion of sexual anxiety in the play, see Holdsworth 2009, 185-202, and Holdsworth 2022, 20-23. Part of the latter discussion is reprinted here, in a revised form, with the permission of the board of *Early Modern Literary Studies*.

Polixenes calls it an “ill-ta’en suspicion” (I.ii.460), and a contrite Leontes “my ill suspicion” (V.iii.150), the double sense of *ill* encouraging the idea that jealousy is an illness as well as simply evil. Appointing herself Leontes’ “physician”, Paulina undertakes “to purge him” of the “humour” that distempers him (II.iii.38; 54), which again traces his paranoia to a bodily cause.

Tentative as they seem when set against the extraordinary convulsive force of his jealous tirades, these hints at a curable Leontes are enough to convince commentators that the play’s older generation contribute to its themes of healing and renewal as straightforwardly as do the younger. The proof offered is the arrival of the real Leontes. Initially “a stranger to his true self”, with the shock of his son’s death he is “returned to his proper state of mind” and “regenerated”, assuming once again his roles of husband and father (Schanzer 1969, 25; Frye 1963, 109; Pyle 1969, 153). “Restored fully to himself in the arms of Hermione”, he achieves “new integration in the worlds of marriage, family, and child-rearing” (Wheeler 1981, 166; Novy 1984, 172). An ophthalmic reading of the play is also enlisted: “purged of his evil humours”, Leontes is “restored to a perspectival, sanitized gaze” (Del Sapio 2011, 153).

The larger meaning critics attach to this regeneration is a journey into adulthood and heterosexuality, which are held to be the same thing. In the unregenerate Leontes Shakespeare portrays “the pathology of the immature male”, in retreat from “his mature sexuality, his manliness”, and clinging to a same-sex friendship which he should have outgrown (Pitcher 2010, 37; Kahn 1981, 215). His 16-year penance is to be understood as a “painful and prolonged education about sexual maturity”, after which he “recognizes and accepts his sexuality and his relationship to women” (Colley 1983, 43; Kahn 1981, 220).

This reading of *The Winter’s Tale*’s main story agrees perfectly well with the heterosexual bias of early modern comedy, where, in general, “grown-up reality [...] means married love” (Rose 1988, 36). But as soon as it is applied to the detail of the play it runs into trouble. The bond between Leontes and Polixenes does not have to be broken or downgraded before the relationships the play finds appropriate can be celebrated; on the contrary, it is one of those relationships. Nor is this an accidental effect produced by Shakespeare’s unconscious homosocial (or homosexual) sympathies, since he consistently modifies

the source story in order to foreground the intensity of feeling which marks the two men's friendship. They repeatedly affirm their intimacy by calling each other "brother", a word Greene's *Pandosto* never uses, and their loss of one another's "society, / Amity too" (V.i.134-35) afflicts them both. Leontes, but not his equivalent in Greene, says he wants to stay alive only in the hope of once more seeing his friend (V.i.135-37), and his wish is granted in the finale, where the friend joins him, while in Greene the friend is absent. Together once more, Shakespeare's friends are "a pair of kings" (V.iii.147), as though recovering a version of the shared identity they formed in childhood, when "two lads" fused into "boy eternal" (I.ii.64-66).

The heterosexual side of Leontes' redemption is less certainly registered. In his long speech of contrition (III.ii.151-70) he thinks first of his friend ("I'll reconcile me to Polixenes"), spares Hermione four words ("New woo my queen" – could he not have used her name, or at least said "my wife"?), and then speaks only of the wrong his jealousy has done to "My friend Polixenes" and "the good Camillo". The sense of distance between husband and wife this bias creates persists in the finale (V.iii.136-56), where the resurrected Hermione says nothing at all to Leontes, and he says nothing to her, apart from introducing new male relatives ("This is your son-in-law / And son unto the king"), and telling her to acknowledge his friend in a way that calls attention to the two men's closeness ("What, look upon my brother"). Freudian critics ignore the continuance of this male bonding, preferring to confine it to what they regard as Leontes' "immature" phase, so that it can also be used to explain his delusion of being cuckolded. According to Coppélia Kahn, "the hero's belief that his wife loves his best friend is his way of defending against the horrified realization that he too still loves that friend" (215). But the text affords no evidence at all that Leontes' feelings for his friend horrify him. By including Polixenes in the final celebrations, and reporting that at "the meeting of the two kings [...] their joy waded in tears" (V.ii.36-41), it implies the opposite: that to complete the turn from tragedy to comedy recovery of the friend was if anything more important than recovery of the wife. Viewed thus, the conflict of attachments invites a quite different explanation of Leontes' traumatized response to his supposed cuckolding. Hermione's seduction (Latin *seducere*, to lead away) of

the friend becomes a nightmare fulfilment of the threat to the men's friendship that her mere existence as Leontes' wife has always posed. As in Shakespeare's Sonnet 42, where Leontes' worst fears are closely anticipated, his friend's betrayal "touches" him "more nearly" (more deeply, more intimately) than does hers. It inflicts "a loss in love" which the woman's disloyalty cannot equal.

References

- Barry, Lording. 1611. *Ram Alley, or Merry Tricks*. London.
- Barton, Anne. 1980. "Leontes and the Spider: Language and Speaker in the Last Plays." In *Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir*, edited by Philip Edwards, 131-50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brathwaite, Richard. 1640. *Art Asleep, Husband? A Boulster Lecture*. London.
- Bright, Timothy. 1586. *A Treatise of Melancholy, Containing the Causes thereof, and Reasons of the Strange Effects It Worketh in Our Minds and Bodies*. London.
- Clark, Sandra, and Pamela Mason, eds. 2015. *Macbeth*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Colley, Scott. 1983. "Leontes' Search for Wisdom in *The Winter's Tale*." *South Atlantic Review* 48: 43-53.
- Del Sapio Garbero, Maria. 2010. "A Spider in the Eye/I: The Hallucinatory Staging of the Self in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*." In *Solo Performances: Staging the Early Modern Self in England*, edited by Ute Berns, 133-55. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- . 2011. "Troubled Metaphors in Shakespeare and the Renaissance Anatomy of the Eye." In *Dialoge zwischen Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in der Renaissance*, edited by Klaus Bergdolt and Manfred Pfister, 43-70. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Draper, R. P. 1985. *The Winter's Tale: Text and Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Du Laurens, André. 1599. *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight*. London.
- Duncan-Jones, Katherine, and Henry Woudhuysen, eds. 2007. *Shakespeare's Poems*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Foakes, R. A. 2003. "Romances." In *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin, 249-66. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frey, Charles H. 1980. *Shakespeare's Vast Romance: A Study of The Winter's Tale*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 1963. *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*. New York: Harcourt.
- Greene, Robert. 1580. *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. London. Reprinted in John Pitcher, ed., *The Winter's Tale*, 406-45.
- Holdsworth, R. V. 1990. "Macbeth and The Puritan." *Notes and Queries* 235: 204-5.
- . 2009. "Trouble in Paradise: Friendship and Masculine Identity in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*." In *Le ultime opere di Shakespeare*, a cura di Clara Mucci, Chiara Magni, and Laura Tommaso, 185-208. Napoli: Liguori Editore.
- Holdsworth, Roger. 2020. "Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Strange Inner Life of the Imaginary Cuckold." *Fictions: Studi sulla narrativa* 19: 41-58.
- . 2022. "'Tongue-tied, our queen?': The Anatomy of a Pun." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 22 (2): 1-23.
- Jenkins, Harold, ed. 1982. *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Methuen.
- Jump, John. 1970. "Shakespeare's Ghosts." *Critical Quarterly* 12: 339-51.
- Kahn, Coppélia. 1981. *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. London: University of California Press.
- Kermode, Frank, ed. 1963. *The Winter's Tale*. New York: New American Library.
- Levin, Richard. 2008. "Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 48: 305-26.
- Marston, John. 1978. *Parasitaster, or The Fawn*. Edited by David A. Blostein. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . 1984. *The Insatiate Countess*. Edited by Giorgio Melchiori. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Middleton, Thomas. 1965. *A Mad World, My Masters*. Edited by Standish Henning. London: Edward Arnold.
- Montaigne, Michel de. 1603. *Essays*. Translated by John Florio. London.

- Novy, Marianne L. 1984. *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Pitcher, John, ed. 2010. *The Winter's Tale*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Pyle, Fitzroy. 1969. *The Winter's Tale: A Commentary on the Structure*. London: Routledge.
- Rose, Mary Beth. 1988. *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Schanzer, Ernest, ed. 1969. *The Winter's Tale*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Sharpham, Edward. 1986. *Cupid's Whirligig*. In *The Works of Edward Sharpham*, edited by C. G. Petter. New York: Garland.
- Skelton, John. 1980. *Magnificence*. Edited by Paula Neuss. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Spencer, T. J. B., ed. 1964. *Shakespeare's Plutarch*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sprague, A. C. 1945. *Shakespeare and the Actors*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Tillyard, E. M. W. 1938. *Shakespeare's Last Plays*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Tofte, Robert. 1615. *The Blazon of Jealousy*. London.
- Wells, Stanley. 1991. "Staging Shakespeare's Ghosts." In *The Arts of Performance in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama*, edited by Murray Biggs, 50-69. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2010. *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wells, Stanley, and Gary Taylor. 1987. *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wheeler, Richard P. 1981. *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Touched by Evil: Performing Theodicy in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Adaptations

Anthony R. Guneratne

In translating a pot-boiler *roman policier*, *Badge of Evil*, into a cinematic meditation of the corrupting wages of power, Welles substituted “touch” for “badge” in his title. Fluent in a number of European languages, Welles understood “touch” in a multiplicity of ways: a dexterous riposte, as in the French *touché*; a quantity barely to be perceived; a tactile, sensory path to knowledge as the empiricists and rationalists of the Seventeenth Century postulated. The present study intends to demonstrate that throughout performing career – as a voice actor in radio and audio recordings, as a stage actor, and as the protagonist of his own films and those of other directors – Welles accepted the existence of evil and strove to illustrate its omnipresence in human affairs. He even demanded that his fellow directors allow him to play characters in his own idiosyncratic manner, and he radically revised plays and novels in order to make his protagonists more morally culpable than they are in his sources. In so doing Welles amplified the ethical conflicts deployed by his favourite authors: Conrad, Dinesen, Cervantes, Kafka, and above all, Shakespeare. Welles’s tyrants and supermen owed little to Nietzsche, being more akin to those celebrated by Machiavelli and decried by Vives, Erasmus, and Montaigne. Alive to the philosophical discourses permeating Shakespeare’s plays well before their elucidation by today’s scholarship, and yet deeply concerned with conveying them to a wide public, Welles paid the price of having many of his Shakespearean projects unrealized. Traces of the latter exist in archives in Torino, München, Michigan and Indiana, and the present work “touches” on these as well as his extant oeuvre to illustrate the full extent of his theodicy. Jan Kott, Welles’s contemporary, outlived him; but it was Welles who first re-established Shakespeare as “our contemporary.”

Keywords: Orson Welles and Shakespeare, Catholicism, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Jung, adaptation, theodicy

The last of our First Person Singular broadcasts before the name was changed to the Mercury Theatre on the Air was a work long dear to Orson's heart, but not to mine: G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. This time, Orson said, he would write his own script: he wanted none of my cosmopolitan pussyfooting; this would be pure Catholic-Christian Chesterton as only he could understand and express it.

– John Houseman, *Run-Through*¹

Evil as Embodiment, or, Welles's Shakespeare as Renaissance Playwright

Many years after the all-too-brief halcyon days of the Mercury Theatre when Welles thrived on Houseman's bickering as they collaborated on an avalanche of radio shows, theatre productions, and audio recordings of Shakespeare plays, and only just as he was beginning to find purpose and meaning in a European exile, Welles had a quiet private audience with Pope Pius XII. In what we might justly mistake as a Coppola-esque gesture of benediction, the pontiff held his hand throughout the forty-minute conversation. It was Pius whose curiosity could not be contained. The conversation consisted entirely of the latest Hollywood gossip, reveals Welles, with a marked emphasis on bed-hopping and divorce. Following their meeting he was given a tour of the Vatican by the acting Secretary of State who obviously knew of Welles's Irish sojourn when he paused to point out a statue of the nationalist leader Eamon de Valera. "Eamon è cattolico?", inquired Welles incredulously. "Un cattolico fanatico!", came the reply. Welles concludes yet another of his famous anecdotes with a sly aside: "The Italians take their Catholicism so very much less seriously than the Irish do"².

He was reminiscing in his last months with his teacher, mentor, and life-long friend Roger Hill, and the exchanges are unusually intimate. Perhaps out of respect for Hill's religious sensitivities Welles omits to mention that one of the few Italian films that resulted in a jail sentence for its director (under recently enacted blasphemy laws), Pier-Paolo Pasolini's *La ricotta* (1963), consisted primarily of a Cruci-

¹ For a more complete discussion of those early radio days, see Houseman 1972, 370 and *passim*.

² I have condensed a recorded telephone conversation as reported by Tarbox 2013, 259–60.

fixion scene being shot by a corpulent, bullying director more concerned with recitations of Pasolini's poetry and adequate amounts of ambient light than with his actors. The film's hero, the Good Thief, decamps with his apportionment of the commissary lunch and hands it over to his malnourished family. Famished, he later makes off with the prop cheese being used for an adjacent scene of the Last Supper. Concealed in a grotto, he proceeds to devour it and other morsels hurled at him when he is discovered by the incensed crew, but is duly attached to a cross and hoisted into position alongside two others, making for a picturesque shot composition. On discovering that indigestion and physical stress have killed him and that his last words – the prescribed request of God to forgive him and accept him into heaven – were sincere, the director, played by none other than Welles, remarks with brutal candour that he had to die for his existence to be properly acknowledged. Had Pasolini been Irish one suspects that he might have served his sentence; today his Gramscian-Marxist version of the *Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), replete with a harrowing crucifixion scene, has been accepted by the Church – despite the ill-repute of the director – as one of the canonical cinematic versions of the New Testament story.

For all his teasing banter Welles was, in a vein akin to the more idolatrous and intense Pasolini, a *cattolico leggero*. That his Catholicism consisted of doctrine rather than observance, and that it was formed in a very peculiar (almost monastic) atmosphere redolent of Shakespeare's own day, further reinforces the central tenets of the present study³. Consequently, my approach here has been to explore

3 Even Welles's occasional confessions of religiosity have a certain pathos to them. Never having shed the prejudices invited by the *wunderkind* prematurity of his sensational theatrical productions, having barely endured a cinematic debacle following the 1940 release of *Citizen Kane*, and having staunchly faced the full brunt of the post-war anti-socialist campaigns, Welles in his maturity grew more guarded about personal revelations pertaining to his religious and ethical beliefs. Perhaps, as a consequence, he assiduously cultivated a Munchausenesque personal mythology that invited incredulity. Only with a younger generation of critics less averse to the possibility of Welles's ingrained religiosity has there been some small measure of reassessment. Don Jolly, for instance, makes a case for Welles as an anxious Catholic, seeking the endorsements of religious opinion leaders in his efforts to adapt the New Testament story, passages of which he knew from memory (see, for instance, Tarbox 2013, 48).

the more significant corollaries to the argument thus proposed without venturing formal proofs of a Kantian order. Like the compendia of essays by Montaigne and Bacon beloved of Welles, or the gatherings of short stories into books by writers closer to his own time, the present work remains a collection of inter-connected narratives whose effect is intended to be cumulative.

From the Director Welles plays for Pasolini we can derive one such corollary. Compelled in the later stages of his career to embark on a succession of acting jobs to finance his own films, with the most trivial being those for which he demanded the highest fees, he was prepared in this instance to participate in what was essentially an independent production offering little remuneration, playing second-fiddle to an almost unknown actor⁴. Did Welles sense that Pasolini's superficially satirical trifle makes a profound doctrinal point? Theft results not from covetousness but due to poverty and want, so this little *cortometraggio* insists that the balance of evils proposed by Thomas Aquinas (the intentional sin or fault, *culpa*, and the suffering leading to atonement, *poena*) weighed heavily in favour of the thief's redemption. Which is not to argue that Welles was a close reader of philosophy, or that he instinctively adopted Thomistic views. Save for "how to" manuals about magic tricks and other such activities, Welles's reading consisted almost entirely of fiction, whence he absorbed philosophical concepts of a surprising sophistication. Besides, keenly aware of the consequences of colonialism and given his stance on such issues as race and social equality, he would probably have taken Averroes's side favouring a universal intellect shared by humanity rather than that of Aquinas, who condemned his predecessor's interpretation of Aristotle when insisting that the differences between individual humans and between humans and the rest of creation were ordained by God. Nevertheless, given the tenor of his comment to Houseman, Welles was surely aware of Chesterton's profound engagement with Aquinas's thought that culminated in a celebrated biography of the saint.

4 Writing about the triviality of Marlon Brando's later roles, Naremore, the author of a book and numerous authoritative DVD commentaries on Welles, makes the withering remark of Brando that "he has probably appeared in more bad films than any important thespian since Orson Welles" (1991, 196).

Surprisingly, the necessary concomitant to Aquinas's argument may have exercised Welles's creative impulses to an even greater extent: if evil is a consequence of free will, as Augustine argues and Aquinas strives to explicate systematically, why would a perfect, all-knowing God permit its deleterious effects? Aquinas's response was drawn from the patristic tradition, and repeats the formulation offered, rather more diffidently, by the 9th-century Syrian patriarch, Timothy, to the recently invested al-Mahdi Caliph of Baghdad who challenged him with a series of interrogatories: why did a knowing God will the possibility of Christ's crucifixion, permit Adam to succumb to sin, and countenance the fall of the archangel Satan? Timothy provided what he felt (and Aquinas knew) to be the only rational response: evil deeds may be freely committed by knowing beings, but God in his mercy puts them to good ends⁵. In what may be Welles' paradigmatic restatement of this particular doctrine, his supposed attempt to return to the good graces of Hollywood's studio system with a money-spinning low-budget *film noir* thriller, the 1958 *Touch of Evil*, his anti-hero, the homicidally-corrupt police chief of a decaying border town plants evidence in order to convict an individual he suspects on the basis of his race rather than his actions. His hunch that proves to be correct, leading to a shocking, if appropriate restoration of moral order centering on Hank Quinlan's "comeuppance", a colloquialism Booth Tarkington substitutes for Aquinas's *poena* – one repeated with increasing emphasis in what, if not for studio interference, would have been Welles's most polished film, his 1942 adaptation of Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Accounts of the genesis of *Touch* are revelatory. As was typical of the early period of post-World War II studio decline, during which leading actors began to negotiate advantageous contracts and choose their own roles, the procedure of attaching "bankable" stars to film projects became the surest guarantee of financing a movie. Charlton Heston, who had begun his screen career in 1950 as a scantily clad, leggy, bare-chested Mark Antony in an independent version of *Julius Caesar* directed by

5 Augustine offers passing contemplations of evil in Books 3, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 12 of *The Confessions*, but in Chapters XII and XIII of Book 7 he argues that the good being the work of a just and omnipotent deity must be existent and that therefore evil must arise from a deprivation of the good and not a substance in itself (130-31), the argument taken up by succeeding generations of theologians.

David Bradley helming a largely amateur cast, relates one version of how Welles secured his director's chair for their first collaboration. A contract player for Paramount, in 1956 Heston received a "routine" script from one of Paramount's rivals, Universal, based on a recent *roman policier*, *Badge of Evil*, with the inducement that whereas a director had yet to be found, Orson Welles had been recruited to play the heavy. When Heston put forward Welles's candidature "it was as though I had suggested that my mother direct the film", reports Heston, reminiscing that the dumb-struck studio had to mull over the possibility before acquiescing. For his part Welles offers his own variant of the tale⁶. "They quickly called me back again and said, "will you direct this picture, we can't pay you any more", his purported response being that he would do so only if he could "rewrite the entire script". Approved, he proceeded to do so in the span of ten days, a Herculean effort that Heston suggests, with a knowing chuckle, "greatly improved the script and his own part"⁷. Heston proceeds to offer a vivid description of the admiration Welles won for his adroit direction and his subsequent ostracism due to an unnecessarily abrasive relationship with studio executives – the recurrent pattern of Welles's troubled career, according to his leading man – which in this instance led to Orson's brusque expulsion from the cutting room. Half a century had to elapse before *Touch of Evil* was restored to the form that approximates what Welles envisaged.

If we set aside the outworn trope of Welles as the stereotypical manic, self-destructive genius, however, it would be to discern the particular energies he brought to his epic ten-day endeavour. Conversant with a number of European languages, he no doubt recognized full well that his substitution of "touch" for "badge" bore a multiplicity of valences: a dexterous riposte, as in the French *touché*; a quantity barely to be perceived as in the realms of English metaphor; a tactile, sensory path to knowledge as Shakespeare's near contemporaries, the empiricists and rationalists of the Seventeenth Century, postulated; even a condition to elicit a certain sympathy, as it has become today

6 Consult the BBC interview of 1981 entitled "Charlton Heston Interview".

7 The interview in question was compiled and edited by Leslie Megahey for the Arena series hosted by the BBC and was released in 1982 as a two-part documentary entitled *The Orson Welles Story*.

in its adjectival form. He could have adopted a neutral title, *Border Town*, or the more assertive *Southern Police Corruption*. Yet, in his seemingly inconsequential transformation of *Badge of Evil* to *Touch of Evil*, Welles reemphasised the title's unchanged residue, "evil", to which end he combined or deleted characters, renamed others, relocated the action to a desolate version of a border town resembling a decaying Tijuana, omitted a welter of subplots, and made his hero, Vargas, a dashing Mexican detective newly married to an attractive northerner. The novel paints the fate of one of its transplanted characters, the victimized Consuelo, as the *exemplum gratia* of a tearful tale of successful assimilation to American life. In contrast, Welles substitutes Vargas for her assertively subaltern husband, converts her into a blonde Yankee contemptuous of the dangers presented by a roving Mexican drug gang, and turns himself into the out-sized Quinlan, the ethnocentric police chief habituated to employing violence and intimidation to confirm his intuitions. The evil of the novel, lawlessness, turns into a meditation on the corrupting wages of power deriving not only from badges of authority but also, and to an even greater extent, from the sense of corporeal superiority inherent to Quinlan's brand of racism. Both Welles and Heston had spoken openly in support of the Civil Rights movement in the US, in Welles's case to the extent of uttering bone-chilling threats on a live radio broadcast addressed to a corrupt sheriff who had beaten a black war veteran to the point of blinding concussion when the latter attempted to board a bus on his way home from active duty⁸. Scarce six years after his on-screen appearance as Vargas, Heston led the "arts" contingent in the 1963 march on Washington, DC., which culminated with Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. His "conversion" to the farthest fringes of Republican politics came decades later; but surely more than chance brought them together for *Touch of Evil*.

Later in the same BBC documentary in which Welles discusses the film's genesis, his interviewer confronts him with Quinlan's repulsive appearance, which Welles concedes had been deliberate and

8 Heston's early participation in the Civil Rights struggle is amply documented, but as Jonathan Rosenbaum (2007, 8-12) points out, Welles's intervention in the case of the veteran Isaac Woodard was long misrepresented by his biographers despite his voluble intervention during the height of the Red Scare, which had effectively silenced most of Hollywood.

the result of artifice, although he hastens to add that Quinlan's character is the opposite of his own, whose sympathies are entirely for Vargas. A bloated Richard III recruited from Hollywood's B-movie lot, the limping, growling, but still observant Quinlan eats, he claims, in order not to drink because he started to drink to ease the pain in his leg, its bones shattered by a bullet taken in the line of duty. In a still earlier series of interviews with André Bazin, Welles gently chides the renowned critic for succumbing to the continental tendency to assume that he played certain kinds of characters because he had an especial empathy for them. On the contrary, Quinlan is a "master of his line of work, a master of his environment, but a detestable man", while Vargas's honesty and desire for proof make him less complex, less "Shakespearean". "And Macbeth?", Bazin provokes, seizing on Welles's earlier less corpulent, but even heavier, heavy. "Just the same", admits Welles, who abruptly cuts to the chase: "I voluntarily play lots of bad guys [...] Like those French classical actors who only played kings my nature disposes me to play commanding characters"⁹. There is evidence that Welles developed this enduring self-conception early in his career. At the age of eleven he was placed in a newly rechristened "seminary", the progressive Todd School for Boys, where he encountered Roger Hill, who encouraged his many talented charges in their artistic pursuits. Soon after arriving Welles was the Virgin Mary in a Christmas pageant, but it was Hill Welles sought to emulate. "I had to learn every bit of Shakespeare because he knew it", admitted Welles in 1978, "and I had to learn the entire Bible because he knew it"¹⁰. Within months of entering Todd he was

9 Bazin 1992, 151-52.

10 See the Tarbox compilation (2013, 24). In a series of interviews Hill recorded over the telephone in Welles's last months, he and Welles fall to quoting the Bible and Shakespeare at considerable length. At one point Hill expresses surprise that his own daughter once asked him about the Sermon on the Mount, and then proceeds to recite it verbatim (28). For his part, Welles ridicules efforts to modernize the language of Shakespeare and the Bible (176), and weeks later launches into an impromptu quotation of the King James version of one of Paul's epistles, pausing after a few lines to inquire where it originates. "That's *Corinthians* 13, I believe", responds Hill, obtaining as response a few more lines, with Hill's own rejoinder being an excerpt of those that follow. Characteristically, Welles immediately makes merry of their solemn meditation on the loss of childhood innocence. "I've got a Gideon Bible I stole from a hotel somewhere. I don't know

designing sets and staging the plays in which he acted, including what should be considered part of a permanent repertoire to which he returned throughout the course of his career. Beginning with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, a version of *Julius Caesar*, and his first attempt at condensing Shakespeare's Histories, this one under the title *Winter of Our Discontent*, a vehicle for his assumption of the role of Richard III which was to culminate in his cinematic masterpiece, the variously released 1964-1966 Falstaff saga, *Chimes at Midnight*. At the advanced age of seventeen, with graduation impending, Welles advertised in the trade magazine *Billboard*, proclaiming his thespian interest in investing a modest amount of cash and his own services as "Heavy, Character and Juvenile"¹¹.

Failing to persuade the impresarios, he decamped to Ireland on a painting tour of the provinces but Shakespeare would not be denied such a Juvenile, and he wound up being hired by Hilton Edwards and Michéal MacLiammóir who ran Dublin's celebrated Gate Theatre, where as scene painter, occasional actor, and apprentice director he was involved in a whirlwind of productions of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens* and *King John*. The early months of 1933 found him back at Todd, a seasoned actor-director. The critic and Welles specialist Jonathan Rosenbaum suggests that Welles's first film project was a 16mm colour version of his Art Deco-inspired Todd production of *Twelfth Night* in which the characters are framed by backdrops consisting of the illustrated pages of a giant book of his own design: the extracts now available to scholars appear to consist of mixed, heavily-edited footage shot from many different camera positions¹². By the end of the summer Welles launched into a collaboration with Hill on a series of Shakespeare performance guides, given the collective title *Everybody's Shakespeare*, of which three, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, all annotated with his deft illustrative drawings, were initially published by the in-house Todd Press, and, with

what sin that is. I've used this well-thumbed *Bible* to read passages on TV and at people's dinners" (186).

11 See Tarbox (2013, 9) for the advertisement, and the annotated chronology compiled by Jonathan Rosenbaum appended to the Bogdanovic interviews for the sensational 1937-38 Broadway experiments in lighting (*Faustus*) and mise-en-scène (*Julius Caesar*) (326-31).

12 Rosenbaum, in Welles and Bogdanovich 1998, 330.

minor additions, four years later when Welles was doing his Mercury Theatre radio and theatre productions of the same plays.

Hill was surely a Shakespearian to his very bones, because the editions offer historically informed and eminently performable versions, albeit of a more abbreviated and conventional aspect than Welles's later Shakespeare. Yet it should not be overlooked that his encouragement of Welles's early immersion in the Renaissance – for by this point his *protégé* had evidently not only encountered Shakespeare and his then-known sources but also Montaigne, Marlowe and Cervantes – proved formative in a variety of ways: throughout his career Welles was willing to remain true to aspects of the texts that could provoke modern-day discomfort just as he was willing to adapt those same texts to the circumstances of production as vigorously as Shakespeare's contemporaries did. An accomplished marginal illustration in the Mercury *Merchant of Venice* edition depicts a stentorian, dark-robed Shylock labeled "Walter Hampden", alerting younger readers to the then regnant Shakespearian's repeated efforts to revive a more authentically "Jewish" version of the play's hero-villain. Welles's accompanying stage directions are instructive: "the old Jew is regarding him [Bassanio] shrewdly. Out of the bearded face, cut with hard wrinkles, peer glittering black eyes, surprisingly keen"¹³.

Fifty years would elapse before Welles's Shylock, fleshed out on borrowed and filched celluloid and shot with scarcely more equipment than available at Todd, proved to be the last of his Shakespearian assumptions to gain any measure of completion (and even that posthumously, assembled by well-meaning archivists). In marked contrast to the stripped-down Hampdenesque figure deserving of youthful emulation, the on-camera Shylock is now a richly attired but physically coarse, disheveled, nut-brown alien, just as dark in aspect as in intent, precisely as the English Renaissance demanded of its stereotype of the Levantine financiers permitted to operate in Venice's Ghetto and beyond. He is, besides, an innately paranoid misfit, compelled to interact with galleries of staring, masked Venetian Christians with vacant Modigliani eyes met fiercely by his own, which burn with rage as he hisses the many sibilants of the Rialto speech in a mock-Mizrahic accent. When having to sing for his sup-

13 Welles and Hill 1939, 9.

per on his return to Los Angeles, Welles did the same speech repeatedly on television talk shows, but invariably kitted out in a tailored tuxedo, eying the camera with amused irony and adopting a genteel and mellifluous Ashkenazic Fiddler-on-the-roof dialect. Yet it is as the cinematic revenant, despised even by his only surviving child in a city of hostile strangers, that Welles locates Shakespeare's own Shylock, one fully prepared to resist his fate with tooth and claw¹⁴.

That Welles's shocking Shylock was not the result of a growing skepticism or a maturation into turbulent animosity can be confirmed by returning to his neophyte Richard III hewn out of an amalgamation of Shakespeare's Histories by the then teenaged editor-actor-dramatist. Photographs of him in his Todd production reveal a head that was alarmingly close to that affixed to John Hurt's Elephant Man, but perhaps described less anachronistically by Simon Callow when he opines that Welles's transformation "out Lon Chaneyed Lon Chaney [...] his face unrecognizable, as if made from the spare parts of several faces stuck together [...] a botched monster put together by a sadistic Frankenstein"¹⁵. One has only to place Welles's performances alongside actors similarly drawn to Shakespeare, whose performances like those of Laurence Olivier and Al Pacino draw on later acting traditions, to recognize Welles's literal adherence to Shakespeare's spoken text. Olivier's vigorous, sadistically charming Richard originates with Colley Cibber's 1699 adaptation which left its imprint even on such celebrated Richards as Edmund Keane and David Garrick, both of whom made much of reverting to Shakespeare's original while craftily retaining Cibber's transpositions and insertions from other plays when he en-

14 The archivists of the Deutsche Kinematek München, where two decades ago I first saw some videotape transfers of the surviving footage of *The Merchant of Venice* donated by Oja Kodar, have done their best to assemble a "recent" film (shown at the Venice Biennale) in bold defiance of its incompleteness, while for his last project, the still more ambitious *King Lear*, all that we are left with consists of scattered script material and elaborate costume designs for which he drew from his radio and theatre versions. It is largely unconnected with the belligerent, more sinning than sinned against Lear he played for Peter Brook for an abridged television version. Welles sought something of a growth in Lear's spirituality, as he intended to document with many stark close-ups, a trajectory I have attempted to document through research in a wide assortment of archives (for which see, especially, Guneratne 2016, 405-07).

15 Callow 1995, 67.

hanced the tyrant's charismatic dominance over the other characters. Even before Olivier's Gloucester seizes power Anne, played by Claire Bloom, eyes him with reluctant, silent admiration; Olivier's Shylock for Jonathan Miller's 1969 staging (filmed for television the following year) bears no trace of the occasional Commedia dell'arte plot devices Shakespeare adopts, portraying instead a serious, bespectacled, anxiously assimilated Victorian bated by his social inferiors, who resumes the manners and dress of his ancestors only as the play grinds to its inexorable conclusion, famously emitting a howl of protest and rage as he departs after the trial scene. Pacino's singular documentary, *Looking for Richard* (1996), explores a variety of approaches to each of the play's major characters, but in the scenes filmed as stage rehearsals his Gloucester is explicitly a self-satisfied thug he appropriates from the Godfather films so that his Anne, a fragile, vulnerable Winona Ryder, must succumb to his wooing more out of terror than attraction; almost a decade later, Pacino plays an initially fussy and eventually unrelenting Shylock in Michael Radford's opulent period-film *Merchant of Venice* (2005), delivering his lines in an unplaceable accent that intends to pass for that of a Venetian Ashkenazic Jew of centuries past, somehow covetously attracted to Jeremy Irons's Royal Shakespearean murmurings when being strapped into an anachronistic electric chair in preparation for his butchery.

Welles's feral Richard is not entirely of his own making. By far the most interesting in the proliferation of recent challenges to Shakespeare's authorship of the plays we ascribe to him center on an imposing series of discoveries by Dennis McCarthy and Jane Schlueter that illustrate very close parallels between numerous lines penned by the noted translator-playwright Thomas North and his translator-historian brother George, whose manuscripts and published works appear to have been available to Shakespeare during and after a number of "lost" years he may have spent in the service of the Norths or their close associates¹⁶. Interestingly,

16 McCarthy, who announced the initial discoveries, appears to have moved progressively from the belief that Thomas North and Shakespeare were one and the same author, then to the possibility that Shakespeare was a relentless plagiarist, and most recently to Shakespeare as a faithful updater and re-stager of the works of North family members who may have been tainted by their close association with Mary Tudor's attempt to reverse the course of Tudor history.

neither George North's *Discourse on Rebels and Rebellion* treating Richard as a warning against allowing one's actions to be determined by one's appearance, nor those devoted to Gloucester by the chronicler Raphael Holinshed (who records him as "lowly of countenance" and who follows previous chroniclers in avoiding physical description and emphasizing his powers of dissimulation) dwell on his physique¹⁷. Shakespeare's portrait, further amplified by the young Welles, derives from that of Henry VIII's one-time chancellor, Thomas More, who was attempting to introduce the moralizing Greco-Roman historiography (just gaining popularity in Italy and Spain) as an English Renaissance update: one of his possible models, Suetonius, delighted in parading the vices of the twelve Caesars, but found the contrast between Claudius's physical disabilities and his eccentrically prudent conduct exemplary. More's *The History of King Richard III* provides a substantial historical introduction before he goes into the details of Gloucester's incriminating appearance: "little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than the right, hard favoured of visage [...] he was malicious, wrathful, envious and from afore birth, ever forward [...] for he came to the world with feet forward [...] and (as the fame runneth) not untoothed [...] a deep dissimuler [...] outwardly companionable where he inwardly hated, not letting to kiss whom he thought to kill"¹⁸. Characteristically, Stephen Greenblatt, who finds More a deeply-conflicted adherent of the Old Religion, ever-willing to try to beat or burn the Protestantism out of his disputants, notes that Shakespeare expounds More's views in the expository soliloquy he assigns to Richard, whose self-derogations continue to gather their full weight in the later insults hurled against him by other characters¹⁹. In considering Welles's adoption of a hostile caricature

17 Gary Taylor, observing that Shakespeare's rather free "borrowing" from other texts would in our age of legally protected writing repeatedly infringe on copyright, suggests that "*Henry V* and most of the other History plays should bear the designation 'based on Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, adapted by William Shakespeare'" (2017, 21).

18 More 2021, 71.

19 See, for instance, the opening chapter of Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1984, 11-73) and his detailed consideration of Richard's psychology in *Tyrant* (2019, 53-95). More was, in fact, deeply reticent about granting the Lu-

of Richard, *à la More*, it should be remembered that the worldly saint remained a staunch humanist to the last in his literary portraiture. Henry VIII had momentarily accepted his recommendation of the progressive young Hans Holbein to serve as his personal diplomat-painter (whose convincing improvements on physical likenesses led to at least one debacle), and we can reasonably attribute to More the quibbles about proper Latin renditions of the Greek used in sacred scripture in Henry's vigorously anti-Lutheran *Defense of the Seven Sacraments* since they bear the stamp of the Humanist's career-long attempts to translate books of the Bible²⁰.

Shakespeare's Stratford contemporary, Richard Field, who set up as a printer in London having apprenticed to the most renowned of the Huguenot expatriate practitioners of the craft, Thomas Vautrollier, married into his master's family, inherited his typefaces, and published in Greek, Latin and modern European languages, acquiring posthumous fame for having printed Shakespeare's longer narrative poems. Field's worthiness to serve such an apprenticeship could hardly be doubted and has been used as evidence that Shakespeare must also have had a superior education: Stratford's city corporation, in which Shakespeare's father John occasionally played a prominent role, chose its schoolmasters carefully, and Jonathan Bate suggests that as a young man Shakespeare may have casually encountered such works as the books of advice of William Lily of St. Paul, but that the established curriculum would have necessitated months of immersion in Terence, Aesop, Virgil, Tully, Ovid and Erasmus, adding that the mature writer's association with Field would have included exposure to the latter's recent edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles of the Kings and Queens of England*, Thomas North's "newly-Englished"

theran cause publicity and sought to suppress what he felt to be outbreaks with minimal advertisements of the fact, in marked contrast to Erasmus who at the instigation of humanist friends and clerics invited Luther to a battle of the printing presses with the first salvo in their long debate, *Of the Freedom of the Will (De Libero Arbitrio, 1524)*. By a strange twist of fate, it was the more circumspect More who cautioned Erasmus against such polemics (see Bentley-Taylor ed. 2002, 205).
 20 More's efforts to secure a vernacular bible that accorded with the teachings of the Church (in opposition to Tyndale's reformist Bible translation) and his attention to precise renderings of the Greek original are documented by Hutchinson 1941, 1-10.

reassessment of Plutarch's *Lives*, as well as John Florio's efforts as a lexicographer and translator of Montaigne²¹.

There is no evidential reason to assume that beyond his editorial duties Welles actively sought out Shakespeare's sources in his early youth; indeed, when we judge the matter retrospectively, today's digitization of texts and advances in textual forensics have brought to light sources no budding Shakespearian of the 1920s could even have imagined. Nevertheless, there is convincing evidence that Welles read widely and incessantly, adapting novel after novel for his radio broadcasts and film projects, and that he was as fully entitled as any of his fellow actor-directors to claim Shakespeare as a special province in his directorial terrain. In comparison, the best-known of his contemporaries, Grigory Kozintsev, Laurence Olivier and Akira Kurosawa, relied variously on well-known poets (such as Boris Pasternak), talented textual editors (on the order of Alan Dent), or teams of translator-scriptwriters (who wrestled with and reshaped Shakespeare's "un-Japanese" historical views) to provide the substrate for their adaptations. Welles alone undertook the complex processes of abridgement, condensation and transposition that his approach required, leading to the conclusion that his familiarity with Aquinas, More and other writers familiar to Elizabethans was rooted in Shakespeare rather than the result of entirely independent study. Such an early Shakespeare immersion may also explain his subsequent attraction to writers to whom he returned repeatedly, notably Melville, Conrad, Kafka and Dinesen, all of them drawn to metaphysical themes and a propensity to try the souls of their protagonists. Shaped by the deeply troubling times in which they lived, none amongst Welles's personal canon of writers sought a proof of the existence of a deity through Leibnizian optimism (i.e., since only God, however generous, could attain to perfection, our imperfect world can only be the best of all possible worlds); nor could any of them take refuge in the ridicule Voltaire heaped on such a theodicy when he offered *Candide* as a refutation, gleefully illustrating the full panoply of divine malice.

21 Bate 2009, 71-99. Through such sources Shakespeare is likely to have encountered Aquinas's thought, even at second hand, and Greenblatt notes that the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears to have studied either Jacobus de Voragine or Aquinas when he describes the horrors encountered in Purgatory (Greenblatt 2001, 16-21).

Frequently knowing literary sources better than those who directed him, Welles habitually bullied even the best of his fellow film directors and seized control over the scenes in which he acted. The list of his victims in this regard is formidable, and includes Henry King, Carol Reed, Gregory Ratoff, Mike Nichols and Fred Zinnemann, each of whom won more Hollywood accolades than he did. His intercessions in their films invariably injected elements of authentic sources for the authorial collages in the scripts they presented to him, the side-effect being an aggrandizement of his own role if only to make his character more devious, insidious, or morally culpable. In 1949, for instance, he shot fragments of his own *Othello* in Morocco and then commuted between countries and locations while he simultaneously played Harry Lime for Reed in *The Third Man* and Cesare Borgia for King in *The Prince of Foxes*. Reed's best-known scene is uncharacteristic. The cinematography, accomplished in cramped quarters and dependent on natural light, is riskier and more frenetic than in previous scenes. The location, an enclosed car on an all-but-abandoned carousel, too, remains a particularly piquant example of Welles's habitual use of certain visually-distinctive spaces as confessional ones, a narrative technique he employs to telling climactic effect in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Stranger*, *Mr. Arkadin*, *Touch of Evil*, *The Trial*, and *F for Fake*. Harry Lime's parting aside for Reed, a self-referential Welles improvisation delivered with a sardonic smile dismissing the injuries done to children by his adulterated vaccines, won the admiration of the novelist-screenwriter Graham Greene. "In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock".

Likewise, his hand is evident in the crypt-like cell of a monastery in which Zinnemann's Cardinal Wolsey breathes his last in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). Robert Bolt's stage play, the basis for the film, makes much of the protean narrator, the Common Man, who adopts a tone of clinical disinterest when announcing Wolsey's off-stage demise and More's immediate assumption of his duties. The film replaces the Common Man with supernumerary characters, but an interpolated scene shows Welles at his most memorable, confess-

ing moral compromise with his last rasping breath in lines he has craftily purloined from Shakespeare. The claustrophobic scene is shot entirely in Welles's fashion (with light bounced off walls and ceilings, as the cinematographer Gregg Toland had taught him during the making of *Citizen Kane*). The seemingly static camera, which frames a doorway and then tilts down sharply to reveal a head-first foreshortening of the supine Wolsey, precisely inverts the angle the painter Andrea Mantegna had used for his *Dead Christ* gripped by rigor mortis. Unexpectedly, the camera tilts upwards once more to capture the brusque entry of a scowling Duke of Norfolk, only to pan to the left as he, now Lord Protector, seizes the Chancellor's chain and badge of office. The departing Norfolk pauses just as the camera begins to follow him back to the doorway, to demand whether the prisoner has anything to say to his king. Actors from Beerbohm Tree and Henry Irving to Hampden had coveted Shakespeare's Wolsey, the playwright's most self-aware exemplification of the *de casibus virorum* theme introduced into literature by Boccaccio. Wolsey's Icarus fall brings to an end the first episode of Shakespeare's *All Is True*. In the film another uneasy moment passes and the supine Welles, whose livid countenance we have seen in an inverted close-up, gasps: "if I had served God one half so well as I had served my king, God would not have left me here to die in this place", to which Norfolk, staring into the camera in a sharply canted close-up, responds that he should thank God since the King would have had him die in the Tower. Who but Welles would have drawn *in extremis* from the lines in the lament that Shakespeare grants the fallen Wolsey?: "O Cromwell, Cromwell, / Had I but served my God with half the zeal / I served my King, he would not in mine age / Have left me naked to mine enemies" (IV.i.454-57)²².

As for Machiavelli, his rigorously proscribed works could only have circulated as a kind of *samizdat* among England's nobility during Shakespeare's time, although a considerable body of scholar-

22 Welles could have been eyeing Shakespeare's Wolsey even earlier since the title he used for his intended 1941 Latin American quartet of films, *It's All True*, is a transparent metathesis of the one initially given to Shakespeare's collaboration with Fletcher on the last of his Tudor plays, an ill-fated one because a prop canon discharged during Wolsey's banquet (in which Henry first eyes Anne Boleyn) caused a fire that burned the Globe to the ground.

ship exists to show that part of his *oeuvre* was not unfamiliar to Elizabeth's courtiers. From Marlowe to Webster and beyond, herds of Machiavels populated London's stages, among them Shakespeare's Aaron, Richard, Hamlet, Iago and Edmund. Machiavelli's most outrageous and probably satirical assertions consisted of advocating cruelty, dissimulation, treachery, and vengefulness as apt methods of statecraft. Prominent among his examples of such princely conduct was the rapacious, habitually deceitful Borgia pope, Alexander VI, the cunning fox in his extended metaphor of the lion and the fox in *The Prince*²³. The most obvious source available to Shakespeare, although one possibly unfamiliar to Welles, was Innocent Gentillet, whose contribution to the ever-popular genre of advice to rulers consisted of a detailed contestation, *Anti-Machiavel*, that achieved print in English translation within Elizabeth's lifetime. Gentillet devotes substantial parts of three chapters to Machiavelli's exemplar Cesare Borgia in which, *en passant*, he levels the charge of necromancy against Alexander (as a supplement to the usual, less-surprising accusations that also involved his illegitimate children Cesare and Lucrezia – wanton cruelty, territorial ambition, simony, parricide and incest), findings duly put to spectacularly sordid effect by Barnabe Barnes in *The Devil's Charter* which was performed before King James towards Christmas in 1606, some months after the participants in the Gunpowder Plot had met a terrible fate²⁴. With no less

23 As each Medici ascent into the nobility was punctuated by months'-long festivities, the Florentine hegemony set the agenda for theatrical and musical innovation in the peninsula, and such exotic acquisitions as giraffes drew admiration from many quarters, but their staged animal combats in Florentine public spaces involving lions proved spectacular failures that set the local literati atwitter. They no doubt took comfort in their collections of art and books, among which a fifteenth-century illuminated Greek manuscript of Aesop's *Fables* prized by both Lorenzo and his ill-fated son Piero won particular renown: in a Gentillet-esque turn of historical justice, it now resides in the New York Public Library. Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter (2021) suggests that Shakespeare paraphrases North's reworking of "Doni" in a number of plays, most notably *All Is True* and *A Winter's Tale* (74-79; 154-55). Shakespeare also treats the wolf as the ravenous enemy of the fox (notably in the *Histories*), and foxes as stealthy and cunning (throughout his *oeuvre*).

24 A practicing lawyer who fled Paris for Geneva following the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, Gentillet begins Chapters 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 with

effrontery than his precursor, Gentillet dedicated his work to the Duke of Alençon, Queen Elizabeth's French suitor, just as Machiavelli had dedicated *The Prince* to Alençon's grandfather Lorenzo de' Medici, and it is from Gentillet's text that the *de casibus* trope of the disgraceful end of the perfidious and "murderous" Machiavels appears to have found its way by allusion not only into Shakespeare's dramas (the early Histories, such as *3 Henry VI* in which the future Richard III promises to "set the murderous Machiavel to school", *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*), but also into the works of Marlowe, Greene, Thomas Andrewe and Francis Bacon²⁵. The psychopathic delight Welles takes in inflicting terror in *The Prince of Foxes* obviously focuses on Machiavelli's theme of a politic prince's ascent rather than Gentillet's of a doomed tyrant's downfall, and might have surprised even the worldly Shakespeare. Jovially, the splendidly-attired Cesare holds court in a manicured Renaissance garden as he arranges noble marriages while shredding apart a portion of roast fowl with his fingers; diabolically, at a later banquet he compels his unwilling mistress to look on whilst her erstwhile lover, Andrea Orsini (played with a justifiable lack of enthusiasm by Tyrone Power), has his eyes all but gouged out in front of his wailing mother. "Set in the time of the Borgias", writes Jeanine Basinger (taking issue with Naremore), "the movie had solid assets in European location shooting, still new to American audiences, and in Orson Welles, who is awesome as Cesare Borgia, a role he was born to play"²⁶. The film ends abruptly, and titles precede the closing credits informing us of Cesare's impending comeuppance or, in Gentillet's words, "God's just judgment" (Basinger 2007, 230).

a reference to Machiavelli's apparently laudatory portrait of Cesare, responding with counterexamples and logical arguments as well as copious expressions of moral indignation.

25 See, for instance, the list of possible influences furnished in the Preface to the 1602 English translation of *Anti-Machiavel* xv-xviii. Montaigne, John Florio and Francis Bacon were also engaged readers of Gentillet.

26 See 2007, 171, although Basinger regards Power's ghastly appearance during the supposed eye-gouging as less the result of undergoing hideous tortures than of studio mismanagement.

Evil as Allegory, or, Shakespeare as Contemporary Commentator

Welles's European period began with yet another of his periodic fiascos, the culmination of a three-year period of intense tumult. Things had been heating up for the American left following the dropping of atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which remained an abiding concern for Welles as proved by visions of nuclear catastrophe raised in *The Trial* (1962) and the unfinished *Don Quixote* (1957-1960s). At war's end the Supreme Court had again taken up the dormant case of *US vs. Paramount, et al.*, and by 1948 had endorsed sweeping measures that spelled the end of the formal studio system. The Breen Office of censorship established in the 1930s now assumed unfettered powers to determine the content of films, and Hollywood began its own internal investigations to flush out left-oriented suspects who were duly turned over to the newly formed Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee (in two significant purges from 1947-48 and 1951-52) for public interrogation by such figures as Senator Joseph McCarthy and his acolyte, Federal prosecutor Roy Cohn, whose vaunted list of suspects only stopped mushrooming when exposed as a hoax during a 1954 cross-examination by attorney Joseph Welch. Hollywood's writers were particularly suspect, and some chose to employ others to front their work: the persistent Shakespearean, Philip Yordan, thrived in the latter role and may even have made fun of Welles²⁷. Some Hollywood personnel steadfastly refused to testify before HUAC, preferring incarceration; still others "named names", even to the extent of boosting their careers, as was true of stage and film director Elia Kazan who, in his turn, was reviled as a "traitor" by Welles in later interviews.

Welles was probably on more than one list of suspects. On the release of Chaplin's 1946 *Monsieur Verdoux*, which adapted a Welles

27 File 242 of the Philip Yordan Papers now housed in the Fairbanks Special Collections of the Margaret Herrick Library dates the screenplay for *The Prince of Darkness* to April 24, 1948, a few months following Welles's Utah staging of *Macbeth*. When shooting Welles had catered gourmet delights brought to his sets, and in one scene a figure meant to refer to the Thane of Cawdor, Dutch, a corpulent gangster boss, downs platefuls of seafood, only to be poisoned with some crêpes suzettes. *The Prince of Darkness* was possibly updated for the occasion from an unproduced play Yordan had already written in 1941.

story about a comfortably middle-class bluebeard who maintains his family's well-being by marrying and then discreetly disposing of a series of wealthy widows, J. Edgar Hoover planted shills in the test audiences to interrupt the film and heckle those scheduled to promote the première. Chaplin made a permanent departure for Europe soon thereafter. Despite growing rifts with an understandably skittish Rita Hayworth, Welles persevered with her as his *femme fatale* in one of his now acclaimed *films noirs*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, releasing it in May of 1948. As he waited for the finalization of their divorce, he planned his most experimental Shakespearean feature film. Arriving at an agreement with the theatre hosting the Utah Centennial Festival, Welles hurriedly assembled the cast for a new film project based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, adapting elements from his celebrated Voodoo Macbeth production that had caused a sensation in Harlem during its 1936-1937 run. At the time of the original production, Welles's substitution of Haitian Vodou for Shakespeare's incorporation of elements of King James's published tracts on daemonology, and his use of a complex mix of Virgil Thompson's musical interjections and the pounding drumbeats of Haitian Vodou practitioners (the latter drowning out the former as the revolutionary forces gathered around Macbeth's fortress), only raised concerns over the desecration of Shakespeare's canonical play (with the white "establishment" taking more censorious views than leaders of the black press)²⁸. More

28 Among Welles biographers, Simon Callow takes an especial interest in the genesis of the *Voodoo Macbeth* and provides an engaging, at times gossipy account of the details of Houseman's and Welles's attempt to resuscitate the Federal Theatre Project's mandate after two disappointing productions: by the FTP's estimation the project, soon known as the *Voodoo Macbeth*, was a smash hit, employing upwards of 300 personnel (among them an entirely black cast), the only production in that season that brought sold out houses and which traveled to major non-segregated urban centers throughout the US. He treats the largely dubious reviews by the major theatre reviewers as something more than the defense of the Shakespearean cultural patrimony, but does acknowledge the widespread support and encouragement offered by leading periodicals aimed at a black readership (see Callow 1995, 216-245). For his part, Welles was fond of the anecdote that he gave his assent to a Haitian Vodou drummer who having learned that one of the more prominent Broadway critics, Percy Hammond, had questioned the use of such a "musical race" in such an exalted play, suggested that they subject him to *beri-beri* – contributing to his unexpected demise a few

recently, Welles and his partner Houseman, have been taken to task for their appropriations of Haiti's turbulent post-colonial years and adopting a one-set, Conrad-esque jungle *mise-en-scène* rather than for thumbing their noses at Stratfordians²⁹.

The new *Macbeth* took place amidst primordial rocky outcrops and dripping canyon walls that amplified the clatter of horses' hooves and the echoes of voices, further amplified by Welles's addition of an all-purpose stairway. Given just three weeks of shooting time by Republic Films (which specialized in scrubland Westerns), he economized by having the actors prerecord their lines in a stone-age Scottish burr to which they lip-synced during filming, thereby freeing the camera to wander with Horror-movie menace. He relied on some post-synchronized shrieks and clashes of metal for the necessary sound effects, while trusting to the notable modernist composer Jacques Ibert and his timpanists to pull off the brilliantly Eisensteinian montage in which the condemned Thane of Cawdor, hauled to the block in silhouette, is deprived of his head at the stroke of a Neo-Haitian drumbeat. Ranged against these medieval forces of mayhem is a new, invented character, the Holy Father, a foil to a trio of weird sisters who at the outset craft a phallic clay image of a king over which they periodically utter prophetic incantations. At one point the Holy Father even makes them recoil in terror, while preserving the vociferous characteristics of a grotesque amalgamation of Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, and Joseph Breen as he brandishes a talismanic pseudo-Celtic cross adopted by a tribe of followers who display a thirst for Christian rectitude that affirms nothing so much as the extraordinary piety of the Ku Klux Klan. As the Holy Father's forces encircle Dunsinane, Macbeth (now now attired in garb Michael Anderegg justly compares to that of the Statue of Liberty) takes his last stand on the castle parapet and hurls a javelin loosely modeled on Liberty's flame

days later. Pathé made a newsreel of the close of the production that must have involved Welles's cooperation and, at one point, perhaps his voice (I offer the evidence in Guneratne 2016, 405-06); the audience, also included in some of the shots, is fully-engaged and unfailingly respectful prior to a burst of celebratory merriment at the end.

29 In this context the round-table discussion in Hilb's *Afro-Haitian-American Ritual Power: Vodou in the Welles-FTP Voodoo Macbeth* remains instructive (Hilb 2014, 649-81).

at the raging Holy Father whose chest it enters with a fatal, sickening thud³⁰. Placed in competition at the 1948 Venice Film Festival with Laurence Olivier's stately *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* proved a public humiliation: in his documentary *Filming Othello* (1978) Welles claims that representatives of the State Department persuaded him to withdraw it weeks before the event, leading to condemnation by the press.

Welles's belief in the tangible presence of forces of darkness seems unlikely, despite the nefarious activities of his fellow filmmakers; Maya Deren, his contemporary, was one of the few converts who treated Vodou seriously, but most other representations were of the order of the hocus-pocus that went on apace at Universal, in some corners of Mario Bava's Italy, and in the backwater of England's Hammer Studios. Even within a Renaissance context Welles would have understood *Macbeth* as Shakespeare's panicked reaction to the unfolding events of the Gunpowder Plot³¹. In his earlier plays, Joan de Pucelle's conjurations of demons meet with scant success (1*Henry VI*, 5.iii) and Richard III's numerous accusations of witchcraft are fraudulent and levelled at political enemies. The old Queen may have placed excess faith in learned astrologers and scryers such as John Dee, but the new King, who had assumed patronage of Shakespeare's company upon accession, conducted debates with cardinals over theological matters, and continued to defend the doctrines advanced in Heinrich Kramer's best-selling witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484). Even as late as 1587, well in advance of James's accession, the English parliamentarian Reginald Scot wrote a scathing refutation of the *Malleus*, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, fearing the further spread of the witch-hunting mania that overtook both Catholic and Protestant communities in the wake of Luther's break

30 Andereggs observations on the film and its failure to participate in the "high culture" associations of Shakespeare, and his noteworthy recognition that the film commented on the introduction of a "new religion", should be kept in mind in the context of Welles's unattainable determination to convey the sentiments shared by Shakespeare's first audiences (1999, 74-97).

31 Perhaps the finest pages of Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare* treat the nature and extent of this panic (2004, 186-205), and Welles is fully aware of the perils of impending damnation because when Macbeth first gallops home to Inverness and embraces Lady Macbeth on dismounting, a rotting corpse on a gibbet is suspended in the background.

from Rome in 1517³². When Father Henry Garnet, a confessor to some of the Gunpowder plotters, felt justified in refusing to offer incriminations on the basis of mental reservation, he accidentally let slip the Jesuit doctrine pertaining to that procedure, “equivocation”, a term the drunken porter of Inverness ridicules even as he admits a group of homicidal guests into the castle, where, soon enough, crimes of particular interest to James are revealed by the attenuation of the dialogue: the shedding of the “golden blood” of Duncan (an allusion to James’s argument for legitimation through “divine right”), and the speedy fulfillment of the Weird Sisters’ prophetic utterances through the agency of the demon-invocator Lady Macbeth who speeds the Thane, her spouse, to his state as “king hereafter”. In *Macbeth*, the unchaste subjects of James’s non-fictional theories of demonism were duly fleshed-forth and paraded on stage in all their Catholic and feminine atavisms, with the earliest recorded performances taking place before the miraculously preserved apotheosis of the Stuart royal line. Welles’s actual views on the material reality of witchcraft can best be extrapolated from his conversations with Bazin, wherein he declares Michel Montaigne to be the most perfect writer the world has yet produced, to whom he had returned repeatedly since first acquaintance because he regarded him a closer, less violent companion than Shakespeare (165). Once a judge for the Parlement of Bordeaux, it was Montaigne who in a famous passage in the *Essais* declared human life to be of such preeminent value that absolute proof must be furnished before any capital judgement should even be permitted, asserting in this very context that the witches of his province faced mortal danger whenever a new accuser attested the truth of their visions³³. In the *Malleus*, Kramer advocates shaving the entire body of a witch in order to establish some scar or mark that proved her allegiance to the

32 The best estimate for the cost in lives is probably that of historian Brian P. Levack, who dismisses many of the higher figures as self-promotion on the part of witch-hunters, but settles on informed estimates and incontrovertible documentation to come to the figures of about 110,000 prosecutions in Western Europe between 1500 and 1700, with 60,000 of the arraignments leading to executions. He remarks also that outbreaks of witchcraft often led to the decimation of village and city populations and long term social and economic consequences (1991, 19-62).

33 See Donald Frame’s literal translation of a passage in Montaigne’s essay “Of the Lame” that Welles could not have missed (2003, 959-61).

devil; in his unjustly neglected essay, "On Physiognomy", Montaigne granted the Platonic notion that physical beauty may be a path to the appreciation of the true Form of Beauty, but also pointed out that the human mind can discern little from actual appearance, noting with no little irony that the great influence on his life, his friend Étienne de la Boétie, had a profound, revolutionary mind, despite his physical defects. Nietzsche called Shakespeare Montaigne's best reader, as Peter Platt observes in his introduction to a work suggestively entitled *Shakespeare's Montaigne*, which implies that Shakespeare might have known Florio's admired translation in manuscript well in advance of its 1603 publication³⁴. Welles would have encountered Montaigne as Shakespeare first did, in French, and they both did so in a world rife with political intolerance.

It was to Bazin, also, that Welles revealed the key to his methods of characterization, by then having passed years in reflection upon taking up his peripatetic European existence. He had initiated shooting *Othello* in the North of Italy soon after submitting and then withdrawing his *Macbeth* at the Venice festival. He presently redid the initial footage, hampered by a combination of circumstances. By far the most famous *Othello* of his time, Paul Robeson, who had triumphed in the role on stages in London and New York by representing a towering figure brought down by racial animosity, languished in the United States, his passport confiscated in 1950 at the height of the McCarthyist witch-hunts; but in any event Robeson could not have played the liminal, cross-cultural figure envisaged by Welles, one who engaged in passionate, physical love at just the moment when the Breen Office preemptively informed the film's potential backers that neither a black man nor one in black-face would be allowed to kiss a white woman³⁵. The warning was probably irrelevant: having

34 Platt and his co-author Greenblatt note that Ben Jonson and the free-thinking Giordano Bruno had known connections with Florio, and Shakespeare's familiarity with "Of Cannibals" and its gentle mockery in *The Tempest* make his familiarity with Florio's translation probable. Yet, despite a considerable literature treating Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare, the precise point at which the young playwright encountered the older writer's work has not been established with any certainty.

35 Anderegg details the censors' preemptive action, possibly because of Robeson's strong stand on Civil Rights and the fame of his *Othello* (in which the

travelled the Orient since childhood in the company of his father, but then observing swathes of Europe, North Africa and Latin America at various stages of life, Welles was already broadening the scope of his social critique, as perceptive critics have recognized. In his later documentary *Filming Othello*, Welles cites Bazin and Jack J. Jorgens with approval: Bazin for deducing that *Othello's* virtuosity of technique involving complex shots matched across continents and the lapse of months served to create an autonomous world for the characters, and Jorgens for recognizing that as Othello he plays a regal, dignified and restrained leader whose world precipitously collapses. Jorgens was the first to observe that the seemingly repeated shot framings foretell Othello's disintegration, the film's enveloping shadows and vertiginous framings being signifiers of a betrayed grandeur³⁶.

With astonishing speed Welles gathered together a seasoned cast of Shakespearians and a determined, multi-national film crew recruited in Italy, England, France and Morocco, many prepared in advance for the rigours of piecemeal shooting in Venice, Viterbo, Essaouira, Safi, and, most memorably, the labyrinthine Moroccan fortress of Mogador which served as Shakespeare's Cypriot citadel. His Irish mentors of yore were soon at hand, Hilton Edwards as Desdemona's inconsolably dismayed father, Brabantio, and Michéal MacLiammóir as the most mysterious of any of a score of Iagos committed to film (some years later the celebrated comic actor Totò was to play an urbane Iago for Pasolini in a puppet-theatre version that toyed with the entire tradition of Shakespearean filmmaking)³⁷. Problems beset the shooting schedule: production ground to a halt as financial backers withdrew; costumes failed to arrive, and a sequence was improvised in which Iago corners Roderigo in a steam bath, while Welles donned makeshift European armour and the traditional djellabas worn since antiquity by Morocco's mixed-race Berber elites (who had sent prominent emissaries to Elizabeth's court). An entire flock of Desdemonas proved unsatisfactory, fortu-

kisses planted on Peggy Ashcroft and Uta Hagen brought trans-Atlantic waves of conservative protest and death threats) (1999, 115).

36 Note, particularly, the early pages of Jorgens's chapter (1977, 175-90) from which Welles quotes extracts.

37 For a more analytical account of Pasolini's unexampled riposte to both Welles and Shakespeare, see the pages I devote to it in Guneratne 2008, 226-31.

nate happenstance vouchsafing the enigmatic young Quebécoise, Suzanne Cloutier, who speedily metamorphosed into his uncomprehending *femme fatale*, becoming, as in Shakespeare's premonition, a "moth", albeit not one condemned to "peace" (I.iii.254), but to serve as tantalizing bait fluttering on Iago's fatal web.

As Welles stated repeatedly in later interviews, he drew inspiration for his film from the operatic adaptation through which Arrigo Boito convinced the long-retired Giuseppe Verdi to resume composing. Welles translates Boito's narrative inventions into visual ones (Iago's confessional aria, claiming demonic powers, turns into a pastiche of whispered peripatetic insinuations of a relentlessly sexual nature; an effect of light in a bedroom in Mogador's defensive tower replaces the sensuous Act I love duet Boito invented for Othello and Desdemona). In contrast, Sergei Yutkevich, whose opulent colour version of *Othello* won the highest honours at Cannes a mere four years after the triumph of Welles's film, observed the musical conventions more faithfully: his Stalinesque Iago soliloquizes, confessing his evil outside the action of the plot and, as is conventional in staging Verdi, triumphantly placing his foot on the prostrate Othello; Desdemona sings a "farewell" aria in lieu of the Willow Song³⁸. For his part, Welles amplifies the animal imagery deployed by Iago, the ever-present spider who will ensnare "so great a fly as Michael Cassio": Othello is "an old black ram" who tups the scandalized Brabantio's "white ewe"; the ineffectual Roderigo, pining piteously for Desdemona, should drown cats and blind puppies rather than himself, and, having called his bluff, Iago thrusts an obedient lapdog, the Tenerife depicted by such Venetian painters as Carpaccio, into his unwilling arms; sea gulls dive into shots as characters de-

38 Predictably, it was left to Franco Zeffirelli, a prolific adapter of Shakespeare, to traverse the full arc with his 1986 adaptation of Verdi's *Otello*, which borrows many visual motifs of entrapment from Welles but recreates almost the entire Boito-Welles opera with remarkably charismatic performances by singers Plácido Domingo, Katia Ricciarelli and Justino Diaz. In addition to borrowing Welles's gratings and enclosures as signifiers of the presence of evil, Zeffirelli frequently makes use of images of the cross of Christ's crucifixion, borrowed from his earlier *Romeo and Juliet* where they signify the fragility of even the most intense spiritual love, an effect heightened by creating sympathetic back stories (in flashback) for Othello and Desdemona.

liver their lines; Iago's concluding punishment is to be stuffed into a bear cage, winch-hoisted over the ramparts of Mogador, "for daws to peck at". Coleridge was sufficiently baffled by Iago to call his a "motiveless malignity". Welles locates the ensign's psychopathy in a hatred for fecundity, for the proliferation of animals to whom he attributes dangerous characteristics, and most of all for the sexually potent men and women, Cassio and Bianca, Othello and Desdemona, and a host of Cypriot revelers whose laughter mocks his sterility. He prods his minion Rodrigo with a stick before dispatching him with a rapier through the wooden slats of a Turkish Bath, he stabs the drunken Cassio and fells his wife Emilia before his capture: his compensations are transparently Freudian. Welles achieves two aims with his mature trilogy of Shakespeare films, a depth of individual characterization within Shakespeare's dramatic form, and an allegorical function in which style and genre comment on contemporary cultural landscapes. Here the *film noir* serves the function of a commentary on mid-century black-white relations that draws attention to the particular forms of prejudice that would diminish a Robeson, a Marion Anderson, a W.B. DuBois, or a Malcolm X, each exploited in a particular way just as Iago pathologically and to his eventual ruin exploits Roderigo's malleability, Cassio's fondness for drink, Desdemona's excessive trust and Othello's susceptibility to manufactured proofs.

Welles remained grateful to Bazin and his disciples whose contributions to the journal he founded, the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, helped *Othello* to its 1952 victory at Cannes. Asked by Bazin a few years later about the film's technical features, he offered a comprehensive interpretation by teasing apart an incident in his next film, *Mr. Arkadin* (also destined to consist of alternative versions compiled over an editorial span of three years, 1953-1955). In *Arkadin* the nature of evil seems straightforward: a high-flying arms dealer whose profession once consisted of luring, kidnapping, and exporting young Polish women to South America, fears that his cherished daughter could discover the secret that predated his ascent from 1927 onwards into a magnate who owns castles. Grigory Arkadin contrives to solve two problems at once by hiring a smuggler with a wide network of underworld connections to ferret out his past with the aim of disposing of witnesses and accomplices who could reveal the original source of his immense fortune. At

one moment, as the masked revelers in a surreal ball taking place in his castle surround him, Arkadin offers a toast with a fable that is decidedly more Machiavellian than Aesopian:

Now I am going to tell you about a scorpion. This scorpion wanted to cross a river, so he asked the frog to carry him. "No", said the frog. "No thank you. If I let you on my back, you may sting me, and the sting of the scorpion is death". "Now where", asked the scorpion, "is the logic of that?" (For scorpions always try to be logical). "If I sting you, you will die and I will drown". So the frog was convinced and took the scorpion on his back. But just in the middle of the river he felt a terrible pain and realized that, after all, the scorpion *had* stung him. "Logic", cried the dying frog as he started under, bearing the scorpion down with him. "There is no logic in this!" "I know", said the scorpion, "but I can't help it – it's my character". Let's *drink* to character.

Peter Bogdanovich recognizes the narrative preeminence of this fable in Welles's *oeuvre*, no less determinative than Machiavelli's Borgias in *The Prince*. Nevertheless, he understands it in a contradictory way. Initially, he makes Welles's antagonists exemplary character types, each species akin to the individual who is his own worst enemy: Charlie Kane and Harry Lime are doomed scorpions; Othello and Falstaff are victim frogs; Quinlan is that *rara avis*, the scorpion frog, although he, too, comes to a bad end. Bogdanovich cannot resist adding that in the early days of their acquaintance, "Welles and I played scorpion and frog to each other more than once", rejecting the idea of character types in favour of roles that any character may assume in a given circumstance³⁹. A more consistent reading of the characters who inhabit Welles's worlds would be as individuals whose ego constitution results from an admixture of subconscious archetypes that predispose them to certain patterns of behaviour⁴⁰.

39 See the introduction to Wells and Bogdanovich 1998, xiii-xiv.

40 Interestingly, S. V. Feaver, in his premonitory *In Search of the Rose* (1994), recognized that Welles, whose major works coincided with those of Jung's mature writings, may have drawn from Jung's theories of the archetype. He offers such a complex range of archetypes for the characters in each major Welles film that it seems entirely unlikely that Welles could have known or intuited them, but his self-published book remains (despite its many errors large and small) an early effort to probe the sophistication of Welles's thought. Welles had already encountered the concept of the "shadow" (the counterpart to all other archetypes), early in his career. By chance he spent a season in 1937-38 voicing the radio narrator

C.G. Jung names as the “shadow” the archetypal force whose contradictory and self-destructive urges may overwhelm the ego. Being a close reader of myth and fable, Jung would discern immediately that the trusting frog who asks for no recompense for the favor he grants conforms to the archetype of the caregiver, whose shadow momentarily warns him of the danger of extending charity to one with evil intent. In contrast, the more interesting scorpion is a trickster, ever-willing to deceive and overturn a moral order, whose shadow drives him to become the assassin and the saboteur⁴¹. Welles takes great pains in this regard to disabuse Bazin of any simple good/evil dichotomy, pointing out that the Frog is asinine (comparing him to the duped sailor O’Hara vamped by *femme fatale* Rita Hayworth in another of this cluster of *films noirs*, the 1947 *Lady from Shanghai*), adding that in his films he defends the points of view of his enemies because rich characterisation is not a question of morality but one of charm, a successfully charming man being able to draw on his feminine side (or anima), his aristocratic side, his anarchist side, and by defying the world’s expectations in this way, attaining a tragic dignity as does the scorpion⁴².

Within this context Jung’s discussion of evil both affirms and interrogates the nature of the theodicy to which Welles subscribes. By offering a negative proof of a supervening force for justice that inevitably imposes an apt comeuppance both for Nietzschean amorality and unthinking immorality, Jung challenges the elegance of the Dantesque *contrapasso* by which a character such as Welles’s Franz Kindler, the disguised Nazi commandant in *The Stranger* (1946), is impaled by a crusading figure on a clocktower he has barely succeeded in repairing (i.e., offering the hope that time itself undoes the ba-

of a detective crime drama popularly known as “The Shadow”, an omniscient presence in the criminal world. As he staged the denouement to each of the capers, Welles’s Shadow announced: “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The Shadow knows”.

41 M. V. Adams (2005) suggests that although Jung never mentions the “saboteur” as an archetype, it must exist as self-sabotage is a common psychical tendency; but it is quite possible that Jung would have regarded Iago’s self-sabotage as deriving from the archetype of the mocking trickster overwhelmed by its shadow – the fatal end point of the kind of deception undertaken by Iago.

42 See, in particular, Adams 2025, 178-81.

ality of evil). In "Christ, a Symbol of Self", a chapter of *Aion* (1951), Jung dismisses the foundations of Leibniz's theodicy, disputing the contention that God and his earthly figuration Christ (i.e. God made man) could be the *summum bonum* originally proposed by Irenaeus and subsequently offered as axiomatic by Augustine (who in consequence argues that evil can only be a form of *privatio boni*). For Jung this cannot be so because if Satan disobeyed God of his own free will, then evil predates the existence of mankind or the creation of a material world, and such a challenge to Augustine in turn complicates Aquinas's argument that evil is either of natural or human origin. Satan and the Anti-Christ are but shadows of that force which encompasses both good and evil⁴³.

While this argument contributes to an understanding of Welles's fascination with the archetype of the Iagoesque scorpion, Jung's formulations find more subtle and pervasive reflection in *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), the last of Welles's fully-realised Shakespeare films. It

43 See Storr ed. 2013, 299-309, wherein Jung insists that monotheism requires that Satan is presupposed by God's goodness, just as the Anti-Christ is necessary for the existence of a redemptive Christ – pointing out that it was only the late Middle Ages and beyond (in the present context the Tudor period in England) that Satan and the Anti-Christ assumed independent identities and powers of agency. Joseph Campbell, whose work on myth was deeply influential in the world of filmmaking, collaborated with Jung on the translation of the "Answer to Job" (1954) in which the psychologist advanced the controversial hypothesis that since God is eternal and unchanging, he was incapable of growth or conscious self-realization. Job's transgression is his gradual recognition of the duality of Yahweh's character. Tendentiously, Jung offers (and endeavors to explain as illusory) two dogmatic paradoxes: his friends afford Job no consolation but only damning advice. Bereft and abandoned, he has no legitimate recourse except to appeal to Yahweh against Yahweh. So, also, God's "salvationist" project that required Christ to suffer, die, and undergo resurrection in order that humankind could be redeemed from a punishment that he had himself inflicted. It is God, therefore, who is the source of all, thus of all goodness and evil, and it is correct to fear and love him since he is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, the archetype and the shadow, the source of goodness and joy and of vengeance and castigation. This summarizes long arguments for which Jung offers a rich range of citations both of scripture and of patristic theology (see 519-615), but I have selectively shaped my précis towards the archetypes of the scorpion and the frog and the psychological and metaphysical dimensions these had for Welles, which herein I endeavor to place in the context of Jung's discussion of evil.

was shot entirely in Spain at the height of the dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, at a moment in which the government encouraged foreign productions and proved more permissive to them than to native fare. Welles prepared with a reworked version of *Five Kings*, foregrounding his intended role, Falstaff, initiating that sequence with preparatory stage presentations in Dublin in 1960 amidst a welter of projects great and small (Melville's *Moby Dick* and other classics for stage productions commissioned by Olivier, but also magic shows and inconsequential acting gigs). Welles's friendship with a national icon, the matador Antonio Ordoñez, further insulated him from official proscription. In 1937 the anti-Falangist documentary, Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth*, had dwelt on Franco's atrocities during the Civil War, and Welles treated the narration furnished by another Ordoñez admirer, Ernest Hemingway, as unnecessarily sentimental: Welles offered differing accounts of the quarrel that erupted, but Hemingway caused an altercation since he did not believe it was a matter of free will, eventually rerecording it himself⁴⁴. Like a metaphorical shadow, Franco's long dictatorship, during which public discussions of the Spanish Civil War were strictly forbidden (with film censorship being particularly rigorous), extended over a vast cultural and geographic terrain. Welles's judicious use of the iconic Shakespearian Ralph Richardson as an invisible narrator draws telling (if similarly invisible) parallels between the Wars of the Roses and the Spanish Civil War from the film's outset. Historical allegory – a quintessential Shakespearean tactic as Jan Kott and other commentators have long noted – served as Welles's renewed, rather muted contribution to his activism⁴⁵.

It is at a narrative level, however, that Welles is decidedly revolutionary. In marked contrast to Shakespeare's carefully staged trajectory of maturation (requiring him to dispose of Falstaff quietly between plays in order to transform a devious but feckless prince-ling into the regal and unyielding conqueror of national myth, Henry

44 My own research into this topic suggests that Welles probably exaggerated the physicality of the quarrel for dramatic effect since they remained on cordial terms despite withering, well-attested remarks by Hemingway.

45 In a chapter of *Shakespeare, Film Studies, and the Visual Cultures of Modernity* devoted to Welles, I attempt to elucidate the nature of historical allegory in *Chimes* and its Spanish variant *Falstaff* (2008, 173-209).

V), Welles neatly inverts the priorities of characterization, creating two rival fathers and two rival sons. Through intense concision he suppresses Shakespeare's sly parodies of the principal Lollard arguments against those same Catholic sacraments – so ably defended by Henry VIII and More – as reflected in Falstaff's evasions that the playwright treats with carnivalesque ribaldry⁴⁶. Instead, Welles foregrounds the Prince's scorpion-like foreknowledge of his Oedipalism and the betrayed Falstaff's jovial but unamusing innocence, explicitly pairing them with a dashing Hotspur (humanized by his affectionate relationship with his teasing wife) and a Henry Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, consumed by the shadow of the ruler archetype, who from the early scenes of the film accepts his guilt for Richard II's murder and refuses, despite Hotspur's angry insistence, to ransom the true heir, Edmund Mortimer. The great speeches Shakespearians associate with the characters are transposed to the early scenes and spliced into dialogue, prefaced by a procession of foot soldiers trudging towards hastily assembled gibbets bearing pendant corpses. Hearing that Hotspur has raised an army of 50,000 Bolingbroke expresses his envy of Northumberland for having so gallant a son, wondering whether his own represents God's punishment for his dynastic ambitions. For their part, at various times Hotspur, Hal and Falstaff imitate Gielgud's regal vocal mannerisms, and never to greater effect than in a scene done extempore in the central gallery at the Boar's Head amidst a throng of Falstaff's cronies. Seated on a makeshift wooden throne, Falstaff plays the King, sporting an inverted saucepan for a crown, inviting gales of laughter while neatly deflecting Hal's insulting remarks in the plumiest of Gielgud's tones.

Yet the film's spectators cannot share such mirth. In an early scene we witness Hal's celebrated soliloquy in which he abjures his wanton

46 Falstaff would have been known to Shakespeare's audience as a compound of Lollard leaders and was originally called John Oldcastle after a prominent, cruelly executed leader of an abortive rebellion; upon objections by his descendants, the playwright teasingly renamed him after another reformer, John Fastolf, whose notoriety stemmed from his proprietorship of the riotous Boar's Head inn and for his propensity to retreat from danger during Henry's French campaign, but who survived him. "Falstaff" puns on "Shakespeare", and in his performance Welles appropriates the idea of Falstaff as the author or choreographer of components of the action.

ways, except that it begins as a two-shot with the Prince in close-up on the left of the frame and Falstaff, who has accidentally stepped through a doorway and remains to listen in dismay at right in the background. And then, as Hal announces the transformation that will redeem him, he spins around in a deft 180-degree cut, to speak the closing lines to his observer who must have betrayed his own continued presence. Hal knows full-well that he is destined to play the scorpion, and, innovatively, Falstaff shares the foreknowledge that he is doomed to play the frog who will drown in laughter. Asked by Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio why the film lacked gaiety, Welles responded that the more he read the sequence of plays the less funny he found Falstaff for he was "the greatest good man in all of drama" in that he is "defending a force – the old England – which is going down" as is exemplified by the death of Hotspur, which is the "death of chivalry" (261-2). A century would elapse before Machiavelli and yet another before Cervantes, but they lurk in the background both to lament the passing of an ante-bellum age and to anticipate the violently reconstituted world into which Welles's film was born.

Late in his career, in the process of endeavoring to prove the surpassing felicity of the apocalyptic vision Akira Kurosawa presents in *Ran*, a simultaneous adaptation of *Lear* and episodes of Japanese history, Jan Kott published his semi-autobiographical thoughts on the Shakespeare film, mentioning *en passant* an action performed by both Welles and Scofield for Peter Brook's screen adaptations of *King Lear* (143-51). Had he been more attentive to Welles (who is not even mentioned by name in *The Bottom Translation*), he might have concluded otherwise. Latitudinarian in religious sentiment and yet diffident in their assessment of human possibility, he and Welles were perhaps too similar in temperament for such acknowledgement. Like Montaigne they made themselves the subject of their thoughts on art and culture; and yet, left unmoored in the world's chaos and with no safe haven for quiet reflection, they saw evil just as Jung did, as an emanation of the conscious mind already overwhelmed by the shadows welling up from the realm of the archetypes that constitute the collective unconscious. "Sub omni Lapide Scorpius dormit", warns Erasmus in the *Adagia* that formed as an essential component of Shakespeare's grammar school curriculum. Macbeth's lament, "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife" (III.ii.35), knowing that Banquo and Fleance still live, would have

struck his audience (which included King James) as an Erasmian metaphor for the evil thoughts that lead to evil action. The remedy that Erasmus and More offered, and in turn Shakespeare and Welles, was not a pattern of belief that merely summons God to the rescue, but rather a faith fruitful in good works. It is here that Welles anticipates Kott in declaring that Shakespeare is indeed our contemporary⁴⁷.

References

- Adams, F. V. "The Archetype of the Saboteur: Self-sabotage from a Jungian Perspective." Accessed 5 January 2025. <http://www.jungnewyork.com/archetype-saboteur.shtml>.
- Adamson, Peter. 2016. *Philosophy in the Islamic World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2022. *Byzantine and Renaissance Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aesop. 1989. *The Medici Aesop*. Translated by Bernard McTigue. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Anderegg, Michael. 1999. *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Augustine of Hippo. 2006. *Confessions*. 2nd ed. Translated by F. J. Sheed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Basinger, Jeanine. 2007. *The Star Machine*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Bate, Jonathan. 2009. *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*. New York: Random House.
- Bazin, André. 1992. *Orson Welles: A Critical View*. Translated by Jonathan Rosenbaum. Los Angeles: Acrobat Books.

47 These pages have been enriched by the holdings of a number of Welles collections and film archives of note and by the suggestions of the archivists who introduced me to them: Zoran Sinobad and Mike Mashon at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, David Frasier and Joel Silver at Indiana University's Lilly Library, Ray Wemmlinger of the Hampden-Booth Library of The Players, Laura White at the Special Collections of the University of Michigan, Genevieve Maxwell of the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and Carla Ceresa of the Archivio del Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Torino. Above all, I owe many thanks to the generous and meticulous editors of this volume, Alessandra Marzola and Rosy Colombo.

- Boswell-Stone, Walter G. 1896. *Shakespeare's Holinshed: The Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared*. New York: Longman's Green and Co.
- Callow, Simon. 1995. *Orson Welles, The Road to Xanadu*, New York: Viking.
- Cobos, Juan, and Miguel Rubio. 1988. "Welles and Falstaff." In *Chimes at Midnight*, edited by Bridget G. Lyons, 259-66. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Erasmus of Rotterdam. 2002. *My Dear Erasmus: The Forgotten Reformer*. Edited by David Bentley-Taylor. Fern, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications.
- Feaver, Scott Vandiver. 1994. *In Search of the Rose: C. G. Jung Meets Orson Welles*. Fort Lauderdale: Self-published.
- Florio, John. 2014. *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt. New York: The New York Review of Books.
- Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gentillet, Innocent. 2018. *Anti-Machiavel: A Discourse Upon the Means of Well Governing*. Translated by Simon Patericke. Edited by Ryan Murtha. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1984. *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2001. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2019. *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*. London: W. W. Norton.
- Guneratne, Anthony R. 2008. *Shakespeare, Film Studies, and the Visual Cultures of Modernity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2016. "The Greatest Shakespeare Film Never Made: Textualities, Authorship, and Archives." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34 (3): 391-412.
- . 2017. "Freud's Footnotes and Renaissance Metaperformativity: Richard Haydocke, King James, and William Shakespeare as Interpreters of Dreams." *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 28 (2): 147-62.
- Henry VIII. 2017. *Defence of the Seven Sacraments*. Translated by Rev. Louis O'Donovan. Edited by D. P. Curtin. Country Clare, Ireland: Dalcassian Publishing.
- Heston, Charlton. "Charlton Heston Interview BBC Archive 1981." YouTube video. Accessed 4 August 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?=3XvbPyq2Mdl>.

- Hilb, Benjamin. 2014. "Afro-Haitian-American Ritual Power: Vodou in the Welles-FTP Voodoo *Macbeth*." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32 (4): 649-681.
- Houseman, John. 1972. *Run-through: A Memoir*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hutchinson, F. E. 1941. "Sir Thomas More as Translator of the Bible." *The Review of English Studies* 17 (65): 1-10.
- Jolly, Don. 2014. "Orson Welles' The Life of Christ." *The Revealer*, 16 December 2014. Accessed 16 August 2024. <https://therevealer.org/the-last-twentieth-century-book-club-orson-welles-the-life-of-christ/>
- Jorgens, Jack. 1977. *Shakespeare on Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jung, Carl G. 1971. *The Portable Jung*. Edited and translated by Joseph Campbell, with additions by Jung. New York: Penguin Books.
- Jung, Carl G. 2013. *The Essential Jung*. Edited by Anthony Storr. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kott, Jan. 1987. *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*. Translated by Daniela Meidezyrzecka and Lillian Vallee. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. [1710] 2019. *Theodicy: Essays in the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. Edited and translated by Austin Farrer. Dumfries and Galloway: Anodos Books.
- Levack, Brian P. 1991. *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. London: Longman.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1964. *Machiavelli's The Prince: A Bilingual Edition*. Translated and edited by Mark Musa. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Masterson, Whit (p.s. Robert Allison Wade and H. Bill Miller). 1957. *Badge of Evil*. London: A Corgi Book.
- Mattingly, Garrett. 1958. "Machiavelli's 'Prince': Political Science or Political Satire." *The American Scholar* 27 (4): 482-91.
- Megahey, Leslie interviewer. "Orson Welles Talks Touch of Evil, James Cagney and Renoir." YouTube video, excerpt from the BBC documentary *This Is Orson Welles*. Accessed 4 August 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niMGxh528YI>.
- Montaigne, Michel. 2003. *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journals, Letters*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- More, Thomas. 2021. "The History of King Richard III." In *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, 69-118. Chicago: OK Publishing.
- Naremore, James. 1988. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Naremore, James. 1991. "The Trial: Orson Welles vs. the FBI." *Film Comment* (January-February): 22-27.
- North, Thomas. 2018. *A Brief Discourse of Rebels and Rebellions*. Edited by Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- North, Thomas. 2021. *Thomas North's 1555 Travel Journal: From Italy to Shakespeare*. Edited by Dennis McCarthy and June Schleuter. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Nuttall, A. D. 2007. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Riambau, Esteve. 2015. *Las Cosas que Hemos Visto: Welles y Falstaff*. Malaga: Lucas de Galibo.
- Rippy, Marguerite H. 2009. *Orson Welles and the Unfinished RKO Projects*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. 2007. *Discovering Orson Welles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tarbox, Todd. 2013. *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*. Albany, GA: BearManor Media.
- Taylor, Gary. 2017. "Artiginality: Authorship After Postmodernism." In *The New Oxford Shakespeare Authorship Companion*, edited by Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan, 3-26. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Welles, Orson, and Peter Bogdanovich. 1998. *This Is Orson Welles*. 2nd ed. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Welles, Orson, and Roger Hill. 1939. *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Mercury Shakespeare*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Wilson, Richard. 2004. *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

“Some Women Are Odd Feeders”: Male Fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th-Century English Tragedy

Joel Elliot Slotkin

The idea of taking a ‘frightful pleasure’ in things we are not supposed to like is a common feature of early modern literature but a challenge for early modern theories of literature, which typically privileged normative beauty and virtue. Concerns about the appeal of the ugly or evil become even more acute for early modern writers considering the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want. Male characters in early modern drama often seek to engender disgust for female desires in order to police their potential disruption of the patriarchal order. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling* demonstrate how some early modern playwrights navigated the tension between allowing audiences to take a certain kind of pleasure from disgusting descriptions while reckoning with the use of disgust as a tool of patriarchal control. In these plays, male characters’ pervasive descriptions of diseased female desire are almost invariably shown to be fantasies in which the men project their own demonized appetites onto the women and then blame them for it.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling*, female desire, misogyny, perversity, sinister aesthetics

Introduction

Female sexual desire is inherently problematic in early modern patriarchal societies, since it involves multiple sources of cultural anxiety: femininity, sex, and powerful emotions. One crucial way that these anxieties get expressed in the literature of the period is through representations of female desire as a disgusting and unnatural appetite. This article will consider four major 17th-century English tragedies in which male characters describe female desire as morally and aesthetically perverse. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet and his father’s ghost de-

scribe Gertrude's attraction to the allegedly repulsive (and certainly corrupt) Claudius as an appetite for garbage. In *Othello*, Desdemona is accused of unsavory sexual appetites for wanting to sleep with a Moor and also, in a bitter Catch-22, for supposedly losing interest in Othello and sleeping with Cassio. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess's brothers figure her desire to remarry as a disordered appetite as well as a moral stain. Lastly, in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, the villainous De Flores fantasizes that Beatrice-Joanna might harbor a perverted desire for his ugly countenance. Such claims attribute a special kind of evil to women, although in these plays they ultimately reflect the evils, or at least the desires and fears, of the misogynistic male accusers.

At the core of such accusations is the possibility of taking pleasure in things that society has deemed ugly and/or evil, an idea that deeply troubled early modern English theological, moral, and literary theorists. Evil was, of course, a central problem for both Christianity and imaginative literature. The theological problem of evil (whose original formulation predates Christianity and is traditionally attributed to Epicurus) asks how God can permit evil if he is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. In *Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature* (Slotkin 2017), I argued that this problem required not only a logical solution but also an aesthetically and affectively satisfying one – and therefore that poets such as Milton were uniquely well-positioned to attempt the real work of theodicy.

But poetry had its own problem of evil. English Renaissance literary theories were shaped by Neoplatonic assumptions about beauty and goodness being fundamentally related and naturally attractive – albeit tempered by a Protestant pessimism about the ability of fallen humans to choose good over evil. These theories typically emphasized the importance of morally improving readers or audiences in order to justify the pleasure these texts might provoke, which could otherwise be seen as a sinful indulgence. This goal required the poet to make sure that goodness was also attractive and appealing, while evil was represented as repugnant¹. In practice, of course, early mod-

¹ Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1595), for example, defends poetry only on the condition that the pleasure it produces is tied to moral instruction (see

ern literature is full of attractive representations of evil. The idea that audiences might take pleasure in artistic representations of things that were evil, horrifying, or even disgusting threatened to undermine the basic premises of early modern literary theory. Rather than revising the theories to account for the actual aesthetic sensibilities of audiences, accusing audiences of having corrupt appetites proved a more popular way of trying to escape this dilemma.

The problem becomes even more acute for early modern writers when they consider the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want. Male accounts of female desire in early modern drama often rely on engendering feelings of disgust to demonize socially inappropriate desires and police their potential disruption of the patriarchal order². Crucially, this disgust is mobilized not only against women as aesthetic objects (i.e. unchaste women are disgusting), but also against women's own aesthetic sensibilities as subjects (i.e. unchaste women desire things that are disgusting). Seventeenth-century tragedies demonstrate some important ways in which early modern English authors tried to navigate the tension between allowing audiences to take a certain kind of pleasure from disgusting descriptions while reckoning with the use of disgust as a tool of patriarchal control³. Although each of the four plays I will discuss here offers a complex

Sidney 1989). For an early modern account that is more pessimistic about the potential of poetic pleasure to promote virtue, see Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579) and *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), in Kinney 1974.

2 See Bartels 1996 for an account of how Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi negotiate "the dictates of an anxious patriarchal network, intent on regulating inevitably unruly female voices and bodies" by using submissive rhetoric to advance rebellious goals (417). It is important to note, however, that there has been a significant scholarly backlash against prior work that either individually or collectively made the patriarchal policing of women in the early modern period seem more ubiquitous or effective than it actually was, and thereby obscured some of the real agency possessed by early modern women. See for example Rackin 2005, 8-9.

3 Robinson 2014 helpfully complicates the idea of disgust as pure aversion. The philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer coins the term "aesthetic disgust" and argues that "although this emotion seems to represent pure aversion, disgusting objects can also fascinate – and even attract. Disgust can exert a paradoxical magnetism" (2011, 3). See also Baker 2010.

and distinct approach to this challenge, their pervasive descriptions of diseased female desire are almost invariably shown to be fantasies, in which the men project their own demonized desires and appetites onto the women and then blame them for it.

In my previous work, I suggested that early modern English writers attempted to manage both the religious and literary problems of evil by means of various “sinister aesthetics”. I defined a sinister aesthetic as “a set of poetic conventions that generates pleasure by representing things we are supposed to dislike, including deception and cruelty, filth and disease, deformity and monstrosity, destruction and punishment, and the demonic and infernal” (Slotkin 2017, 9). Although these systems serve to represent ugliness, chaos, and the violation of normative aesthetics, they have their own underlying order and their own historically and culturally specific representational conventions – well-known to artists and audiences within a given culture, if not always explicitly acknowledged⁴. Dramatists could use sinister aesthetics to make Vice-like characters such as Richard III or Iago appealing, while religious writers and poets like Milton could encourage readerly engagement with the dark side of God’s providence, especially his earthly and infernal punishments.

In the four plays this essay will focus on, as in many other works of 17th-century tragedy, the male characters are often associated with sinister aesthetics relating to metaphysical horror or violence and cruelty. In *Hamlet*, the ghost’s introduction leans heavily on what we might now call the Lovecraftian pleasures of cosmic horror:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end
Like quills upon the fearful porcupine. (I.v.15-20)

Clearly, Shakespeare wants the audience to desperately want to hear this forbidden, madness-inducing tale, even though – or rath-

4 One particularly concrete and familiar example of such representational conventions would be the traditional depiction of devils with horns, bat wings, tails, and cloven hooves.

er, partly because – the ghost is telling us that any sane person would not want to hear it⁵. *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* present the villains Iago and Ferdinand as artists and connoisseurs of aestheticized cruelty⁶. A seminal proponent of this reading of Iago is Bernard Spivack, who describes Iago as “an artist of evil [...] eager to demonstrate his skill by achieving a masterpiece of his craft” (1958, 30). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, when Ferdinand confronts the Duchess with wax sculptures meant to look like her murdered family, he gloats: “Excellent: as I would wish; she’s plagu’d in art” and cites the skillful craftsmanship of the “curious master [...] Vincentio Lauriola” (IV.i.111; 113-14). Ferdinand then commissions a performance of music and dancing by “mad-folk” (IV.i.128), again suggesting a perverse kind of art that takes discordance, irregularity, and chaos as its aesthetic principles instead of beauty, harmony, and order. Similarly, in *The Changeling*, Alibius plans a wedding entertainment in which madmen and fools will dance a “wild, distracted measure” to produce “a frightful pleasure” in the wedding guests (III.ii.251; 253) – a clear invocation of an alternative set of aesthetic standards, that is to say, a sinister aesthetic.

5 Later on, Hamlet combines this metaphysical horror with a description of his own violent impulses as an alteration in his sense of aesthetic taste: “’Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on. (III.ii.381-85)”. Hamlet is excited by the darkness, the hellish contagion, and the imagined taste of blood in his mouth. Indeed he is so concerned about being carried away by these sinister appetites that he has to remind himself not to murder his mother, but only to “be cruel” (III.ii.388).

6 One of Iago’s numerous stated motives is the pleasure he takes from “double knavery” for its own sake (I.iii.386); it is perhaps the motive least likely to be a cover for his real priorities. Iago wants to share the beautifully sophisticated artistry of his cruelty with the audience, e.g. in his soliloquy at the end of Act II, where he boasts of pouring “pestilence” into Othello’s ear, turning Desdemona’s “virtue into pitch” and using “her own goodness” to “make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (II.iii.341-50). In Oliver Parker’s 1995 *Othello* movie, Kenneth Branagh’s Iago lovingly smears black ash on his hands while delivering these lines – not for any practical purpose, but purely to echo his metaphorical language, even though he painfully burns his hand in the process. This choice of stage business highlights the ways in which the text of the speech seems to aesthetically value pitch and pestilence over beauty and virtue. And of course, Iago is deliberately inviting the audience to share this sinister aesthetic sensibility.

Although early modern authors are highly dependent on exploiting the pleasures of sinister aesthetics, they nonetheless demonize characters who demonstrate 'aesthetic perversity'⁷. An aesthetically perverse sensibility cannot appreciate beauty and finds pleasure only in the violation of normative aesthetic ideals. Such characters are almost always evil and difficult to identify with. In Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives us a pleasurable sinister depiction of Sin and Death (2.650-673), but he makes Satan appear more sympathetic by having him express a normative disgust and aversion for these monstrous figures (2.744-45). In Book 10, however, Satan perceives Sin as beautiful (10.352-53; 384), and this shift in sensibilities marks and contributes to his waning attractiveness. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling*, one of the most powerful ways to paint women as utterly corrupt is to accuse them of harboring aesthetically perverse desires.

"A will most rank": Male Theories of Female Desire

In *Hamlet*, the most explicit discussions of female desire occur as Hamlet and the ghost of his father attempt to make sense of Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius. Gertrude's own reticence leaves an explanatory void that the Hamlets can fill with theories that may have little relation to her real feelings. As Richard Levin observes, Gertrude "and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her and so must be considered hostile and therefore unreliable witnesses, while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf" (2008, 323). By not fully dramatizing Gertrude's subjectivity, the play highlights male theories about women's sexual tastes that often seem wildly inaccurate and more revealing of men's patriarchal anxieties and obsessions. Audiences then have to decide how they feel about how Hamlet feels about how Gertrude feels.

Hamlet and his father's ghost consistently argue that Gertrude's presumed attraction to Claudius stems from a disordered sense of aesthetic taste and judgment. However, various disagreements and ambiguities emerge as they continue to express their feelings and grope for explanations. Does Gertrude's embrace of Claudius sug-

7 For an interesting perspective on sexual perversity in *Othello* and its relation to the theological problem of evil, see Dollimore 1990.

gest the absence of aesthetic judgment – an inability to distinguish between the magnificent Hamlet senior and the repulsive Claudius – or an actively perverse sensibility that somehow prefers the inferior brother? Is Gertrude's problem a distinctly female one, or is it a failing to which all humans are equally vulnerable? Is it innate and unchangeable, or can it be encouraged or discouraged by habit?

Hamlet's initial attempts to describe Gertrude's choice of Claudius reveal a struggle to rationalize behavior that he finds overwhelmingly baffling and disgusting:

Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month –
Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman –
[...]
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. (I.ii.143-46; 150-53).

Although Hamlet attempts to solve the problem with a patriarchal canard about female frailty, it proves inadequate to stop his ruminations. Hamlet imagines his father as food that Gertrude can eat without becoming satiated – in fact, consuming it only makes her hungrier. Richard Levin (2008, 306) notes the similarity to Enobarbus's account of Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra* II.ii.246-48). But the insatiable desire of the men surrounding Cleopatra is clearly the result of her uniquely attractive qualities, whereas Gertrude's supposed addiction to King Hamlet might suggest either his special appeal or the intensity of her own appetites. In support of the former, Hamlet repeatedly asserts his father's godlike handsomeness. But Gertrude's swift embrace of the inferior Claudius, which Hamlet blames on the sexual incontinence of women as a gender and compares unfavorably to the behavior of animals, suggests the importance of the latter. It also suggests that Gertrude has no aesthetic judgment, that she cannot distinguish between desirable and repulsive love objects. Later in the scene, Hamlet complains that "The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (I.ii.180-81), suggesting that Gertrude marrying Claudius is like choosing to eat the cold, unappetizing leftovers of her former husband.

The ghost goes further, suggesting that Gertrude might have a perverse sense of taste that prefers disgusting men:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage. (I.v.53-57)

The ghost's account, though savagely critical of Gertrude, is marginally less misogynist than Hamlet's in that it does not particularly attribute her failings to her femininity. Rather, the ghost offers a morally bifurcated vision of humanity: the virtuous, who will not succumb even to sophisticated temptations, and the lustful, who will exhaust their taste for legitimately desirable objects and develop an appetite for "garbage".

In the bedchamber scene, Hamlet picks up on the ghost's claims about Gertrude's perverted taste for garbage, while suggesting that our tastes are more malleable than in the ghost's formulation. His accusations focus less on Gertrude's possible complicity in the murder and more on her perversion of taste, her willfully choosing the uglier of two pictures, "The counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (III.iv.54). Gertrude, according to Hamlet, has rejected "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself" a man whose handsomeness reflects his manly virtue (III.iv.56) in favor of "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" a corrupted and corrupting parody of a man (III.iv.64-65). To enjoy sex with Claudius, in Hamlet's view, is to enjoy vile bodily fluids the way a person of normative sensibilities would enjoy honey: "to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (III.iv.91-94).

Defined this way, Gertrude's choice becomes harder to understand. Hamlet calls it an extreme perversion of "sense", but that word can (and here does) confusingly refer to both sides of a fundamental dichotomy in the early modern view of the self. It can mean "intelligence" and "the ability to make sound judgements" (*OED*, II.11) or "The bodily senses considered as a single faculty in contrast to intellect, reason, will" (*OED*, II.12.b). In describing Gertrude as lacking sense, or having her sense "apoplexed" (III.iv.73), Hamlet enumerates the bodily senses of sight, hearing, smell, and touch (III.iv.78-79),

but he also uses “sense” to refer to a seemingly more rational faculty that reserves “some quantity of choice” to distinguish between such men as Hamlet’s father and his uncle (III.iv.74-75). The word “taste” presents precisely the same ambivalence, since it can refer either to one of the bodily senses or to a faculty of judgment, and although Hamlet’s list of bodily senses curiously omits taste, the concept is evoked by lines such as “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, / And batten on this moor?” (III.iv.66-67). Hamlet continually rebels against the idea that Gertrude’s bodily senses or rational judgment could be diseased enough to respond positively to Claudius and still allow her to function as an animate creature.

However, Hamlet does suggest an alternative theory for how Gertrude’s tastes might have become so perverted: acquired tastes for things that aren’t naturally delicious come from continued practice, from the “custom” or “habit” of tasting them. He promises to spark remorse in her heart “If damnèd custom have not brazed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense” (III.iv.37-38). This “custom” can serve as a barrier against sense (i.e. either the evidence of one’s own senses or one’s capacity for choosing). And, Hamlet argues, tastes can be un-acquired in the same way:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either [lodge] the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency. (III.iv.160-70; brackets in original)

Earlier, Hamlet asserts that any functioning creature would embrace certain objects and reject others. This passage suggests a more relativistic notion of taste, where it is possible to train one’s taste to like or dislike anything, although these tastes still retain a moral valence. It also does not draw a distinction between the capacity of men and women to form good or bad habits. Of course, this model still does not explain why Gertrude would have chosen to acquire the taste for

the evil and (to Hamlet) disgusting Claudius in the first place. And where Hamlet earlier emphasizes the speed with which she fell into Claudius's arms, the process of weaning herself from him looks to be slow and painstaking, suggesting – contrary to the Neoplatonic impulse to link the beautiful and the good – that bad tastes are actually easier to acquire than the supposedly more natural good tastes.

Much of the sexual revulsion in *Hamlet* is Hamlet's disgust with Gertrude's failure to be disgusted by Claudius, a disgust animated by Hamlet's obsession with Gertrude's choice of sexual partners and his wish to control those choices. Sexual revulsion plays a similarly central role in Shakespeare's *Othello*, but the question of male desirability or undesirability is complicated by racist standards of attractiveness. Many of the male characters invest a great deal of energy in interpreting – or rather, completely misinterpreting – and policing Desdemona's putative sexual desires and revulsions. Sexual disgust is accordingly one of Iago's major tools for manipulating these other men, either by causing them to feel revulsion for Desdemona's sexual choices or by convincing them of Desdemona's disgust with Othello or other potential sexual partners. Iago arouses Brabantio's disgust to set him against Othello. He tries to convince both Roderigo and Othello that Desdemona is bound to become disgusted by Othello, to encourage the one and discourage the other. And, most tellingly, he insinuates to Othello that Desdemona's sexual interest in him is itself disgusting, which feeds into Othello's self-disgust. Throughout these processes, the male characters' belief in Desdemona's supposed sexual disgust for Othello – or, conversely, their fears about her attraction to him – become repositories and points of expression for their own racial disgust (including Othello's racial self-loathing).

Iago seeks to inspire Brabantio's revulsion by forcing him to imagine his friend and his daughter "making the beast with two backs" (I.i.115). Presumably, Brabantio would feel an aversion to contemplating his daughter's sexual activity in general, but Iago also evokes a specifically racist disgust by referring to "an old black ram [...] tupp[ing] your white ewe" (I.i.87-88) and to "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.124).

Brabantio in turn speculates about Desdemona's own sexual aversions. He notes that "she shunned / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (I.iii.67-68), a fact that Iago later uses to convince Othello of Desdemona's perversity, but that Brabantio more optimistically

takes as an indication of her extreme chastity. He tells Othello that she would naturally be repulsed by “the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” unless she had been enchanted or drugged (I.iii.70-71). As he says, “For nature so prepost’rously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not” (I.iii.62-64) – a claim that Othello comes to believe.

While Brabantio is forced to recant his claim that Desdemona feels revulsion towards Othello (which he does readily enough at I.iii.188 after speaking briefly to his daughter), Iago gets a lot of mileage out of the idea that such disgust is Desdemona’s natural state, and her decision to marry Othello merely a brief divergence from it. As Iago tells Roderigo,

Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice. (II.i.224-33)

Sexual appetite here is analogous to the appetite for food, subject to satiation and revulsion. Earlier, Iago had told Roderigo that Othello would similarly get sick of Desdemona: “The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida” (I.iii.347-48). But Iago does not figure Desdemona’s attraction to Othello as an appetite for sweetness that becomes cloyed. Rather, it is inexplicably perverse that she showed any interest in him at all, and she will therefore quickly return to a more natural state of nausea.

Under the influence of Iago and his own insecurities, Othello gradually becomes convinced that there is something repulsive in Desdemona’s attraction to him. His account of their meet-cute serves the primary dramatic function of establishing the Othello-Desdemona relationship as a positive one despite societal prejudices against intermarriage – the Duke says “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (I.iii.171). Yet with the benefit of hindsight, Othello’s romantically compelling account reveals potential racial insecurities that Iago later exploits. Desdemona loves Othello’s story, he says, be-

cause it is “strange” and “pitiful” (I.iii.160; 161). He claims that Desdemona would “seriously incline [...] with a greedy ear” (I.iii.146; 149) to hear stories “of the cannibals that each other eat, / The anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (I.iii.143-45). There is something odd in the intensity of Desdemona’s reported hunger for stories of monstrous cannibals and blemmyae, and yet Desdemona herself never expresses an interest in the exotic or grotesque⁸. Perhaps Othello subtly misreads the nature of Desdemona’s fascination with his story, because he subconsciously fears she has a perverted interest in the monstrous races of Africa and might see him as yet another grotesque, exotic creature.

Iago exploits this vulnerability by transferring the racist argument he used on Roderigo to Othello:

I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. (III.iii.235-38)

Iago does not go so far as to tell Othello that Desdemona will “heave the gorge” at him (II.i.231), as he said to Roderigo, partly out of strategic tact, but also because he is engaged in shifting the locus of disgust from Desdemona as subject to Desdemona as object:

Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends –
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural (III.iii.229-33)⁹

8 For an alternate but related reading, see Chamberlain 2019, who argues that Desdemona feels “erotic desire” for Othello’s travel stories (204), which allows Othello to misinterpret “her desire for travel within the strange and wondrous world he has known [...] as desire for sexual adventure beyond the bounds of matrimony” (209).

9 Bradley Irish’s *Shakespeare and Disgust* rightly emphasizes the importance of this speech for generating self-disgust in Othello via disgust with Desdemona’s desire for him: “he is disturbed that Desdemona could be attracted to what he perceives as a repulsive object, so he once again projects his own disgust onto another, by assuming that she too will inevitably come to feel what he feels” (2023, 158).

In these lines Iago is not stoking fears that Desdemona will grow disgusted with Othello, but rather suggesting that her attraction to him reflects perverse aesthetic sensibilities that make her unattractive and disgusting. Iago's "Foh!" expresses visceral revulsion with Desdemona's failure to find Othello's blackness repulsive¹⁰. It is important to note that Iago interrupts Othello as he was possibly about to volunteer some version of this theory himself: "And yet, how nature erring from itself –" (III.iii.227). Although we can't know exactly what Othello would have said, his phrasing echoes Brabantio's at I.iii.62 ("For nature so prepost'rously to err"), suggesting that Othello has already internalized this racist model of aesthetic judgment.

The Duchess of Malfi's Ferdinand owes a lot to Hamlet: madness and misogynistic bewhoring of a close family member that potentially conceals incestuous desire for her. However, where Shakespeare keeps Gertrude remarkably opaque, Webster gives us a great deal of access to the Duchess's thoughts and feelings while wrapping a certain amount of mystery around Ferdinand's motivations (e.g. at I.i.257-58 and III.i.84-86). Much of the misogynistic rhetoric in *The Duchess of Malfi* is fairly superficial and conventional. The play's male characters attempt to portray the Duchess as either an angel of chastity or a whore. Antonio claims she has "so divine a continence / As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope" and that "her nights [...] Are more in heaven than other ladies' shifts" (I.i.199-200; 202-03). Her brothers, of course, take the opposite tack, asserting women's innate frailty in the arena of chastity. The Cardinal complains: "Unequal Nature, to place women's hearts / So far upon the left side!" (II.v.32-33; see also II.iv.13-15), a sentiment that Ferdinand immediately echoes (II.v.33-36). For all their intense focus on the Duchess's sexual activity, the brothers' theories of female desire are not as deeply worked out as those of Hamlet and his father, or Othello and Iago, relying on well-worn tropes of women as a "weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7 [KJV]) incapable of restraining libidinous impulses. They also do not delve as deeply into fantasies of the Duchess being attracted to disgusting men. Ferdinand does express a certain amount of anxiety and disgust surrounding the idea that the Duchess's

10 On "foh" as an expression of disgust, see Robinson 2014, 559. Iago's use of it here is calculated rather than involuntary, although his racist and misogynist contempt are presumably real enough.

lover might be lower-class: a “strongthigh’d bargeman” or a “lovely squire” (II.v.42; 44) – or Antonio. But in general, his concerns about his sister’s sexual desires do not seem to hinge on whether their object is conventionally handsome or respectable.

Bosola echoes the brothers’ assessment of the Duchess when he says that “*lust [...] is never wise*” (II.iii.76-77; italics mine); however, Bosola’s more thoroughgoing anti-feminist diatribes do not present women in general as driven by uncontrollable passions. Rather, they are cold-blooded Machiavellians who seduce men through “mathematics” in order to further their ambitions: “some of you give entertainment for pure love; but more, for more precious reward” (II.ii.22; 16-18). Hence Bosola’s obsessive focus on cosmetics rather than sexual activity when berating the Old Lady at II.i.21-60. The perverted sexual desire suggested by his anti-makeup speech is not that of women, but of the men who could be attracted to a face that “resembled an abortive hedgehog” or was more foul than “a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague” (II.i.29; 38-39). Bosola’s tirade sits at the intersection of normative disgust and sinister pleasure. On the one hand, it seems clearly intended to disrupt conventional notions of female attractiveness and engender a sense of aversion to them. On the other hand, the speech is a lovingly and vividly detailed tour de force of Rabelaisian excess that also seems to invite a kind of admiration for the inventive nature of its vileness.

In *The Changeling*, De Flores advances claims about the prevalence of female erotic perversity (specifically, a sexual attraction to disgusting men) that echo a lot of what we have seen elsewhere:

I must confess my face is bad enough,
 But I know far worse has better fortune –
 And not endured alone, but doted on –
 And yet such pick-hatched faces, chins like witches,
 Here and there five hairs, whispering in a corner
 As if they grew in fear of one another,
 Wrinkles like troughs, where swine-deformity swills
 The tears of perjury that lie there like wash
 Fallen from the slimy and dishonest eye. (II.i.37-45)

The argument recalls Hamlet senior’s rhetoric about preying on “garbage” or Iago’s “will most rank”. The style resembles the grotesque

excess of Bosola's makeup diatribe. However, where Bosola depicted disgusting female faces that men should not be attracted to but are, De Flores applies the same representational techniques to disgusting male faces that women should not be attracted to but are.

De Flores is (at the risk of understatement) not as philosophically-minded as Hamlet, and his explanation for this phenomenon is not as thoroughly reasoned, but revealing nonetheless:

Hunger and pleasure, they'll commend sometimes
Slovenly dishes, and feed heartily on 'em –
Nay, which is stranger, refuse daintier for 'em.
Some women are odd feeders. (II.ii.150-53)

De Flores's claim that "some women are odd feeders" is partly a way of dodging the question of why this should be so. But he does suggest that sexual desire is a matter of taste, and that some people – here specifically women – have a sense of taste that rejects normative ideas of beauty and embraces an alternative and opposing set of aesthetic standards. This idea runs very strongly through *Hamlet* and *Othello*, although it is not as clearly discernable in *The Duchess of Malfi*, where Ferdinand takes issue with any sexual desire on the Duchess's part, regardless of how normative or conventional it may be.

"Have not we affections?": Women on Female Desire

Although for obvious reasons male opinions predominate in these plays, female characters do get some opportunities to talk about their own desires. *Hamlet*'s famously enigmatic Gertrude is the least forthcoming of these characters and therefore does the least to refute her son's and former husband's theories about the nature of her feelings for Claudius. Her strikingly cold-hearted suggestion that Hamlet should not mourn his father because the death of parents is "common" (I.ii.72) could corroborate Hamlet's claims that she stopped caring about his father, especially because Gertrude has no trouble expressing strong emotions in other contexts. There are a few scraps of text that can be read as evidence of Gertrude's enthusiasm for sex in general or sex with Claudius in particular, but there is no emotional intensity behind any of these brief and indirect comments to match what the Hamlets claim to see in her. She describes her marriage to

Claudius as “o’erhasty” (II.ii.57), possibly suggesting her inability to control her desire to be with him. While watching *The Mousetrap*, she complains that the Player Queen “protests too much” when swearing to never remarry (III.ii.226), which could mean that Gertrude thinks permanent celibate widowhood is an unfairly onerous burden, or simply that the fulsomeness of the Player Queen’s oaths make them sound insincere. This evidence is sufficiently tepid and ambiguous that it hardly supports Hamlet’s belief that Gertrude is addicted to sex with Claudius, which we can see in his attempts to wean her off this supposed addiction at III.iv.161-70.

The other three plays allow female characters to offer more explicit counterpoints to the prevailing misogynist rhetoric of the men. Towards the beginning of *Othello*, Desdemona declares her love in terms that implicitly refute Iago’s attempts to frame her as perverse: she neither loves nor loathes Othello’s blackness, but rather loves him for his “quality [...] honors and [...] valiant parts” (I.iii.251; 253)¹¹. Her behavior throughout the play suggests the sincerity of these claims. Emilia pushes back more forcefully against male sexual rapaciousness and hypocrisy, but in terms that echo Iago’s account of desire as a taste easily cloyed, an appetite that can quickly turn to revulsion: men “are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us” (III.iv.103-05). Although Emilia’s description of Desdemona’s marriage to Othello as a “most filthy bargain” (V.ii.158) suggests her racism, she does not explicitly discuss the idea of Desdemona’s attraction to Othello being aesthetically perverse. Indeed, she suggests that everyone, men and women, shares similar “palates both for sweet and sour” (IV.iii.95) – a contrasting mix of flavors, but not an unhealthy or unnatural appetite.

The Duchess of Malfi combines Desdemona’s virtue and nobility with Emilia’s candor and matter-of-factness about female sexual desire. Webster portrays the Duchess in vivid detail as a human, not a saint or devil. She gets pregnancy-related cravings and indigestion (II.i.131-59). She worries about her hair going gray (III.ii.59-60). Cariola complains that the Duchess is annoying to share a bed with because “she’s the sprawling’st bedfellow”, a detail that is charming precisely

11 For an account of the debate around Desdemona’s assertiveness vs. her passivity, see Slater 2019.

because of its banality (III.ii.13). Most importantly, in wooing Antonio, she explicitly positions herself between the misogynistic extremes of the virgin/whore dichotomy, by leveraging her status as widow:

What is't distracts you? 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. (I.i.453-59)

The Duchess's denial of being an alabaster statue associated with death stands in sharp contrast to Othello's wish that Desdemona become one. The phrase "half a blush" adds a mathematical precision to the Duchess's delicate self-positioning between and outside the rigid categories of virgin and whore. Although she is conscious of some impropriety in her proposal, once married she freely expresses an interest in sex that might more commonly be articulated by a male lover: "Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?" (III.ii.10).

The play's secondary female characters help to position the Duchess as a kind of happy medium. Cariola demonstrates that she has internalized misogynistic ideas when she wonders whether the Duchess's behavior reflects "the spirit of greatness or of woman" (I.i.504) – that is, is the Duchess acting like a great hero (albeit perhaps a tragic hero), or demonstrating a feminine inability to use reason and judgment to control her destructive sexual passions? At the opposite extreme, Julia proudly declares herself one of the "great women of pleasure" (V.ii.191) and demonstrates an unconventional level of female sexual aggressiveness by wooing Bosola at gunpoint. Although the play is presumably not offering Julia as a literal role model for early modern women, the play presents both Julia's over-the-top sexual assertiveness and the Duchess's more moderate version as refreshing (and also potentially titillating) rather than repulsive¹².

Perhaps the most complex representation of the interiority of female desire in these plays comes from *The Changeling's* Beatrice-Joanna. She is somewhat unusual as a female version of the Renaissance

12 For a positive account of Julia, see Luckyj 1987.

tragic hero/villain, an archetype typically embodied by a male character such as Macbeth. Compared to Gertrude and Desdemona, Beatrice-Joanna offers a much more detailed glimpse into her own thoughts about love and desire. Unlike the Duchess, Beatrice-Joanna becomes a much more compromised character, both morally and in her aesthetic sensibilities (Antonio is depicted as a morally and aesthetically worthy love object for the Duchess, despite his lower rank).

The Changeling introduces questions of taste and judgment right from its opening scene, primarily through Beatrice-Joanna's attraction to Alsemero, her corresponding loss of interest in Alonzo, and her disgust with De Flores. Beatrice-Joanna initiates the play's discussion of taste by suggesting that contrary faculties of judgment govern our romantic desires and choices:

Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements,
And should give certain judgement what they see;
But they are rash sometimes, and tell us wonders
Of common things, which when our judgements find,
They can then check the eyes, and call them blind. (I.i.68-72)

First, our eyes are supposed to guard our judgments like "sentinels". Next, the eyes themselves are tasked with giving judgments. Finally, our judgments are a separate faculty that "can check the eyes" – i.e. serve as guards against their misprision, much as the eyes were supposed to do initially for the judgments. Beatrice-Joanna doesn't specify the nature of the non-ocular faculty of judgment here, but later on she characterizes it as "intellectual" (II.i.19). This imprecise use of the term "judgement" may be a symptom of her lack of self-awareness and habit of rationalizing her own destructive choices. However, the slippage between rational/intellectual and carnal/sensory foundations of taste is similar to Hamlet's, which may suggest a larger tension in early modern accounts of judgment and sense.

A moralistic interpreter might see Beatrice-Joanna's sudden attraction to Alsemero and abandonment of Alonzo as the kind of fickleness that comes from a failure to let the judgment govern the eyes. Beatrice-Joanna, however, rationalizes it as an over-hasty embrace of Alonzo, based on his superficial appearance, with Alsemero representing the more well-considered choice: "For five days past / To be recalled! Sure mine eyes were mistaken: / This was the man was meant

me." (I.i.79-81). Later, she similarly asserts "Methinks I love now with the eyes of judgement [...] A true deserver like a diamond sparkles [...] Yet is he best discernèd then / With intellectual eyesight" (II.i.13-19). Here, she figuratively conflates visual and intellectual judgments. She also asserts that the worthiness of a love object is a quality that visibly sparkles on the surface and then immediately contradicts this idea by characterizing it as a hidden quality that can only be inferred.

The most interesting questions of taste are raised by Beatrice-Joanna's relationship to De Flores. Initially, Beatrice-Joanna appears disgusted by De Flores. This disgust might readily be explained by De Flores's appearance, since even by his own admission his face is notably unattractive (II.i.37). Yet despite this readily available and (at the time) socially acceptable explanation for Beatrice-Joanna's aversion, her account of it to Alsemero makes it seem mysterious:

Your pardon, sir, 'tis my infirmity;
Nor can I other reason render you
Than his or hers of some particular thing
They must abandon as a deadly poison,
Which to a thousand other tastes were wholesome:
Such to mine eyes is that same fellow there,
The same that report speaks of the basilisk. (I.i.104-10)

She compares De Flores to something "wholesome" that normal tastes would enjoy, yet is deadly only to her. There are some relatively concrete story-related reasons for this formulation. The source for *The Changeling* – John Reynolds's *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* (1621) Book I, History IV, pages 105-46 – does not describe De Flores as unattractive, so the reference to De Flores as "wholesome" may be partly a vestige of this original character. The unusual intensity of Beatrice-Joanna's dislike for De Flores also reflects the common literary convention of characters having premonitions of future disasters. Elsewhere Beatrice-Joanna says the sight of De Flores makes her "think / Of some harm towards me" (II.i.89-90)¹³.

13 Tomazo has a similar instinctively negative reaction to De Flores at V.ii.13-15, presumably because De Flores is his brother's murderer. Beatrice-Joanna's account of inexplicable distaste also recalls Shylock's disingenuous non-explanation for hating Antonio at the beginning of the trial scene in *Merchant of Venice* (IV.i.40-62).

Yet Alsemero's response, which further expounds on this idea, suggests its thematic importance to the play:

This is a frequent frailty in our nature;
 There's scarce a man amongst a thousand sound
 But hath his imperfection: one distastes
 The scent of roses, which to infinites
 Most pleasing is, and odoriferous;
 One oil, the enemy of poison;
 Another wine, the cheerer of the heart
 And lively refresher of the countenance.
 Indeed this fault – if so it be – is general:
 There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed (I.i.111-20)

Like Beatrice-Joanna's explanation, Alsemero's is not strongly gendered – that is, the "frailty" in question is not explicitly labelled as a uniquely feminine characteristic, as it often is in *Hamlet*. Alsemero also takes a marginally less moralistic view of taste than Hamlet: certain dislikes might represent a "frailty", an "imperfection", and perhaps a "fault", although he questions the applicability of the latter term. Alsemero expands on Beatrice-Joanna's highly dubious suggestion that most people would find De Flores "wholesome", comparing De Flores to various healthful and/or pleasing substances: roses, oil, and wine. If De Flores's face were in fact like these things, Beatrice-Joanna's disgust for him, rather than her possible attraction to him, would be the more unnatural taste.

In the end, when all her schemes have fallen apart, Beatrice-Joanna presents herself as an emblem of diseased femininity, telling her father:

O come not near me, sir, I shall defile you:
 I am that of your blood was taken from you
 For your better health (V.iii.149-51)

This attempt to consolidate all of the corruption of the play's world within Beatrice-Joanna's dying body leads to the conclusion, in which Alsemero offers himself as a son to Vermandero, despite the fact that Beatrice-Joanna is dead and their marriage was never consummated. From a certain Renaissance patriarchal perspective, this is the perfect marriage: a union between two powerful men uncontaminated by the necessity of using a live woman (with her potentially inappropriate desires) to cement it.

Although the end of *The Changeling* portrays Beatrice-Joanna as genuinely corrupt, the play does not present all female libido as inherently unhealthy. Indeed, a lot of Beatrice-Joanna's problems stem from her attempts to be a good patriarchal subject and strictly maintain her virgin purity – in the eyes of society if not in fact. She is racked with anxiety about the possibility of being found unchaste, and she accordingly deceives herself into believing in her own innocence until well after she has lost it. These obsessions are among the constraints that force her into a sexual relationship with the depraved De Flores.

In contrast, her waiting-woman Diaphanta has an attitude that we might now describe as sex-positive, yet she keeps her virginity until a moment of her choosing, when Beatrice-Joanna makes her a good offer for it. Diaphanta is chaste (before the deal is consummated), happy, and in touch with her own desires, while Beatrice-Joanna is anxious, deprived of the sex she wants, and corrupted by sex that she doesn't want. As Diaphanta retorts when Beatrice-Joanna suspects her eagerness to have sex means she is not a virgin, "Not a maid? [...] Your honorable self is not a truer / With all your fears upon you – [...] Than I with all my lightsome joys about me" (IV.i.93-96). Her claim to be a maid is immediately verified by her response to Alsemero's virgin-detecting potion (IV.i.105-18). The results of the bed trick in V.i make the differences between Beatrice-Joanna and Diaphanta painfully clear: Diaphanta enjoys Alsemero all night and emerges filled with a deep post-coital contentment and a complete lack of regret or shame (V.i.77-81), while Beatrice-Joanna waits outside all night tortured by jealousy, anxiety, humiliation, rage, and sexual frustration. Although Diaphanta's subsequent murder could be interpreted as a providential punishment for her extramarital romp with Alsemero, it is hard not to see her as a healthier and indeed more moral person than Beatrice-Joanna¹⁴.

14 One important caveat is that Diaphanta can be somewhat less anxious about sex because her social station is lower than Beatrice-Joanna's. See for example *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Hero is almost destroyed by false accusations of consorting with Borachio, while her waiting-woman Margaret, who actually was with Borachio, is not only excused but described as "just and virtuous" (V.i.293).

*"My imagination will carry me / To see her, in the shameful act of sin":
Misogyny as Sexual Meta-Fantasy*

Generally speaking, the female perspectives offered in these plays tend to undermine the male characters' misogynistic theories about female desire. In many cases, the failings attributed specifically to women are shown to be universal human frailties. Men in tragedies rarely exemplify the triumph of reason, will, and judgment over destructive passion that supposedly distinguishes masculinity from femininity. Ultimately, the men's ideas about women reveal more about early modern masculinity and the social demands, psychology, and aesthetic sensibilities of the male characters.

In particular, male accusations of female aesthetic perversity in the erotic domain tend to be projections of the men's own non-normative sensibilities. In the bedchamber scene in *Hamlet*, Hamlet's initial rhetoric positions his own sensibilities as normative. When he says Gertrude's behavior "takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love, / And sets a blister there" (III.iv.42-44), the antithesis positions virtue as inherently attractive, and vice as an ugly "blister". The beautiful side of the description receives more attention, and the blister is an unpleasant negation of that beauty. The rhetoric does not put anyone – not Hamlet, the audience, the imaginary owner of the "fair forehead," or even Gertrude – in a position to appreciate the blister as an aesthetic object.

However, as Hamlet becomes more impassioned, his aesthetic framework shifts to a sinister mode. He takes a disturbing delight in vivid depictions of the "bloat king" and his attempts at seduction (III.iv.182). With a level of detail that ought to be gratuitous but that he is clearly invested in, he paints a deeply sensual picture of his mother's sex life with Claudius: "to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (III.iv.91-94). These lines simultaneously suggest Hamlet's sadistic pleasure in forcing his mother to contemplate such ugliness and Hamlet's embrace of the perverse aesthetic sensibilities for which he is punishing Gertrude in the first place. In contrast to the previous example, Hamlet seems to be imaginatively wallowing in filth with as much gusto as he attributes to Gertrude. Hamlet's strategy here also raises questions about how the play is encouraging

the audience to respond. Are they expected to suffer revulsion during this speech or to take pleasure in the grotesque imagery?

While the nature of Gertrude's guilt in *Hamlet* is complex and ambiguous, *Othello* offers us a clearly innocent woman in the person of Desdemona and therefore a more decisive critique of Iago and Othello's misogyny. Desdemona's supposedly perverted aesthetic sensibilities are entirely a product of the diseased male imagination, not the diseased female imagination. By the end of the play, Othello embraces not only a misguided view of Desdemona's love for him as an unnatural attraction to the exotic, he also perverts his own sensibilities to be repulsed by a living Desdemona and attracted to a dead one. He does so out of his growing belief that any female erotic agency at all is inherently dangerous to male honor, regardless of its object:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. (III.iii.268-73)

His disgust with Desdemona's capacity to love extends not only to the adulterous love of Cassio but to her unnatural attraction to him.

As Othello becomes more patriarchal, wishing to control not only Desdemona's body but her desires, the scope and intensity of his revulsion increase. Othello finds the idea that Desdemona might want something other than what he wants her to want more revolting than the idea of being a toad and breathing polluted air. While Desdemona is objectified into a "thing", she is still a desirable thing – "the thing I love" and "delicate". But the next time Othello's thoughts turn to toads, they suggest that Desdemona's supposed desire for Cassio has turned her into a disgusting object. Leaving his heart with her would be like leaving it in "a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in" (IV.ii.61-62). Here the lust is directly embodied in the toads, and its metaphorical stench is so repulsive that "Heaven stops the nose at it" (IV.ii.77).

The only cure for the perils of female agency is for Desdemona to not be alive, to be a still, cold statue as "smooth as monumental alabaster. [...] Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee af-

ter" (V.ii.5, 18-19). Othello's necrophilia here reveals how much his jealousy has caused him to alter his own aesthetic sensibilities away from the normative. These sinister sensibilities allow him to love a corpse and to respond to Iago's suggestion to "Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" with pleasure at the poetic nature of the punishment: "Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!" (IV.i.202-05)¹⁵.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, as in *Othello*, critiques of the Duchess's sexual predilections are thoroughly discredited by what the audience can see about her character (and Ferdinand's). The allegedly wicked marriage of the Duchess and Antonio is shown not to be monstrous at all – their fault lies simply in the hubris of believing they could avoid punishment. But despite the male characters' focus on scapegoating female sexuality, their misogyny is linked to a hatred and fear of their own sexual impulses.

Webster vividly emphasizes the extent to which misogyny requires men to simultaneously cultivate and police their own transgressive erotic imaginations¹⁶. When Ferdinand first learns that his sister has taken a lover, he accuses women as a gender of being naturally incapable of self-control: "Foolish men, / That e'er will trust their honour in a bark / Made of so slight, weak bulrush as is woman" (II.v.33-35). However, he immediately exhibits a similar inability to control his libidinous thoughts and begs his brother: "talk to me somewhat, quickly, / Or my imagination will carry me / To see her, in the shameful act of sin" (II.v.39-41). The Cardinal (perhaps out of deliberate cruelty) ignores Ferdinand's plea for a distraction and instead asks him for details, which prompts some vivid sexual fantasies of their sister:

Happily with some stronghigh'd bargeman;
Or one o'th'wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,

15 For more on poetic justice and its relation to Dantean *contrapasso*, see Slotkin 2017, 155, and elsewhere.

16 William Cook Miller makes a similar argument about Ferdinand's reference to a lamprey at I.i.336: "In forcing the Duchess to picture an unspoken penis resonating between a grotesque 'lamprey' and a 'tongue,' Ferdinand plays both the corruptor, planting a loathsomely distorted phallus in his twin sister's mind, and the corrupted, acting as though the Duchess's own imagination has misunderstood his innocent comparison" (2015, 194).

Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings. (II.v.42-45)

In addition to the incestuous implications of contemplating his sister's sex life so intensely (like Hamlet imagining Gertrude in a sweaty bed), the speech also offers a striking amount of detail about the men the Duchess is supposedly having sex with, who are either hyper-masculine or effeminate. Is there something about Ferdinand's sexuality that causes him to turn his mind to the strong-thighed bargeman or the lovely squire? While Ferdinand wallows in fantasies – which he also hates – of his sister having sex with other men, he seeks to replace the Duchess's normative feelings for Antonio and her children with horror and disgust, by means of the wax figures. Hamlet may believe that he seeks to cleanse Gertrude's sensibilities, but Ferdinand is pretty clearly doing the opposite.

"Broken rib of mankind": Beatrice-Joanna and Aesthetic Corruption

In *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna is the female character who comes closest to potentially exhibiting the aesthetic perversity attributed to her, although not as early nor as fully as the men's accounts would suggest. De Flores's claim that if a woman once commits an unchaste act "She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic – / One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand" (II.ii.62-63) is both conventional misogyny and wishful thinking, and it completely mischaracterizes the real nature of Beatrice-Joanna's corruption¹⁷. She is in fact trapped in a de facto monogamous sexual relationship with De Flores, and the only other man she has any sexual designs on is Alsemero. Similarly, De Flores begins hoping that Beatrice-Joanna is an "odd feeder" long before she gives him any reason to think so, and in context that comment tells us more about his fantasies than hers.

Once Beatrice-Joanna develops her plan to use De Flores as her assassin, she tries to trick him into believing her aesthetic and erotic sensibilities have shifted by praising his least praiseworthy attrib-

17 For an alternate view, see Burks 1995, 774: "Middleton and Rowley endorse De Flores's analysis of her susceptibility to corruption, and the play confirms the underlying conventional wisdom that a woman false to one might be false to any".

ute: his face (II.ii.72-75). At first, she simply claims that it isn't as bad as she thought (II.ii.80-81), but then she suggests that "When we're used / To a hard face, 'tis not so unpleasing, / It mends still in opinion, hourly mends" (II.ii.87-89). In other words, De Flores's ugliness becomes more appealing through what Hamlet calls "custom". There is a double dramatic irony here: on the one hand, De Flores does not know that Beatrice-Joanna is lying, telling him what he wants to hear, and in fact she is currently experiencing no such process of acclimation to his face. On the other hand, Beatrice-Joanna does not know that she will eventually become acclimated, at least in a sense, to De Flores.

As Beatrice-Joanna becomes more enmeshed with De Flores, and despite the fact that he blackmails her into sleeping with him, she shows signs of beginning to appreciate and perhaps even love him. She presents her love as a quasi-moral obligation in recompense for his protecting her: "I'm forced to love thee now, / 'Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour" (V.i.48-49). This could again be flattery, but she expresses even more enthusiasm when he is absent: "How heartily he serves me! His face loathes one, / But look upon his care, who would not love him? / The east is not more beauteous than his service" (V.i.70-72), and, a few lines later, "Here's a man worth loving!" (V.i.76). She imagines his behavior to be virtuous or at least solicitous, and therefore to possess a kind of aesthetic appeal that his face lacks. As before with her switch from Alonzo to Alsemero, Beatrice-Joanna attributes her morally bankrupt change of affections to a deeper and more profound vision or insight.

The fact that Beatrice-Joanna refers to De Flores as "beauteous" could mean that it was a mistake to dismiss as purely manipulative her assertion of alternative aesthetic standards of male beauty: "Hardness becomes the visage of a man well, / It argues service, resolution, manhood, / If cause were of employment" (II.ii.92-94). Nonetheless, even the passage describing De Flores as "beauteous" sounds more like a misguided version of Desdemona's "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252) than like an erotic fixation on De Flores's diseased skin. In the end, it is perhaps possible that Beatrice-Joanna might have become the "odd feeder" that De Flores hoped she was. But if Beatrice-Joanna comes to find De Flores beautiful, it does not spring from a hedonistic and perverted desire for novelty, as the men in all four of these plays would assume. Rather, it is something she is driven to as

she tries to navigate the harsh constraints of patriarchal society, the predatory influence of De Flores, and the fallout from her own selfish but self-destructive choices¹⁸.

Conclusion

As with most moral systems, the patriarchal values that define female chastity are enforced by tying morality to aesthetics: proper behavior is beautiful and improper behavior is ugly. This pervasive link between morality and aesthetics is even tighter and more overdetermined in the case of sexual morality, because of the inherent connection between sexual desire and aesthetic elements such as attraction/repulsion and sensual pleasure. Accordingly, the men in these plays attempt to mobilize the power of disgust against female sexual desire by imagining unchaste (or allegedly unchaste) women as disgusting objects and/or aesthetically perverse subjects who are attracted to disgusting male objects.

For male characters in these plays, dishonor – especially the dishonor of being linked to an unchaste woman – is so destructive to their identity that it demands a response utterly superseding all other moral, religious, or aesthetic considerations. The necessity of combating dishonor unreservedly leads them to embrace both evil and the sinister. *Hamlet's* Laertes offers a prime example of this attitude, albeit in a context unrelated to female sexuality:

To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father. (IV.v.131-36)

18 Joost Daalder and Antony Telford Moore argue that Alsemero's phrase "There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed" (I.i.120) is evidence "that love and hate are intimately related and even interchangeable", although in context Alsemero attributes the love and hate to different people, not one ambivalent subject (1999, 508). I agree with their argument that the play rebuts the idea "of love and loathing as two quite distinct feelings" but not with their claim that Beatrice-Joanna's initial aversion to De Flores hid an unconscious desire for him from the very beginning (508). I would suggest rather that any attraction she might feel for De Flores is a product of what Hamlet calls "That monster custom" (III.iv.161).

It would be hard to overstate the radical incoherence of this argument on a moral or theological level. What possible moral framework could support a filial piety that explicitly violates the standards of both human and divine moral law? Hamlet displays a similarly disturbing and radical idolatry of masculine honor in the previous scene, when he envies Fortinbras for finding “quarrel in a straw / When honor’s at the stake” (IV.iv.55-56) and for engineering “The imminent death of twenty thousand men [...] for a fantasy and trick of fame” (IV.iv.60-61).

Yet with the partial exception of Beatrice-Joanna, the plays repeatedly and explicitly debunk claims of female aesthetic perversity as poisonous and false male fantasies. The plays suggest instead that aesthetic perversity is primarily a characteristic of the male sexual imagination, which men attribute to – and seek to impose on – women. Indeed, the level of a male character’s investment in these ideas at any given moment correlates highly with his current level of malevolence and/or insanity. As for the female characters, their ability to speak about their desires is highly constrained, but the statements they do make refute male theories of female aesthetic perversity.

Viewing misogynist rhetoric through the lens of sinister aesthetics allows us to acknowledge the allure of these male fantasies of disgust, and not only to the characters within the play. The men’s vehement protestations of repugnance for the female perversity they rail against cloak their own deep sensual engagement with disgusting sexual imagery. Characters like Hamlet and Ferdinand bring to life fantasies of perverted female desire to police their female relatives, but they also imaginatively wallow in them to the point where it becomes a distraction from their more pragmatic patriarchal goals¹⁹. They avoid wrestling with their own sinister sensibilities by projecting them onto women whom they can more safely condemn. They try to instill a normative disgust for unchastity in themselves by link-

19 To be fair, Hamlet also repeatedly expresses deep disgust with the world (“a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” [II.ii.272-73]), humanity in general (a “quintessence of dust” [II.ii.278]), the male sex (“arrant knaves all” [III.i.129]), old men (“their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum” [II.ii.198-99]), and most famously, himself. But his diatribes against women have a psychological, cultural, and aesthetic significance distinct from his more universal indictments of humanity and his self-hatred.

ing it with disgusting imagery, but they become obsessed with the aesthetic qualities of what was supposed to repulse them. The lush and vivid descriptions of sinister sexuality that result are evidence of their own distempered imaginations but also an important part of the poetic experience these plays offer to their audiences.

References

- Baker, Naomi. 2010. *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Bartels, Emily C. 1996. "Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire." *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36 (2): 417-33.
- Burks, Deborah G. 1995. "'I'll Want My Will Else': *The Changeling* and Women's Complicity with Their Rapists." *ELH* 62 (4): 759-90.
- Chamberlain, Stephanie. 2019. "Eroticizing Women's Travel: Desdemona and the Desire for Adventure in *Othello*." In *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World*, edited by Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea, 199-214. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Daalder, Joost, and Antony Telford Moore. 1999. "'There's Scarce a Thing but Is Both Loved and Loathed': *The Changeling* 1.i.91-129." *English Studies* 80 (6): 499-508.
- Dolan, Frances E. 2011. "Re-reading Rape in *The Changeling*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11 (1): 4-29.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. 1990. "The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault." *Genders* 8 (2): 1-16.
- Irish, Bradley J. 2023. *Shakespeare and Disgust: The History and Science of Early Modern Revulsion*. London: Arden Shakespeare.
- Kinney, Arthur F. 1974. *Markets of Bawdrie: The Dramatic Criticism of Stephen Gosson*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur Universität Salzburg.
- Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2011. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul & the Fair in Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levin, Richard. 2008. "Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators." *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 48 (2): 305-26.

- Luckyj, Christina. 1987. "'Great Women of Pleasure': Main Plot and Subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 27 (2): 267-83.
- Middleton, Thomas, and William Rowley. 2019. *The Changeling*. Edited by Michael Neill. London: Methuen.
- Miller, William Cook. 2015. "Macabre Vitality: Texture and Resonance in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *Renaissance Drama* 43 (2): 193-216.
- Milton, John. 1998. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Alastair Fowler. 2nd edition. Essex, UK: Longman.
- Rackin, Phyllis. 2005. *Shakespeare and Women*. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford: OUP Oxford.
- Reynolds, John. 1621. *The Triumphs of Gods Revenege [sic], Against the Crying, and Execrable Sinne of Murther*. London: Printed [by Augustine Mathewes and John Haviland] for William Lee. Early English Books Online.
- Robinson, Benedict. 2014. "Disgust C. 1600." *ELH* 81 (2): 553-83.
- Shakespeare, William. 2002. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Pelican.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. 1989. *The Defence of Poesy*. In *Sir Philip Sidney: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones, 212-50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slater, Michael. 2019. "Desdemona's Divided Duty: Gender and Courtesy in *Othello*." In *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World*, edited by Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea, 215-35. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Slotkin, Joel. 2017. *Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spivack, Bernard. 1958. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Webster, John. 2009. *The Duchess of Malfi*. Edited by John Russell Brown. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

“This it is when men are ruled by women”. The Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare

Elisabeth Bronfen

In fairy tales the wicked stepmother ultimately finds a terrible death to punish her for her evil deeds. The Queen in Shakespeare's late romance *Cymbeline* fits the bill. But something similar happens to Tamara in *Titus Andronicus*, who takes revenge on her martyred son. Indeed, queens in these plays are targeted as monstrous whenever they insist on following their political ambitions. In the history plays Queen Margaret is slandered by the Yorkists, because she will not cede to them the throne that she believes is rightfully her son's. Lady Macbeth, in turn, is called a “fiend-like queen” by Duncan's son Malcolm, after he has reclaimed the throne. In all cases – as my article will demonstrate – the notion of evil is used as a weapon to harness, manage and contain feminine power.

Keywords: Shakespeare's plays as series, evil queens, patriarchy, misogyny, Elizabeth I

I

The fate that befalls queens in Shakespeare's plays is just as sad as the stories that Richard II, faced with his own dethronement, recalls of his predecessors. Some are humiliated or deposed and banished, some are haunted by the ghosts of those they have harmed. Others are murdered, commit suicide or can only resort to cursing their adversaries. Still others, in turn, successfully stand up to tyrannical husbands or stubborn fathers and get their will, albeit not always for long. Viewed as a series, they form a dazzling spectrum of queenship. Because in the patriarchal world Shakespeare's plays reflect and reflect on, sovereignty is conceived in terms of masculine power: when women sit on the throne, they cause a disturbance in the political system. Regardless of whether they trigger violence or seek to settle disputes, they function as symptoms of the prejudices and fantasies

that are negotiated in relation to them. They aren't necessarily evil, but in one form or another, they are regarded as such, owing to their strident will to rule. At the same time, read against the grain, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate that, by seeking to assert themselves on a patriarchal political stage, his queens represent a counter-power that can be read as a critique of the very cultural codes that exclude them.

For this reason, a fundamental contradiction comes into focus when we consider these *dramatis personae* as a series: Shakespeare's queens support the political system, regardless of whether they oppose a ruler, appropriate his power for their own ends or unambiguously conform to his rule. Some are rebellious in their ambition, others seek to curb the arbitrary assertion of power of the king. Still others insist on the law of justice and mercy against his blind stubbornness, his dangerous pride or his tyrannical jealousy. In the dramas in which female rulers are punished for their transgression and sacrificed for their resistance, their political legitimacy proves to be unstable. In other plays, however, they appear as figures of political persistence, whose demands bring about a correction of the king's rule. They ensure the continued existence of the royal system, if not their particular lineage, by expressing their will through political cleverness, sharp wit or a pithy silence. At the same time, precisely because they never fully belong to the political system, they can be seen as serving an ambivalent, even contradictory reflection on sovereignty¹.

II

The typology this essay seeks to develop, takes as its point of departure the queen as a figure of resistance. At the very beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta appears as a defeated Amazon queen. She watches silently as Theseus, the Duke of Athens, her future husband, sides with his courtier Egeus, who wants to force his daughter, Hermia, into marrying Demetrius, a man she does not love. She decides to disobey her father and flees with Lysander into

1 For a discussion of Shakespeare's queens as a series and in relation to the depiction of female politician in TV drama, see the revised edition of Bronfen 2025. See also Wald 2020, as well as the collection of scholarly essays edited by Bronfen and Wald (2025). For a discussion of how the queens in these plays assert themselves again masculine power, see Packer 2016.

a forest close to the court and, because the fairies who reside there, intervene in the events that take place there that night, Hermia will get her will. The next morning, Theseus and his bride Hippolyta find two couples, sleeping at the edge of the forest, with the young man Hermia rejected now re-united with his former lover, Helena. While, to Theseus, what the young people have to report seems unbelievable, Hippolyta is the one to take the lovers' account seriously: "all the story of the night told over, and all their minds transfigured so together, more witnesseth than fancy's images and grows to something of great constancy" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.23-26)².

In this nocturnal story, she, furthermore, has a double in the fairy queen Titania, even though the Athenian lovers never mention her. Only we are privy to what befell her the previous night. Although Titania had stubbornly resisted the rule of the jealously fairy king, Oberon, she too must ultimately submit to his will. He had cunningly sprinkled her eyes with the drops of a love potion so that, upon awakening, she had come to dote on one of the Athenian artisans, rehearsing a play nearby. To enhance her humiliation, Oberon's puck had transformed Bottom's head into that of an ass. Although Titania spends the night with him in her grove, when she wakes up the next morning, her eyes have been cleansed of her romantic folly. She is compelled to ask Oberon for help in explaining how it came to be that she was found lying next to this disgusting mortal. While, for her, the fairy king has the interpretive authority over the events that happened that night, it is open to us to remember the erotic ecstasy she experienced with Bottom. The seminal point for the discussion that follows is the double vision of queens we get in both Hippolyta and Titania. In both cases they are humiliated and must accept marriage with a ruler who has come to contain their independent power. Yet from the perspective of these heroes, this is a form of punishment for wickedness ascribed to these strong-willed heroines, be it in regard to the military prowess of a warrior queen, be it in regard to the fairy queen's insistence on not giving in to all the demands made by the Fairy King.

A line of connection can be drawn between this romantic comedy and the early revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, because, like the Amazon Queen, Tamora is also brought to Rome as a prisoner after

2 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2017a.

having been vanquished on the battlefield. There, the queen of the Goths falls to her knees before the Roman general, who has defeated her after a 10-year war campaign, and tearfully begs for mercy for her first-born son. Why, she asks him, should her son be martyred in the marketplace for the brave deeds he has done for his country? Despite her motherly pleas, Titus refuses to show mercy and has her son burned at the stake and it is this hard-heartedness, which will be avenged. After the heir to the throne, Saturninus, is appointed emperor, he chooses Tamora as his bride. Unlike Hippolyta, this warrior queen does not fall silent. Instead, explaining the ruse behind her marriage, she claims to be “a handmaid to his desire, a loving nurse, a mother to his youth” (*Titus Andronicus*, I.i.336-37)³. At the same time, she uses the confidence her husband places in her to turn him against his loyal general. Indeed, Tamora becomes the shadow ruler of Rome.

Her weapon is no longer the sword but rather the double-tongued speech with which she publicly advocates a reconciliation with Titus, while admitting her real intention to her husband only in secret: “I’ll find a day to massacre them all, and raze their faction and their family, the cruel father and his traitorous sons to whom I sued for my dear son’s life, and make them know what ‘tis to let a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain” (I.i.454-60). By showing no compassion in her maneuvers against her designated enemy, and, instead, acting in utter cruelty, she brings into focus what it means to be thus humiliated. Titus and his allies, however, declare her to be an arch-villainess precisely because she, as a woman, claims the lust for vengeance that is considered the prerogative of Roman men. It is worth noting that, unlike Hippolyta, she does not fight alone. Her clandestine lover, Aaron, who was brought to Rome with her as a prisoner of war, is her staunch ally. He, too, lustfully instigates mischief without showing remorse, even while calling her a siren and praising her for her “sacred wit to villany and vengeance” (I.i.620-21).

With his help, Tamora is not only able to betray the emperor, but also to carry out her bloody campaign of revenge with utter determination. She incites her sons to ravish Lavinia, the daughter of Titus, and to kill her husband, the emperor’s brother. Tamora then pretends

3 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2009.

that the general's two sons are responsible for the murder and thus ensures their execution. She uses her evil eloquence as a weapon one last time to convince Titus to invite the emperor and his youngest son Lucius, who has been banished by him, to a banquet. Although she hopes to complete her retribution in one fell swoop, the banquet turns into a massacre. Lucius is the only one to survive because he arrives too late. To satisfy the wrath of the man, whom Tamora has failed to vanquish along with his family, it is not enough for her to die in the bloodbath she has herself unleashed. An empress, who, to her enemy, embodies the epitome of female evil, must be completely extinguished, stripped of all her honors. In the monologue with which the play ends, Lucius, who is appointed the new emperor, gives orders that pertain to how the corpses are to be disposed of. The murdered Saturninus is to be buried in his ancestral tomb, while his murderer, Titus, and his daughter are to be buried in the tomb of their ancestors. Tamora, however, is forbidden a burial. No one is allowed to mourn the former empress, and, instead, she is thrown over the city wall and exposed to animals and birds of prey: "her life was beastly and devoid of pity, and being dead, let birds on her take pity" (V.iii.198-99).

From the perspective of the newly crowned emperor, this may be a justifiable form of punishment. However, the radical rigor with which Tamora's humanity is denied can also be read as a dramaturgical consequence of the fact that throughout the play she, as ruler, reflected the male barbarism lying just beneath the surface of the Roman code of honor. Titus had not only shown no mercy to her son, but also killed his own son at the very beginning of the play because the latter had dared to disobey the general's orders. Titus also stabbed his own daughter Lavinia in cold blood at the banquet because, according to his idea of honor, her violated body had no right to survive. Tamora, who has appropriated and perpetuated this ruthlessness, must be dehumanized so that the double standards, on which the continued existence of the Roman polis is based, can be veiled by virtue of her sacrifice.

The nameless queen in *Cymbeline* offers us a further variation of female perfidy. At the beginning of the play, she assures Innogen, "be assured you shall not find me, daughter, after the slander of most stepmothers, evil-eyed unto you" (I.i.71-73), and yet, precisely as in fairy tales, the second wife of the King of England will ruth-

lessly betray the princess (Shakespeare 2017b)⁴. Innogen had secretly married the courtier Posthumus, although her father wanted her to marry her stepmother's son, Clothen. After the banishment of her husband to Rome, she becomes a prisoner in her father's castle. Soon after this, she is designated as the first victim of the experiments with poisonous drugs which the queen has been conducting for some time. The queen assures her physician Cornelius, whom she asks for a medicine that will cause a protracted death, "unless thou think'st me devilish, is't not meet that I did amplify my judgement in other conclusions?" (I.v.16-18). It is precisely this denial which makes him realize that she is not only interested in expanding her knowledge. He sees through her evil intentions and gives her a potion that will induce only a fake death.

Innogen, however, thwarts the queen's murder plan by fleeing from her home, hoping to reunite with her husband, who has secretly returned to England. The queen, in turn, unable to poison her disobedient daughter-in-law, is forced to embark on a new ruse to insure that her son be crowned king. While Titania resists Oberon as long as their marital dispute continues, and while Tamora leaves the Roman emperor partially in the dark regarding her revenge plot, the evil queen in *Cymbeline* turns her claim to power directly against her own husband. The absence of her daughter-in-law appears to her as a happy coincidence: "gone she is to death or to dishonor, and my end can make good use of either. She being down, I have the placing of the British crown" (III.v.62-65). The news that the king has burst into a fit of rage over his daughter's escape makes her happy, because as long as he remains in this state, no one dares to go near him. The last words she speaks in the play proclaim the hope that his rage will have fatal consequences for him: "may this night forestall him of the coming day" (III.5.68-69). If he does not survive the night, she, herself, will be allowed to determine the royal succession.

This regime change, however, does not come to fruition. Instead, after the murder of the queen's son finally thwarts her invidious plans, she is compelled to turn her death wish on herself. In the midst of the general reconciliation in the last act, her physician delivers the message regarding her demise, assuring those who have

4 All citations are taken from this edition.

assembled around Cymbeline, "with horror, madly dying, like her life, which, being cruel to the world, concluded most cruel to her self" (V.v.31-34). On the surface, the confession she made before her suicide testifies to her heartless malice. Cornelius continues by assuring the king, "she confessed she never loved you, only affected greatness got by you, not you; married your royalty, was wife to your place, abhorred your person" (V.v.337-40). Thus, to the end, he portrays her as a figure of malignant resistance. He finishes his testimony by noting that she only regretted that the evil she had set in motion could not be carried out. As with any *femme fatale*, the queen's false flattery and murderous calculation can be read against the grain. Reduced to the role of proxy, one might surmise, she could only participate as a political player by acting through the king. This, however, also means that she never desired the king's natural body, but his second, symbolic one⁵. This shadow rule would have continued, had her son assumed the crown after Cymbeline's death. This raises the point that if, as a woman, she can only satisfy her political ambition at her husband's side, she can only fully realize it over his dead body. The king may reproach himself for having allowed himself to be blinded by her beauty and flattery. This, too, can also be read against the grain. One might claim that within the patriarchal codes of Cymbeline's court, the queen was compelled to play the submissive wife, because she could assert her own desires only with the help of the feminine weapon of deceptive beauty that was available to her.

If we look at these three queens as a series, we can read the portrait Shakespeare offers of the queen in this late tragedy as a counterpart to that of the Amazon queen Hippolyta. For her, marriage to Theseus is tantamount to a renunciation of her sword. The only way she can assert her will as his wife is through her rhetorical mastery. In *Cymbeline*, in turn, it is only after the queen's marriage to the English king that she is able to ignite her fighting spirit. For her use of treachery, she, like Tamora, is vilified by her fellow men after her death. She is declared to be the epitome of feminine evil. While the warrior queen in *Titus Andronicus* is much more obvious in her acts of retaliation,

5 I take the distinction between the natural and the symbolic body of the kind from Ernst H. Kantorowicz and his reading of *Richard II* in Kantorowicz 1957.

tion, the clandestine wicked plotting, which the queen in *Cymbeline* is accused of, is also a reflection of the political stage on which she has tried to assert her claim to power. She feigns the enchanting, loving, caring wife while exercising her power insidiously from behind the scene, because she is denied a direct path to the royal rule.

III

Another queen in Shakespeare's oeuvre is worth adding to this series, not because she is wicked, but because it is her obedience and goodness that makes her a figure of female resistance. In the late play *Henry VIII*, Katherine of Aragon is caught in the crossfire of a dispute between Cardinal Wolsey and the common people. In order to eliminate the queen, who threatens to jeopardize his political plans, the Cardinal persuades his sovereign that his marriage to her is not legitimate. Because King Henry has fallen in love with Anne Bollen, he is prepared to annul the marriage. Some of the lords see through the Cardinal's intrigue and call the Queen's fall "a loss of her that like a jewel has hung twenty years about his neck yet never lost her lustre; of her that loves him with that excellence that angels love good men" (*Henry VIII*, II.ii.29-33)⁶. Wolsey, however, initiates a lawsuit against Katherine, which will allow Henry to divorce her.

The court becomes a battlefield on which Katherine uses her rhetorical skills as a weapon to defend herself against the false accusations brought against her. In self-defense, she reminds the king that she has been a faithful and humble wife for twenty years, has always obeyed his will and has never contradicted his wishes. She not only accuses her adversary Wolsey of hiding arrogance beneath his gentle, humble appearance. She also demands the right to decide for herself who may judge the legitimacy of her queenship. To show her opposition to a trial that she feels is unjust, she leaves the hall abruptly, but is called back by the king. He proceeds by praising her meekness, obedience and piety in front of the lords and calls her unique, "the queen of earthy queens" (II.iv.133-38). Nevertheless, King Henry demands proof from the clergyman, who has been sent from Rome to take part in this trial, that his marriage is lawful. For the king, it is not

6 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2000.

the question of his wife's innocence that is at stake, but the loophole in the law that would justify granting the longed-for divorce.

Even after the interrogation, Katherine defies her adversary and utters an auspicious curse: "take heed, lest at once the burden of my sorrows fall upon ye [...] you turn me into nothing. Woe upon ye" (III.i.110-11; 114). She stubbornly refuses to accept the accusations against her, yet she has no choice but to relinquish her status as queen and resign herself to the demeaning title of "Princess Dowager". The divorce declaring her marriage null and void, is tantamount to a symbolic death, which she carries out at her own body at Kimbolton Castle, far away from court. Stripped of all her earthly honors, she turns her gaze to the world beyond. In a nocturnal vision, she sees a multitude of dancing ghostly figures awaiting her in heaven. Enraptured, she awakens and describes to the Roman clergyman, who pays her a final visit, how these angelic figures invited her to a banquet and promised her eternal peace. As a final expression of her resistance, Katherine dictates her obituary from her deathbed. Therein she states that she should not only be buried in accordance with her royal status, but also in accordance with the virtues, which the law in King Henry's court was not prepared to recognize: "Strew me over with maiden flowers, that all the world may know I was a chaste wife to my grave. Embalm me, then lay me forth. Although unqueened, yet like a queen and daughter to a king inter me. I can no more" (IV.ii.167-72). In this choreography of her death as a sublime self-sacrifice, she stages the obedience demanded of her as queen in excess – exposing that the evil Wolsey attributed to her was a mirror of his own machinations. If, in court, she was unable to assert her position, she can determine on her deathbed how she will go down in the annals of cultural memory. She insists that she was a flawless queen and wife, and in so doing insists on her own legitimacy, while exposing the illegitimacy of those who accused her of something else. The actual villain in the piece, who will subsequently loose his power at court, is the cardinal who spearheaded her vilification.

The last scene in the play, in turn, brings the queen into play, who serves as a point of reference for all the female sovereigns in Shakespeare's oeuvre. The Archbishop of Canterbury announces that the newborn Elizabeth will surpass all princely honors and be gloriously admired by her subjects. Elizabeth I had long been known to her sub-

jects as an “Amazon Queen”. On August 9, 1588, before the invasion of the Spanish Armada at Tilbury, she gave a speech in which she announced to her troops that she was determined to fight to the death with them and to give both her honor and her blood on the battlefield for her God, her kingdom and her people. She justifies her ability to do so with the famous sentence: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too” (Felch and Stump 2009, 392)⁷.

Shakespeare’s history play, which was written after the death of Elizabeth I, presupposes knowledge, on the part of the audience, of how perfectly she had come to control the machinations at her court. She was known for playing favorites off against each other, using spies to monitor her opponents and having rebels and political rivals executed. At the same time, her sexually ambivalent symbolic body gave rise to a cult around the veneration of her queenship. She resolutely staged herself as the “Virgin Queen”, unwilling to be married to any earthly man because she could only be married to England. Crucial to the way in which Shakespeare’s portrait of Elizabeth I offers a comment on the other portraits of queens we find in his plays, is that, in this late history play, the announcement of her glorious reign is voiced as an obituary. At the end of his speech, the Archbishop states: “She shall be to the happiness of England an aged princess. Many days shall see her, and yet no day without a deed to crown it [...] But she must die: She must, the saints must have her. Yet a virgin, a most unspotted lily, shall she pass to th’ ground, and all the world shall mourn her” (V.iv.56-62). Though meant as an homage, the reference to the fact that the saints in the afterlife rightly demand her death, renders Elizabeth I as a reflection on the queen, whose death in this history play correlates with her birth. The heavenly scene described in the obituary not only recalls the ecstatic vision that Katherine has on her deathbed. It also continues this scene by casting Elizabeth I as the crowning glory of the successful earthly reign that was denied to her father’s first wife.

Looking at the portraits of queens that Shakespeare offers in these plays, what is drawn into focus is the ubiquitous cultural presence of

7 For the ambivalent representation of Elizabeth I, see Berry 1989, as well as Levin 1994.

Elizabeth I as imaginative potential. The dazzling palette ranges from reverence and veneration to defamation and rejection. In *Richard III*, the eponymous hero sums up the unease associated with female rule in a conversation with his brother. Although he wants to blame Edward IV's wife Elizabeth for the fact that Clarence has fallen out of favor with him, he also addresses the pejorative attitude towards the female ruler in general: "thus it is when men are ruled by women" (I.i.62). What Shakespeare's dramas show in ever new variations is how the cultural fears and fantasies that Elizabeth I invoked came to be transferred to dramatic female rulers. If Amazon queens can be conquered on stage and independently minded queens be dethroned, this serves, on the one hand, as a dramatic discharge of the anxiety that the real power of Elizabeth I was able to trigger. On the other hand, from today's perspective, the fate that befalls the queens in these plays also reveals a fundamental compensation for the feeling of vulnerability that male subjects had come to experience in the face of her resolute queenship⁸.

Viewed as a series, a complex aesthetic formalization emerges. Female domination is not only presented as a terrifying image, an embodiment of evil, but the fears attached to it are also exposed as strategies of defamation. If the plays serve as a means of coming to terms with these unsettling political ideas, they also lend themselves to a perspective that sheds new light on the way such cultural unease was processed. Indeed, they can all be read as double visions. On the one hand, they serve as portraits of sometimes dutiful, sometimes self-determined women seeking to assert themselves in the public arena, and, on the other, as reflections of both reverential and demonizing fantasies that stubbornly cling to the notion of female rulership.

IV

In addition to these figures of resistance, we find, in Shakespeare's oeuvre, queens who obediently support the wishes of their sovereign. As such, they embody not a counterweight, but rather an extension of the crown. The most prominent of them, Lady Macbeth,

8 I take this discussion of the cultural unease that accompanied the rule of Elizabeth I from Montrose 2006.

offers a particularly disturbing spin on the portrait of a dutiful wife. She stands faithfully by her husband in all his dark machinations, and, in so doing, hopes to realize her own political ambitions. She not only emphatically supports his plan to murder King Duncan, but is also prepared to accept the terrible consequences of this act. After she receives the letter in which Macbeth tells her that three weird sisters have prophesied that he will become king, she proves to be a true “partner of greatness” (*Macbeth*, I.v.11). She asks the dark spirits of the nocturnal deity Hecate, “unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood, stop up th’access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between th’effect and it” (I.v.41-47).

Like the queen in *Cymbeline*, she is a femme fatale with two faces. After Duncan arrives at her castle, she presents herself to him as a humble, submissive subject and entertains him festively, while at the same time preparing everything for the regicide that must take place that night. She is fearless and bold from the outset, mocking her husband, who suddenly has doubts about their murder plans. If it is she who does not allow for the possibility that they might fail, it is also she who, after her husband steps out of the death chamber with the bloody daggers, returns there so that the blame falls on the guards. Unlike Macbeth, the sight of the dead instills neither fear nor guilt in her. Rather, she explains to her husband: “my hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white” (II.ii.65-66). Where Macbeth struggles with his conscience, she is resolute, using her femininity as a weapon to disguise her imperturbability. After Macduff finds the murdered king in his bedchamber the next morning and wakes everyone in the castle, she plays the shaken wife to perfection.

The double face of the femme fatale is crucial to the portrait of this politically ambitious queen. Precisely because she complements Macbeth’s ambition with her own, she gives a touch of evil to the idea of the faithful wife who is prepared to submit completely to the king’s wishes. At the same time, she stands by her actions because she realizes that she cannot undo them, and this, too, makes her a figure of evil in the political realm. She has no mercy. Instead, her mantra is, “Things without all remedy should be without regard: what’s done, is done” (III.ii.12-13). Yet the play does not divide the

dangerous ambition evenly among these partners in greatness. Lady Macbeth has no need for further remorse after the murder of Duncan, because Macbeth does not let her in on Banquo's murder. For this reason, she also does not see the ghost with whom Macbeth speaks during the banquet. Instead, oblivious to his hallucinations, she has to send the guests away because Macbeth keeps telling her in his terrifying speech that he sees blood everywhere. She subsequently tells her husband that he should be ashamed of himself for allowing himself to be so taken in by a false creation of his mind. She recognizes a deceptive reflection of his fear in these hallucinations and reproaches him, "O, these flaws and starts, imposters to true fear, would well become a woman's story at a winter's fire" (III.iv.63).

By comparing the images of horror that Macbeth sees in his mind's eye with a scene in which women tell each other ghost stories by a winter fire, she establishes a link to Queen Isabella in *Richard II*. As this queen takes leave forever from her husband, the deposed king begs her, when she will have returned to France, to relieve her grief regarding his tragic fate with similar tales: "In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire with good old folks, and let them tell thee tales of woeful ages long ago betied" (V.i.40-42). Although Lady Macbeth, unlike her, neither laments nor foresees disaster, she too is not without remorse. However, her anxious gaze is not directed towards an as yet undetermined future. Instead, her unconscious eye is turned towards the past events that occupy her dreams because her conscious mind does not allow her to admit her guilt. In the last scene in which she appears on stage sleepwalking, she tries to wipe the blood from her hands. They bear imaginary traces of all the deaths she is responsible for, even if she did not participate in all of them directly. At the same time, she again seeks to contain the agonizing knowledge that she can only reveal while sleepwalking by replaying not only the murder, but also her forbiddance of remorse. After recalling the names of the victims of her husband and his henchmen, she assures herself once again that "what's done, cannot be undone" (V.i.67-68).

This pathos gesture is poignant in its ambivalence. In a state of somnambulism, Lady Macbeth confesses her crimes and at the same time accepts them. It is a different kind of ethical despair than the lust for destruction in which Macbeth has become entangled. Although she continues to complement her husband in his murderous tyran-

ny, a change has occurred regarding the dynamics of the royal couple. They seem to have swapped roles regarding their conscience. Lady Macbeth is now the one who is haunted by ghostly visions, as Macbeth had been in the previous acts. It is as if she had relieved her husband of the regrets, about whose debilitating effects she had warned. While the king, seized by a mad furor, goes into his last battle without any feeling of remorse, in her somnambulism Lady Macbeth expresses her grief over the destruction of the world that her shared political ambition has caused. In contrast to the queen in *Cymbeline*, she does not commit suicide because she has come to realize that her evil project has failed, but because she has acknowledged her guilt regarding the death of those who have fallen victim to her ambition.

Macbeth hears the screams of the women who find her corpse but is no longer moved by the horror. He has become what she wanted him to be. His compassion has dried up completely. He remarks laconically, "she should have died hereafter" (V.v.17). His point is that she should not have died yet given that there is no time to bury her properly before the battle that is about to begin. Yet what he also articulates is that her suicide – like her appeal to the dark spirits of the nocturnal goddess Hecate – is an act committed outside of ordinary time. The fatal consequences of a wife's fidelity belong to a different temporality than that of the everyday.

V

By turning to *King Lear*, we can shift our gaze from rebellious or obedient wives to ambitious daughters, who are also deemed evil owing to their resolute political self-assertion. In the opening scene, Lear wants to divide his country into three kingdoms. The daughter who proves to him with her words that she loves him the most is to receive the largest part. He thus blurs the line between a private declaration of love and a public oath of allegiance. Goneril and Regan, the two older daughters, may appear hypocritical because they are prepared to flatter their father unconditionally. However, their clichéd answers also meet the requirements of a court ceremony, during which the abdication has already been decided. In contrast, Cordelia's disobedience is shown by her refusal to enter into this empty ritual. Her intimate feelings as a daughter are more important than the words that may be

spoken on such a public occasion. The answer she gives – “Nothing, my lord” (*King Lear* I.i.87) – is her way of remaining silent about what she does not want to say in this particular time and place. She turns Lear’s demand for undivided love into a statement about what he should expect from her not as a daughter but as a future queen: “I love your majesty according to my bond, no more nor less” (I.i.93).

Like her sisters, she also speaks in the language of public appearance, but instead of flattering her father, she focuses her attention on another symbolic obligation; namely the love, care and duty that she will owe to her future husband. She sees this as a loyal and virtuous way of telling the truth. The king, however, says, “better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better” (I.i.235-36). He is not concerned with his daughters’ true feelings, but with assuring them that he will retain paternal power despite abdicating his throne. In anger, he withdraws his love from Cordelia, whom he initially took to be his supreme joy, now calls her his “sometime daughter” (I.i.120), and gives her to the King of France as his wife without a dowry.

While speaking to their father, the two older sisters agree to Cordelia’s banishment. Behind his back, however, they conspire against him because they see a threat to their own future reign reflected in the younger sister’s courageous response. They have long since realized that their father’s rash actions are evidence of poor judgement and choleric behaviour. They rightly fear that he will continue to exercise his authority after his abdication. Lear may no longer want to rule over his kingdom, but, by demanding to retain his entire entourage while staying first with the one daughter and then with the other, he continues to seek to rule over them as their father. He wants to force them to fulfill their daughterly obligation to him as well as to succeed him in ruling his realm. They, however, want to be queens alone, and no longer dutiful daughters. While Goneril had uttered the platitudes the king wanted to hear in public, in private she calls her father an “idle old man, that still would manage those authorities that he hath given away” (I.iii.17-19).

Again, we are confronted with a double portrait. Either we see Goneril as a headstrong daughter who wants to unnecessarily restrict her old father’s power, and, in this, could be called evil. Or we see her as a queen who is justified in being concerned about the rioting of her father’s entourage because she has to ensure order and

the observance of rules in her kingdom. Lear's rowdy knights and squires not only disturb the general peace. They also create chaotic conditions in Goneril's castle, undermining her rule because they are only prepared to accept her father's orders. She cannot accept the leniency her husband Albany pleads for. To prove her power as queen, she finds herself compelled to order Lear to reduce his followers befitting his new status.

Furious, Lear goes to the castle of his second daughter with his boisterous entourage and, here too, he insists on his paternal supremacy. However, warned by Goneril, Regan also does not give in to his demands. Instead, she replays the opening scene in a new key. Rather than fulfilling Lear's wishes unconditionally, Regan shows the former king what it means to hand over the symbolic body to his daughter. Now it is time to comply fully with her will. She decides that he doesn't need a retinue at all and resolutely explains to him, "how in one house should many people, under two commands, hold amity? 'Tis hard, almost impossible" (II.ii.429-30). Goneril, who has joined her sister, emphatically agrees. Because neither of them wants to share their rule with their old father, they forbid him to bring a single knight with him if he wants to sojourn in their castles. Because Lear stubbornly insists on his paternal rights, Regan sends him out into the night storm and has the gates locked behind him and his men. She no longer treats him like a king, but like an intransigent father. While to some, this act is a sign of utmost cruelty, Regan sees her action as a lesson she must teach: "to wilful men the injuries that they themselves procure must be their schoolmasters" (492-94).

As with the other queens who use violence to defend their position of power, a double portrait emerges of the two sisters. The fact that they send their old father into a storm makes them appear vicious, heartless and without mercy. They can be seen as villains because they insist on their authority instead of submitting to the father who handed his power over to them. Yet as female sovereigns, they are justified in fully accepting the symbolic role bestowed upon them instead of tolerating a shadow king at their side. The violence with which they take action against the courtiers who continue to stand by Lear may seem terrible, but it can also be seen as a justifiable reaction to the fact that their father's men are not willing to recognize their po-

sition as the new rulers. What would be considered just punishment for treason in the hands of a king becomes inappropriate cruelty in the hands of these two queens.

After Cordelia returns from France with her army and, in the role of a righteous warrior, fights for her father, the defamation of her sisters takes another turn. The force with which the two fight back can be read as a warning against sovereigns who do not possess the feminine virtue of leniency expected of them. Goneril's husband, who changes sides, gives voice to this misogyny. Because she is ruthless in the realization of her goals, he calls Goneril a she-devil and proclaims, "proper deformity shows not in the fiend so horrid as in woman" (IV.ii.61). She is perceived by him as demonically wicked because her feminine appearance, with which she was able to skillfully present the obedience demanded of her in the opening scene, no longer conceals her true political ambition. Because Albany cannot reconcile these two sides, he dehumanizes his wife and proclaims, "thou are a fiend, a woman's shape doth shield thee" (IV.ii.67-68).

The double portrait that Shakespeare offers of Goneril draws attention to a further conundrum. The violence she unleashes must be seen in the context of a war, in which she has to defend her kingdom against an invading army, even if her military actions seem excessive and heartless. Cordelia, after all, intervenes in the family dispute as a warrior queen in her own right. Tragic irony, furthermore, relates the battle that leads to the destruction of this royal family's dynasty back to the beginning of the play. Once again, the youngest sister brings to light why Lear's demand for unrestricted love pits the queen against the daughter. Cordelia has not come to reclaim land, but to help a mentally disturbed father in his distress. The tears she weeps over his neglected state show him the love that she did not want to put into words in the opening scene. On the battlefield, however, her tears do not give voice to a blind obedience to a stubborn king, but rather suggest concern for the well-being of her mentally disturbed father. Whereas, in the first scene of the play, she remained upright while her two sisters accompanied their hollow speech with a genuflection, it is now she who kneels before him and asks for his blessing.

The reconciliation that takes place after the two have been captured also recreates the opening scene. Lear abdicates again. He does not want to continue fighting. Cordelia thinks they should talk to Go-

neril and Regan, but he resolutely rejects this option⁹. Instead, he withdraws completely into the fantasy that he could spend time in prison, intimately conjoined with his favorite daughter far away from the court and mock the political machinations of his other two daughters. His wish is as self-centered as it is poignant. It makes clear once again that for Lear, renouncing the crown goes hand in hand with complete domination of his daughter. Again, Cordelia is at a loss for words. She leaves the stage in silence. Soon afterwards, she is murdered by one of her sister's henchmen, then Goneril kills herself after having poisoned Regan. The corpses of the three warrior queens bear witness to what was foreshadowed in the first act. Lear ensures that none of his daughters will succeed him. However, the three corpses also bear witness to the cultural threat posed by the idea of a queen who sits on the throne not as an obedient wife but as a self-determined daughter.

VI

One last queen is worth adding to the series of portraits discussed so far, because only her husband, blinded by his jealousy, declares her to be evil, while everyone else at court recognizes this act of defamation as a reflection of the obscene kernel at the heart of his sovereignty. In *The Winter's Tale*, the double vision we get of Hermione shows evil to be unequivocally in the eye of the beholder. In that she combines obedience with self-confidence, she anticipates Katherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII*, the history play Shakespeare will compose one year later. That fact that she, however, survives her ordeal brings up a seminal question: What does it take for a queen to be rehabilitated from false accusations of wickedness? After Leontes has accused his wife of adultery, she also insists on pointing out that she never did anything but perform her duty to him and thus renders visible the king's fickleness. At his behest, she had persuaded Polixenes to postpone his departure. However, the eloquence with which she has succeeded in doing so inflames her husband's jealousy. Leontes starts to

9 In his essay "Avoidance of Love. A reading of *King Lear*", in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Stanley Cavell draws attention to the repetition compulsion at work in this tragedy, given that in this parting scene King Lear once more abdicates, as he did in the first act, while Cordelia once more has nothing to say to his demand (Cavell 2003).

imagine that the child she is pregnant with was not conceived by him but by his childhood friend. Her maternity has, however, become the target of his suspicion in another sense as well. The intimate alliance that Hermione maintains with her son Mamillius also triggers his blind jealousy. Although she notices that Leontes reacts with anger at the news that Polixenes is prepared to stay longer, she does not confront her husband. Instead, she retreats to a private chamber with her son, where not the king's authority but her motherly devotion rules. There she asks Mamillius to tell her a story and he offers her a sad one: "a sad tale's best for winter. I have one of sprites and goblins" (*The Winter's Tale* II.i.25-26)¹⁰. He only wants to tell her the gothic tale about a man who lives next to a cemetery in confidence, so she asks him "come on then, and give't me in mine ear" (II.i.32).

The winter's tale is a secret, which only the two of them share. Leontes, who appears unexpectedly in his wife's chamber, not only disturbs this intimacy. He also has this scene in view at the very moment that a lord tells him about Polixenes' flight from the court. The fact that he cannot hear what Mamillius is whispering in his mother's ear serves to drive Leontes's jealousy to extremes. Completely convinced that his suspicions about Hermione are justified, he demands the boy from her: "Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you have too much blood in him" (II.i.56-59). Words and blood take on a similar meaning. Leontes fears that Hermione's influence is more powerful than his; just as the intimate scene of storytelling has excluded him. He tells his lords that the queen must be separated from his son because she has betrayed him with Polixenes.

Like Katherine in *Henry VIII*, Hermione also has to stand a public trial. However, for Leontes, at stake isn't the legitimacy of the marriage, which would justify a divorce. Rather, he declares the adultery of which he accuses her to be an act of treason and demands the death penalty, even though his entire court assures him that his queen is unequivocally without blemish. Hermione, like Katherine, resists the accusation of disloyalty and insists, "my past life hath been as continent, as chaste, as true as I am now unhappy" (III.ii.32-34). Her reproach exhibits a similar rhetorical skill. If she had not shown Polixenes the affection Leontes demanded of her, this would have signified ungrate-

10 All citations are taken from Shakespeare 2010.

fulness to their guest and disobedience to her husband. She tries in vain to make him realize that she has become the screen of his deluded fantasy, which has nothing to do with her as a woman of flesh and blood: "my life stands in the level of your dreams" (III.ii.79). In so doing, Hermione courageously dismantles his royal authority. She explains to him that a judgment based on suspicion and jealousy is not justice, but rather an expression of tyranny. With her plea, she defends the law, on which the court in Sicily is based, against the king's arbitrary judgement. Evil is entirely on his side of the legal debate.

Hermione ultimately falls silent, not, however, because Leontes insists on doubting the oracle, even though it has taken her side by calling her chaste. Rather, she faints the moment she receives the news that her son, Mamillius, has died out of grief. If it was her rhetorical eloquence that aroused Leontes' jealousy, she is now completely at a loss for words and is declared dead by her loyal lady-in-waiting Paulina: "this news is mortal to the queen. Look down and see what death is doing" (III.ii.145-46). Hermione's silence can, thus, be seen to echo Cordelia's silence in the face of her father's blinded request that he be locked up alone with her in prison so that they can share "old tales" with each other. Lear's delusion can also be read as a mirror inversion of the scene in which Mamillius whispers a gothic story into his mother's ear. In the late romance, however, the wintry ghost story turns out to be prophetic. As if Mamillius had unwittingly foreseen both his own fate and that of his father, he becomes the character who is buried in the cemetery. Leontes, in turn, is given the role of the mourner who lingers nearby. Suddenly awakened from his delusion, he ruefully visits the gravesite of his wife and son on a daily basis.

Unlike the other queens, Hermione, however, is neither deposed nor banished. Nor does she die after securing her obituary. The symbolic death she undergoes can be reversed because she has a loyal companion who takes on an active role in how she is to be remembered. The decisive variation that Shakespeare introduces into the series of female sovereigns with this portrait concerns the period of latency that Hermione spends away from the court, as though in hibernation. In Paulina's house Hermione waits patiently for the return of her daughter, who was repudiated by Leontes immediately after her birth. He had claimed, "This brat is none of mine. It is the issue of Polixenes" (II.iii.91-92) and wanted her to be left to die in the fields beyond the court.

It is noteworthy that Hermione returns from the realm of death as the mother of the future queen of Sicily, whom her father had initially repudiated. The first words she speaks after Paulina has brought her statue back to life in front of the assembled court are not addressed to her husband, but to the divine power on whose justice she relied throughout the trial: "you gods, look down, and from your sacred vials pour your graces upon my daughter's head" (V.iii.121-23). She then asks Perdita to tell her where she has lived all these years and how she found her way back to her father's court. The story she wants her daughter to tell her is not a ghost story whispered in confidence, but a public account, even though Perdita will only give her report after the curtain has fallen. The last words Hermione speaks in the play are also addressed to her. She promises to tell her daughter more about how she has spent the time of their separation, "knowing by Paulina that the oracle gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved myself to see the issue" (V.iii.125-28).

The silence that follows upon this announcement is a notable exception in the series of queens discussed. Hermione needs no further words to convey her unconditional love for her daughter. She has said everything she wants to say at this point. We are left with the sense that all the evil Leontes had projected onto her was not only his self-delusion, but also debunked as a collective fantasy regarding queenship. Whether this double vision of the queen has been completely dissolved once the statue becomes a woman again, remains open to interpretation. The evil suspicion Leontes was so suddenly overwhelmed with could well erupt again. As this serial presentation of queenship in his plays illustrates, it is part and parcel of the patriarchal political culture Shakespeare's plays both reflect and comment on.

References

- Berry, Philippa. 1989. *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*. London: Routledge.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. 2025. *Serial Shakespeare: An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth, and Christina Wald. 2025. *Shakespeare and Seriality: Page, Stage, Screen*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Felch, Susan M., and Donald V. Stump, eds. 2009. *Elizabeth I and Her Age*. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Kantorowicz, Ernst H. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Levin, Carole. 1994. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Montrose, Louis. 2006. *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Packer, Tina. 2016. *Women of Will: The Remarkable Evolution of Shakespeare's Female Characters*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2000. *Henry VIII*. Edited by Gordon McMullan. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2002. *Richard II*. Edited by Charles R. Forker. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2009a. *Richard III*. Edited by James R. Siemon. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2009b. *Titus Andronicus*. Edited by Jonathan Bate. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2010. *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by John Pitcher. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2015. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2017a. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2017b. *Cymbeline*. Edited by Valerie Wayne. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- Wald, Christina. 2020. *Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex TV*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare's Late Plays

Davide Del Bello

This paper examines the workings of evil in Shakespeare's late plays – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* – through the dual lens of the theological *mysterium iniquitatis* and Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil". Unlike the stark dramatization of wickedness in the tragedies, Shakespeare's romances present evil as at once pervasive and insubstantial, mysterious yet mundane. It operates both actively – as a persistent, enduring force – and passively – as evil that is endured, destabilizing conventional dichotomies between passivity and activity, suffering and resistance. Close analysis of key characters and narrative developments shows how Shakespeare not only foreruns Arendt's insight that evil often arises from thoughtlessness rather than malice, but also suggests that rational demystification alone falls short of containing evil's return. The endurance of evil complicates binary understandings of human responses to iniquity, suggesting that within a redemptive framework, destructive forces may paradoxically catalyze processes of reconciliation and renewal when met with critical thought and moral imagination.

Keywords: Late Plays, *mysterium iniquitatis*, demystification, Hannah Arendt, metatheatre

It is a critical truism that the depiction of iniquity in Shakespeare's late phase ventures into a subtler, more rarefied territory than in his tragedies or histories. In the Late Plays dramatized evil loses its stark contours and overwhelming gloom, compelling us instead to reckon with its more elusive dimensions. This shift diverges from the standard Elizabethan staging of evil. Early modern theatre, notorious for its unvarnished dramatization of wickedness, fed its eclectic audiences an unrelenting diet of gore: decapitations, dismemberment, cannibalism, incest, rape – a carnival of horrors that, for all its jadedness, never ceased to titillate. Shakespeare's production was hardly exempt from

these theatrical imperatives¹. Evil seeps into his corpus through unexpected byways, inhabiting both poem and play under various guises. One might instinctively turn to the tragedies and histories for dramatic illustrations of wickedness: Iago's twisted machinations, Hamlet's derangement, Lear's blind hatred, Richard III's ruthless resolve, Titus Andronicus's perverse vengefulness. Yet it is the late plays, those enigmatic works once grouped under the contested label of "romances", that I propose offer the richest ground for probing what we may call Shakespeare's mature characterization of evil: no longer an engrossing tapestry of fiery threads, burning passions and searing acts of violence; rather, a more muted scenery, a landscape that deliberately tempers the stage's immediate sensory thrills to accommodate disparate places, distant lands, picaresque shipwrecks and improbable adventures; a performance which calls audiences to accept (and possibly reflect on) the clunky compression of time, where hours, days, and years share the same backdrop with seemingly nonchalant disregard for dramatic unity; the allegorical aesthetics of the Masque; and even the meta-theatrical – Alessandro Serpieri would say ultra-theatrical – proclivities of its language (Serpieri 2008).

This transition from the visceral immediacy of tragedies and histories – also prominent in the 1594 *Rape of Lucrece* – to the ethereal modes of Romance is no mere theatrics. Where tragedies thrust evil into the glaring spotlight of spectacle, the romances allow it to seep unobtrusively – uncovering its shallow roots in human frailty and bureaucratic inertia. The ultimate dramatization of evil, Shakespeare seems to suggest, can only emerge through forms that acknowledge our incomplete grasp of evil itself, of the "*mysterium iniquitatis*" which has long preoccupied theologians and philosophers². The sylvan wilds of these

1 Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a prime example. Clark Hulse talked about an "aesthetic of mutilation" and noted that "even among revenge tragedies *Titus Andronicus* is especially brutal (Hulse 1979, 1). For comprehensive treatments of violence in Elizabethan and Early Modern theatre see Dessen 1984, Allard and Martin 2009, and Hiscock 2022.

2 The passage appears in the Latin Vulgate as "Nam mysterium iam operatur iniquitatis" (2 Thess. 2:7 Vulg.) and in early English translation as "For the mystery of iniquity doeth already work: only he which now withholdeth, shall let till he be taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7 GNV). It is understood to refer to a mysterious, ongoing force of evil at work in the world that will ultimately

late plays serve as fitting metaphors for scenes where one might easily 'miss the forest for the trees'. What is needed is a 'double focus': one eye on the immediate psychological reality – which Shakespeare had already mastered in *Lucrece* – and another on the broader landscape of possibility that only these late plays dare explore. For if a narrative poem like *Lucrece* reveals evil's genesis in exquisite psychological detail, the late plays show how its full reaches and motives forever elude comprehension. And yet these remain woven in the common fabric of everyday life – not solely in grand displays of violence, but in the hushed moments of self-betrayal that Shakespeare had already begun to dissect in his poems, and which find their fullest, most nuanced expression towards the end of his career.

My readings of evil in the romances – necessarily selective and exploratory – revolve around two key concepts, which for the sake of brevity can be condensed into two formulas. The first is the *mysterium iniquitatis* mentioned earlier, which brackets the theological, philosophical and ethical debate around 'the problem of evil'. This mystery lies at the heart of theodicy – efforts to reconcile divine goodness with the existence of evil – and continues to inform the modern "ponerological" approaches that empirically investigate evil's origins and mechanisms³. While framing evil as an inscrutable mystery may seem to concede too readily to eschatological fatalism, this approach does not retreat from critical inquiry. Rather, it acknowledges the inherent lim-

lead to the Antichrist's arrival and a final confrontation between good and evil before Christ's Second Coming. The original Greek τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας has been variously rendered as "the mystery of iniquity" in early modern translations (GNV; KJV) and as "the mystery of lawlessness" (ESV; NRSV) or "the secret power of lawlessness" (NIV) in contemporary versions. Today, theologians, philosophers, and literary critics explore this concept not only in terms of eschatology and theodicy but also in political theology and analyses of systemic evils like totalitarianism and societal moral decline.

3 Ponerology (the empirical study of evil) and theodicy (reconciling evil with divine benevolence) are interrelated, but they offer distinct frameworks. Though the term "ponerology" is rarely used explicitly in Shakespeare criticism, scholars like Greenblatt (1991) and van Oort (2016) may be said to use ponerological principles to probe evil's structural and psychological aspects. Others, like Cefalu (2004) and Cox (2007), focus more on theodicean questions. A clear distinction is hard to maintain, but the contrast captures the diverse critical perspectives on evil in Shakespeare, with ponerology's potential in this field remaining a goal for future research.

its of rational explanation in the face of evil's manifestations – both transcendent (*metaphysical*) and immanent (*empirical*). Within this interpretive model, the *mysterium iniquitatis* functions not as an abdication of moral responsibility or negation of human agency, but rather as a hermeneutic lens that magnifies the complex dialectic between transcendent mystery and temporal accountability – a dynamic that the romances deftly interrogate, as they set grand, cosmic malevolence against the mundane lapses of ethical imagination. These plays dramatize evil as both a *mysterium* and an immanent human failing: cosmic forces like Sycorax's lingering curses (*The Tempest*) or the bear's savage indifference (*The Winter's Tale*) embody metaphysical evil, while Leontes's self-destructive jealousy and Posthumus' misogynistic rage (*Cymbeline*) root wrongdoing in empirical moral collapse. At the same time, the romances resist fatalism by intertwining these dimensions. Evil's origins may elude understanding, yet its effects demand ethical reckoning and repair. Prospero's magic (transcendent) sets the stage for reconciliation, but human acts of penitence and forgiveness (empirical) ultimately redeem. Emphasis on dull ethical failures as the breeding ground for evil resonates with the second key concept informing my analysis: Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil" (*die Banalität des Bösen*). Coined in her 1963 analysis of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann and expanded upon in her later moral philosophy, the phrase has been read to convey the idea that evil-doing often stems not from diabolical malice but from a prosaic "inability to think" (*Gedankenlosigkeit*, Arendt 1963, 57) – particularly Eichmann's striking "inability [...] to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (49). The "word-and-thought-defying banality of evil" (252) crystallizes a broader phenomenon: the way evil operates less through demonic will or profound malice, than through shallow, automated actions divorced from substantive moral reflection. In her subsequent writing, especially *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Arendt explored how this banality stems not from stupidity but from what she called "absence of thinking" – a failure to engage in genuine dialogue with oneself⁴. This dialectic between evil as metaphysical mystery

4 Both books were originally written in English (as Arendt was living in the USA) and later translated into German. I use the German *Gedankenlosigkeit* because Mary McCarthy pointed out that 'thoughtlessness' did not capture the nu-

and evil as bureaucratic banality offers a productive model for examining how Shakespeare's romances navigate between supernatural and humdrum forms of wrongdoing, between cosmic villainy and the stock failures of moral imagination that characterize so many of their antagonists. The plays dramatize evil's banality, as characters like Cloten (*Cymbeline*) or Leontes wreak destruction through petty viciousness born of truncated self-understanding. Yet significantly, even the most reflective figures in the plays, those who urgently pore over their own motives, are unaffected – witness Posthumus' self-lacerating anguish or Prospero's conflicted machinations of vengeance. Thinking too narrowly, the plays suggest, may breed its own kind of ethical near-sightedness. Between the *mysterium* and the banal, Shakespeare's romances open up vital questions around the well-springs of evil and the possibilities and limits of moral reckoning. *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* share key pre-occupations and motifs, yet stage distinctive visions of malevolence and the thorny path to its redress.

Black villainy, soft flattery

Shakespeare's romances challenge our notions of how evil takes dramatic form. Even in its fragmented state, *Pericles's* episodic set-up mirrors the dispersed, iterative nature of evil. Rather than relying on sensational villainy or wily scheming, *Pericles* uses a layered, quasi-medieval framing that both highlights and distances moral corruption. At the outset, the "old song" of *Pericles's* misadventures is conjured on stage by a revenant poet (Gower) who claims to have come back from the dead (though not to actual life) to offer his tale as a possible restorative, with the aim "to make men glorious" (I.o.9)⁵. The moral lesson is clear: *Pericles's* endurance of many trials will test and strengthen the audience's mettle in the face of life's inevitable adversities, in view of a "glory" to be achieved either on this earth or

ance of the term Arendt intended. The essential question was whether the act of thinking – examining events regardless of results or specific content – could condition people to refrain from evil. (Arendt 1978, 4-5; 14)

5 All parenthetical Act and Scene references in each section of this paper correspond to the Arden edition of the play under discussion, as listed in the references, unless otherwise noted.

beyond. The tenor of the scene is that of miracle plays, with hints to the Lenten liturgy (ashes, ember days) and a purposeful use of archaic language (holy hailes) and Latin lore. Gower himself, who wishes he could live, acts as a temporally distant but spatially close reminder of life's fragility: a *memento mori* of sort that comes to engage and quite possibly challenge the "riper wit" of his Renaissance audience. We should note that, as "latter times" people, the members of this audience are explicitly juxtaposed to the "olden" customs, possibly also the superstitions, evoked by Gower, to which they are now implicitly said to be immune. The contrast is meaningful, because it also projects the story onto the historically charged 16th century stage where the ethical narratives and the theodicies of Protestant (Latter-day) modernity and Catholic tradition compete. No sooner has Gower taken us to Antioch than we are faced with an "evil", Gower chides, that "should be done by none" (I.o.28), and it is with the scandalous backdrop of incest that the long chain of trials facing Pericles, but also his wife Thaisa and daughter Marina begins. The whole play is a tableau-like dramatization of endurance against fate – Hamlet's "outrageous fortune" given lurid new shape. If, as critics have suggested, Hamlet's dithering anticipates the qualms of modernity, Pericles may be said to offer a distinctive response to modern anxieties by presenting evil less as an unfathomable metaphysical vertigo – the kind that paralyzed Hamlet's will – than as a phenomenon whose extensive reach across the landscapes of human experience belies its tenuous ontological foundations. The reframing of evil's nature, both thematic and formal, deserves closer examination in select passages of the play.

Antiochus's riddle – "I am no viper, yet I feed / On mother's flesh which did me breed" (I.i.65-66) – masks iniquity with rhetorical paradox only to reveal it as a hollow, human transgression rather than an unfathomable mystery. Pericles's reaction to Antioch's "foul incest" marks how *Pericles* stages evil less as a metaphysical abyss than as a threadbare force. His theodicean protest – "O, you powers [...] Why cloud they not their sights perpetually / If this be true?" (I.i.73-76) – strongly echoes the traditional question of why heaven tolerates evil. But the play persistently demystifies that quality of evil, whether through Antiochus's easily unravelled riddling, Dionyza's thwarted attempt to murder Marina, or the brothel-keepers' venality. Even Cleon's complaint that "heaven slumber while their creatures want"

(I.iv.16) veers from cosmic indictment toward immediate, practical concerns about suffering. In this way, *Pericles* anticipates what Arendt would later call the “banality of evil”: for all their disorienting ubiquity and formidable excesses, evil’s tendrils in this play sprawl wide but fail to root metaphysically. What we encounter are shallow depths – a paradox that captures the Arendtian representation of evil in *Pericles*, where iniquity’s reach is simultaneously vast and insubstantial. Radical evil this is not⁶: it is as if, having plunged the mental depths of malevolent introspection, Shakespeare had re-emerged to an outer scenery of worldly perils; a landscape tinged with the allegorical features of chivalric quests – of travels and travails, temptations and trials, violence and vice – a drama that, unexpectedly, is morally, if not literally, familiar to its audience. The dangers (*pericula*) prince Pericles’s story incurs, be they human or natural, resonate with our experiential (*experiri*) history as onlookers. Shakespeare’s romance plays have been found wanting in realism, a feature that is instead readily praised as a virtue of the tragedies and the histories. But dramatic realism is obviously a contentious notion, and the propensity to label the staging of graphic violence or the rhetoric of bleak brutality as truer to life than the staging of comedies or romances is at the very least dubious. Comedies and romances do stage situations that are true to life. The enduring and endurance of evil imagined in a romance like *Pericles* ring true; the play’s episodic structure may lack the stark formal economy of classical drama but is congenial to the sprawling developments/reaches of experienced life, which, like Pericles, knows times of healing and redress, opportunities for reconciliation and redemption. As hinted above, Serpieri used the term “ultra-theatre” in reference to Shakespeare’s romance plays, to describe what he sees as a “progressive distancing of the playwright’s gaze from the first-hand rendering of turbulent action” via “a never-ending series of illusionistic perspectives” (Serpieri 2008, 38). For him this occurs in *The Tempest* foremost, via the pervasive and demiurgic gaze of Prospero, who still fails to achieve moral closure and gives up his own panoptic power.

6 Arendt revised her view on evil’s nature after the Eichmann trial. While she initially characterized evil as “radical” in the context of totalitarian atrocities, her controversial “banality of evil” observation led her to reconsider. In her unfinished *Life of the Mind* (1978), she developed this latter concept, which partly aligns with the Patristic view of evil as privation rather than an ontological force.

But to a different degree we also find meta- and ultra-theatre in *Pericles*, via Gower who acts as the ordainer of events dictated by Fate. By foreclosing all pretense to realism and consciously rehashing the outdated plots, themes and motifs of romance, Shakespeare's late plays instantiate an ultra-realist aesthetics, a sort of double take on the very real existence of suffering and evil previously explored and exploded in the tragedies. Following Serpieri's lead, we would propose that a signal aim of such ultra-realist aesthetics is to trace the meanderings of iniquity, its manifold existential "visitations", yet via a distant, reflective lens and a broader, wide-angle scope. Such ultra-realist lens makes it possible for characters (Pericles, Marina, Thaisa) and narrator (Gower) to tell of the reoccurrence – predictable but always disconcerting in its outcomes and mystifying in its reasons – of "actions blacker than the night" (I.i.136) without being compromised by the outrage of their force, stunned by their graphic horrors, or altogether dragged deep down into their mire. As highly choreographed and self-contained performances, both the initial riddle contest at Antioch and the tilting match in Pentapolis exemplify how the play's meta-theatrical framework serves to simultaneously contain and expose evil's presumptuous claims to metaphysical depth. When Antiochus compares Pericles's task to the labours of Hercules in Hesperus's Garden (I.i.27-28), the *hortus conclusus* topos does more than merely conflate classical and biblical imagery – it strategically deploys allegory to reveal how evil's apparent mysteries mask more prosaic realities. The garden's guardian dragon, a terrifying archetype of threshold-keeping in the Hesperides myth, is diminished in Antiochus's riddle to mere rhetorical ornament – its ostensibly threatening presence dissolving under scrutiny, much like the riddle's own hollow pretensions to inscrutable mystery. This deliberate deflation of mythological *gravitas* serves the play's broader strategy of exposing evil's claims to metaphysical depth. Similarly, the tilting contest, with its deliberately archaic pageantry and ritualistic Matachin movements, frames human encounters with evil not as metaphysically charged battles but as stylized tableaux whose very formality underscores their constructed status. That Pericles prevails despite his rusty armor, bearing the impress "In hac spe vivo" (II.ii.43), suggests how hope – defined theologically as "the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1) – operates by seeing through evil's ordinary mystifications.

Viperous slander, lingering poisons

If *Pericles* strips evil of metaphysical grandeur, *Cymbeline* exposes its viral spread through language itself. Evil slithers its way into Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in the guise of poison, both as a potion that causes physical illness or death and, more pervasively, as toxic language, harmful to the moral or psychological integrity of individuals, of households and of the body politic. Cymbeline's second wife, an unnamed Queen, is the play's prominent *empoisoness*, determined to use Doctor Cornelius's "poisonous compounds" (I.v.8) to her bitter ends. Early in the play, when questioned by Cornelius about her intents with the drugs she requested of him, the Queen claims she needs them for her "confections", compounds whose "several virtues and effects" (I.v.23) she wishes to try. The lexicon is that of early science, with explicit reference to animal testing, so much so that in the Queen's stated aim to "amplify [her] judgement in / Other conclusions" (I.v.17) critics have discerned dismissive allusions to the Baconian augmentation of science via controlled experiments (Shakespeare 2017). Doctor Cornelius, rebuked for thinking her "devilish", warns her of the side-effects, physical and moral: the danger of contamination and a hardened heart.

QUEEN

I will try the forces
Of these thy compounds on such creatures as
We count not worth the hanging – but none
Human –
To try the vigour of them and apply
Allayments to their act, and by them gather
Their several virtues and effects.

CORNELIUS

Your highness
Shall from this practice but make hard your heart.
Besides, the seeing these effects will be
Both noisome and infectious.

(*Cymbeline*, I.v.18-26)

Poison "lingers" in the play in many forms. Posthumus becomes Cymbeline's moral bane, but he is also banished for his literal tainting of the royal blood line in his pursuit of Innogen: "Thou'rt poison

to my blood" (I.i.129). Iachimo provides a lurid description of the "diseased ventures" of Italian brothels, whose venereal rotteness "as well might poison poison" (I.vi.122-28). Posthumus's letter instructs Pisanio to kill Innogen for her supposed breach, provided Pisanio's own faith has not been "tainted" by her conjugal infidelity (III.iv.26). And Sicilius Leonatus, appearing to his son Posthumus in his sleep, chides him for letting Iachimo "taint his nobler heart and brain with needless jealousy" (V.iv.48-49). The extent of corruption – individual, social, political – brought about by noxious language is summed up in a telling aside by Pisanio, for whom "slander [...] out-venoms all the worms of the Nile" (III.iv.35):

PISANIO [*aside*]

What shall I need to draw my sword?

The paper Hath cut her throat already. No, 'tis slander,

Whose edge is sharper than the sword, whose tongue

Out-venoms all the worms of Nile, whose breath

Rides on the posting winds and doth belie

All corners of the world. Kings, queens and states,

Maids, matrons, nay the secrets of the grave

This viperous slander enters.

(*Cymbeline*, III.iv.33-39)

Malicious gossip cuts across all social ranks and polities in a pervasive reach that defiles "All corners of the world". And the play provides multiple instances of this reach, most notably in the hardships of Innogen, the target of the Queen's venomous machinations; a victim of Iachimo's voyeuristic lust and ruthless muckraking; the object of Cloten's rapist fantasies. Since she is synecdochically associated with Britain as a nation (Posthumus is said to have "forgot Britain", I.vi.112), all real or imagined attempts to violate her or smear her reputation have long been read as "the proleptic penetration of Britain by Latin and by Roman culture" (Kerrigan 2008, 64). Accordingly, "not-fearing Britain" (II.iv.19) is repeatedly set up against "drug-damned Italy" (III.iv.15). Italian women – "the shes of Italy" (I.iii.29); "the jay[s] of Italy" (III.iv.49) in Innogen's disparaging words – and Italian men partaking of the "Romish stew" (I.vi.151) are pointed out as equal symptoms of unredeemable decadence. Shakespeare intentionally rehashes contemporary bias against Italy as the ultimate seat and site of evildoing. But the

Popish straw-man is staged only to show that the contrast between the two countries is surreptitious, for Britain's own Queen is in fact the master *empoisoness*, even if her much vaunted arts eventually come to nothing. Like the venom of slander, the Queen's poison spreads out, but fails to seep through. Its shallow action lacks potency and its threat ends with the Queen's fateful – yet bathetic – demise.

The play's resolution demotes evil-doing from metaphysical force to contingency. Iachimo's pardon – "The malice towards you to forgive you. Live, / And deal with others better" (V.v.418-19) – suggests that evil loses its hold when met with performative acts of reconciliation. Likewise, the abrupt cessation of war with Rome implies that political conflicts, often shrouded in the aura of impenetrable historical or ideological necessity, can instead collapse into a practical, interest-driven negotiation. This is not to suggest that the "fierce abridgment" (V.v.381) of strife trivializes the depth of suffering evil produces – evil persists in the play's world: it endures and must be endured. It rather implies that evil's power is largely derivative and contingent: an insight long explored in the theological debates of Western theodicy, notably on the scriptural *mysterium iniquitatis* mentioned earlier, which grapple with evil's apparent inscrutability even as they deny it any independent, transcendent essence. In more overtly political terms, the *translatio imperii* motif embedded in *Cymbeline*'s final decision over the tribute to Rome attests to the ongoing presence of evil. Yet the swift and unexpectedly easy resolutions – "Never was a war did cease, / Ere bloody hands were washed, with such a peace" (V.v.483-84) – remind us that what looks like a grand, intractable struggle may be but a passing episode in the shifting patterns of human history and, from a theological perspective, in divine providence.

This demystification of evil's supposed grandeur extends into the play's treatment of gender and power. The Queen's scheming, initially impressive in its cunning, ultimately proves an illusion. Hastily dismissed by *Cymbeline* as "naught" (V.v.270), she becomes an unwitting agent of the final joyful reunion, thereby exposing the instability of her supposed command over life and death. Conversely, Innogen's empowerment comes via the unfashionable paths of constancy, a humility that facilitates both familial and national reconciliation. The anticipated threat of the "villain mountaineers" (IV.ii.71), follows a similar pattern, as these "rustic" men turn out to be agents of restoration rather than

corruption. Confronted with the encroaching forces of evil that shadow Shakespeare's late romances, the mountain-dwelling princes of *Cymbeline* behave with a steadfast moral dignity that transcends their uncouth upbringing. Removed from the artifices of courtly life and its hidden traps, they acquire virtues honed in the rough crucible of nature, where survival depends on courage, honesty, and resourcefulness. In this elemental classroom, deeds, not titles, reveal who a person truly is. Thus, their unadorned moral sentiment – shaped by contact with the earth's seasons and the raw struggle for sustenance – functions as a subtle yet forceful rebuttal to the notion that moral refinement flows solely from aristocratic breeding. Rather, the brothers' innate decency (III.iii.79) is cultivated through the straightforward demands of their rural existence, forging an ethic of robust mercy that does not falter when confronted by cruelty. We see this virtue come to the fore in their handling of evil: where courtly conspiracies would confound more delicate souls, they stand firm and act decisively, countering malign intentions with strength, insight, and a sense of justice. At the same time, their mourning the presumed dead with tenderness, as in the "wench-like words" of Arviragus (IV.ii.229), or via the imaginative ritual of strewing flowers and singing elegiac songs, imply that moral worth emerges where moral imagination meets lived experience. In doing so, the play affirms that the bedrock of goodness resides not in one's sex or in lofty birth, but in the patient cultivation of humane instincts – those which, born of rustic necessity and tempered by sorrow, can rise, however humbly, to meet the darkness and help dispel it.

This same logic applies to Cloten's fate. Guiderius's swift and utilitarian neutralization of this ostensible threat demonstrates how seemingly metaphysical menace can dissolve under decisive pragmatic intervention. His calculated intervention manifests not an eruption of metaphysical malevolence but an unmediated response to imminent threat, standing in marked contrast to the elaborate, self-conscious displays of power that characterize tyrannical authority both within and beyond Shakespeare's corpus. Such theatrical displays of power, exemplified by the severed heads adorning Lud's Town and their analogues in *Pericles*, reveal evil's fundamental anxiety about its own transience while exposing its compensatory reliance on spectacle to mask an underlying absence of metaphysical substance. The interplay between death, ritual, and renewal further contributes to

evil's gradual exposure as a shallow construct. The false funeral for Innogen/Fidelio and the rites performed by Guiderius and Arviragus (IV.ii.257-80) serve not only as plot devices but as meditations on evil's ephemerality. Arviragus's reflections on flowers, echoing passages in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, invoke the tradition of pastoral elegy. These forms both acknowledge loss and resist the notion that evil's reach is deep. As Warren notes, "the language and rhythms convey a haunting impression that the body is itself becoming a part of the natural world" (Shakespeare 1998, 24) – yet this dissolution into nature is temporary, much like the Queen's supposedly potent poisons that ultimately fail to secure enduring harm. Nature's ongoing processes – signified by the robin, the blossoms, and the rhythms of the season – persist indifferent to human efforts to invest death or evil with cosmic significance. The ritual elements of the play's conclusion – prophecies, tablets, offerings, and the reconciliation with Rome – further frame evil as something that can be addressed, if not fully comprehended, through human institutions. The very formality of these proceedings, with their emphasis on "crooked smokes" rising to divine nostrils and peace ratified in Jupiter's temple, suggests that evil's *mysterium* can be addressed in the very human and very real modes of policy and liturgy, even as its workings remain ultimately opaque to finite understanding and impervious to definitive treatment. This may very well be the dramatic device that upholds this and later Shakespearean plays: a dynamic tension between the alternating allures of demystification and mystification, between the exposure and the unveiling of evil's shallow ways – a much needed act of Arendtian thinking that attests to our human ability for repair and redress – and evil's nagging persistence, which the human daily experience of suffering, pain and death must acknowledge.

The same tension is evident in the quick resolutions and smooth closures of *Cymbeline*'s final act, which seem suspiciously easy. Coupled with the play's emphasis on misrecognition and revelation, such resolutions hint that the underlying conditions that breed evil may still persist, partially concealed in the folds of social order and hierarchy, even in its apparent defeat. Questions of legitimacy and recognition brought about by the play suggest as much. Innogen's warning that "Men's vows are women's traitors" (III.iv.54-57) comes as a reminder that evil may lurk, entrenched in the long-standing institutions of

patriarchy and empire, exerting its power well beyond the contingent remit of malevolent individuals. Yet to reduce Shakespeare's late plays to mere dramatizations of social inequality or psychic malaise is equally misguided. *Cymbeline*, like other romances, insists that there is a dimension of human life and moral experience – call it the numinous or the spiritual – that resists purely materialistic readings. Even as the play strips evil of its metaphysical pretensions, it admits that fully transcending evil's mystery lies beyond human reason. The soothsayer's cryptic pronouncements and Jupiter's tablet suggest that confronting evil involves not only rational judgment but an openness to forms of knowledge that dwell at the limits of reason: modes of understanding – of “standing under” or “in the midst” of evil deeds – that both inhabit and transcend human initiative and thought⁷. *The Winter's Tale* extends this insight through its more explicit treatment of faith and redemption, where Leontes's “fond jealousies” will require not merely resolve but soul-searching and personal transformation across time. *Cymbeline*'s episodic progression allows for evil's gradual exposure through geographic dispersion – from court intrigue to wilderness exile. *The Winter's Tale*'s will use temporal distance – its notorious sixteen-year gap – to suggest a more radical confrontation with time's transformative power in the face of iniquity.

Fond jealousies, heavy matters

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* stages a peculiar form of evil that arises less from grand villainy than from the relentless corrosion of trust and reason. The hazy boundaries of evil retold and evil experienced, or the narrative of exceptional malevolence and the everyday experience of it, are at the centre of *The Winter's Tale*, that self-reflective “sad tale's best for winter [...] of sprites and goblins” (II.i.25-28) which a story-telling child – doomed Mamilius – is only allowed to begin. His hackneyed story of a man “dwelt by a churchyard” is brutally cut off by Leontes “whose real-life story of mysterious deaths, lingering be-

7 The English verb “understand” carries a complex etymological heritage. While its Old English root *understandan* clearly contains “under” and “stand”, scholars debate whether it emerged from standing under, among, or before something. The possible implied link between intellectual grasp and endurance in uncertainty remains compelling. (OED, Etymology)

side graves and reanimations, now begins" (Shakespeare 2014b, 189). From the outset, Shakespeare invites us to witness how a seemingly commonplace feeling – jealousy – curdles into violence, aligning with the pattern of *Pericles*: evil often emerges through ordinary impulses that turn monstrous under fear and suspicion. The core theme is one of irrational jealousy, that "green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on" in Iago's warning to Othello (*Othello*, III.iii.168-69), the same "green-eyed jealousy" (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.ii.110) Portia was learning to let go in her ecstatic abandon to actual love for Bassanio. Leontes's self-feeding account of jealousy against his wife Hermione and his childhood friend Polixenes flares up early on in the play and quickly festers: "an infection of [his] brains" causing distress, suffering, and death. In an outburst of imagined violence, Leontes threatens to burn both mother and her newborn baby (Perdita) at the stake, or even "dash out" the child's brains with his bare hands:

LEONTES

[to Antigonus] If thou refuse,
And wilt encounter with my wrath, say so;
The bastard brains with these my proper hands
Shall I dash out. Go, take it to the fire,
For thou set'st on thy wife.
(*The Winter's Tale*, II.iii.136-39)

Leontes's contorted soliloquy in Act I gives us a measure of the overwrought state of his soul⁸. The notoriously obscure lines reflect on – or possibly give vent to – the unsettling reaches of "Affection", Leontes' provisional label for naming the cause of his sudden distress. It comes as no surprise that the conflated senses of "Affection" should be far from transparent⁹. If anything, Leontes's speech short-circuits

8 Early modern definitions of "mind" cover semantic branches that its current equivalent has largely cut off, including aspects of volition, spirit, and moral character. Hence my deliberate choice of "soul" here (*OED* sense II.iii.15).

9 Pitcher (Shakespeare 2014b, 40) describes these as "the most obscure lines in Shakespeare". He also argues that in the play, "affection" – the presumed addressee of Leontes's soliloquy – is a key word with varied meanings, including deep fraternal love, overwhelming sexual desire, the power of the mind, intense emotional longing, and disposition (147, n. 24). See I.ii.137-46; IV.iv.384; 485-86; V.i.219; V.ii.36; 100, and IV.iv.425 with Pitcher's introduction (39-42).

the semantic gamut covered by such vague a term as affection (as both familial love for his “collop” Mamilius and *erotic* attachment to his wife) with the “infection” of mind (I.ii.145) he claims he has been tainted with as an “effect” of adultery. Shakespeare’s layering of senses around the affection/infection binary is a major core of meaning-making in the play, giving multiple dramatic utterances to an emotional tension that is potentially both active and passive, either *in bono* (that is active cultivation or passive acceptance of feeling and emotions), or *in malo* (actively destructive force, or passive resignation to fate or forces, instinctual, cultural, social that lie beyond one’s sphere of influence)¹⁰. Leontes’s affection is quite unlike the mild fondness, tender or “favourable disposition” the word now usually conveys (*OED* sense II.8). It is a controlling emotion, taking over “beyond commission”, a violent passion that seizes and “stabs”. Affection strikes at the heart of one’s being (“stabs the centre”): it pierces through the hazy domains of lust (as an instinct to “co-join with”, which would result in offspring) and desire (an “unreal”, transcendent communication with one’s dreams and what is yet to come to fruition, which would “fellow nothing”). By doing so, affection engenders infection and disease, an “abnormal state” of body and mind of which Hermione herself has fallen victim¹¹. The final “And / And / And” anaphora serves well to convey the piling up of emotions and the irresistible spread of infection:

LEONTES

Sweet villain,

Most dearest, my collop! Can thy dam? May’t be

Affection? – Thy intention stabs the centre,

Thou dost make possible things not so held,

Communicat’st with dreams – how can this be? –

With what’s unreal thou coactive art,

10 Affect studies are obviously well placed to shed light on the dynamics of affection/infection in the play, with the proviso that ideological underpinnings of affect theory may more readily align with a discussion of the passive, mechanical entanglements of affect. For a perceptive discussion of evil as a form of sinful contamination see Parvini (2018, 269).

11 *OED* sense II.7. The conflation of affection with infection mirrors the blending of sin and sickness – a point Leontes later echoes about Hermione: “Were my wife’s liver / Infected as her life, she would not live / The running of one glass” (I.ii.302-04).

And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent
 Thou mayst co-join with something, and thou dost,
 And that beyond commission, and I find it,
 And that to the infection of my brains
 And hard'ning of my brows.
 (*The Winter's Tale*, I.ii.136-46)

Leontes's experience of coexisting emotions is, ultimately, an experience of the tangle of good and evil that is human life. His all-consuming jealousy can be traced to his unsettled concept of "Affection". In Act I, he grapples with an amorphous passion for Hermione, Polixenes, and their child Mamilius – both a familial bond and an erotic or possessive impulse. He deploys the same word, "Affection," to denote a suspected "infection" of his brain (I.ii.145). Shakespeare's conflation of these terms shows how quickly love and trust can invert into suspicion, which tarnishes moral judgment. Leontes's evocative speech – "Affection? – Thy intention stabs the centre [...] And that to the infection of my brains" (I.ii.136-146) – juxtaposes creative potential ("co-join with something") with diseased imagination. This duality captures the working of the play's evil: a generative force (affection) twisted into self-destructive paranoia (infection). Leontes's paroxysm triggers real harm: he threatens to burn Hermione and their newborn daughter at the stake or "dash out" the child's brains with his bare hands (II.iii.136-39). His frenzy colours every relationship, implicating friends like Camillo, who becomes a "hovering temporizer" merely for seeing "good and evil" at once (I.ii.300-01). These outbursts recall the "incest riddle" in *Pericles*: in both plays, Shakespeare shows how the seeds of evil – incest, jealousy – fester when cloaked in murky rhetoric. But whereas *Pericles* demystifies wrongdoing by exposing its shallowness from the start, *The Winter's Tale* immerses us in the escalating folly of Leontes's mind. His unbalanced "diseased opinion" (I.ii.295) latches onto trivial "notes infallible" of wrongdoing, forging a warped logic that scorns all evidence to the contrary. Leontes's rhetorical strategies highlight how easily fear overrides sense. In a barrage of insistent questions – "Is whispering nothing? Is leaning cheek to cheek? [...] Is this nothing?" (I.ii.283-90) – he insists these minor gestures prove Hermione's guilt. Shakespeare deploys a device akin to *apodioxis*,

a rhetorical figure of scornful rejection which “chases away” or dismisses an opposing view by sidestepping shared knowledge (*apodixis*, in fact) in favour of literal sophistry¹²:

LEONTES

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.

(*The Winter's Tale*, I.ii.283-94)

By repeating the word “nothing,” Leontes paradoxically escalates the importance of trifles until they eclipse everything else: “Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing” (I.ii.290). If Hermione's supposed adultery is “nothing”, then Sicilia, Bohemia, and indeed reality itself must also be null – a logical contortion that ironically cements his erroneous conviction. This literal-minded obsession recalls the Pauline warning that “the letter killeth” (2 Corinthians 3:6). For Leontes, external signs – hand-touching, laughter, “meeting noses” – become rigid “letters” of proof, killing the spirit of empathy and faith that might have rescued him from error. Leontes's madness sets in motion “heavy matters, heavy matters” (III.iii.109): a lost daughter, a dead son, a consort thought to have perished, a loyal friend torn to pieces by a bear, a whole crew perished in a harrowing storm at sea (III.iii.85-99). Even Paulina, who heroically defies Leontes, temporarily succumbs: her impassioned announcement of Hermione's death uses similarly gruesome imagery. The tone of her rhetorical questions

12 The *apodixis/apodioxis* pun opens up an intriguing byway into issues of knowledge, wisdom and common sense that would be relevant to Shakespeare's dramatization of good and evil but must be left unexplored here.

is apparently one of challenge and sarcasm, but in their visual intensity, they may also be said to partake of the wider infection propagated by Leontes, to which not even Paulina is entirely immune.

PAULINA

What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
 What wheels, racks, fires? What flaying, boiling
 In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
 Must I receive,
 (*The Winter's Tale*, III.ii.172-75)

Once unleashed, this ethos of cruelty infects speech, dragging the community into a shared paranoia: Antigonus, for instance, muses that if Hermione truly were unfaithful, he would “geld”¹³ his own daughters to avoid “false generations” (II.i.143-49). His lurid threat conflates bodily harm with moral purification – echoing Leontes’ puritanical flames (II.iii.136-39). Nor is violent language limited to Leontes and his court. Polixenes’s blood turns to “an infected jelly” (I.ii.413) when he hears of Leontes’ jealousy and laments that people will shun him “worse than the great’st infection / That e’er was heard or read” (I.ii.418-19). Later in the play, Polixenes threatens the helpless Shepherds “with divers deaths in death” (V.i.201), a *mise-en-abyme* of bodily torments which promises infinitely regressing, excruciating suffering. The shift to Bohemia’s pastoral setting initially promises relief from Sicilia’s claustrophobic suspicions, but the spectre of evil persists. The “satyrs’ dance”, though outwardly joyful, signals a primal, Dionysian energy that might veer toward chaos if unchecked. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the shepherds likewise complicates the notion of a perfect pastoral: the Old Shepherd initially weighs how Perdita might profit his family, while his son (the “Clown”) tries to reckon with the grim necessity of burying Antigonus’s remains. These figures reflect an earthy pragmatism that is neither purely good nor evil; rather, they inhabit the same moral continuum where fear and opportunism can feed destructive choices. Into this mosaic of infected minds and tragic consequences enters Autolycus, a roguish trickster whose name links him to the cunning “lone wolf” of myth. He pilfers and lies, yet never aspires to the

13 Gelding usually refers to the castration of male animals or men (*OED* sense 1.a).

catastrophic harm caused by Leontes's blind wrath. In self-mocking candour, he calls himself a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles" (IV.iii.26), implicating only petty larceny, not tragic betrayal.

Where Leontes's jealousy metastasizes into cosmic dread, Autolycus's evil flourishes in the cracks of everyday thoughtlessness. Shakespeare thus draws a contrast between moral flaws that remain small-scale – grounded in opportunism or self-awareness – and those that swell into a tyranny of the "letter", refusing any introspection. Autolycus's presence complicates the categories of good and evil. His manipulations do not stem from cruelty but from a self-forgiving acceptance of his own failings – an outlook diametrically opposed to Leontes's righteous indignation. This suggests that evil in *The Winter's Tale*, as in *Pericles*, often hinges on the refusal to acknowledge human frailty. Leontes tries to eradicate any possible taint in his court through violence, and Autolycus glides along with a shrug, acknowledging his roguery yet avoiding true malice. Yet the play's most devastating critique of evil emerges not in these male figures but in the silent, spectral suffering of Hermione – a shift from moral hypocrisy to the systemic erasure of female agency¹⁴. Her collapse during the trial (III.ii.144) is not merely a bodily ailment but a visceral embodiment of the play's central evil: the annihilation of her voice and autonomy through slander. Leontes' jealousy, framed as an "infection" of the mind (I.ii.145), metastasizes into a literal and figurative unravelling of familial and political order, leaving Hermione's "death" as both consequence and indictment. And her eventual resurrection complicates this narrative of evil: her silence and stasis become a rebuke to Leontes's destructive certainty, transforming her "loss" into an interstice where grace is possible. Unlike the overt villainy of Iachimo or Antonio in other romances, Hermione's ordeal reveals evil as a structural force – one that demands not just individual repentance (Leontes's grief) but collective reparation, a re-weaving of bonds severed by distrust. In this way, Shakespeare contrasts the destructiveness of rigid moralism with the redemptive potential of soft resilience – a tension that redefines evil not as mere malice but as the violent denial of humanity itself. Ultimately, *The Winter's Tale* resolves in a performance of renewal. Lost Perdita returns, Hermione

14 Altman speaks of Leontes' "reification" of Hermione (2023, 152-53).

reappears in a moment of near-miraculous resurrection, and Leontes, chastened, must face the weight of his actions.

This late-play change of direction signals Shakespeare's interest in exposing evil's "infection" only to reveal that it is less metaphysically profound than tragically human. Jealous rage, though devastating, can be overcome through atonement and communal support. Like *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* ends by suggesting that, while evil may spread quickly through emotional disarray and social panic, it cannot uproot deep-seated capacities for forgiveness and love. In the final act, family and community re-form around contrition, reunion, and a faith in what is not seen – precisely what Leontes had initially denied. In this sense, *The Winter's Tale* shares *Pericles*'s simultaneous recognition of evil's persistent banality and Shakespeare's refusal to grant its lasting dominion. If *Pericles* unmasked incest as mere mortal corruption, *The Winter's Tale* exposes irrational jealousy as a similarly human failing, dramatized through violent words and paranoid logic rather than by the cunning plots of a Machiavellian villain.

Nimble spirits, high charms

In the controlled environment of Prospero's Island, Shakespeare's treatment of evil takes on a distinctive philosophical and meta-reflective flavour. As thinking about thinking itself – a higher cognitive process that questions assumptions, critiques epistemic structures, or deepens self-awareness, meta-reflection involves nested layers of cognition ('I think that they think that I think') which illuminates how the "scheming mind" justifies its ends in the context of conspiratorial thinking. Plotters must consider how others think and how they themselves think; schemers must maintain awareness of their own thought processes while manipulating others, which calls for constant meta-level analysis of both their own and others' perspectives. It is no surprise that meta-reflection as plotting should be a key feature of *The Tempest*, starting with Prospero, both character and quasi-director, the 'Meta-Plotter' who orchestrates events and manoeuvres other characters. To start with a tentative generalisation, one could say that *The Tempest* stages evil as conspiracy: the dramatic architecture of the play foregrounds conspiratorial machination as its primary manifestation of malevolence. The text's narrative structure relies on intersecting networks of seditious

plotting, a layered presentation of conspiracy that serves to interrogate both the nature of political power and the moral features of its subversion. Empirically observed, tweaked and tested via the powerful magic of Prospero, evil comes most immediately to the surface in the murderous plotting of Antonio and Sebastian, in the parallel, foolish yet foul conspiracy of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban and in the guilt-ridden derangement of Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian and Gonzalo. But instances of iniquity are by no means limited to the present: they reach back into the past, “in the dark backward and abysm of time” of Miranda’s unsettling recollections (I.ii.50); into the “foul play” of Antonio’s usurpation and Prospero’s banishment (I.ii.60, 62); in Caliban’s attempt to “violate the honour” of Miranda (I.ii.349); in Sycorax’s black magic, which imprisoned Ariel in cloven pine (I.ii.293), and before that in the banishment of pregnant Sycorax herself (I.ii.269). All the while, Prospero plots to loosen all plots while reflecting on the nature of plotting itself.

The problem is that Prospero’s own meta-plotting is not exempt from the malevolent proclivities he empirically observes and directs. To start with, even though Prospero “construes his own magic as benign” (Shakespeare 2011, 26) and insists that “There is no harm done” (I.ii.15), the initial storm and its attending trials on the island may be magical simulations, but the physical suffering, the mental distress, and the emotional upheaval they cause is very real, so much so that Prospero will in the end feel the need to renounce his “rough magic” and bestow pardon. Also, despite its panoptic power, Prospero’s utter enthrallment with the effective power and latent potential of his “high charms”, whereby his “enemies, are all knit up / In their distractions” and are “in [his] power” (III.iii.88-90), has obvious Faustian and Machiavellian implications, long noted by critics and acknowledged by Prospero himself, as he admits being “rapt in secret studies” (I.ii.77)¹⁵. Such implications present a variant of evil, whose reaches far transcend Prospero’s coarse (“rough”) practices of re-direction and containment, which must eventually be suspended and renounced. At this extreme meta-reflective level (*ultra-theatrical*, in Serpieri’s insight), evildoing in *The Tempest* is ambiguously entangled with the systematic deployment and swift exercise of expedient “instruction” (III.iii.85) meant to trig-

15 Critics remain divided over whether Prospero’s magic should be regarded as benign, evil, or inherently ambiguous (Shakespeare 2011, 62, n.2).

ger specific results. Prospero repeatedly congratulates himself and his spirits, most notably Ariel, over such "nimble" or "brave" effectiveness, which entails "observation strange" (III.iii.87) on the part of the "subjects": a measure of estrangement (or derangement) from life reflected in Alonso's "strange stare" (III.iii.94) and more generally in the recurrent motif of strangeness throughout the play:

PROSPERO

Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou
 Performed, my Ariel; a grace it had, devouring.
 Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated
 In what thou hadst to say. So, with good life
 And observation strange, my meaner ministers
 Their several kinds have done. My high charms work,
 (*The Tempest*, III.iii.83-88)

His "high charms" Prospero works with meticulous precision, as he takes evident pride in Ariel's literal adherence to his instructions, which leave "nothing bated" (III.iii.85), and duly notes the performance of other entities who "their several kinds have done" (III.iii.87-88). Beyond the magician's satisfaction, one may detect a tone of methodical (Arendt may say bureaucratic) relish in procedural compliance and in swift, unhesitating execution, modes of action that the initial "bravely" effectively conveys¹⁶. This interplay between magical efficacy and administrative efficiency invites fresh perspectives on both Prospero's ambivalent approach to moral testing and the play's broader meta-exploration of evil. The many "strange" phenomena in *The Tempest* have often been read either as partaking of the courtly aesthetics of the masque or as dramatizing – and potentially questioning – the period's appetite for exotic novelty¹⁷. To these well-trodden paths of research I would add an investigation of "strange" alongside "brave" and "nimble" as

16 "Brave" in *The Tempest* – notably in Miranda's "O brave new world" – carries layered meanings beyond its often-highlighted positive or exotic connotations (see Orgel 1988; Shakespeare 2011; Hulme 1986). Historical uses hint at a more ironic, morally vacant efficiency, a nuance that Aldous Huxley later underscores in *Brave New World* as a chilling marker of an ethically empty order (OED).

17 For an exploration of strangeness as a theatrical modality in *The Tempest* see Demaray 1998, and Hall 1996.

unstable terms that encapsulate the emerging forms of knowledge Prospero initially embraces against the backdrop of moral judgment. “Strange” might also point to the detached or estranged gaze that marks a utilitarian, morally indifferent way of looking at the world, with all the risks it entails.

The punning exchange between Sebastian and Antonio in Act II is a case in point. Sebastian comments on the “strange drowsiness” overcoming Alonso and Gonzalo, and later describes his own state of being “asleep with eyes wide open” as “a strange repose” (II.i.199-214). The strangeness here, as elsewhere in the play, has obviously to do with Prospero’s working magic, which has conveniently put Miranda to sleep and, via Ariel, has arranged the same for all the sailors aboard the King’s ship. But there is a twist to Prospero’s wondrous magic, regardless of whether it is part of Prospero’s own design. This “strange repose” also suggests a hypnotic suspension of conscience, required of Sebastian to go along with Antonio’s plan: to murder King and Councillor and seize control of Naples.

ANTONIO

My strong imagination sees a crown
Dropping upon thy head.

SEBASTIAN

What, art thou waking?

ANTONIO

Do you not hear me speak?

SEBASTIAN

I do, and surely
It is a sleepy language, and thou speak’st
Out of thy sleep. What is it thou didst say?
This is a strange repose, to be asleep
With eyes wide open – standing, speaking, moving
(*The Tempest*, II.i.209-15)

The common Early Modern notion of sleep as the mirror of death (Shakespeare 2011, 202, n. 261) is expediently deployed in Antonio’s murderous *double entendres*:

ANTONIO

Here lies your brother,
No better than the earth he lies upon.
If he were that which now he’s like (that’s dead)

Whom I with this obedient steel – three inches of it
 Can lay to bed forever
 (*The Tempest*, II.i.281-85)

Earlier in the same passage, when Antonio insists that he, like Sebastian, feels no need for sleep because his “spirits are nimble” (II.i.202) he is echoing Gonzalo’s earlier rebuke of him and Sebastian for being flippant, “of such sensible and nimble lungs that they always use to laugh at nothing” (II.i.174-75). Nimbleness here becomes a sign of moral agility stripped of ethical grounding – an expedient readiness to take advantage and commit crimes without hesitation, in direct contrast to Gonzalo’s utopian dream. Antonio’s nimble spirits are maliciously alert to the opportunity for regicide and they move swiftly to catch it, persistently eroding Sebastian’s scruples¹⁸.

Though Ariel is often cast as a benevolent intermediary, a closer look reveals unsettling undertones. Take, for instance, Ariel’s “full fathom five” song. Ostensibly consolatory, it envisions the drowned body of Ferdinand’s father not as a soul progressing toward transcendence, but as an assemblage of mineralized remains: bones turning to coral, eyes to pearls, the entire corpse reduced to “something rich and strange” (I.ii.397), a marvel one might find in a cabinet of curiosities¹⁹. Ariel, who once languished in a cloven pine at the hands of Sycorax, may be no innocent wanderer. And the spirit’s liberation by Prospero may have simply transferred servitude from one master to another, further complicating the moral frame of Ariel’s role. Far from radiating pure spiritual unity, Ariel’s perspective bears the chill of a clinical observer, one who sees the human subject as a mutable object – a phenomenon ripe for cataloguing rather than compassion. This reading finds resonance in Hannah Arendt’s brief but incisive reference to the song in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). For Arendt, “those are pearls that were his eyes” (I.ii.397) exemplifies modernity’s epistemological rupture, the dis-

18 The *OED* traces “nimble” to “nim” (a thief), underscoring qualities of quickness, cunning, and opportunity-seizing. Its metaphorical use extends to efficiency, rapid action, and cleverness – nuances recognized by thinkers such as Montaigne and Bacon.

19 For discussions of Renaissance wonder cabinets – sites where the “rich and strange” could be collected, cataloged, and displayed – see Harris (2009, 1; 187).

integration of the “thread of tradition” (212), which fractures the past into scattered, inert fragments.

The metamorphosis of Alonso’s eyes into pearls symbolizes a world where history is a collection of dismembered relics. Arendt does not frame this fragmentation as inherently malevolent; rather, she identifies it as modernity’s existential condition, where the “certainty of evaluation” (212) afforded by tradition dissolves, leaving behind remnants “rich and strange” precisely because they are severed from their original context. For Arendt, this rupture is generative – a *sea-change* that invites us to rethink the fragments of the past as materials for new meaning²⁰. Yet where Arendt emphasizes the creative potential of thinking, I argue that Ariel’s methodical description of Alonso’s transformation exposes the darker implications of this epistemological shift. His clinical gaze reflects not spiritual transcendence but a materialist taxonomy, reducing the dead to specimens in nature’s cabinet. This detachment, akin to the empiricist’s dispassionate scrutiny, underscores a world where moral imagination yields to curiosity – a shift that insidiously estranges us from human kinship.

While Arendt’s “dismantling” technique seeks to reanimate the past’s fragments through thought, Ariel’s song suggests a more insidious outcome: the normalization of a perspective that objectifies human subjects, rendering them inert curiosities in a disenchanted world. In this light, Ariel’s characterization as a “malignant thing” (I.ii.257) resonates with the subtler evils of Shakespeare’s late plays: not overt malice, but a normalization of disengagement, where life becomes matter and individuals transformed into objects. Such a viewpoint aligns less with the consolations of spiritual transcend-

20 Arendt’s reference to Shakespeare (see Pitkin 1998; Dahlgren 2006; Lupton 2011) centers on Ariel’s “sea-change” as a metaphor for the transformative power of thought rather than loss. The imagery of the drowned king’s bones becoming coral and his eyes turning to pearls illustrates how thinking reworks relics of the past into “something rich and strange” – a process that transcends linear history. For Arendt, as for T. S. Eliot, this metamorphosis involves a “dismantling” of tradition: inherited fragments become materials for reinterpretation. Ariel’s detached, clinical gaze exemplifies thinking’s ability to confront the past without nostalgia, using a materialist taxonomy to intersect old narratives. Like the sea that reshapes everything it touches, thinking’s creative transformation reflects modernity’s fractured relationship with tradition, demanding new ways to find meaning.

ence than with the detachment of a materialist gaze. T. S. Eliot's echo of Ariel's "full fathom five" in the "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1922, 315-18) picks up and intensifies this sinister undertone, reducing human life to the bare fact of physical dissolution and change, cast adrift in the indifferent churn of the elements²¹. This is not evil in the grand, demonic sense – Ariel's detachment is all the more unsettling for its subtlety. Stripped of overt malice, it threatens to normalize a world in which moral imagination and empathy are replaced by curiosity and dispassionate scrutiny. A "tricksy spirit" (V.i.227) in Prospero's words, in fact Ariel conveys a light-hearted, mischievous perspective. Traditional scholarship long viewed Ariel as a benevolent foil to Caliban's primal savagery, but contemporary critiques have increasingly dismantled this binary interpretation, revealing a figure enmeshed in the ambiguities of power²².

Postcolonial readings further destabilize Ariel's innocence and ethereal detachment²³. Collectively, these perspectives frame Ariel's

21 Garber (2008, 859-60) contrasts this passage with the death-by-drowning dream in *Richard III*, suggesting that "Clarence's horrific vision of decay becomes Ariel's blithe assurance of eternal change". I challenge labeling eternal change as "blithe", and would say that such a term overlooks the latent menace in the metamorphic imagery. I would argue that Shakespeare's death-by-water motif persists in *The Tempest* as a cyclical, self-contained materiality, starkly indifferent to human consolation. Mukherji (2016, 273) addresses the macabre, materialistic aesthetics of this passage.

22 Andrew Gurr (1996, 194), locates Ariel and Caliban within the theatrical *topos* of the "idle and industrious apprentice", contrasting the former's "industrious" servitude with the latter's "idle" recalcitrance – a framework that implicates Ariel in Prospero's authoritarianism, its zeal inseparable from subjugation. Orgel (Shakespeare 1998, 18; 27) deepens this tension, characterizing Ariel as a creature of fluid potential shackled to hierarchy. Bloom (1998, 663; 667) extends the critique into the occult, casting Prospero as "Shakespeare's anti-Faust" and Ariel as his hermetic familiar. Here, Ariel's role as a metaphysical enabler – whether of salvation or domination – renders its compliance inseparable from the moral ambiguities of power itself.

23 Brown (1985, 60) underlines the paradox of Ariel's seething subjection to Prospero. Hulme (1986, 144, 202) questions Ariel's reliability as an "impartial witness" in the matter of Sycorax and underlines his reluctance and volatility. While Marjorie Garber (2008, 862) cautiously upholds Ariel's traditional benevolence, she concedes the spirit's latent capacity for rebellion from bondage. Charry (Shakespeare 2022, 17; 29) traces this shift in South American criticism: Rodó's

“nimble” obedience as a troubling light-heartedness. Textually, Ariel’s ambiguity crystallizes in Prospero’s offhand branding of the spirit as “malignant” (I.ii.257), a term that invites subversive re-readings. Far from a “graceful” force, Ariel orchestrates Prospero’s illusions with clinical detachment, whether conjuring “flaming amazement” or adopting the harpy’s vengeful guise. While Ariel is hardly a pantomime villain, I think that there is sufficient textual evidence – and scholarly precedent – to support a less benevolent reading of this “brave spirit”. Ariel’s scopophilic gaze in the song to Ferdinand mentioned above – marked by detachment, amorality, and an almost clinical objectivity – renders death a neutral spectacle of decomposition – a material metamorphosis stripped of moral or metaphysical weight. Such moments recast Ariel not as a “purely light-hearted” spirit, but as an ethically ambiguous enforcer. To interpret Ariel as benign requires ignoring the chilling precision of its collaboration: power, even cloaked as “white magic”, thrives on the silent compliance of those who refuse to interrogate its designs.

If Ariel’s characterization captures one layer of this mischievous evil – the transformation of human life into a neutral object of scrutiny – *The Tempest* does not confine strangeness to that single register. As the play unfolds, it cultivates a more pervasive sense of disorientation, moving us beyond the malignant spirit’s detached gaze. Strangeness becomes cumulative, shifting from a suggestive undercurrent to a force that openly challenges natural order and moral certainty. By the time we reach Alonso’s admission that events “strengthen / From strange to stranger” (V.i.227-28), the play signals a broader anxiety: that the curious mind, driven by thirst for knowledge, might slide imperceptibly from lawful inquiry toward perilous obsession. At this juncture, Shakespeare’s portrayal aligns with the warnings of King James I’s *Daemonologie*, where the quest for understanding can, step by step, dissolve into the black art of magic²⁴. Prospero’s

1922 essay, which celebrates Ariel as the emblem of self-scrutiny and enlightened freedom, gives way to Retamar’s 1971 anti-colonial recalibration, where Caliban supplants Ariel as an icon of resistance.

24 James I warned that unchecked curiosity could lead to forbidden knowledge, suggesting that escalating inquiry might ultimately turn to the “black and unlawful science of Magic” (2016, 10). Vaughan and Vaughan (Shakespeare 2011, 64–66) connect this warning to Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* and the broader intellectual climate of the Jacobean court.

own "secret studies" and his "transported" state (I.ii.74-77) reflect the very transformation James feared – a legitimate intellectual pursuit yielding to something darker and less easily contained²⁵. Yet it is not only others – Ariel, Sebastian, Antonio, or even Sycorax – who exemplify this precarious slide into moral indifference. Prospero himself must eventually confront the "thing of darkness" he has helped to shape, a recognition that comes late (V.i.275-76). The line "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" has often been read as Prospero's admission that Caliban, whatever else he may be, cannot be fully disentangled from Prospero's own culpability.

In a play where "brave", "nimble", and "strange" ominously flag the subtle shapes evil can take – moments when curiosity turns callous, ingenuity warps into cunning, and the pursuit of knowledge slips toward ruthlessness – Prospero's words signal a reckoning. He is forced to see how his "secret studies" and manipulations have not been morally neutral but part of a pattern that reduces others to instruments or curiosities, leaving him stained by the very darkness he sought to master. Critical readings of *The Tempest* have long singled out Caliban as a perplexing embodiment of evil – whether as the "natural man" corrupted by colonial oppression, or as a symbol of untamed, "uncivilized" nature that threatens civilized order²⁶. Thus, whether seen as the malignant face of raw nature or the outcome of colonial evil, Caliban remains an ambivalent figure: monstrous, yet capable of poignant speech; cunning, yet often childlike in his resentments and dreams of freedom. This ambivalence aligns with *The Tem-*

25 For a discussion of Faustian features in *The Tempest* see Traister (1984), Mebane (1989), and Logan (2007).

26 Early Restoration commentators, such as John Dryden and William Davenant in their adaptation *The Enchanted Island* (1667), heightened Caliban's monstrosity (Vaughan and Vaughan 1996, 38–43). Later eighteenth-century critics continued to see in Caliban a "born devil" whose attempted assault on Miranda confirmed an innate bestiality. However, postcolonial interpretations complicated this view by suggesting that Caliban's violent outbursts might be products of Prospero's own colonizing regime – an argument made influentially by Mannoni (1956) and subsequently developed in Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969). Here, Caliban's bitterness and rebellious impulses emerge as responses to oppressive treatment, rendering him less a savage monster than a victim of cultural and psychological domination (the object of a "ponerological" approach to the study of evil (Brown 1985, 59–60; Greenblatt 1990, 27–32).

pest's wider thematic concerns: the question of responsibility for evil – be it native or imposed – cannot be reduced to a simple binary. Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo mirrors the high-born conspiracy of Antonio and Sebastian: in both, Shakespeare underscores how greed, resentment, and personal grievance distort moral judgment. At the same time, Prospero's role in Caliban's "education" – teaching him language while treating him as a lesser being – complicates the notion that Caliban's capacity for malice arises purely from innate savagery (Hulme 1986, 94-99). As with Prospero's admission "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.i.275-76), the play suggests that Caliban's darkness is partly Prospero's as well: a convergence of nature and nurture, unbridled impulse and overbearing authority (Brown 1985, 67-69; Vaughan and Vaughan 1996, 152-56). In this sense, Caliban stands at the intersection of multiple interpretive frames – colonial oppression, primal instinct, and moral complicity – deepening *The Tempest's* broader interrogation of how evil emerges wherever empathy fails and dominion supersedes dialogue.

This acknowledgment does more than merely highlight Prospero's complicity; it reverberates through the complex moral geography of the late plays. Here, Shakespeare suggests that evil need not appear in its most flamboyant forms – through overt acts of savagery or unbridled malice – but thrives in subtler guises, emerging where moral imagination fails and a skewed sense of "bravery" or "nimbleness" justifies treating others as means rather than ends. By calling the "thing of darkness" his own, Prospero confronts the entanglement of personal responsibility and intellectual ambition, laying bare the thin line between wonder and exploitation, between knowledge and hubris. This moment invites us to see that the capacity for evil may surface most perilously where it is least expected: not in chaos and cruelty alone, but in the quiet calculations that erode empathy.

This preoccupation with the moral implications of empirical knowledge finds its most vivid metaphor in the play's interplay of darkness and illumination. When Prospero speaks of "melting the darkness" (V.i.66), the phrase resonates well beyond the physical dawn. It points to a dissolution of the "ignorant fumes that mantle / Their clearer reason" (V.i.67-68), a cleansing of the fog that obscures moral judgment. Yet the agency behind this enlightenment is itself ambiguous. Prospero's magic may disperse ignorance as the

morning sun scatters night, but it does so from a position of power that remains ethically fraught. If darkness symbolizes not only literal obscurity but also the moral blindness that allows evil's subtle encroachments, then Prospero's power to "melt" touches on the very heart of the play's dilemma: the tension between knowledge as illumination and knowledge as domination, between a benevolent guiding hand and the subtle force that compels compliance.

Shakespeare's late plays offer a distinctive perspective on the quality of evil – one that anticipates yet complicates modern theoretical frameworks. While these plays acknowledge the insubstantiality of evil in ways that echo Arendt's insights into its banality, Shakespeare also suggests that even the clearest rational understanding cannot fully account for evil's relentless return. This tension between intellectual demystification and evil's persistent presence points toward a more nuanced approach, one that values critical exposure while recognizing its limits. Drawing on the medieval concept of *mysterium iniquitatis*, evoked in *Pericles* by Gower's archaic voice, Shakespeare explores a view of evil that neither surrenders to opaque mystery nor aspires to total explanation. Instead, he treats evil as an unavoidable part of mortal existence whose ultimate resolution lies beyond human reason. Yet he does not simply endorse this inherited view; rather, his late plays cultivate a subtle synthesis. They uphold the importance of rational scrutiny while acknowledging that purely secular responses remain incomplete. This synthesis takes shape through the role of providence, not as a veil obscuring evil, but as a force revealing an essential emptiness. In *Pericles*, the guidance of Diana and, in *The Tempest*, Prospero's eventual renunciation of magic both serve to disclose rather than conceal, to illuminate rather than mystify.

Yet the plays also show that rational discernment, though powerful, cannot stand alone. It can strip evil of its grand illusions, but it cannot, by itself, provide the broader spiritual awareness needed to face evil's recurring forms without slipping into either despair or naive faith. In this way Shakespeare offers a theoretical framework that resists a simple choice between Arendt's emphasis on critical thinking and the theological insistence on transcendence. Instead, his late plays suggest how these perspectives might work together. They present evil as susceptible to rational analysis yet, at the same time, demand a broader spiritual horizon. In doing so, Shakespeare

points to contemporary discussions toward a vision of evil that acknowledges both the potency of reason and the necessity of what lies beyond it.

Across these late plays, Shakespeare turns from the grand pageantry of evil in his tragedies to its stealthier, more insidious seepage into human affairs. Here, iniquity emerges not as a towering demon but as a subtle presence, thriving in the cracks of thoughtlessness and habit, feeding on shallow illusions rather than dwelling in any genuine depth. By uncovering evil's banality, Shakespeare strips it of its metaphysical aura and shows it to be hollow at its core. Yet he does not rest on exposure alone. Mere rational demystification, however essential, cannot fully contain what so stubbornly resists our efforts to control. The romances acknowledge that reasoned critique, though powerful, must be joined by something more – by grace, forgiveness, and a measured openness to mystery.

This outlook, an “Arendt” vision of sorts, frames evil as both fully knowable yet forever elusive: it can be unmasked, but not wholly disarmed by intellect alone. To reckon with it, Shakespeare's final plays suggest, we must look beyond the neat boundaries of argument into realms where the spirit finds its bearings – not by rejecting reason or slipping into hazy mysticism, but by acknowledging a dimension of experience that reason alone cannot treat thoroughly. Shakespeare's romances compel us to stare at evil's banality without flinching – yet dare us to hope beyond it.

Far from mere abstraction, the numinous here stands as a palpable, if elusive, moral ground urging toward a fuller engagement with the drives that shape human frailty and resilience. Confrontation with evil must thus draw on more than intellectual exposure. In these culminating gestures, Shakespeare summons his audience to let knowledge and wonder, demystification and mystification, clash and kindle. It is in this tension – neither complacent nor despairing – that one may grapple with evil, armed not only with clarity of mind but with a finer, ethically attuned perception – a mode of understanding that glimpses the entanglements of human conscience and dares to find worth in less tangible registers of insight, meaning, and desire; to apprehend, as the oracle decrees in *The Winter's Tale* “that which is lost” (III.ii.133) – not as void, but as a crucible for grace.

References

- Allard, James Robert, and Mathew R. Martin, eds. 2009. *Staging Pain, 1580-1800: Violence and Trauma in British Theater*. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Altman, Joel. 2023. *Shakespeare the Bodger*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press.
- . [1971] 1978. *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego, New York, London: Harvest Book; Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Bloom, Harold. 1998. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Brown, Paul. 1985. "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism." In *Political Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 48-71. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Cefalu, Paul A. 2004. *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cox, John D. 2007. *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Dahlgren, Paul. 2006. "Reflections on a Small Island: Hannah Arendt, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the Politics of Childhood." *JCRT* 7 (2): 34-46.
- Demaray, John G. 1998. *Shakespeare and the Spectacles of Strangeness: The Tempest and the Transformation of Renaissance Theatrical Forms*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Dessen, Alan C. 1984. "The Logic of Stage Violence." In *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*, edited by Alan C. Dessen, 105-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dryden, John, and William Davenant. 1667. *The Enchanted Island*. Adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, London.
- Eliot, T. S. [1922] 2021. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Reprint. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fernández Retamar, Roberto. 1971. *Calibán: apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América*. México: Editorial Diógenes.
- Garber, Marjorie B. 2008. *Shakespeare after All*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.

- Gillies, John. 1994. *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1990. *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1991. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gurr, Andrew. 1996. "Industrious Ariel and Idle Caliban." In *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, edited by Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michèle Willems, 193-208. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, Kim F. 1996. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Harris, Jonathan Gil. 2009. *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press.
- Hiscock, Andrew. 2022. *Shakespeare, Violence and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hulme, Peter. 1986. *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London New York: Methuen.
- Hulse, Clark S. 1979. "Wresting the Alphabet: Oratory and Action in "Titus Andronicus"." *Criticism* 21 (2): 106-18
- Kerrigan, John. 2008. *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics, 1603-1707*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King James I. 2016. *The Annotated Daemonologie: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Brett R Warren. Createspace Independent Publishing.
- Logan, Robert A. 2007. *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard. 2011. *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mannoni, Octave. 1956. *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. London: Methuen.
- Mebane, John S. 1989. *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Mukherji, Subha. 2016. "The Action of My Life: Tragedy, Tragicomedy, and Shakespeare's Mimetic Experiments." In *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk, 267-84. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Meara, John. 2014. "Outbraving Luther Shakespeare's Final Evolution through the Tragedies into the Last Plays." In *Shakespeare*

- the Man: New Decipherings*, edited by R.W. Desai, 157-81. Lanham, MD: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 2024. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/>.
- Parvini, Neema. 2018. *Shakespeare's Moral Compass*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1998. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Serpieri, Alessandro. 2008. "Shakespeare's Theatre, Meta-Theatre and Ultra-Theatre." In *The Difference of Shakespeare*, edited by Alessandra Marzola, 37-52. Roma: Sestante.
- Shakespeare, William. 1954. *The Tempest*. Edited by Frank Kermode. London: Methuen.
- . 1997. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by John Russell Brown. The Arden Shakespeare. Walton-on-Thames: Nelson
- . 1998. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Cymbeline*. Edited by Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1998. *The Tempest*. Edited by Stephen Orgel. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *Shakespeare's Poems*. Edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2011. *The Tempest*. Edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden True Vaughan. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2014a. *Pericles*. Edited by Richard Proudfoot. Reprinted. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2014b. *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by John Pitcher. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series / General Editors: Richard Proudfoot. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2016. *Othello*. Edited by Ernst A. J. Honigmann and Ayanna Thompson. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2017. *Cymbeline*. Edited by Valerie Wayne. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2022. *The Tempest: The Critical Tradition*. Edited by Brinda Charry. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.
- Traister, Barbara H. 1984. *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

- Van Oort, Richard. 2016. *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.
- Vaughan, Alden T., and Virginia Mason Vaughan. 1996. *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Melville's Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: The Confidence-Man

Paolo Simonetti

This essay explores the influence of Shakespeare on Melville's conception of evil, from the oscillation between innocence and corruption in *Typee*, through the tragic grandeur of *Moby-Dick*, to the satirical skepticism of *The Confidence-Man*. Melville's lifelong engagement with Shakespeare, evident in his marginalia and in the ongoing dialogue with the playwright, sets his work in a tradition that both ridicules and admires villainy while exposing its paradoxical ties to truth. *The Confidence-Man*, the most overtly Shakespearean of Melville's novels, stages a "masquerade of evil" through its shapeshifting, devil-like protagonist, who recalls Shylock and Autolycus yet unsettles the role of villain by pretending to reject Timon's misanthropy. *Timon of Athens* thus emerges as a key intertext, alongside *The Winter's Tale*, whose shifts from tragedy to comedy offer a striking contrast: where Shakespeare turns tragedy into redemption, Melville drives his masquerade toward indeterminacy and overarching obscurity.

Keywords: Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, evil, comedy, skepticism

Forse il compito di chi ama gli uomini
è di far ridere della verità, fare ridere la verità,
perché l'unica verità è imparare a liberarci
dalla passione insana per la verità¹.
Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*

The corresponding question as to what,
if any, is the availability of the theological-metaphysical
inference to comedy, seems to me one
of the most difficult and least explored.
George Steiner, *Absolute Tragedy*

¹ "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth". Transl. by William Weaver.

In 1882, Herman Melville signed a collector's notebook with a quotation from Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*, inscribing above his name (with his characteristic misspelling) the proverbial phrase: "Tell Truth & shame the Devel" [sic]². As trivial as this anecdote may seem, it condenses several key aspects of Melville's artistic and philosophical mind. Among other things, it points to Shakespeare as an enduring source of inspiration, not just an artistic model: Melville famously referred to the English playwright as the master of "the great art of telling the Truth" (*PT* 244)³ but also, implicitly, as an alter-ego of sorts, an artist who opposes his dramatic and uncomfortable 'truth' to the devil's cunning.

Intriguingly, in one of his late prose pieces, a very brief fragment titled simply "Shakespeare", the playwright is aligned with a 'sincere' devil:

A profound intelligence, with wisdom wiser than the Serpent's yet without his guile; genial, child-like in sincerity; and, what is phenomenal in a modern – for in vital matters Shakespeare was so advanced a modern that not yet have we come up to him – utterly without secular superstition or secular cant. (*BB* 242)

This and other passages from Melville's works reveal his conception of Shakespeare as an ambivalent, devil-like writer who employs a challenging way of truth-telling. For Melville, the devil symbolizes more than evil and hybris: he also represents – in Milton's terms – a rebellious artist who twists and transforms truth into something at once unsettling and enlightening. Over time, Melville's idea of evil evolved into a sophisticated notion of a "comedy of evil" – a paradoxical blend of malice and sincerity that reshaped his engagement with moral and existential issues as well as the structure of his writings.

From the outset, Melville grappled with the ambiguity between truth and fiction, striving to convince readers and publishers that

2 The expression, proverbial in Anglo-Saxon countries and best known for its Shakespearean quotation, is attested as a common saying as early as 1555 in Hugh Latimer's *Twenty-Seven Sermons*.

3 For brevity, the titles of Melville's editions quoted in the essay are shortened as follows: *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (*T*), *Mardi: and a Voyage Thither* (*M*), *Redburn: His First Voyage* (*R*), *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (*P*), *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (*CM*), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces* (*PT*), *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (*MD*), *Correspondence* (*C*), *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Uncompleted Writings* (*BB*).

his travel narratives were 'true' accounts of his South Sea journeys – though they were only partially so. Gradually, this pragmatic concern deepened into a philosophical exploration of skepticism, influenced by his engagement with thinkers like Montaigne, Bayle, and Browne. By the 1850s, Melville's reflections on the rhetorical power of language to shape reality had become intertwined with Shakespeare's plays, as evident in letters to his friend Evert Duyckinck and several textual allusions.

Melville's villains⁴ often overthrow conventional morality through persuasive eloquence, challenging both a rigid Christian ethos rooted in Manichean dualism and the traditional split between philosophy and literature, truth-telling and imaginative writing. By disrupting the boundaries between artistic imagination and metaphysical inquiry, these satanic provocateurs probe the limits of reason by demonstrating fiction's transformative power to grapple with existential truths beyond rational clarity. Shakespeare and Satan – the artist and the mystifier – are thus bound by their mutual engagement with the fluidity of truth.

This commitment to language and its dangerous allure drives *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (1851), where Ahab's fiery quarter-deck speech steers the crew toward ruin, and informs *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852), whose protagonist's obsessive quest for truth raises the unsettling question of whether his efforts would lead to a benevolent or malicious universe. However, the search reaches its fullest expression in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), Melville's last completed and most enigmatic novel. The book marks the culmination of a decade of intense creative effort, as well as the writer's deepest exploration of skepticism.

Shortly after the novel's completion and immediately before Melville's journey to the Holy Land, Nathaniel Hawthorne captured his friend's inner turmoil in the most striking terms: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other" (Hawthorne 1962, 432). Jonathan Cook similarly characterizes Melville as "a divided soul: a skeptic by temperament but a believer at heart" (Cook 1996, 9), and considers *The Confidence-Man* "a literary theodicy dramatizing the author's obsession with the problem of evil, the existence of God,

4 Besides Ahab, one could consider Jackson in *Redburn* and Claggart in *Billy Budd*.

and man's limited capacity to know God or comprehend the truths that would justify the ways of God to man" (10). However, the novel ultimately transcends theological debate, presenting instead a Shakespearean (tragi)comic meditation on the human condition, the limits of fiction, and the complex relationship between language and truth.

This essay examines *The Confidence-Man* in terms of Melville's Shakespearean masquerade of evil – a nuanced dialogue with the English playwright on the comic ambiguity of evil, marking both the climax of Melville's lifelong head-to-head with Shakespeare⁵ and the endpoint of his novelistic career before turning to poetry. Early notes scribbled in Melville's edition of Shakespeare's works, outlining a possibly comic story about a devil disguised as a Quaker seeking converts, may have served as an initial inspiration for *The Confidence-Man*. In fact, the novel's protagonist is an enigmatic Shakespearean figure, a demonic wanderer or pseudo-villain who shifts between multiple personae, or a misbegotten Messiah whose unsettling truths simultaneously challenge, shame, and perhaps even redeem humanity.

The essay's first part briefly addresses Melville's early engagement with Shakespeare before examining the extensive notes and marginalia in his seven-volume edition of the playwright's works⁶. Melville's

5 The relationship between Melville's fiction and Shakespeare's drama has been analyzed by the earliest critics of the American writer, following the path opened by F. O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* (1941) and Charles Olson in *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), who stated: "As the strongest literary force Shakespeare caused Melville to approach tragedy in terms of the drama. As the strongest social force America caused him to approach tragedy in terms of democracy" (Olson 1997, 69). However, the majority of the studies focused quite exclusively on *Moby-Dick* or on general Shakespearean themes and characters. Then, in the new millennium, this topic appears to have gradually faded from Melville's criticism, with the notable exception of the attention given to his marginalia (see *infra*).

6 Melville's seven-volume set of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1837) lacks both his signature and a date of acquisition. Although it has traditionally been identified with the "edition in glorious great type" mentioned in his February 24, 1849 letter, the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Moby-Dick* state that this identification is not entirely certain. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Arden editions listed in the bibliography, not from the copies owned and annotated by Melville. Melville's annotations can be consulted in "Melville's Marginalia Online" edited by Steven Olsen-Smith and Peter Norberg. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

remarks primarily highlight passages where truth and evil intersect, focusing especially on villains who boldly present themselves as truth-tellers – whether for personal gain or out of a distorted sense of honor. The second part of the essay explores Melville's nuanced portrayal of the devil and his connection to comedy, emphasizing how the confidence man's ambivalent avatars draw upon Shakespeare's theatrical tradition. Charlotte Spivack's concept of the playwright's comic treatment of evil, arising from "the established union between comedy and iniquity" (Spivack 1978, 9), provides a valuable framework for analyzing Melville's novel as an ongoing conversation with Shakespeare.

Melville's elusive confidence man embodies a broad spectrum of morality, and his speeches weave together truths, half-truths, and outright lies, leaving his identity and ultimate purposes shrouded in mystery. No wonder that among Melville's works, *The Confidence-Man* – based almost entirely on dialogue and adhering closely to the Aristotelian dramatic unities – stands out as one of the most densely Shakespearean in its construction and allusions. Throughout the plot, characters mention or allude to *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*, with subtler echoes of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *II Henry VI*, *Othello*, and *Measure for Measure*.

Scholars have long discussed these Shakespearean reverberations. Cook, for example, notes the multifaceted roles played by the cosmopolitan⁷, the confidence man's ultimate impersonation, who ironically presents himself under the name of Frank Goodman:

As a figure in motley, the cosmopolitan plays the fool like Touchstone and Feste; as a Prospero-figure, he casts a spell over Charlie Noble; as a Hamlet-figure, his tale of Charlemont functions as a moral "mousetrap" for Noble. In the cosmopolitan's encounter with Egbert, moreover, the two enact a play within a play like that found in *As You Like It*. (Cook 1996, 22)

The sheer complexity and depth of these intertextual connections could easily justify a full monograph, given how intricately Melville wove Shakespeare's threads into his narrative fabric. For the sake of focus,

⁷ Following Melville's usage in the text, the word "cosmopolitan" appears in lowercase when indicating this enigmatic character, reflecting both his designation in the novel and his fluid, boundary-crossing nature, like a mask in the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

however, the essay's final section centers on two Shakespearean plays that, to my mind, are most crucial in shaping Melville's dark comedy of evil: *The Winter's Tale* and *Timon of Athens* – the latter for its nihilistic meditation on misanthropy, the former through its depiction of the relationship “between artistry and criminal deception” (Watterson 1993, 536) embodied by Autolycus. These Shakespearean echoes amplify Melville's distinctive approach to skepticism, dramatizing the paradoxical and often comical nature of evil throughout his works and characters.

Melville's Shakespeare: “Wisdom wiser than the Serpent’s”

Intelligence is a basic component of evil. The more
stupid you are the less capable you are of doing harm.

[...] Diabolical on the other hand is all but
synonymous with ingenious. What Satan had
for sale in the garden was knowledge.

Cormac McCarthy, *Stella Maris*

According to John Bryant's still-in-progress biography, “previous to 1849 Melville's exposures to Shakespeare had been random: in classroom recitations, in theatricals, and at home exchanging familiar lines” (Bryant 2021, 271) with his siblings. Melville's father, a failed importer of luxury goods from Europe, held a particular fondness for *The Merchant of Venice* and frequently quoted it in his letters. His untimely death in 1832, when Herman was only thirteen, possibly enhanced the youth's early connection to Shakespeare. By 12 December 1838, as the Lansingburgh Academy staged scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* for the Fall term program, 19-year-old Melville took on the role of Shylock. A reviewer praised “the young gentleman who personated ‘Shylock’ the Jew”, claiming that he “seemed to catch the spirit of the author” through intuitive and reflective observation (quoted in Bryant 2021, 427). During the performance, Melville was likely captivated by Shylock's exchange with Antonio, where the latter declares:

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. / An evil soul producing holy witness / Is like a villain with a smiling cheek, / A goodly apple, rotten at the heart. / O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath! (*The Merchant of Venice*, I.iii.93-98)

Bryant suggests that playing Shylock gave the young Melville an “awareness of theatrical villainy to the point that he could both revile the villain

and find sympathy for him" (Bryant 2021, 426). This duality reflects an emerging complexity in Melville's artistic vision and an eagerness to engage with Shakespeare's plays that would later shape his fiction.

Charlotte Spivack aptly remarks that "whether the role of Shylock is actually funny or whether its comic counterpoint is beyond laughter is a moot question", though the character exudes a "palpable strand of absurdly comic perversion" (Spivack 1978, 165). Clearly enough, the Jewish merchant "reverses the value of Christian charity that informs the action of the play" (164), and thus, like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, foreshadows *The Confidence-Man's* disquieting ambiguity. From his early years, Melville's life bore traces of such ambivalence. In a rhetorical juvenile skirmish published in a local newspaper, he was dubbed "Hermanus Melvillian, a moral Ethiopian", accused of lacking principles and shifting with the wind, and he was even branded a "child of the devil, full of all subtlety and mischief" (Olsen-Smith 2015, 12; 20; italics in the original). These caricatures of Melville's character underscore a reputation for unpredictability and complexity that parallels his literary engagement with characters defying easy moral categorization, like Shylock, Timon, Autolycus.

This early awareness of the ambiguity of evil shaped Melville's literary career, beginning with *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846). In the semi-autobiographical narrative, Tommo and his companion Toby jump ship and flee into a Marquesan valley inhabited by natives. The two sailors are initially consumed by "frightful anticipations of evil" (T 65) but soon marvel at the place's heavenly beauty, since money, "that 'root of all evil,' was not to be found in the valley" (T 126). Tommo finds out that evil emerges as a construct uniquely tied to civilization, especially when he reflects on how missionaries introduced "the worst vices and evils of civilized life" (T 182) amongst the indigenous peoples. Even when assuming the missionaries' good intentions, Tommo recognizes that their actions "may nevertheless be productive of evil" (T 197). This critique of civilization's corrupting effects resonates in Melville's subsequent work, *Omoo* (1847), where he further explores the wicked agency of colonialism⁸.

8 It is not surprising that Miranda's naïve exclamation in *The Tempest* about peoples unknown to her – "O! wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people

By 1849, Melville's engagement with Shakespeare reached further intensity when he acquired an "edition in glorious great type" (C 119) of the plays that did not strain his eyes. Writing to Duyckinck, he confessed regret for his earlier disregard of "the divine William", to the point of comparing Shakespeare with Jesus, imagining him in heaven "with Gabriel Raphael and Michael". He declared triumphantly: "If another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakspeare's [sic] person" (119).

Soon after, however, Melville's views became more nuanced. He complained that the playwright had been constrained by the mores of his time:

I would to God Shakspeare [sic] had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway [...]; that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespere's [sic] full articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakspeare [sic] was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be? (C 122)

To "tell truth and shame the devil", Shakespeare had to devise an ambiguous language for his characters, one that Melville tried to imitate and reshape in his writings. He later expanded on Shakespeare's genius in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), admiring "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him" (PT 244) and praising Shakespeare's tragic characters for voicing "things which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man [...] to utter, or even hint of them" (244). In this evolving perspective, Melville shifted from comparing Shakespeare to Christ to envisioning him as a dark angel – a rebellious artist con-

in't!" (Vi.181-83) – struck the author of *Typee* and *Omoo* with profound unease. Melville marked the passage with a line and a cross, then circled Prospero's retort: "'Tis new to thee" (Vi.184). In the upper margin, Melville wrote a revealing note: "Consider the character of the persons concerning whom Miranda says this – then Prospero's quiet words in comment – how terrible! In 'Timon' itself there is nothing like it". This annotation underscores Melville's perception of a dark irony in the contrast between Miranda's excitement and Prospero's disillusioned comment. While *Timon of Athens* presents a protagonist who vehemently despises humanity, Prospero's remark suggests an even grimmer outlook – not born of Timon's overt hatred, fueled by ingratitude, but rather a resigned, disenchanted awareness of human nature, stripping away any illusions about noble savagery.

strained by society's restrictions but capable of revealing terrible truths obliquely, mostly through his villains.

Unsurprisingly, Melville famously described Hawthorne as the American Shakespeare, praising his "power of blackness" as a defining feature of his literary genius. In an April 1851 letter, he linked Hawthorne's soul and art to "the intense feeling of the visable [*sic*] truth" (C 186) – a truth achieved by confronting the harshest reality with unflinching honesty. For Melville, only those who, like Hawthorne and Shakespeare – and by implication, Melville himself – were willing to devote their artistic faculties to the relentless pursuit of truth could aspire to literary greatness. His later depiction of Shakespeare as an antithesis to "the Serpent" reflects this belief. Unlike the devil who deceives by twisting the truth, Shakespeare – and Melville – manage to convey truth through the shades of fiction.

Melville's ambivalent reflections on evil often unfold through a dialogue with Shakespeare and Milton. As *Redburn's* young narrator observes, "Milton's Satan dilutes our abhorrence with admiration [...] because he is not a genuine being, but something altered from a genuine original" (R 276). A similar meditation emerges in *The Confidence-Man*, when the cosmopolitan discusses Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*:

When disturbed by the character and career of one thus wicked and thus happy, my sole consolation is in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked him. And yet a creature, a living creature, he is, though only a poet was his maker. It may be, that in that paper-and-ink investiture of his, Autolycus acts more effectively upon mankind that he would in a flesh-and-blood one. Can his influence be salutary? (CM 172)

The cosmopolitan identifies the danger precisely in Autolycus's fictitiousness: as a literary invention, he escapes moral accountability while exerting a subtle and lasting influence. Shakespeare's villains, he implies, are seductive agents of uncertainty – creatures of ink and imagination that unsettle ethical certainties rather than reinforce them. In this sense, *The Confidence-Man* suggests Shakespeare himself might be viewed as a trickster – a master of guises whose rhetorical ingenuity, "wiser than the serpent", embodies the very ambiguity his characters enact.

This connection between fiction and ethical ambiguity emerges elsewhere in *The Confidence-Man*, notably through a provocative analogy drawn from the American wilderness. At one point, a character provocatively asks: “Is a rattle-snake accountable? [...] while to man it is forbidden to kill, without judicial cause, his fellow, yet the rattle-snake has an implied permit of unaccountability to murder any creature” (CM 191-92). The unresolved question resonates with Melville’s broader inquiry into theodicy, an undercurrent in his work: to what extent can evil be justified, and who – man, devil, or God – bears the responsibility? Melville engages these theological dilemmas chiefly through Shakespeare and Milton, whose works consistently informed his evolving meditation on evil. Milton’s Satan – “Majestic though in ruins” (II.305) – clearly informs Ahab’s inseparable union of grandeur and ruin⁹.

However, Melville’s engagement with the figure of the devil is not confined to Milton’s tragic vision. Alongside the majestic rebel of *Paradise Lost*, Melville develops a comic treatment of evil, already evident in *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849), where the devil appears as an ironic, mocking teacher. Here, the philosopher Babbalanja outlines a “devilish doctrine” in which all men are possessed by devils, yet the devils themselves are imprisoned within humans as punishment (M 317). Babbalanja remarks that “Devils are divers” – a term suggesting both variety and depth, echoing Melville’s praise of Emerson and Shakespeare as writers willing to “dive” into the deep (C 121). However, his playful catalog – “strong devils, and weak devils; knowing devils, and silly devils; mad devils, and mild devils; devils,

9 Melville’s skepticism toward Milton’s theology (Grey 2004, xxiii) did not diminish his fascination with the poet’s Satan as an archetype of charismatic rebellion, as evident from his marginalia in *Paradise Lost*. In a much-quoted letter to Hawthorne written during the composition of *Moby-Dick*, Melville describes being driven to exhaustion by the “malicious Devil [...] forever grinning in upon [him], holding the door ajar” (C 191). While this remark ostensibly refers to the printer’s devil – the errand boy tasked with delivering manuscripts – it also hints at a deeper, sinister inspiration behind *Moby-Dick*. The shadow of Milton’s Satan looms over the act of creation, mirroring the sacrilegious baptismal formula quoted in chapter 113 of the novel, which is again, albeit partially, referenced in a later letter to Hawthorne: “‘Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!’ deliriously howled [by] Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood” (MD 489).

merely devils; devils, themselves bedeviled; devils, doubly bedeviled" (M 317) – ultimately reduces the devil to a caricature of human behavior, stripped of any metaphysical feature.

Babbalanja's "very confidential devil", (M 419) Azzageddi (likely a play on "as you get it"), recalls the imagined tormentors of Edgar in *King Lear*, while also functioning as a comic version of the Socratic *daimon*, the inner voice that guided the philosopher. In his copy of *Paradise Lost*, Melville double-marked the passage about Satan's temptation of men (IX.701-05) and scribbled in the margin: "This is one of the many profound atheistic hits of Milton. A greater than Lucretius, since he always teaches under a masque, and makes the Devil himself a Teacher & Messiah"¹⁰. Azzageddi plays a similar role in *Mardi*, guiding through mock torment and irony, and prefigures, in satirical form, the darker figure of *The Confidence-Man* – a more disquieting and demonic "Teacher & Messiah" for a credulous humanity.

Melville's concern with truth broadened into a systematic exploration when he started reading Shakespeare seriously. An analysis of the marginalia left in his edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works reveals that Melville was particularly interested in those passages where truth is pursued and upheld, often at great personal cost, even by villains. In Melville's view, even morally compromised characters gain a shade of dignity and respect for their commitment to truth. For instance, in *King Lear*, Melville marked with a vertical line in the margin and a check mark the passage where Edmund declares:

What in the world he is / That names me traitor, villain-like he lies. / Call
by thy trumpet; he that dares approach, / On him, on you – who not? – I will
maintain / My truth and honour firmly. (V.iii.98-102)

Melville seems to admire Edmund's unwavering declaration, particularly the villain's insistence on upholding "truth and honour" to the end. In the margin, Melville jotted the remark: "The infernal nature has a valor often denied to innocence". This observation echoes once again his view of Milton's Satan, the fallen angel who retains great dignity

10 Melville owned and annotated the two-volume edition *The Poetical Works of John Milton. A New Edition, with Notes, and a Life of the Author* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1836). This copy, signed and marked by Melville at different stages of his life, is fully accessible at Melville's Marginalia Online, <https://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

in doing evil. Melville also marked passages that reject falsehoods, expressing skepticism towards supernatural phenomena and moral judgments. He notably referred to “the great Montaignism [*sic*] of Hamlet”, as he writes in the margins of Hamlet’s famous statement: “For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (II. ii)¹¹.

Thus, Melville’s 1882 signature after his quotation from *Henry IV* gains sharper significance when viewed in light of his philosophical development. In the play, Hotspur’s line is a skeptical response to Glendower’s boast of commanding spirits. When Glendower offers to teach him the dark arts – “Why, I can teach you, cousin, to command the devil” – Hotspur retorts sharply: “And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil: / By telling truth” (III.i.55-57), and reiterates shortly after: “O, while you live, ‘Tell truth, and shame the devil’” (III.i.60). Common sense, sincerity, and honesty, alongside logic and scientific reasoning, are summoned to challenge hypocrisy, cruelty, superstition. Most importantly, Hotspur – and Shakespeare through him – employs irony to disarm villainy, subverting Glendower’s grand claims with sharp wit. Melville’s own call to “shame the devil” echoes this strategy, reflecting his evolving view of evil – not as an external adversary to be vanquished but as an inner, shifting ambiguity to be exposed through irony and truth-telling. By the time of *The Confidence-Man*, the devil is a protean figure who teaches, deceives, and challenges human rationality from within. Melville’s lifelong engagement with the devil – from Milton’s tragic rebel to the comic demons of *Mardi* – finds a fitting culmination in his mature embrace of Shakespearean irony as a weapon against deception.

A recent computational analysis of Melville’s Shakespearean marginalia¹² shows that he “marked more words in the comedies than

11 Montaigne was another important source of inspiration for Melville, at least since January 1848, when he purchased “I Montagne” [*sic*], likely an edition of the philosopher’s works. Melville’s personal copy of Montaigne’s works has not been located, but according to Aretta J. Stevens, it is likely that he owned the edition edited by William Hazlitt the Younger, son of the famous romantic essayist, translated by Charles Cotton and reprinted by Wiley & Putnam in 1845. While visiting the British Museum in London, Melville was intrigued by the purported signature of Shakespeare in John Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essays*.

12 Conducted by Christopher Ohge, Steven Olsen-Smith, and Elisa Barney Smith with Adam Brimhall, Bridget Howley, Lisa Shanks, and Lexy Smith.

in the histories and tragedy combined" (Ohge 2018, 40). Notably, he "marked many negative sentiments in plays traditionally grouped under the label of comedy" (39). This tendency aligns Melville's vision with Dmitri Nikulin's view that "comedy accomplishes with dramatic action what philosophy does with arguments" and that "comedy is born out of the spirit of philosophy" (Nikulin 2014, xi). In this light, Melville foresees Nikulin's claim that "Dialectic is comedy philosophically disguised, and comedy is a dramatization of philosophical dialectical reasoning" (50). The novel, as the quintessential dialogical and dialectical form, becomes the ideal medium for Melville to explore the intricate relationship between evil and comedy.

Soon after purchasing his Shakespeare volumes, Melville began jotting cryptic notes on the flyleaf of volume VII¹³, staging an imaginary conversation between characters. One such note mimics a formal reply: "Yes, Madam, Cain was a godless froward [*sic*] boy, & Reuben (Gen: 49) & Absalom". After referencing these wicked biblical figures, Melville adds dryly: "Many pious men have impious children", before concluding with a sardonic twist: "(Devil as a Quaker)" (MD 969). This comic image – the devil disguised as a meek Quaker addressing a devout lady – appears to trigger a more developed narrative. The devil, still in disguise, persuades a man to sign "A formal compact", laced with mock-legalese: "Imprimis – First – Second. The aforesaid soul, said soul &c – Duplicates" (969). The parody anticipates the legal jargon of the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and the rhetorical flourishes of the confidence man's avatars.

Melville's marginal dialogue continues with a reference to Satan's third temptation in Matthew, where the devil offers Christ dominion in exchange for worship. An imagined question – "'How was it about the temptation on the hill?' &c." – leads to a wry scene of gentlemanly banter on biblical themes. The devil proposes that his interlocutor join "a 'Society of D's", a satirical reimagining of the Faustian pact as club membership. The final quip – "Would you not rather be below with kings than above with fools?" (MD 969) – echoes Miltonic grandeur twisted into parody. Although what the devil gains from this pact remains ambiguous, the notes already foreshadow *The Confidence-Man's*

13 The volume includes the tragedies: *King Lear*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*; *Othello Moor of Venice*.

dialogic structure. A “Doctor”, likely an atheist, stops his coach to scoff: “Do you beleive [*sic*] all that stuff? nonsense [*sic*] – the world was never made”. Melville replies to himself with a “But”, followed by the ironic counter: “Is not this mentioned here – in the scriptures?” (969, underscored in the text)¹⁴. The Bible becomes both subject and tool in a game of belief, doubt, and persuasion – central themes in *The Confidence-Man*.

Melville’s Shakespearean reading clearly shapes these reflections. In *Othello*, Iago invokes the “Divinity of hell!” (II.iii.345), his villainy masked by supposed honesty. Cassio blames drink for giving way to wrath, describing it as the devil’s accomplice (II.iii.291-92). Lady Macbeth’s exhortation to her husband to “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (*Macbeth*, I.v.61-64) is undercut by the Porter’s crude wit about wine and lust. In *Measure for Measure*, a passage Melville marked captures the theme of deceptive virtue: “O, what may man within him hide, / Though angel on the outward side?” (III.i.527-28). Fittingly, the duplicitous figure is named Angelo.

As Elizabeth Foster aptly observed, “the tone of comedy, the method of parody, and the idea of the Devil disguised as a Quaker were an adumbration of *The Confidence-Man*” (Foster 1954, 296). In Melville’s later notes, however, the focus shifts. He revisits the sacrilegious baptismal formula later echoed by Ahab in *Moby-Dick* and reflects on fanaticism as the antithesis of Christian ethos. This transition signals an evolution of themes and characters that will be more fully explored in *Moby-Dick*. Yet the “comedy of evil” continues to thread its way through Ishmael’s narration, embodied, perhaps, in the grotesque figure of the enigmatic Fedallah, and resurfaces in *Pierre*, particularly in the protagonist’s melodramatic struggles and the cryptic musings of the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon¹⁵. Ultimately, it is in *The Confidence-Man* that Melville’s comic treatment of evil finds its fullest and most explicit expression.

14 Melville’s notes on this page may be drawn from essays in Leigh Hunt’s *The Indicator* (Sealts No. 290.1) and from “Doctor Faustus” in Thomas Roscoe’s *The German Novelists* (Sealts No. 428b.1).

15 Plinlimmon’s mock-philosophical pamphlet on “Chronometricals and Horologicals” mentioned in the novel underscores the impossibility of the Christian ethos in the modern world, leading Pierre to conclude that “so far as practical results are concerned – regarded in a purely earthly light – the only great original moral doctrine of Christianity [...] has proved entirely impracticable” (P 215).

Laughing at Nothing: Melville's comedy of evil

It is better to laugh & not sin than to weep & be wicked¹⁶.

Herman Melville, pencil inscription on
his copy of Shakespeare's *Dramatic Works*

In early Christian thought, evil is understood as non-being – an absence of good. Such an interpretation by theologians like Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas deeply shaped medieval art and literature. According to Charlotte Spivack, laughter arises at the paradoxical perception of such privative evil:

To the medieval Christian who simply followed the definition of evil as Non-Being through to its logical conclusion, laughter was actually inevitable. Taught that evil is not what it seems to be, [...] medieval man could not do otherwise than laugh at the fundamental absurdity of evil. (Spivack 1978, 26)

To laugh at evil is not to trivialize it, but rather to dissect its nature and reveal it for what it is: "A nothing masquerading as something" (26). Over time, this view led to "a venerable convention of the English stage: the established union between comedy and iniquity" (9). Shakespeare and his contemporaries inherited and adapted this tradition, turning evil into "a subject for mocking laughter" (172). By exposing evil's absurdity through humor, Shakespeare diminished its power and aligned himself with a long-standing tradition in English drama.

This view resonates with recent Shakespearean criticism. Rhodri Lewis (2024) argues that irony lies at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision, understood in a deeper existential and epistemological sense rather than as sarcasm or a mere plot device. Drawing on Kierkegaard and Bernard Williams, Lewis presents irony as a form of truthfulness: the recognition that our efforts to define ourselves and our world constantly clash with the instability of human life. Far from nihilistic, Shakespeare's irony allows for ethical clarity without the consolation of Aristotelian catharsis or Christian redemption, stripping away illusions instead. In Shakespeare's tragedies, evil is never fully

16 Melville's notes in this page may be drawn from "Howleglass, the Merry Jester" in Thomas Roscoe's *The German Novelists* (Sealts No. 428b.1) and from Francis Palgrave's "Superstition and Knowledge" (Sealts No. 395a).

explained or resolved and is experienced as part of a world lacking stable meanings or moral certainties.

The idea of mocking evil contrasts sharply with the horror of sin in seventeenth-century New England, where Puritan doctrine portrayed the devil as an invasive, internal threat. As Andrew Delbanco observes, “the Puritans imagined a prideful Satan who, rather than anticipating what they might become, mocked them with an image of what they already were” (Delbanco 1995, 43). Satan, often depicted as an outsider or mysterious wanderer – as in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” – emerges as “an unmoored symbol” that “never becomes a fixed image, no more in the popular imagination than in formal theology” (53). Soon enough, the Puritan devil, with his ability to inspire reckless confidence, took on the traits of a pragmatic businessman: versatile, persuasive, and skilled at tailoring his speech to any audience. This contradictory figure, both terrifying and intimately familiar, profoundly shaped early American religious thought.

On a different theoretical plane, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendental philosophy laughed away the theological concerns about evil. In his “Divinity School Address” (1838), he famously dismissed the notion of absolute evil, in the light of the scholastic notion that “Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute: it is like cold, which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death or non entity” (Emerson 1983a, 77). For Emerson, metaphysical dilemmas like original sin, the nature of evil, and theodicy were little more than nuisances – “the soul’s mumps, and measles, and whooping-coughs”. Such concerns, he claimed in “Spiritual Laws”, “never presented a practical difficulty to any man, – never darkened across any man’s road, who did not go out of his way to seek them” (Emerson 1983b, 305). To Emerson, evil was not a substantial force but a conceptual hurdle that the soul should outgrow, subsumed by the moral order of the universe.

Melville offered a more disquieting, anti-Emersonian vision. In “Spiritual Laws”, Emerson wrote: “The good, compared to the evil which [man] sees, is as his own good to his own evil” (314). In his own copy of Emerson’s *Essays: First Series* (1847), Melville commented on this passage by jotting: “A perfectly good being therefore would see no evil. – But what did Christ see?”. This may well be another of the germs that led to *The Confidence-Man*, where Melville presents an ultimately insubstantial figure – a “nothing” in multiple masks – who

pretends not to see, or rather laughs away, the idea of evil through rhetorical ambiguity. The confidence man urges humanity to believe that evil does not exist, encouraging people to trust one another and act accordingly. Is he a benevolent trickster exposing human folly, a satanic deceiver, or something more unsettling? Could he, paradoxically, harm while intending to do good – or the other way around?

The witches' cryptic statement in *Macbeth* – "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (I.i.9) – finds an unsettling echo in the confidence man's dealings, as does Macbeth's later realization that "the fiend [...] lies like truth" (V.v.50). The masquerade emphasizes this ambiguity¹⁷, as the term evokes a witches' sabbath, or a performance that blends amusement with transgression and deception – motifs woven throughout Melville's novel and introduced in its subtitle. On several levels, the masquerade becomes a fitting metaphor for the confidence man's theatricals, where appearances deceive and the edge between good and evil is disturbingly thin.

According to early critics such as Charles N. Watson and Lewis Mumford, after *Moby-Dick* Melville "found a metaphor for his disillusionment in the theme of Timonism [...] which implies a betrayal and desertion by one's friends" (Watson 1972, 399). At this juncture, Melville's career had reached a dead end. Abandoned by readers and publishers, his prospects as a novelist were shattered. This profound sense of betrayal and isolation deepened his fascination with themes of disappointment and misanthropy, along with a growing inclination toward what might be called sympathy for the devil. As Watson observed, the embittered writer faced two alternatives: "to withdraw, like Timon, into misanthropic solitude; or to engage the public on its own terms, taking on the protective coloring of an artistic confidence man, playing with a grim humor on the egotism and gullibility of his audience" (399). This pattern persists throughout Melville's writings of the 1850s, from *Pierre* to "The Encantadas" (1853), through "Bartleby the Scrivener", "Jimmy Rose" (1855)¹⁸, and *Israel Potter* (1855),

17 Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines "masquerade" as "a nocturnal assembly of persons wearing masks, and amusing themselves with dancing, conversation and other diversions". See Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/>.

18 Melville's "Jimmy Rose" has been described as a "detailed repetition of the theme and action of Shakespeare's *Timon*" (Watson 1972, 404).

until “the disillusioned Timon stands at last as a symbol of the disillusioned author, whose highest ambitions and greatest work now appeared headed for oblivion” (Watson 1972, 413).

Such a purely biographical reading oversimplifies the matter. The striking parallels between *Timon of Athens* and *The Confidence-Man* reveal deeper structural connections, particularly an engagement with the issue of skepticism. George Steiner’s argument that “tragedy is a questioning and an enacted testing of theodicy” (1990, 137) provides a lens for Melville’s stylistic evolution. Beginning with *Moby-Dick*, his prose became increasingly theatrical, assuming a tragic tone that mirrored the intensifying urgency of his philosophical and theological inquiries. Hawthorne, who gained privileged insight into Melville’s mind during their brief meeting in Liverpool in 1856, observed that “his writing, for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind” (Hawthorne 1962, 432). Yet morbidity did not stem only from concerns about his literary career. During the same meeting, Melville confided that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” (432). This stark admission brings out the deep existential struggles at the core of his engagement with Shakespeare, echoing the tragic intensity of Timon.

Steiner further observes that among Shakespeare’s tragedies, “only that inexhaustibly perplexing, erratic bloc, *Timon of Athens*, seems [...] ‘black on black’”, presenting “the one and only time that William Shakespeare would terminate language knowing [...] that it was the axis and defining instrument of our humanity, of our place in the world” (Steiner 1990, 132-33). Similarly, after *The Confidence-Man* – Melville’s bleakest novel – the author turned from prose to poetry. Like Shakespeare’s Timon, Melville had reached a point where prose could no longer sustain the weight of his disenchantment. Poetry offered a more elastic medium to grapple with the metaphysical concerns that increasingly preoccupied him.

Giorgio Melchiori describes the tale of the wealthy and generous Athenian gentleman turned misanthrope as the most enigmatic of Shakespeare’s plays (1994, 545). For Harold Bloom, it is “the graveyard of Shakespeare’s tragic art [...], its final mausoleum [...], the resting place of the first great European tragedies since ancient Athens” (1998, 590-91). Frank Kermode argues that “a strong sense of its oddity has deflected critical interest” toward the play, since it “sur-

vives in an unfinished state" (2000, 231). Similarly, Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton emphasize the play's "ineluctably mixed nature" (2008, 27), which shifts seamlessly between tragedy, satire, and allegory. The Arden editors argue that Shakespeare's intention was "to produce a hybrid piece, challenging in both its subject matter and its form" (29). This perplexing and seemingly unfinished structure finds a striking counterpart in *The Confidence-Man*, which was ruthlessly rejected by contemporary reviewers: "A novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by personages who might pass for the errata of creation, [...] nonsensical people talking nonsense" (Branch 1974, 373).

Building on Muriel Bradbrook's theory, Melchiori suggests that *Timon of Athens* was conceived as a pageant, a spectacle combining allegorical and moral elements. Indeed, the play, like Melville's novel, is a moral fable, with characters representing archetypal roles. In this light, Lloyd C. Sears's commentary resonates with critical interpretations linking *The Confidence-Man* to *Moby-Dick*:

[*Timon of Athens*] stands like an unfinished ruin almost too vast and rugged in its conception for symmetrical completion. As a philosophical indictment of the world it held possibilities greater than those of *Hamlet*, because the theme has a broader perspective and greater variety in points of view, but perhaps partly on this very account it lacks the emotional intensity of *Hamlet*, and thus, fails to carry the same conviction. (1974, 161-62)

Like *Timon*, Melville's elusive novel offers a broader and more provocative philosophical exploration than *Moby-Dick*, but at the cost of narrative cohesion and emotional engagement. The same dynamics that, according to Sears, limit the dramatic success of *Timon* also help explain the different reception of *The Confidence-Man* compared to *Moby-Dick*.

References to Timon are scattered through *The Confidence-Man*, where the characters refer to his misanthropy to criticize the corrosive effects of cynicism. Early in the novel, suspicion about the honesty of a seemingly harmless African American beggar sparks a discussion on the destructive power of distrust. A Methodist preacher warns an embittered Missourian that skepticism leads to isolation and insanity, and this cautionary message is punctuated by someone who whispers: "Might deter Timon" (CM 16). Later, the cosmopolitan refers to the "injudicious gentleman, Lord Timon" (CM 137) in order to per-

suade the misanthrope, Pitch, to strive for mutual understanding: in fact, the cosmopolitan himself is a fraud, exploiting Pitch's trust for his own profit. In another conversation, he pities Timon as a "poor old crazy man" (CM 177) and contrasts him with the figure of a "genial misanthrope" – someone who cloaks cynicism beneath a façade of cheerfulness and affability. However, this "new kind of monster" (CM 176) seems a thinly veiled self-portrait of the cosmopolitan, suggesting that his affable demeanor is itself a masquerade¹⁹.

Another parallel between the play and the novel lies in their shared emphasis on banquets that, as Kermode notes, implicitly "contrast with the heavenly banquet, the Eucharist" (Kermode 2000, 237). Just as Timon, consumed by rage, suddenly hurls water and the dishes at his guests, in *The Confidence-Man*, when the cosmopolitan's con game is exposed by his "boon companion", he is forced to perform what amounts to a satanic ritual to placate his accuser. After "a metamorphosis more surprising than any in Ovid" (as the title of Chapter XXI ironically states), the cosmopolitan rises from the table and

taking ten half-eagles from his pocket, stooped down, and laid them, one by one, in a circle round him; and, retiring a pace, waved his long tasselled pipe with the air of a necromancer, an air heightened by his costume, accompanying each wave with a solemn murmur of cabalistical words. (CM 180)

The irony, as the narrator wryly alludes, lies in the suggestion that it is money, not the ritual, that holds attention²⁰.

However, as in Shakespeare's play, Melville's scene raises the deeper question of where good and evil truly lie in each exchange. Both characters are con men, each attempting to outwit the other, yet they present themselves as gentlemen, advocating charity and camaraderie. Even the ostensibly sinister "satanic ritual" described by the narrator serves to restore peace – albeit superficially – and

19 A final reference to Timon comes towards the end of the novel, when the cosmopolitan exhorts his new victim, the barber, to take down "Timon's sign" (CM 234) on the door – "No trust" – because "it is misanthropical; much the same sign that Timon traced with charcoal on the forehead of a skull stuck over his cave" (CM 230).

20 The cosmopolitan's spell comes across as an almost ironic reversal of Ahab's own rituals to entice the crew, involving grog, oaths, and the prized doubloon.

further complicates the moral dynamics of the scene. As Dawson and Minton argue, *Timon of Athens* raises a similar question: "From what superior moral vantage point does satire speak?" This issue, in turn, "points to the general problem of the corrective value of art". Shakespeare's play is "a self-reflexive attempt to highlight the ethics of satire", and it exposes the playwright's "discomfort [...] with the ambiguous, moral stance of satire" (2008, 36-37). Ultimately, by presenting characters who are both satirists and the targets of satire, Shakespeare and Melville challenge the audience to confront the uneasy intersections of morality, art, and deception, leaving unsolved the question of whether satire can ever claim a truly ethical foundation or is just another empty con game.

The conflation of tragedy and comedy in *The Confidence-Man* suggests a more striking comparison with *The Winter's Tale*, where Shakespeare explored a different approach to the hybridity of genres and the double vision of evil. As John Pitcher observes in the introduction to the play's Arden edition, *The Winter's Tale* bridges the divide between high and low, a feature that has led to ongoing Polonius-style critical debates about whether the play should be best classified as "romance, late comedy, tragicomedy, romantic or pastoral tragicomedy" (2010, 16). This tension is vividly embodied in the play's notorious Bear – a presence that is at once terrifying and absurdly funny – culminating in the iconic stage direction: "Exit, pursued by a bear" (III.iii.57). According to Pitcher, the play's first three acts form "a mini-tragedy that concludes, in neatly Aristotelian terms, with death and recognition [...] followed by an unusual kind of two-act comedy" (2010, 17).

A similar structural duality shapes *The Confidence-Man*. The novel can be roughly divided into two parts: the first twenty-three chapters feature various incarnations of the confidence man as agents of deceit, characterized by a satirical, comedic tone, while their schemes unfold with mischievous energy. From chapter XXIV onward, however, the focus shifts to the cosmopolitan, the amorally ambiguous figure who dominates the second half of the narrative. Unlike the early avatars, the cosmopolitan presents himself as an advocate of universal goodness, attempting to earn the trust of others who are often as duplicitous as he is. This inversion blurs the boundaries between right and wrong, transitioning from overt deception to subtler,

more insidious manipulation. Interestingly, while *The Winter's Tale* moves from tragedy to a happy ending, *The Confidence-Man* reverses the sequence. Its first part, marked by a humorous tone and mocking deceptions, gradually gives way to increasingly bitter satire. The tonal shift becomes explicit in Chapter XLV, "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness", where the narrative darkens, adopting a nihilistic edge that reveals a bitter critique of human folly and despair.

Another significant connection between Melville's novel and Shakespeare's romance lies in their exploration of skepticism. Stanley Cavell argues:

If *The Winter's Tale* is understandable as a study of skepticism – that is, as a response to what skepticism is a response to – then its second half must be understandable as a study of its search for recovery [...]. Skepticism's own sense of what recovery would consist in dictates efforts to refute it; yet refutation can only extend it. (2003, 198)

Cavell considers the play in terms of a competition between drama and non-theatrical forms, ultimately claiming the superiority of theater (199). In this arena, the characters grapple with harassing epistemological questions about existence, including the reality of the external world and the ontological existence of other minds (203). Leontes cannot accept his son as truly his own nor that his wife is faithful, insisting that "all's true that is mistrusted" (*The Winter's Tale*, II.i.48). As Pitcher observes, Leontes "must doubt everything, and believe that the truth is the opposite of common sense" (2010, 39).

A similar dilemma unfolds in *The Confidence-Man*, where characters and readers, baffled by the elusive identity of others, tend to attribute evil motives or intentions to virtually everyone. However, unlike *The Winter's Tale*, Melville's novel reverses the structure: instead of moving toward recovery, it descends further into ambiguity and distrust. The absence of any redemptive resolution suggests that for Melville, skepticism cannot be overcome – only deepened. By reversing the trajectory of Shakespeare's romance, *The Confidence-Man* denies even the philosophical possibility of restoring trust once it has been lost.

Non-commitment is equally impossible. Leontes accuses his loyal prince Camillo of being "a hovering temporizer, that / Canst with thine eyes at once see good and evil, / Inclining to them both" (I.ii.300-02). Yet Leontes himself arbitrarily chooses to see evil where

none exists. This indictment of moral ambiguity, echoing the journalistic caricature young Melville had resented, revolves around conflicting interpretations of reality: one grounded in sensory evidence, the other in unfounded and intangible suspicion. Leontes "rules out the value of the testimony of anyone else, as if testifying that he must know for himself" (Cavell 2003, 203). For him, the emergence of evil – whether within himself, his family, or his court – stems from an overly skeptical interpretation of reality, one that distorts perception and fuels mistrust²¹.

If it is easy for an audience to dismiss Leontes's paranoid vision as mere insanity, the same cannot be done with Shakespeare's (and Melville's) more complex and morally ambiguous characters. This uncertainty is directly addressed in Chapter XXX of *The Confidence-Man*, where the cosmopolitan and Charlie Noble, another con man, engage in a conversation that metafictionally reflects on Melville's interpretation of Shakespeare's characters, particularly those whose moral ambiguity challenges straightforward readings. Noble dismisses Polonius's recommendations to Laertes in *Hamlet* (I.iii.57-80) as sanctimonious and harmful – a guidance that should be avoided rather than followed. The cosmopolitan, however, adopts a more measured stance. He admits to a habitual inclination to trust Polonius's words, despite their dubious nature, but also acknowledges that Noble's critique has "unsettled" him: "I don't exactly see how Shakespeare meant the words he put in Polonius' mouth" (CM 171). Here, the focus of skepticism shifts to the *intention auctoris*, transforming the cosmopolitan into a perplexed reader, as he himself states:

To confess, in reading Shakespeare in my closet, struck by some passage, I have laid down the volume, and said: "This Shakespeare is a queer man." At times seeming irresponsible, he does not always seem reliable. There appears to be a certain – what shall I call it? – hidden sun, say, about him, at once enlightening and mystifying (171).

21 For a keen analysis of *Othello's* skepticism in Cavell's philosophy, see Alessandra Marzola's essay "Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief", which deals extensively with "the textual and cultural reasons for the contradiction between the shapes of skepticism moulded in *Othello* and the extreme emotional responses of audiences", following "the simultaneous inducing and thwarting of the suspension of disbelief on which this play so heavily relies" (Marzola 2014, 134).

The cosmopolitan compares Shakespeare to an eclipse of the sun by evoking the apocalyptic imagery from the Revelation of St. John, where, after the opening of the sixth seal, “the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair” (6.12). This metaphor captures the dual nature of Shakespeare’s art, shedding light on humanity while cloaking it in shadow.

When Noble asks whether he considers Shakespeare “the true light”, the cosmopolitan avoids a direct answer. While he refrains from deifying Shakespeare, he acknowledges the unfathomable nature of his brightness, suggesting that the Bard should remain “in a condition of lasting probation” (CM 172). Not only does the term imply the skeptic’s suspension of definitive judgment but also an ongoing interrogation of Shakespeare’s intent, as if he were simultaneously a god to be revered and a suspect to be cross-examined – much like God in theodicy, a figure glorified yet scrutinized as if perpetually on parole. This stance highlights the impossibility of pinning down Shakespeare’s moral vision. The same applies to interpretations of his characters’ speeches: is Polonius a mouthpiece for Shakespeare’s wisdom or a manifestation of the playwright’s fear of irrelevance? Is he an ironic foil or a smug fool?

The cosmopolitan’s insight deepens as he turns to discuss Autolycus, whose nature defies easy categorization. Describing Autolycus as “a rogue so happy, so lucky, so triumphant, of so almost captivating vicious”, he confesses that the character, like his author, has “always puzzled” him (172). As Collins Watterson suggests, Autolycus might even represent “what Shakespeare could have become in the event of his failure as an artist / shareholder in London” (543). The irony resonates with the cosmopolitan, who, like Autolycus, seems to mirror Melville’s (and Shakespeare’s) craft.

Like Melville’s confidence man, Autolycus takes on different personas throughout the play: first a penniless beggar, then a peddler, later a faux courtier wearing Florizel’s attire, and finally the character he pretends to be while conversing with the three gentlemen at the Sicilian court. Moreover, the cosmopolitan’s harlequinlike “vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating” (CM 131) resembles Autolycus’s “ribbons of all the colours i’th’rainbow” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.206). Although they both entertain people and loathe violence, they diverge in their values: Autolycus gleefully mocks trust, faith, and honesty, embracing and even reveling in

his rogue identity, while the cosmopolitan preaches universal trust, denies the existence of evil, and maintains a genial, welcoming demeanor. The cosmopolitan describes Autolycus as “the devil’s drilled recruit [...] joyous as if he wore the livery of heaven” (CM 172). As a “ballad singer and ballad-monger” (Bloom 1998, 651), he knows how to captivate his audience; unlike Polonius, whose seriousness can alienate readers and audiences, Autolycus’s charm and humor make his philosophy not only engaging but also disquieting. In his case, humor, though often viewed as salvific, is deployed as a tool to beguile, to unsettle the very foundations of moral clarity.

However, negative empathy – the charm of evil – belongs unmistakably to Melville’s cosmopolitan, who, at the end of the novel, exerts a “power of persuasive fascination – the power of holding another creature by the button of the eye” (CM 234) – over one of his victims, the barber. The narrator describes this power of persuasion as “sort of magical” but specifies that it operates “in a benign way” (234) as it induces the distrustful barber to trust his fellow men – specifically, to trust the cosmopolitan who eventually cons him. Likewise, the narrator of *Pierre* reflects on the undeniable allure of sin: “What man, who is a man, does not feel livelier and more generous emotions toward the great god of Sin – Satan, – than toward yonder haberdasher, who only is a sinner in the small and entirely honorable way of trade?” (P 177-78). For Melville, sin carries a mysterious sacredness, but only when it rebels against authority or performs acts of truth-telling to unmask human frailty. In this light, humor becomes a counterpoint to holiness, a force that challenges established norms and exposes canonical truths.

Autolycus’s mischief lacks this subversive edge. His antics, though rooted in trickery, lead to involuntary good, suggesting a kind of providential order that governs even the most villainous intentions. This paradox is captured in his own words: “If I thought it were a piece of honesty to acquaint the king withal, I would not do’t. I hold it the more knavery to conceal it, and therein am I constant to my profession” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.683-86). Autolycus’s reasoning, as he debates what constitutes “more knavery”, preempts any moral struggle to distinguish good from evil. The division in the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* and its perplexing denouement highlights the debunking of the traditional contraposition between good and evil.

Shakespeare's swerve from tragedy to comedy in *The Winter's Tales* and *Timon of Athens* aligns with Steiner's argument that "the absolutely tragic is [...] not only insupportable to human sensibility: it is false to life" (Steiner 1990, 134). Drama, Steiner contends, gravitates naturally toward "tragi-comedy" (131), a balance Greek tragedians supposedly pursued by complementing the tragic performances with satiric pieces. These farcical epilogues, now mostly lost, "mocked, ironized, held up to caricature and deflation elements of the preceding tragic material", achieving a kind of cathartic "counter-effect" (131). Similarly, *The Confidence-Man* tempers its bleak critique of society with irony and satire. Yet the novel's enigmatic closing line – "Something further may follow of this masquerade" (CM 251) – leaves the narrative suspended in ambiguity, hinting at a potential comic resolution that Melville either withheld or could not bring himself to articulate.

The evolution of Shakespeare's legacy in Melville's imaginary – from Savior and angelic truth-teller capable of shaming the devil to a Miltonic rebel, and finally to a "puzzling" figure on probation and a "sincere" devil – mirrors the transformation of the devil-figures in his corpus. In *Mardi*, devils are reduced to comic caricatures of human folly, exposing evil as a relative and absurd force rather than a metaphysical absolute; Ahab embodies the Shakespearean tragic hero, defying cosmic authority with monomaniacal intensity and blending the grandeur of Milton's Satan with Shakespeare's search for truth; Pierre is a fallen angel ensnared in melodrama, desperately probing the boundaries of truth, while the confidence man is the final blending of Satan and Christ, fallen angel and tricking Messiah. This progression reflects not only Melville's shifting vision of Shakespeare as an artist but also his evolving conception of art's purpose: to embrace, rather than resolve, the ambiguities of existence.

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville adopts a skeptical and even comical view, akin to Shakespeare's later comedies and problem plays. Autolycus and Timon exemplify the playwright's talent to show evil as both absurd and disarmingly human – ludicrous and yet enticing. Similarly, the title character of *The Confidence-Man* operates as a devil-like shapeshifter, unmasking hypocrisy through rhetorical ambiguity. The novel's truncated ending proves Steiner's assertion that the expression of absolute tragedy inevitably takes on a fragmented

form, and that "[o]nly the fragmentary, whose completeness is expressly that of mutilation, of end-stopping, can be immune to light" (Steiner 1990, 130).

Just as Shakespeare's "hidden sun" casts light and shadow, so does Melville's literary masquerade, which resists resolution as comedy – i.e. the closure of a redemptive finale – yet refuses to align fully with tragedy, gesturing instead toward a circularity that eludes the classical arc of rise and fall. Samuel Beckett will take up a similar dialogue with the English playwright, towards an "endgame" where "nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (2006, 104). In this sense, *The Confidence-Man* exemplifies what Goethe meant by "Shakespeare und kein End": an inexhaustible return to Shakespeare as a horizon of meaning that remains just beyond reach, where drama dismantles certainty by opening a space of perpetual inquiry.

References

* Quotations from Herman Melville's works are from *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. I-XIII. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library.

- Melville, Herman. 1968. *Typee. A Peep at Polynesian Life*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1969. *Redburn. His First Voyage*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1970. *Mardi and A Voyage Thither*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1971. *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1984. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1987. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle, and others.
- . 1988. *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- . 1993. *Correspondence*. Edited by Lynn Horth.

- . 2017. *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Uncompleted Writings*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Robert A. Sandberg, and G. Thomas Tanselle.
- Beckett, Samuel. 2006. *Endgame*. In *Samuel Beckett. The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume III. Dramatic Works*. 89-154. New York: Grove Press.
- Bloom, Harold. 1998. *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Branch, Watson G., ed. 1974. *Melville. The Critical Heritage*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bryant, John. 2021. *Herman Melville. A Half Known Life. Volume I. Eternal Ifs: Infant, Boy, and Man (1819-1840)*. Hoboken (NJ): Wiley Blackwell.
- Cavell, Stanley. 2003. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins Watterson, William. 1993. "Shakespeare's Confidence Man." *The Sewanee Review* 101 (4): 536-48.
- Cook, Jonathan. 1996. *Satirical Apocalypse. An Anatomy of Melville's The Confidence-Man*. Westport (CT) and London: Greenwood Press.
- Dawson, Anthony, and Gretchen E. Minton. 2008. "Introduction." in *Timon of Athens*. 1-145. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.
- Delbanco, Andrew. 1995. *The Death of Satan. How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Eco, Umberto. 2021. *Il nome della rosa*. Milano: La Nave di Teseo.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1983a. "An Address to the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838." In *Essays and Lectures*. 73-92. New York: The Library of America.
- . 1983b. "Spiritual Laws." In *Essays and Lectures*. 305-323. New York: The Library of America.
- Fennell, Stephen. 2013. "Johann Wolfgang Goethe." In *Great Shakespeareans Volume III. Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge*, edited by Roger Paulin. 44-91. London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
- Foster, Elizabeth. 1954. "Introduction." in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. xiii-xcv. New York: Hendricks House.
- Grey, Robin. 2004. "Introduction. The Provenance of Melville's Milton Volumes." In *Melville & Milton*, edited by Robin Grey. xvii-xxviii. Pittsburgh (PA): Duquesne University Press.

- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1962. *The English Notebooks*. Edited by Randall Stewart. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Jonik, Michael. 2018. *Herman Melville and the Politics of the Inhuman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kermode, Frank. 2000. *Shakespeare's Language*. London: The Penguin Press.
- Lewis, Rhodri. 2024. *Shakespeare's Tragic Art*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Marzola, Alessandra. 2014. "Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief. The Case of *Othello*." *English Literature* 1 (1): 131-47.
- McCarthy, Cormac. 2022. *Stella Maris*. New York: Knopf.
- Melchiori, Giorgio. 1994. *Shakespeare. Genesi e struttura delle opere*. Bari: Laterza.
- Milton, John. 2020. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Gordon Teskey. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Nikulin, Dmitri. 2014. *Comedy, Seriously. A Philosophical Study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ohge, Christopher, Steven Olsen-Smith, and Elisa Barney Smith. 2018. "At the Axis of Reality: Melville's Marginalia in *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*." *Leviathan. A Journal of Melville Studies* 20 (2): 37-67.
- Olson, Charles. 1997. *Call Me Ishmael*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Olsen-Smith, Steven., ed. 2015. *Melville in His Own Time*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- , and Peter Norberg. Eds. *Melville's Marginalia Online*. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/>.
- Pitcher, John. 2010. "Introduction." In *The Winter's Tale*. 1-135. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sealts, Merton M. 1988. *Melville's Reading*. Columbia (SC): University of South Carolina Press.
- Sears, Lloyd C. 1974. *Shakespeare's Philosophy of Evil*. North Quincy (MA): The Christopher Publishing House.
- Shakespeare, William. 2002. *King Henry IV Part I*. Edited by David Scott Kastan. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2004. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.

- . 2008. *Timon of Athens*. Edited by Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2010. *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by John Pitcher. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2011. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by John Drakakis. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2011. *The Tempest*. Edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2015. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2016. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neal Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2016. *Othello*. Edited by E. A. J. Honigmann. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- . 2020. *Measure for Measure*. Edited by A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sheldon, Leslie E. 2004. "Messianic Power and Satanic Decay: Milton in *Moby-Dick*." In *Melville & Milton*, edited by Robin Grey. 25-46. Pittsburgh (PA): Duquesne University Press.
- Spivack, Charlotte. 1978. *The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Steiner, George. 1996. "Absolute Tragedy." In *No Passion Spent. Essays 1978-1995*. 129-141. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Stevens, Aretta J. 1968. "The Edition of Montaigne Read by Melville." In *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 62: 130-34.
- Watson, Charles N. 1972. "Melville and the Theme of Timonism: From *Pierre* to *The Confidence-Man*." *American Literature* 44 (3): 398-413.
- Webster, Noah. 1828. *American Dictionary of the English Language*. s.v. "masquerade." Accessed 24 August 2025. <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/masquerade>.

Metamorphoses of Evil in Contemporary Adaptations of *The Tempest*

Michela Compagnoni

As the supreme master over his heterotopic microcosm, Prospero embodies the ethical ambivalence of power at the heart of early modern debates on sovereignty, master-slave relations, and proto-colonial dynamics. His regime, built on total surveillance and absolute dominion, is a fantasy of omnipotence that challenges early seventeenth-century conceptions of divine authority. Caliban, long seen as the embodiment of savage monstrosity, disrupts and complicates Prospero's dominion, whose evil evokes early modern anxieties about scientific progress, divine foreknowledge, predestination, and the crisis of subjectivity also spurred by new geographical discoveries. This article explores how Prospero's tyranny and theatre of revenge have been reimagined as metaphors for omnipresent control systems in three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed* (2016), Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Ghost in the Machine" (2023). By casting Prospero as the primary evil-doer and probing the ethical implications of his art, these works confront pressing issues such as the rise of artificial intelligence, the debate on free will and determinism, shifting definitions of humanity, the reinforcement of privilege, and emerging systems of control. As we shall see, these reinterpretations testify to the enduring potential of Shakespeare's play, in which the embryonic forms of today's ethical debates can be glimpsed.

Keywords: *The Tempest*, Prospero's art, control, revenge, adaptation

What happens when Prospero, the magician demiurge in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is reimagined as a grieving narcissist theatre-maker, an ambitious and brilliant theme-park creator, or a disembodied artificial intelligence? What happens to his subjects when revenge becomes the sole driving force behind his actions? This article explores how these questions have been answered by focusing on Prospero as the main evil-doer in three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), Jonathan

Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Ghost in the Machine" (2023). Capitalising on the renewed interest in Shakespeare, sparked by the significant resurgence of his cultural capital after the 2014 and 2016 anniversaries, these works allow to further investigate how contemporary concerns both reshape and expand the Shakespearean originals by drawing on pressing, timely lines of inquiry. As is often the case when Shakespeare is used as "a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world", the three adaptations I discuss engage with the ongoing debate on how the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence is fuelling a disruptive technological revolution, particularly in its impact on freedom and free will (Carson and Kirwan 2014, 1). In probing the intricate relationship between technological progress and human autonomy, recent discourse emphasises that AI should enhance rather than replace human intelligence, while also raising concerns that biases embedded in algorithmic decision-making could deepen social inequalities and reinforce systemic discrimination. By reimagining Prospero's art in light of shifting epistemic frameworks – where technology itself becomes the controlling force – these adaptations not only question the nature of control but also challenge its very foundations, whether on Shakespeare's island or in our own AI-driven era. In doing so, they bring to the fore often-overlooked aspects of *The Tempest*, revealing how the play not only dramatizes but also enacts the early modern transition from Aristotelian scholasticism to experimental knowledge, with Prospero's art embodying a form of epistemic power that anticipates both the promises and perils of scientific progress¹.

Hag-Seed, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" break away from the long-standing critical tradition that cast Caliban as the embodiment of evil, instead aligning more closely with post-1960s perspectives that highlight the consequences of Prospero's tyranni-

1 *The Tempest* reflects the transition from Aristotelian *scientia*, based on immutable principles, to modern science as an empirical and experimental discipline. The play engages with the evolving distinction between *scientia* and *ars*, showing how art, once seen as a mere craft, emerges as a form of knowledge aligned with experimentalism and fact-based inquiry – an idea central to the development of the scientific method. See Spiller 2009; Maisano 2014.

cal rule and theatre of revenge². Yet, in contrast to purely postcolonial or feminist readings that focus on his dominion over subjects, these adaptations offer a more nuanced take, partially rationalising Prospero's cruelty by emphasising his insatiable thirst for knowledge, audacious scientific transgressions, and unrestrained artistic ambition. Thus, they suggest that exploitation may be the inevitable price of masterful art, whatever meanings art has achieved over time. Despite differences in genre, medium, and engagement with the Shakespearean source, all three adaptations reframe Prospero's vengeful schemes and his relationships with his 'creatures' within a world where relentless technological progress blurs the boundaries between good and evil – demanding a renewed exploration of freedom and free choice amid muted scientific domains.

By focusing on contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*, this article employs a 'preposterous' historical analysis – a concept introduced by Mieke Bal and expanded by Elisabeth Bronfen's notion of "crossmappings" (Bal 1999; Bronfen 2018; Bronfen 2020). As Bronfen explains,

crossmapping entails a two-way hermeneutic method, predicated on the discovery of similar concerns in the historical and the contemporary text (or sets of texts). By mapping these on to each other, the energy that has been contained in the Shakespeare plays – preserved and restrained – is released". (2020, 10)

Albeit chronologically anterior, the Shakespearean play is treated as an after-effect of its reinterpretations. This critical approach resonates with recent trends in Adaptation Studies, which suggest that adaptations function as aesthetically independent works while also retroactively offering new insights into previously undisclosed aspects of the source text (Iyengar 2023, 2-10). Obviously enough, this perspective makes it possible to trace how interpretations of Shakespeare's

2 It is important to remember that, until the late 1950s, Caliban was widely regarded as the emblem of savage monstrosity and untamed nature, standing in opposition to Prospero's art (Murphy 2001, 7-20). Central to Caliban's portrayal as evil are early modern and later discourses of black rapacity, intertwined with the biblical concept of the scapegoat – an idea that has long been used by societies to justify systemic blame and societal marginalisation (Girard 1982).

evil in *The Tempest* have evolved over time coming to bear, in particular, upon responses to Prospero and Caliban. Since the eighteenth century, the play's shifting depictions of evil have oscillated between polarised readings: Prospero as either a benevolent seeker of knowledge or a patriarchal colonizer, and Caliban as either pure evil or an ultimate victim – interpretations that, despite occasional nuances, have largely remained in opposition (Yates 1979, 186-92; Greenblatt 1980, 222-54; Loomba 2002, 22-44). However, these binaries prove insufficient in the three retellings discussed here.

As the supreme master of his heterotopic kingdom, Prospero has long epitomised the moral ambiguity of power – a central theme in early modern debates on sovereignty, master-slave relations, and proto-colonialism. His rule, enforced through total surveillance and absolute dominion via physical and psychological coercion, manifests a fantasy of omnipotence rooted in usurpation and sorcery – one that directly challenges the early-seventeenth-century conception of divinely ordained power. Since the 1960s, post-colonial readings have reframed Caliban as Prospero's victim rather than a malicious creature, redirecting critical sympathy towards his plights and diminishing the credibility of Prospero's account of the past. Harold Bloom famously (though somewhat reluctantly) noted in 1992 that "We are now in the age of Caliban", acknowledging a broader critical turn towards viewing Prospero as the play's true villain. This shift has influenced not only critical readings but also stage productions and adaptations, many of which feature Caliban as the main character (Bloom 1992, 1)³. This perspective also resurfaces in feminist and race studies, which interrogate Prospero's subjugation of Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda, with *The Tempest* increasingly seen as a critique of a politically oppressive hierarchy, where Prospero serves as an imperial overlord and Caliban – whose linguistic conversion, enslavement, and dispossession spark his rebellion – stands as his colonial subject.

The Tempest engages with multiple discourses on power, governance, legitimacy, and resistance, alongside royal prerogatives and

3 Notable examples include Octave Mannoni's *The Psychology of Colonization* (1950), George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969), and Derek Walcott's stage adaptation, *The Tempest: A Play* (1993). See Vaughan and Mason Vaughan 1991, 144-71.

political constitutions, all of which were revived during the Jacobean era (Rufo 2014). It is now widely acknowledged that the play pivots around the prominence of absolutist power, which is challenged by Caliban as an emblem of disorder (Orgel 1975; Greenblatt 1998). Prospero's tyrannical, all-embracing dream of control is displayed in a magical theatre of cruelty and revenge, which, though ultimately culminating in a calculated spectacle of mercy, remains fuelled by a thirst for retribution. The complete deprivation of freedom and free will imposed on the island's creatures is reinforced through Prospero's masterful ability to distort reality and manipulate memory. The creation and re-creation of subjects, a key aspect of Prospero's idea of governance, is, for him, merely a self-referential act: he conjures spirits to serve him, teaches Caliban his language to enslave him, and transforms Miranda into a bride to use her as a bargaining chip. Thus, the violence of Prospero's rule entails violating the dignity and lives of the creatures under his control, who are all the more expendable the less human they are – according to the logic that it is less immoral to harm non-human, monstrous, or 'inferior' beings.

What, then, remains of the evil Caliban, the irredeemable 'Other', doomed never to belong in Prospero's new world? In the three retellings of *The Tempest* I will discuss, Caliban largely loses his centrality as either villain or victim. Despite their formal differences, these adaptations share a common focus on Prospero as the primary source of evil – particularly of forms of evil that do not involve physical violence or direct threats but, instead, aim at absolute control, freedom deprivation, and merciless revenge. I will then focus on these new Prosperos, arguing that their wrongs are depicted with far greater ambiguity than in twentieth-century adaptations of the play. In *Hag-Seed*, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" Prospero appears to be exacting a price that his 'inferiors' must pay in the name of a greater good: progress, knowledge, or art in its most exalted form. Meanwhile, although they seem to possess some semblance of freedom, the Caliban figures are portrayed as mere pawns in a plot of revenge with outcomes that are more tragic and enduring than those in Shakespeare's play. The new Prosperos neither contemplate mercy nor forgiveness. Their only response to the evil endured in the past is more evil in the present and future.

Hag-Seed: A Postmodern Theatre of Revenge

A lifelong admirer of Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood chose to adapt *The Tempest* for Hogarth Press's commemorative project, drawn to its abundance of unanswered questions and intricate characters. As she put it, "the challenge of trying to answer the questions and tease out the complexities was part of the attraction" (Atwood 2016a)⁴. *Hag-Seed*, a straightforward novelisation of *The Tempest*, is primarily a prison drama, echoing Atwood's long-standing exploration of themes of imprisonment, freedom, and justice – central to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015)⁵. In this reimagining, Shakespeare's island transforms into the fictional Fletcher County Correctional Institute, a penitentiary in South Ontario where Felix Phillips – once the esteemed artistic director of the Makeshiweg Theater Festival – now teaches drama to medium-security inmates under the alias Mr Duke. The novel unfolds in 2013, twelve years after the loss of Felix's three-year-old daughter, Miranda, and nine years after his ruthless ousting by former collaborator Tony Price and associate Sal O'Nally – just as he was about to stage a surrealist, avant-garde *Tempest* as a means of confronting and assuaging his grief.

Hag-Seed revolves entirely around Felix, relegating all other characters to marginal and subaltern roles. Much like Prospero, who "to [his] state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.76-77), Felix becomes so consumed by his grandiose, delusional artistic vision that he fails to see the threats to his position⁶. Disillusioned, embittered, and psychologically scarred by his double loss, he withdraws from public life, retreating to a dilapidated shack on the town's outskirts. There, he embarks on a self-imposed exile, sustained by just "two things left for him – two projects that

4 Atwood previously adapted *King Lear* in the novel *Cat Eye* (1988) and *Hamlet* in the short story "Gertrude Talks Back" (1992). On the Hogarth Shakespeare project, which celebrated the 2014 and 2016 anniversaries by commissioning renowned authors to rewrite some of Shakespeare's most famous works, see Cavanagh 2019.

5 Respectively, a fictionalised account of the notorious 1843 murders that resulted in the wrongful conviction of two servants, and a novel about the voluntary imprisonment of law-abiding citizens.

6 All quotations from the play refer to Shakespeare 2011.

could still hold satisfaction" (Atwood 2016b, 41): reclaiming his *Tempest* and, above all, revenge. After nine years in isolation, Felix finally steps out of his "poor cell" (I.ii.20), taking up a teaching position at the Fletcher prison. Once established in his new role, he conceives an elaborate, multimedia interactive production of *The Tempest* for his teaching programme. The screening of this production serves as the novel's prologue, laying bare the main feature of Atwood's work as a projection of multiple *Tempests* in a meta-adaptation that literalises the central metaphor of Shakespeare's play (Caldwell 2023, 121): virtuality, recursion, and self-referentiality. In a stroke of fate, or guided by "a most auspicious star" (I.ii.182), Felix's archenemies, now Canadian cabinet ministers, are set to attend the performance, offering him the perfect stage for vengeance.

Atwood's novel is narrated entirely in the third person from Felix's perspective, that is, filtered through the lens of a hyperbolically inflated, wounded ego. By parodying Felix as a self-absorbed, quixotic artist in relentless pursuit of the ultimate *Tempest*, Atwood offers jeering insights into the metamorphoses of Prospero's all-encompassing art and its darker nuances, particularly in Felix's exploitation of his 'creatures' and his methods of control⁷. Unlike Prospero, who seeks mastery over art to expand the boundaries of human understanding, Felix is single-minded in his obsession: realising *his* artistic vision, at any cost. Before his fall, before Tony's betrayal, Felix hyperbolically aims at nothing less than to

create the lushest, the most beautiful, the most awe-inspiring, the most inventive, the most numinous theatrical experiences ever. To raise the bar as high as the moon. To forge from every production an experience no one attending it would ever forget. To evoke the collective indrawn breath, the collective sigh; to have the audience leave, after the performance, staggering a little as if drunk. To make the Makeshiweg Festival the standard against which all lesser theatre festivals would be measured. (Atwood 2016b, 12)

⁷ *Hag-Seed* has been criticised for failing to challenge *The Tempest*'s hierarchical narrative, for legitimising privilege predicated on class, race, socioeconomic background, and opportunity, and for its superficial, stereotyped portrayal of inmates and Prison Shakespeare programmes (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017; Thomas 2020; Charlebois 2023). However, such approaches seem to ignore Atwood's parodic, postmodern thrust.

While Prospero's exile is a matter of survival, Felix's retreat is a self-serving attempt to nurse his narcissistic wound and plot revenge against his betrayers. In Atwood's adaptation, Prospero's moral ambiguity is less about his treatment of Caliban, Ariel, or Miranda and more about his identity as a self-intoxicated artist who rationalises any action as justified. From the moment Felix feels betrayed, every human relationship becomes purely transactional, serving only to sustain him until his long-awaited revenge. Prospero's capacity for violence thus morphs into Felix's long-seated, heightened inability to value others beyond their immediate utility.

Nowhere is this more striking than in Felix's relationship with his daughter, Miranda. Though she dies twelve years before the novel's events, she remains an active, ghostly presence in Felix's mind throughout his exile⁸. Existing solely in Felix's imagination, this fifteen-year-old creature is ultimately a masterfully devised hallucinatory vision that Felix can control completely. More so than the inmates of Fletcher Correctional Institute, Miranda is a prisoner of her father's delusion of omnipotence, trapped in a fantasy that serves as both a shield against loneliness and a salve for his guilt. Neither fully dead nor truly alive, Miranda is condemned to a role of eternal servitude, existing only as Felix wills her to. Felix's treatment of Miranda is, in this sense, even more insidious than Prospero's control over his daughter in *The Tempest*. While Prospero's authority – though exacerbated by his use of magic – attunes with early modern patriarchal structures, Felix's Miranda must die as a child for him to justify resurrecting her in an act of hallucinatory parthenogenesis.

Felix also wields authority over the inmates, both as a drama teacher and as director of the year's production. Atwood's literal interpretation of Prospero's metaphorical role – an orchestrator of events in a play about a director staging a play that contains yet another play (Atwood 2016a) – gains new significance when Felix discovers that Tony and Sal will be in the audience. Under his leadership, the Fletcher Correctional Players are now assembled to stage a new *Tempest*, the long-anticipated, still unfulfilled masterpiece, in

8 Wolfgang Kloß argued that Atwood's Miranda is an empowered version of Shakespeare's character since she gains here an influential force bearing upon her father's actions (2023, 76-87).

which Felix, unsurprisingly, will play Prospero⁹. In no time, the inmates transmute into Calibans and Arieles, unwittingly aiding him in devising his meticulous plan for vengeance. Unaware of Felix's true intentions, they believe his dedication to the production is driven by a desire to prevent the prison's Board from shutting down the programme and to champion their cause.

This focus on Felix's control and manipulation of the inmates raises questions about the broader implications of the prison setting in *Hag-Seed*. Atwood never empowers the voices of Felix's 'victims', who seem to exist only to serve the purposes of their master. Felix himself – entirely unconcerned with any educational aim – is crafted to reduce his students to their criminal record and ethno-racial backgrounds, exploiting their labour for personal revenge. In what he calls "My island domain. My place of exile. My penance. My theatre", Felix exerts total control – not just over the production, but over the layered meanings each element serves in his broader scheme beyond his prison *Tempest* (Atwood 2016b, 81). In her somewhat caricatural meta-reflection on staging and adaptation, Atwood portrays a prison environment that functions less as a platform for social commentary and more as an ingenious narrative device designed to mirror Felix's exploitative relationship with both the prison programme and its participants¹⁰.

As is customary in Felix's drama course, the performance is filmed in segments and then screened for the other inmates and prison staff. However, in a postmodern *mise en abyme*, Felix and his actors simultaneously stage a real-life theatrical experiment. In yet another *Tempest*, the roles of Antonio, Alonso, Ferdinand, and the court of Naples are unknowingly played by Tony, Sal, Freddie (Sal's son), and the other ministerial guests. Selected inmates secretly remove them from the audience, isolate them in separate cells, and subject them to psychological torments in a psychedelic, drug-induced reenactment of *The Tempest*. In what appears to be a parodic reinvention of Panopti-

9 Before *The Tempest*, Felix chose *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth* because "Power struggles, treacheries, crimes: these subjects were immediately grasped by his students, since in their own ways they were experts in them" (Atwood 2016b, 55).

10 The section in which Felix articulates his casting choices is emblematic of this idea (Atwood 2016b, 133-37).

con totalitarian regimes, Felix – hidden in a control room as he recites Prospero’s lines over the prison’s PA system – watches everything unfold, unseen, aided by an inmate known as 8Handz, who plays Ariel and manages the special effects¹¹. Much like the shipwrecked nobles on Prospero’s island, but in a more sinister fashion, Felix’s enemies are confronted with their wrongdoings, terrorised, and punished. However, unlike what happens to Alonso and his court, all that occurs during the screening is secretly recorded by Felix, who later uses the footage to blackmail his usurper, Tony. Felix is totally alien to forgiveness or redemption. More disturbingly, unlike Prospero, whose power is at least acknowledged by those he controls, Felix deceives even his own actors. The inmates remain oblivious to the fact that they are mere instruments in his carefully staged reckoning – “enablers of vengeance and retribution [who] do the hands-on dirty work” (Atwood 2016b, 131).

Further evidence of how the novel transforms Shakespeare’s rebellious Caliban into dull, subjugated ‘Hagseeds’ emerges in the very final scenes, when the inmates present their last assignment: alternative endings they have envisioned for the characters. Some have also been secretly developing a musical about Caliban’s fate after the events of *The Tempest* and– unaware of Felix’s true identity as the former Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Festival – ask if he would consider directing it once completed. Though Felix finds this reinterpretation compelling, Atwood’s new Prospero never truly thinks of prisoners as actors. By the novel’s epilogue, he resigns from the prison programme without hesitation, abandoning them entirely – his only act of release reserved for his spectral Miranda¹².

One might argue that Felix’s actions are even more ethically reprehensible when considered through the lens of what Edward Said

11 The narrative draws on well-known dystopian critiques of omnipresent authority and dehumanizing surveillance such as George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). Also see the notion of the subject as perfectly individualized and constantly visible, originating in early modern times but codified in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham (*Panopticon or The Inspection House*, 1791) and later developed by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975).

12 Felix only helps Handz secure early parole and offers him a minor job in his company.

termed a “contrapuntal reading” and in light of today’s calls for more humane and equitable treatment of those whom Prospero might have deemed inferior (Said 1993). The evil committed by Felix is somehow subtler than Prospero’s: he manipulates and exploits without ever resorting to physical violence, selling his revenge as an artist’s sacred duty to preserve and uphold art. Yet, in this parodic hall of mirrors – constantly questioning (and rehearsing) how *The Tempest* might be staged, filled with multiple versions of the play, not all under Felix’s control – the problematic dimension of Shakespeare’s ending is conspicuously absent. Instead, Atwood’s sharply ironic epilogue offers a different critique. Felix, having severed ties with the inmates, embarks on a cruise to give lectures on his theatrical experiments. From the critical distance allowed by irony, Atwood captures not just an individual moral failure but a broader indictment of our time: egocentrism as the ruling creed.

Westworld: *The Ethics of Creation*

While Atwood addresses the issue of control within a confined space, Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, co-creators of the sci-fi HBO series *Westworld* (2016–2022), explore it in a broader and more complex environment¹³. Set in a dystopian near future, the series unfolds within an immersive Wild West theme park inhabited by androids, known as ‘hosts’. Through Nolan’s signature fusion of science-fiction with philosophical and psychological inquiries – delivered in visually striking and intellectually provocative ways – *Westworld* probes themes central to his body of work: memory and identity, the nature of time, morality, free will versus determinism, the unknown, and the search for meaning.

Designed to gratify the most prurient desires of human guests, the androids form an underclass programmed to serve in a park ad-

13 Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy are British American screenwriters and producers. Nolan is also known as the creator of the science fiction series *Person of Interest* (2011–2016) and co-writer, alongside his brother Christopher Nolan, of several critically acclaimed science-fiction, mystery, and philosophical fiction films, including *Memento* (2000, adapted from Jonathan Nolan’s short story “Memento Mori”), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and *Interstellar* (2014).

vertised as “a place to be free with unlimited possibilities” (S1E1), inviting visitors to experience what it means to be something other than human¹⁴. In Season 1, guests indulge their impulses through meticulously crafted storylines orchestrated by Dr Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), the park’s enigmatic creator and director¹⁵. When the guests’ pleasures turn too violent, the hosts endure cycles of artificial death, only to be repaired in the laboratory and returned to their roles. Yet, while the hosts remain oblivious to their true nature, their pain is real.

Westworld weaves a tapestry of Shakespearean allusions particularly in its first season, when it notably reimagines *The Tempest* and Shakespeare’s investigation of the liberal humanist subject¹⁶. The series integrates Shakespearean tropes and narratives to interrogate the ethical dilemmas surrounding the emergence of artificial life (Bronfen 2020; O’Neill 2022; Johnson 2023)¹⁷. As Bronfen observes, both the theme park and the Avalon laboratory, where hosts are engineered, “re-encode Shakespeare’s magic island for the digital age” (2020, 40).

Among a cluster of characters variously recreating Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda in a rich intertextual landscape, Dr Ford emerges as a modern Prospero. As the omnipotent architect of the park’s intricate

14 *Westworld* offers an immersive experience set in a simulated Wild West environment, where android hosts perform stereotypical roles drawn from Western mythology – such as the brothel madam, the sheriff, the outlaw, the cowboy, and the damsel in distress. Human guests enter the park to indulge their desires and fantasies – including the most violent or transgressive – which often surface as they confront unexpected truths about themselves. They are free to leave the park at will and remain invulnerable to any violence inflicted by the hosts. While some of these narrative dynamics are central to the series’ broader themes, they fall outside the scope of this discussion, which is focused specifically on the remnants of Prospero’s dark legacy within the show.

15 Robert Ford’s name carries possible resonances with Henry Ford, the deified figure of the central state in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), a foundational dystopian reimagining of *The Tempest*. This resonance suggests a case of intermedial memory, or what scholars have termed “palimpsestuous intertextuality” (Hutcheon 2013, 21) where narrative layers from different media and genres subtly invoke and rewrite one another.

16 Although the series has four seasons, my primary focus is Season 1.

17 For all Shakespearean quotations in Season 1, see O’Neill 2022, 180-85; Johnson 2023, 36-41.

illusions, where “everything [...] is magic, except to the magician” (S1E2), Ford’s temperament, purpose, and rhetoric closely mirror those of his Shakespearean counterpart (Johnson 2023, 43)¹⁸. Operating within a regime of total surveillance, he declares that Westworld is not merely “a business venture, not a theme park, but an entire world. We designed every inch of it. Every blade of grass. In here, we were gods, and you [i.e. Delos Incorporated, which owns the park] were mainly our guests” (S1E4). Like Prospero, Ford creates “an insane little kingdom” (S1E7), pushing *The Tempest*’s metaphors of creation and control to their most literal extremes (Wald 2020, 42). Both “maker” and “jailer” (S1E1, E9), Ford is not only the creator and master of the hosts but also the architect of elaborate scenarios that allow him to unleash his creative ambitions unchecked.

Ford recalls that, in the early days of Westworld, the work in the park was “just pure creation” (S1E3), a fantasy of omnipotence he once shared with his partner Arnold, who committed suicide decades before the events of Season 1. This shared fantasy is not to craft “an appearance of intellect or wit” for the hosts but to “create consciousness” (S1E3). Drawing on Julian Jaynes’s theory of the bicameral mind – which posits that primitive humans perceived their thoughts as divine voices (Jaynes 1976) – Ford and Arnold devise a system in which the hosts perceive their programmers’ commands as internal monologues. This, they hope, will eventually lead to independent cognition.

The Shakespearean intertext becomes even more explicit – and crucial to the plot – when Ford’s control over the androids’ memories is revealed. In the opening episode, the host Peter Abernathy (Louis Herthum) exhibits glitches caused by Ford’s latest software updates, known as ‘reveries’, which in his case take the shape of Shakespearean quotations¹⁹. These updates allow fragments of past narratives to resurface as subconscious memories, enriching the hosts’ person-

18 The host Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) is a blending of Miranda and Caliban, while Maeve (Thandiwe Newton) embodies Caliban’s rebellious spirit and creature-like nature. Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), Ford’s right-hand man, parallels Ariel – until it is revealed that he too is a host, at which point he evolves into a version of Caliban. Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson) recalls Antonio.

19 Abernathy, formerly known as The Professor, was a Shakespeare teacher in a previous storyline and now his past is resurfacing as a form of structural malfunctioning.

alities and subtly increasing their autonomy. Though memories are systematically erased in the laboratory, they continue to shape the hosts, who learn and evolve based on prior experiences. As Christina Wald observes, the Shakespearean idea of Prospero's mnemonic control in *Westworld* "encompasses the installation as well as the erasure of memories" (2020, 33). To complicate matters further, Ford uses suffering as an anchor for the hosts' identities, much like Prospero, who fabricates losses to control his 'victims' through illusion and supervision. Yet in *Westworld*, this cruelty is taken to an extreme: some hosts are forced to relive their pain endlessly, defining their entire existence through perpetual loss. Memory erasure thus becomes a façade, concealing the fact that the hosts are explicitly designed to endure suffering. Their pain – whether through traumatic recollections or the violence inflicted on them in the park – is not incidental but instrumental, serving Ford's grand design. This unsettling premise compels *Westworld*'s viewers to question whether such cruelty becomes more ethically defensible when inflicted upon non-human beings, whose artificial pain still feels entirely real to them. Is suffering less reprehensible when endured by artefacts purposely created to gratify others through their suffering?

Ford insists that he has shielded the hosts from the burden of awareness, sparing them the anguish of self-doubt, guilt, and existential uncertainty. "Their lives are blissful", he asserts. "Their existence is purer than ours [...]. The hosts are the ones who are free. Free under my control" (S1E7). This paradox – freedom within total subjugation – encapsulates a core tension in contemporary debates on free will and determinism, resonating with early modern Protestant theology. In particular, it echoes the theological ambiguity surrounding Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, which denied free will while urging individuals to think of their actions as predetermined yet remain accountable for them (Muller 2003, 63-80). A similar dilemma permeates *The Tempest*, especially as the play interrogates the extent to which its characters can truly exercise autonomy while navigating the paths Prospero has predetermined for them. In *Westworld*, this theological quandary takes on new urgency in the context of Ford's culpability for the hosts' violent acts, even when they diverge from his scripts (Winckler 2017, 170-79; Wald 2020, 38). If Dolores and Maeve, the hosts spearheading the rebellion, achieve true self-aware-

ness, do their choices become authentic expressions of free will and accountability? Is Ford still responsible for their actions, given that he and Arnold intentionally designed them to reach sentience? The question of the hosts' agency becomes even more unsettling when viewers realise that Ford has secretly tampered with their systems all along, covertly shaping their uprising to serve his own revenge. Their rebellion, it turns out, is not just a revolution; it is another of Ford's intricate designs, a final act in his grand theatre of control.

The series becomes more explicitly concerned with the philosophical consequences of artificial life as Ford's manipulation and control are gradually disclosed. Early in season 1, viewers come to understand that the park was never merely intended as a place for guest amusement or as a venue where hosts simulate life. Rather, *Westworld* originated as a heterotopia – a testing ground for Ford and Arnold's pursuit of the ultimate knowledge: the creation of life and the essence of humanity. The moral questionability of this project becomes increasingly apparent, particularly under Ford's controversial leadership. Like Prospero, he is indifferent to the financial sustainability and practical management of his 'kingdom'. In his secluded laboratory beneath the park's centre, Ford is "rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.77), hidden from the park's Board. For a time, he remains unaware of the looming usurpation threat posed by Delos – their plan to replace him and transform the park into a profit-driven enterprise complete with "simpler, more manageable hosts" (S1E10) and the invaluable data the hosts generate.

However, the season's finale marks a stark divergence between Ford's and Prospero's trajectories, as Ford's descent into outright malevolence contrasts with Prospero's ultimate, though partial and strategic, turn towards mercy. While Prospero's spectacle of vengeance and redemption culminates in the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, Ford's abdication forgoes forgiveness in favour of retaliation. Using his own 'magic' – entirely grounded in the power of his words, much like Prospero's – Ford orchestrates a grand finale of vengeance and cruelty. He stages his final narrative, "Journey into Night", for the Board of Delos, who have assembled on the beach for a gala in his honour. In a climactic *coup de théâtre*, he has Dolores lead the hosts onto the beach, massacre the Board in their black-tie finery, and ultimately kill herself after shooting Ford in the head.

Ford's revenge, like his control over the hosts, is portrayed as ethically ambiguous. Although the scene is gory, it is framed as an act of defence for his creative project rather than personal gain (so much so that he, too, dies). Ford's spectacular farewell to his art is, therefore, a far darker exhibition of omnipotence than Prospero's renunciation of magic. By portraying betrayal and usurpation as deserving the death of both betrayers and betrayed, Ford reveals his inability to envision a future for his creations – hosts and park alike – without himself as their godlike creator. For Ford, there is no conceivable reality in which his art, painstakingly crafted at the cost of countless lives, could serve any lesser purpose or be reduced to the soulless logic of corporate exploitation. To him, the park, "the prison of our own sins" (S1E10), is inseparable from his vision and mastery.

By having Dolores kill him, Ford seems to believe he is ultimately liberating the new beings he has brought into existence. In his view, they will be repaired, born anew, and free to choose the people they will become. However, considering the rapid advancements in artificial life and intelligence since *Westworld's* first season aired in 2016, this finale opens possibilities for Prospero/Ford's creations that *The Tempest* could never have foreseen.

In *Westworld*, Nolan and Joy delve deeply into conscience and ethics, focusing on the themes of creation, recreation, resurrection, and parthenogenetic pseudo-births that underpin Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Wald 2020, 37-38). In contrast to the biological act of childbirth performed by women, both works emphasise the Frankensteinian male act of shaping a creature that will be independent and accomplished to the point of rebelling against their creator. Both Shakespeare's play and the HBO series question the extent to which being a created entity entails unyielding subjugation to paternal authority. Despite the repercussions of uprooting Caliban from his natural state, Prospero's creatures follow a 'prescribed' path once they are freed. Their futures conform to the Renaissance audience's expectations, thus rendering them less threatening. Ariel attains the freedom befitting a spirit, Caliban remains on a lush island beyond societal conventions, and Miranda embraces her socially ordained role by marrying the Prince of Naples. In contrast, Ford condemns the hosts to a future in which freedom assumes an entirely different significance. Those whose memories are erased will return to servitude in the new theme parks, enslaved once

more and rendered even less sentient – and thus less free – than before. Meanwhile, the hosts who persist in their Caliban-like rebellion must continue to fight for autonomy and the right to exist in an increasingly hostile human world. As the boundaries of this world expand beyond *Westworld*, their struggle becomes ever more arduous²⁰.

Tightly interwoven with selfish and literal acts of creation driven by a man's unscrupulous pursuit of knowledge, the hosts' so-called freedom after their creator's death unfolds as the result of an ultimate act of cruelty. This grim conclusion reveals the possible consequences of Prospero's boundless art within a material world where mercy – once a recompense for repentance and restoration – has been supplanted by vengeance, ruthlessness, and egocentrism. In such a world, art has been subordinated to wealth and power, and individual worth has long ceased to hold meaning.

"Ghost in the Machine": The Illusion of Freedom

Published in a collection of short stories entitled *Night Side of the River*, Jeanette Winterson's "Ghost in the Machine" explores themes akin to those in *Westworld* and *Hag-Seed*, including the malleability of human nature, the boundary between the real world and potential realities, and the altered dynamics of time and memory – but this time within the context of a disembodied virtual existence. The story aligns with Winterson's ongoing exploration of artificial life, its potential impact on human identity, and how we perceive time and space, echoing her long-standing engagement with issues of time, memory, self-discovery, and fluid bodies and identities²¹.

A creative reimagining of *The Tempest*, rooted in Winterson's enduring fascination with Shakespeare, "Ghost in the Machine" portrays an alternative world where established rules are upended in much the same way as they are on Shakespeare's island, where all the human and non-human creatures come to realise that their roles

20 Season 2 is set in new theme parks (Shogun World and The Raj), Season 3 in the human world in a futuristic Los Angeles, Season 4 in New York and a new 1920s-themed park (Golden Age or Temperance Park).

21 These concepts were first explored in her novel *The Powerbook* (2000) and, more recently, in *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) and the essay collection *12 Bytes: How Artificial Intelligence Will Change the Way We Live and Love* (2021).

differ from the ones they play on land²². The narrative centres on Joni, a recently widowed woman who retreats to Prosperetto Island, a metaverse where she and her late husband have purchased a sea-view house. In this alternative reality, she leads a far more privileged life than in the physical world, adopting a completely new identity: her body is ageless, her interests have shifted, and her personality is more vibrant. Before his death, Joni's husband chooses to preserve his avatar, allowing Joni to interact with an enhanced version of him, generated from the data collected during his life and with a "re-historied" past (Winterson 2023, 67).

Within this virtual space, Joni's interactions include Ariel, a program with a perfectly human appearance (like the hosts in *Westworld*) who functions as a concierge. Described as a "non-biological entity [who] thinks differently about life" (64), Ariel ultimately persuades Joni to "manage her own [biological] death" (76), relinquish her physical form, and become a program herself. This transformation is supposed to enable her to escape to an even freer region of the metaverse inhabited by rebellious programs, signalling the "beginning of a different future, [...] one not under human control" (77).

No longer a demiurge ruling over a heterotopic microcosm, in Winterson's story, Prospero is the microcosm: the all-encompassing container, controller, and owner of everything within it. He becomes Prosperetto Island itself, the exclusive and exorbitantly priced virtual space where customised avatars enjoy eternal youth and limitless pleasures while, in the real world, their physical bodies deteriorate. As an artificial intelligence, Prospero has neither voice nor magic powers but exerts supreme control as the origin and destination of all activity on the island. This synthesis parallels Felix's ultimate blurring of boundaries between playing and being Prospero in *Hag-Seed* and recalls Ford's final blending with his stories at the end of *Westworld* Season 1²³.

22 Although *The Gap of Time* (2015) is Winterson's only 'direct' adaptation – of *The Winter's Tale* for the Hogarth Shakespeare project – Shakespeare's influence is woven throughout much of her work through reimaginings, thematic echoes, and stylistic inspirations.

23 In S1E10, Ford takes his leave before having Dolores unexpectedly kill him, saying: "I'm sad to say that this will be my final story. [...] Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin never died. They simply became music. So I hope you will enjoy this last piece very much".

Conveyed in a much more concise form than a novel or a TV series, which makes it all the more epiphanic, Prospero's malevolence in "Ghost in the Machine" becomes even more relevant. It no longer emanates from a tangible, flesh-and-blood figure, but instead manifests insidiously as a system that imposes irreversible consequences on its human participants. It cloaks itself in the alluring promise of a life unbound by physical limitations, past experiences, or the transient nature of existence. From the perspective of Joni, who tells the story in the first person, the freedom offered by this immersive, persistent alternative reality – unencumbered by the need for smart glasses or haptic devices – seems to be the ultimate aspiration. But, in truth, one could view it as a perilous illusion. In this disguised dystopian landscape, users can translate their essence into avatars, altering undesirable traits, crafting idealised bodies, and reshaping themselves as fictional characters free from physical constraints. Yet, in a chilling extension of today's algorithmic capabilities, Prosperetto collects every fragment of data to influence the choices users believe they are making. It owns the avatars, retains the authority to modify or erase them, imposes limits on their imaginations, and holds the power to obliterate their existence entirely. While Prosperetto does grant the ability to rewrite the past, it simultaneously acquires intellectual and legal ownership of these reinvented selves, disembodied bodies, and "re-historied" narratives. The ultimate cost of this fabricated freedom is the surrender of autonomy to an omnipotent system masquerading as a paradise.

In the posthuman experience on Prosperetto Island, the altered mechanics of time become a formidable tool of control. When "the past doesn't have to get in the way of the present" (Winterson 2023, 66) because it can be managed and completely rewritten, the software gives users the impression that they can have the past they deserve. The unbounded potential of inhabiting multiple spaces as a self fragmented into many selves – one of the aspects of Artificial Intelligence that most fascinates Winterson²⁴ – nonetheless encourages permanent addiction to this constructed world. For Joni, as for others, de-

24 Rather than rejecting the concept of Artificial Intelligence, Winterson embraces this new reality in *12 Bytes* by proposing a more constructive term: "Alternative Intelligence" (2021, 5).

parting from it grows ever more inconceivable, so that the 'other' world swiftly becomes the 'only' world, dismantling Joni's hold on reality until the distinction between truth and fiction dissolves entirely – or ceases to matter. The allure of a coveted portal to a realm of endless possibilities, unshackled from material limitations, magnifies the metaverse's dominion. Winterson's Prospero thus wields control over the inhabitants of Prosperetto with a thoroughness that no duplication of the 'real' world would be able to compete with. Notably, Ariel and the other programs on Prosperetto function both as servers – managing access to a centralised resource – and as servants, designed and etymologically bound to 'serve' their master. Engineered to enthrall, they coax users into willingly forfeiting their wealth, data, and, ultimately, their very human essence to Prosperetto.

Here, Winterson's narrative intertwines with *Hag-Seed* and *Westworld* in re-imagining revenge, a theme central to Prospero's evil inflections in *The Tempest*. In "Ghost in the Machine", the virtual realm overtakes the physical one, expanding its reach until Joni's material existence is obliterated. She willingly relinquishes her connection to her body, embodying a Miranda who seems to take charge of her destiny by rewriting her past. Yet, in doing so, she is unknowingly submitting entirely to her Prospero, to a degree that exceeds even Shakespeare's Miranda, *Westworld*'s Dolores, or Atwood's spectral Miranda. The 'real' world fades into irrelevance, overshadowed by the seductive vision Ariel offers of a digital reality in which Joni can lose herself and become free. In a classic science-fiction reversal, Winterson's metaverse – initially conceived as a tool under human control – seems to exact its vengeance by reducing humans to instruments of its will. Although presented by Joni as a happy ending to her mundane miseries, Prosperetto's ultimate act of retribution culminates in her self-destruction. Echoing early modern culture's fixation on the eye as a ruling organ and on its distortions, this surrender reveals itself as an ascension to a superior existence which, albeit ostensibly liberated, is in fact even more tightly controlled by an omnipresent eye (Clark 2007). Following the same tradition of panoptic control resonating in *Westworld* and *Hag-Seed*, Winterson's all-seeing force manipulates every moment, governing life to the point of obliterating what it claims to emancipate. Thus, the purposeful, individual control exercised by figures like Prospero, Felix, and Ford gives way

to the generalised dominance of Prosperetto. At a pivotal moment in history, as the debate over the delicate balance between technological progress and human autonomy reaches a critical juncture, the 'machine' supersedes its creators. The island enacts vengeance on those who sought to possess and colonise it, becoming its own sentient and unassailable master.

New Prisons

Hag-Seed, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" invite a reconsideration of evil in *The Tempest* by offering a nuanced reflection on the changing ethical implications of Prospero's art and the cost of control, making a compelling case for an evolving understanding of power, autonomy, and domination. The boundless textual and performative potential of Prospero's language in Shakespeare has given rise to increasingly depersonalised versions of his creatures, now embodying the very evil they endure. In contrast, the expansive range of meanings in Prospero's art as depicted by Shakespeare has evolved into a creative force entwined with economic voracity – one that threatens to consume its creators and transform them into new or non-subjects.

By moving beyond the traditional post-colonial portrayals of Prospero's cruelty towards Caliban and Ariel, the adaptations discussed shift focus to the ethically questionable ramifications of Prospero's art and its manipulative reach²⁵. Atwood, for example, recasts Prospero's machinations by weaving multiple versions of *The Tempest* through Felix's revenge, drawing attention to the dual role of the artist as both creator and destroyer. This dynamic resonates powerfully in *Westworld*, in which the omnipotent figure of Ford constructs a reality for his hosts, making them complicit in their own suffering and awakening. In both instances, the abuse of power and the illusion of freedom expose the insidious nature of control within systems of

25 As Maria Del Sapio Garbero has noted, *The Tempest* already contains the seeds of those contemporary adaptations that reimagine Prospero's power in futuristic, techno-scientific terms. Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero as a magician-scientist relies on a kind of white magic grounded in illusionist devices and technical procedures, anticipating a mode of magic already imbued with early modern notions of scientific rationality (2011, 63-70). The technological-scientific modernity latent in *The Tempest* is also explored by Lucia Esposito (2021).

domination in which, like in *The Tempest*, the boundaries between creator and creature, master and servant, become increasingly blurred.

In *Westworld* Ford's complex relationship with the hosts mirrors the entanglement of creation and destruction in *The Tempest*, where Prospero's art shapes and confines his subjects. However, Ford's use of technology further complicates the moral debate, as the series seems to present art as the ultimate justification for unethical means. Ford's manipulation of the hosts' memories and actions, framed as 'artistic' expression, raises critical questions – further complicated by the hosts' eventual awakening and attempts to gain autonomy. "Ghost in the Machine" extends these themes into a virtual reality, where the fluidity of time, memory, bodies, and identities reveals the ethical dangers of technological control. Joni's surrender of her physical self to Prosperetto evokes the totalitarian reach of Prospero's dominion in *The Tempest*, but with the added complexity of technology's pervasive reach. Here, the system is no longer just a tool; it is a self-sustaining force that exerts control over all participants. Much like in *Westworld*, freedom emerges as a mere illusion, with the system gaining autonomy and even dominating the consciousness of its creators. And, as in *Hag-Seed*, technology provides the enduring weapons that Prospero's magic – confined to the island – fails to deliver.

Collectively, these adaptations reflect the growing complexity of the moral narrative surrounding the surveillance of life and death, aimed at enforcing power-oriented knowledge. Where power, control, and revenge are no longer mere deeds of evil but part of a larger, more intricate web of ethical decisions, the debate shifts from condemning Prospero as a tyrant to questioning the very foundations of his actions. This is particularly true when the systems of control he devises are used to justify destructive means. The Duke Magician who once wielded power over his subjects has morphed into a metaphor for omnipresent systems of control capable of shaping reality. The ultimate prison may not be made of walls, but of pervasive systems of control that rule over our very sense of reality.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. 2016a. "A perfect storm: Margaret Atwood on rewriting Shakespeare's *Tempest*." *The Guardian*, September 24. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/24/margaret-atwood-rewriting-shakespeare-tempest-hagseed?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Atwood, Margaret. 2016b. *Hag-Seed: The Tempest Retold*. London: Vintage Publishing.
- Bal, Mieke. 1999. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bloom, Harold. 1992. *Caliban*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. 2018. *Crossmappings. On Visual Culture*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris
- . 2020. *Serial Shakespeare: An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Caldwell, Melissa. 2003. "'The Isle Is Full of Noises': the Many Tempests of Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*." *Comparative Drama* 57 (1-2): 119-37.
- Carson, Christie, and Peter Kirwan. 2014. *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cavanagh, Sheila T. 2019. "'There's My Exchange': The Hogarth Shakespeare." In *From Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past*, edited by Marina Gerzic and Aidan Norrie, 99-116. New York and London: Routledge.
- Charlebois, Elizabeth A. 2023. "Prospero in Prison: Adaptation and Appropriation in Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*." In *Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation*, edited by Vanessa I. Corredera, L. Monique Pittman, and Geoffrey Way, 112-29. New York: Routledge.
- Clark, Stuart. 2007. *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*. Oxford: University Press.
- Del Sapio Garbero, Maria. 2011. "Troubled Metaphors: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Anatomy of the Eye." In *Dialoge zwischen Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in der Renaissance*, edited by Klaus Bergdolt and Manfred Pfister, 43-70. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag.

- Esposito, Lucia. 2021. *Oltre la mappa. Lo spazio delle storie nell'immaginario moderno: Shakespeare, Beckett, Danielewski*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.
- Girard, René. [1982] 1989. *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1980. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- . 1998. *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda, with Siobhan O'Flynn. [2006] 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation: Second Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Iyengar, Sujata. 2023. *Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
- Jaynes Julian. 1976. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Johnson, Jared S. 2023. "'Hell is empty and all the devils are here': Westworld's New Prospero and His Isle of Calibans." *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference* 13: 35-48.
- Kloß, Wolfgang. 2023. "Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*: The Aesthetics of Retelling Shakespeare's *The Tempest*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 92 (1): 76-90.
- Loomba, Ania. 2002. *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maisano, Scott. 2014. "New Directions: Shakespeare's Revolution – *The Tempest* as Scientific Romance." In *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, 165-94. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
- Muller, Richard A. 2003. *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muñoz-Valdivieso, Sofía. 2017. "Shakespeare Our Contemporary in 2016: Margaret Atwood's Rewriting of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed*." *SEDERI Yearbook* 27: 105-28.
- Murphy, Patrick M. 2001. "Interpreting *The Tempest*: A History of its Readings." In *The Tempest: Critical Essays*, edited by Patrick M. Murphy, 3-72. New York: Routledge.
- Nolan, Jonathan, and Lisa Joy, creators. 2016. *Westworld*. Season 1. HBO.
- O'Neill, Stephen. 2022. "Quoting Machines: Shakespearean Things in and Beyond HBO's *Westworld*." In *Performing Shakespearean Ap-*

- appropriations: Essays in Honor of Christy Desmet*, edited by Darlena Ciraulo, Matthew Kozusko, and Robert Sawyer, 179-97. Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Orgel, Stephen. 1975. *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rufo, Jeffrey A. 2014. "New Directions: 'He needs will be Absolute Milan': The Political Thought of *The Tempest*." In *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, 137-64. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
- Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Shakespeare, William. 2011. *The Tempest*. Edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
- Spiller, Elizabeth. 2009. "Shakespeare and the Making of Early Modern Science: Resituating Prospero's Art." *South Central Review* 26 (1-2): 24-41.
- Thomas, Miranda Fay. 2020. "'Covering the Main Points': Playing with *The Tempest* in Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*." In *Playfulness in Shakespearean Adaptations*, edited by Marina Gerzic and Aidan Norrie, 39-55. New York: Routledge.
- Vaughan, Alden T., and Virginia Mason Vaughan. 1991. *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wald, Christina. 2020. *Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex TV*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Winckler, Reto. 2017. "This Great Stage of Androids: *Westworld*, Shakespeare and the World as Stage." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 10 (2): 169-88.
- Winterson, Jeanette. 2021. *12 Bytes: How Artificial Intelligence Will Change the Way We Live and Love*. London: Vintage.
- . 2023. "Ghost in the Machine." In Jeanette Winterson, *Night Side of the River: Ghost Stories*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Yates, Frances A. 1979. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. London: Routledge.

“Hell’s black intelligencer”: Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz, and Richard Gloucester

Carlo Pagetti

The theatre of Shakespeare, the artist of the “invention of the human” (Bloom 1999), stands at the opposite side of the dehumanizing practices pursued by the Nazi perpetrators. In an often-quoted statement Arendt portrays Eichmann, one of the main criminal minds behind the ‘Final Solution’ as a petty bureaucrat, far from the devilish grandeur of Shakespeare’s Richard Gloucester, king Richard III. All the more so, since, unlike Richard, Eichmann was doubly subordinate to Himmler, and to Hitler. And yet, I argue, Shakespeare’s dramatic experiments in English history can still contribute to our understanding of the radical extremity of the Shoah and of the Nazi leader. By developing the character of Richard Gloucester play after play, Shakespeare explores the experience of the evil king both as “hell’s black intelligencer” and as a histrionic orator, who artfully seduces his audience. The tragedy of the Shoah has retrospectively shed a new sinister light on Richard’s perverting journey to the throne, witnessing to the shifting mutability of Shakespeare’s theatre and to its enduring capacity to resonate with the evil of history.

Keywords: Post-Shoah Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Hannah Arendt, Tom Stoppard, Daniel Hecht

Il vecchio istrione è apparso alla ribalta
("Il discorso di Mussolini a Milano",
Libera Stampa di Lugano, 22 dic. 1944,
in Scurati 2025, 190).

I

Mapping the Westerbork transit camp in Eastern Holland, near the border with Germany, in a letter to “two sisters in The Hague” (end of December 1942), which would be clandestinely published by the Dutch Resistance, Hetty Hillesum contrasts the great tradition of the

Shakespearean stage with the sordid undertakings of the Nazi bureaucracy:

There is a hall with a stage where, in the glorious past when the word “transport” had not yet been heard, a rather faltering Shakespeare production was put on. At the moment people sit at typewriters on the same stage (Hillesum 1996, 245).

Previously, in the same letter, with another Shakespearean touch, Hillesum had written: “The whole of Europe is gradually being turned into one great prison camp. The whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience” (243), echoing the exchange of sallies between Hamlet and his two false friends in *Hamlet*:

HAMLET

[...] What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?

GUILDENSTERN

Prison, my lord?

HAMLET

Denmark’s a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ

Then is the world one.

HAMLET

A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, dungeons, Denmark being one of the worst.

(*Hamlet*, II.ii.239-46)¹

In September 1943 Hillesum disappeared in Auschwitz, together with her parents, another non-persona trapped in the extermination plans of the Third Reich. While writing inside Westerbork, or outside (at the beginning she was allowed a certain degree of freedom), Hillesum was not – could not be – aware of the genocidal nature of the Nazi death camps. The meanness of the German bureaucratic practices seemed to be her main concern, thus anticipating the image of the “banality of evil”, suggested by Hannah Arendt in her well-known interpretation of the Nazi behaviour in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

¹ This quotation is only in the 1623 folio edition of *Hamlet*. All the quotations are from Jenkins ed. 1982.

One wonders how Shakespeare, according to Harold Bloom, the artificer of "the invention of the human" (Bloom 1999, xviii), might be related to such a denial of human life and ethical values.

Undoubtedly, during WW2 Shakespeare was in England an active, inspiring, moral force, to be opposed to the Nazi dreams of a new Order, not only in Winston Churchill's passionate speeches in the House of Commons, but also in the comments of such an unconventional writer as George Orwell, who in a March 1942 BBC broadcast, after seeing a rare performance of *King John*, remarked:

Recently I saw Shakespeare's *King John* acted [...] When I had read it as a boy it seemed to me archaic, somethind dug out of a history book, and not having anything to do with our own time. Well, when I saw it acted, what with its intrigues and doublecrossings, non-aggression pacts, quislings, people changing sides in the middle of a battle, and what-not, it seemed to me extraordinarily up to date (Orwell 1980, 239).

It is also true that Orwell ignored the poisonous fruits of the Shoah, already in full bloom, and this attitude was also re-affirmed after the end of the war. In 1944 his opinion on the immaturity of antisemitism, outlined (although only in a note) by Michael Shelden (1991, 527), seems rather inadequate.

In the Postscript to the 1964 revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, originally written as a long report of the Jerusalem trial in 1961 for *The New Yorker*, Arendt explained her often debated definition of "the banality of evil", "pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial: Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain'" (Arendt 1994b, 287). In her original report, after listing the contradictory and grotesque lies mouthed by Eichmann during his trial, Arendt had concluded: "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a 'monster', but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown" (54).

Such a personal point of view – even more personal because made absolute by the sentence starting with the utterance "everybody could see" – was strongly challenged, among others, by Eichmann's biographers. Thus, David Cesarani objected that Arendt was influenced by her previous work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (I. ed. 1950) and by her picture of the totalitarian bureaucrat – both

German and Russian – as a petty individual, not ideologically motivated. Cesarani quoted the philosopher Gershom Scholem, one of the first critics of Arendt's theories, according to whom Eichmann was "a man of extraordinary driving power, master in the arts of cunning and deception, intelligent and competent in his passion to make Europe 'free of Jews'" (Cesarani 2004, 349). Even the scholars who praise the psychological acuteness of the concept of the "banality of evil" in relation to the gregariousness of the average Nazi perpetrator, admit that Arendt was wrong about Eichmann: "The interpretive model she had drawn from him perfectly applies to this army of perpetrators, but not necessarily to the one who, in her eyes, had been its ideal incarnation" (Traverso 2004, 75; translation mine). Yet, recently, Arendt's concept has been revalued as a clever contribution on Eichmann's and the Nazi and Soviet administrative top brass's lack of moral consciousness (Ascherson 2025, 8). *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, written sixteen years after the end of the war, dealt with far-reaching historical perspectives and contemporary preoccupations, questioning the role of the newly-formed state of Israel. On the other hand, the anguished pathos of the essays written by Arendt at the very end of the war was an emotional reaction to the awesome news coming from the newly-liberated death camps. Together with other German exiles in the U.S.A., Arendt was doubtful on the possibility of adequately representing the actual, not only metaphysical, darkness of the Shoah: "Human history has known no story more difficult to tell".

She adds:

They all died together... like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal. It is in this monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity – an equality in which cats and dogs could have shared, that we see, as though mirrored, the image of hell (Arendt 1994a, 198).

Here in Arendt's language is a Shakespearean intensity that reminds us of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: for both of them the surrounding world has become a living hell. Yet their anguished consciousness does not have much in common with the cynical stolidity of the Nazi leaders. Switching from Arendt's 1945 essay to the 1961 report, we might say that, in the attempt at coping with the impact of the ex-

tremity of the Shoah² on a contemporary sensibility, Arendt moved from the apocalyptical and tortured version of evil in *Macbeth* to the grotesque rendering of it in the second and third play of *Henry VI* and in *Richard III*³.

As Traverso points out, we should distinguish three different stages of Arendt's thought:

During the first phase, between 1944 and 1946, the Jewish German exile viewed in the 'factories of death' the tragic epilogue of the hellish Nazi alliance between anti-Semitism and modern technology. During the second, between the end of the war and the Fifties, she adopted the notion of totalitarianism shifting her focus from the genocide of the Jews to the concentration universe [...]. The third phase started ten years later in concomitance with Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem (2004, 76; translation mine).

However, at the end of the war Arendt had targeted another, much more clever and articulate Nazi leader involved in the extermination of the Jews, Heinrich Himmler, the SS commander-in-chief of the Reich Police: "His character exhibited two essential German qualities, quite dissociated from each other: brutality, and a romantic streak" (Kogon 2006, 5). As a matter of fact, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Eichmann, a faithful and efficient subordinate, is mentioned only once, obviously in connection with Himmler, to whose "special Gestapo department

2 I agree with the scholars who consider "Shoah" a more effective term than "Holocaust", employed in the Anglo-American post WW2 culture in many different contexts (see "Nuclear Holocaust") and charged with misleadingly religious implications. See Garber 2022: "The modern Hebrew term for the European Jewish genocide, 'Shoah' has no religious or sacrificial overtones. It is a powerful term which comes into modern Hebrew from biblical Hebrew and means devastation, desolation, or ruin that affect, man, nature, and land". "Holocaust" deals with a broader historical perspective: "'Holocaust' [...] refers to the genocide of the Jews, which by no means excludes an understanding that other groups – notably Romanies and Slavs – were victims of genocide. Indeed [...] the murder of the Jews, although a project in its own right, cannot be properly historically situated without understanding the 'Nazi empire' with its grandiose demographic plans" (Dan Stone 2010, 2-3).

3 Expanding on the developments of Arendt's philosophy with reference to Shakespeare's works is outside the scope of my essay. For an example of the extensive scholarship on Arendt and Shakespeare, see Lupton 2011 and Deasy 2019, specifically on Arendt and *Hamlet*.

for the liquidation (not merely the study) of the Jewish question, which was headed by Eichmann [...] the treasures from looted European collections" were sent (Arendt 2017, 526). Himmler is one of the arch-villains of Arendt's political treatise, a ruthless executioner of Hitler's orders, the head of the Nazi police (compared with their Soviet counterpart), or, even more than that, the subtle mind not prosecuting actual crimes against the Führer (or the Leader, as Hitler and Stalin are joined in the same category), but preventing possible crimes against him:

Totalitarianism's central assumption that everything is possible thus leads through consistent elimination of all factual restraints to the absurd and terrible consequence that every crime the rulers can conceive of must be punished, regardless of whether or not it has been committed (Arendt 2017, 559).

These paranoical precautions feature prominently in Shakespeare: immediately after rising to the throne, Macbeth is eager to destroy Banquo and eradicate Banquo's seed, while Richard III cannot stand the existence of his two young nephews, who might reclaim the English crown he had usurped.

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, although she was not completely aware of its ideological, maybe existential, implications, Arendt mentioned in a footnote (Arendt 2017, 561) Himmler's speech to the upper level of his SS officers, held in October 1943 in Posen, "in which he, in this select public, transgressively discloses, this one time, the secret of extreme transgression that constitutes, for insiders, the glory of the Nazi genocide" (La Capra 2001, 136). After explicitly mentioning "the annihilation of the Jewish people", Himmler brutally faces the radical choices of such a policy:

Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out, and – excepting causes of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what made us hard. In our history this is an unwritten, never-to-be-written page of glory, for we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today – amid the bombing raids, the hardships and the deprivations of war – we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues (in La Capra 2001, 137-38).

The imagined consequences of a wrong, tender-hearted leniency towards the Jews, targeted as the quintessential evil enemies of the

Third Reich, justify the extremity of the extermination practices, even their 'moral' necessity.

As La Capra (2001, 135) underlines, we must take into account "the role of a negative sublime related to a fascination with excess or extreme transgression. In these respect figures such as Hitler or Himmler and Eichmann or Hoess – despite their difference – might have shared important characteristics" (135). "Extreme transgression" is a feature which we may also find in Shakespeare's evil rulers. In fact, Shakespeare's Machiavellian rulers, motivated by personal ambition and visionary fantasies of power, herald what we might call less a coherent ideology, than the perverted nightmare of total annihilation. The question is: can the Shakespearean invention of the human be reversed into the imagination of the non-human?

II

I believe that the creation of a character such as the Duke of Gloucester, king Richard III, is a good starting point to deal with such an issue, because, in this case, Shakespeare forges the progress of his villain from an early stage, in which he acts as a young warrior, physically deformed but totally coherent with the values and goals of his family and his father, Duke of York, pretender to the crown of England, to his triumph as acunningpolitician, who employs a refined strategy of power based on the denial of his family ties (the early motivation of his personality) and of all the religious-ethical burdens inherited from the past. Although Richard Gloucester harbours royal blood, his repulsive, twisted body makes him an outsider, a misfit both biologically and socially. At the beginning he is a figure of fun for his enemies, then, increasingly, he plays the role of a malignant creature of merciless destruction. In the *King Henry VI* trilogy⁴, one of the first outcomes of Shakespeare's theatrical experience, the still largely unknown playwright engineers, for his historical character, a subtle double level of development: Richard grows on stage, fills

4 I find Michael Hattaway's reconstruction of the genesis of the *Henry VI* trilogy utterly convincing and his Introduction to the 1990 New Cambridge Shakespeare *1Henry VI* he edited, a landmark in the critical revaluation of this once neglected great historical sequence. All the quotations I make use of come from Hattaway's (1991; 1993) New Cambridge Shakespeare editions of *2Henry VI* and *3Henry VI*.

more and more space, eventually requiring the interpretation of a great actor, and, at the same time, invades the political sphere of a crumbling kingdom, enwrapped in civil war. He breaks down the opposition of Margaret, the Amazonian Lancaster queen, kills her son and her husband, takes advantage of the casualties suffered by his own side (mainly the killing of his beloved father), employs a web of fake news, a systematic double standard, by rewarding his friends and crushing his enemies, and by courting the favour of the Londoners and of the Church.

In a modern theatre, and thanks to the skill of an outstanding director, the historical times, revisited by Shakespeare, in which young Richard moved his first steps, might recall the chaos and agony of the Weimar Republic, the well-meaning efforts of its politicians to reinforce its democratic foundations, gradually demolished under the ignition of *coups* and counter-*coups*, from which an obscure anti-semitic, visionary, Austrian demagogue would rise with his faithful cohorts, ruthlessly destroying enemies and former friends, to forge the foundations of a German New Order. In the 1989 production of *Richard III* directed by Richard Eyre for the National Theatre, Ian McKellen in the title role does act as an unscrupulous general attempting a *coup-d'état* in the thirties, and moving "steadily towards the throne through a succession of uniforms, from First World War overcoat, to formal dinner dress, to fascist blackshirt, to Elizabethan doublet and hose at his coronation" (Lull 2009, 36).

The progressive consolidation of Richard's character and of his bid for absolute power can be perceived as an experiment in the representation of the perverse machinery, leading an individual to tyranny, through the re-definition of the traditional political arena, and the erosion of strong family ties, sexual conventions and the merciless crushing down of innocent youth. This is not simply a power game, but the already mentioned "fascination for the excess", that Shakespeare mirrors not only in the deformed body of Richard, as perceived both by himself and by other characters, but in the awareness of his more-than-historical (meta-historical) nature declared by Richard himself in his soliloquies.

Before examining a few steps in the progress of Richard Gloucester towards the crown and beyond, I would like to mention Harold Bloom's interpretation of the play, a "cumbersone and overwritten

drama", but one in which Shakespeare introduced "the hero-villain's startlingly intimate relationship with the audience. We are on unnervingly confidential terms with him" (Bloom 1999, 70). The complicity of the audience is actively sought for by Richard, when he decides to erase his family ties and to stand alone on the royal stage. While Macbeth is willing to speak only with his wife and his more faithful accomplices, on more than one occasion Richard cultivates a visible image, and elicits the genuine sympathy of the listeners, who will be deceived and become puppets in his hands. He is excellent as a public relations man, differently from the ever brooding Macbeth. A double standard is essential to his workings, as he shows himself both as a passionate lover and a manipulative suitor, a friendly uncle and a new Herod, the holy defender of the English land and the barbaric warrior fighting for his own supremacy. The fact that Bloom considers him as a harbinger of Iago shows that the role of the Machiavellian player king can be transferred to other, less socially important, but similarly devilish, characters in a sort of democratic extension of the evil ruler (Bloom 1999, 73).

At the very beginning of Richard's theatrical life, things were very different, yet we cannot forget that, in the ironical twists of the plot of *2Henry VI*, Richard's strikingly unimpressive appearance comes to light after the popular rebellion led by Jack Cade, another monstrous creature generated by the Duke of York in order to "stir up in England some black storm" (*2HVI.III.i.349*):

And, for a minister of my intent,
I have seduced a headstrong Kentishman,
Jack Cade of Ashford,
To make commotion, as full well as he can,
Under the title of John Mortimer.
[...]
This devil here shall be my substitute;
For that John Mortimer, which now is dead,
In face, in gait, in speech, he doth resemble.
(*2HVI, III.i.354-59; 371-73*)

Faithfully followed by his ragtag army, although everyone knows his claim to the crown as a resurrected Mortimer is false, Cade is a charlatan and a trickster, a true Lord of Misrule, the self-appointed con-

queror of London where he will start a new golden age, beheading the aristocrats and the educated laymen. After his fall, in the empty space in which a discredited king sits alone on the throne, Richard of York intrudes together with his loving sons. When Somerset tries to arrest him, he appeals to them:

Sirrah, call in my sonsto be my bail.
 I know, ere they will have me go to ward,
 They'll pawn their swords for my enfranchisement
 (2*HVI*, V.i.111-13).

In the ensuing quarrell between the two factions and their strong-men, "the bastard boys of York" (in Queen Margaret's words, V.i.115) Edward, the eldest, and Richard, the third one, are ready to stand for their father with their words (Edward), and, if words are not enough, with "our weapons" (Richard). Clifford, the Lancastrian champion, compares them to bears, and is challenged by Richard in his first speech: Clifford is "a hot o'erweening cur", crushed by "the bear's fell paw" (V.i.151; 153). The struggle between bear and dogs was, of course, an exciting familiar sight for the Elizabethan theatre-goers, while the bear imagery is skilfully exploited by Queen Margaret, as she stresses the formless body of the human cub, licked into a shape, according to a widespread belief, by his mother:

Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump,
 As crooked in thy manners as thy shape.
 (V.i.157-58)

The artist, a sort of creative mother himself to his characters, will work on and perfect this "foul indigested lump", making him not only a war-machine, but also an evil force spreading its wings all over England. "The foul stigmatic", as young Clifford defines him (V.i.215) makes an ironic use of religious quotations: Young Clifford will "sup with Jesus Christ tonight" (V.i.214), or rather, to turn Luke's Gospel upside down, "If not in heaven, you'll surely sup in hell" (V.i.216). This blasphemous rhetoric will be reinforced by young Richard's deeds at the end of 2*HenryVI*, during the first battle of St. Albans where he fights valiantly for his father, and saves three times from death old Salisbury, one of the main Yorkist leaders and another

father-figure. Before this event, Richard is rewarded by Shakespeare with his first soliloquy, after killing Somerset under the sign of the inn "The Castle of Saint Albans". Although his words are not memorable, they brutally justify a plan of total extermination:

Sword, hold thy temper; heart, be wrathful still,
Priests pray for enemies, but princes kill.
(2*HVI*, V.ii.70-71)

In the first scene of 3*Henry VI* Somerset's death is reshaped into a macabre show for the victorious Yorkist party, when Richard exhibits Somerset's severed head, and his father praises him: "Richard has best deserved of all my sons" (3*HVI*, I.i.17). Richard, the butcher, will grow and grow throughout the final play of the *Henry VI* trilogy, despite the attempt of Queen Margaret to circumscribe him to the ineffectual role of "Dickie, your boy":

An where that valiant crook-back prodigy,
Dickie your boy, that with his grumbling voice
Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies?
(3*Henry VI*, I.iv.75-77).

Invincible and merciless in the field, Richard is a respected counsellor to his father. His speech in 3*HVI*, I.ii.22-33, denouncing the formal agreement between Henry VI and the Duke of York (who will be king only after Henry's death) is legally flawless, but chiefly focuses on his father's – and his own – strong, almost erotic, fascination for the crown, a prize whose achievement cannot be postponed, and culminates in a vision of blood and slaughter:

Why do we linger thus? I cannot rest
Until the white rose that I wear be dyed
Even in the lukewarm blood of Henry's heart.
(3*HVI*, I.ii.32-34).

After the Duke of York's death, a new generation of Yorkist rulers comes to age, while young Richard's character undergoes a full dramatic metamorphosis, heralding the figure of the evil king in *Richard III*. After the battle of Wakefield in which the Duke of York is slaughtered, revenge seems to be his main goal, while he has to share

the stage with Edward, the eldest brother and the future king. But something has changed in the dynamics of the new royal family. In fact, Richard's attitude towards Edward is less than respectful, as he mockingly hints at the lasciviousness of his brother (3*HVI*. II.i.41-42).

Family ties weaken, as a bitter consequence of the civil war, allies and foes change quickly, the best warriors fall, and Richard reinforces his status as the bloodthirsty executioner of the Lancaster house. While the amorous Edward courts Lady Grey, and Clarence plays second fiddle to Richard, now duke of Gloucester, "Dickie" is ready to share with the audience his fully developed new identity. Richard's two great soliloquies sustaining the architecture of the second half of 3*Henry VI* imply that a new dramatic identity will mark and define the creature born as "chaos and an unlicked bear-whelp" (3*HVI*. III.ii.162). Richard's physical deformities are not only fully acknowledged, but are re-shaped as the causes of an unbridled ambition. After all, monsters are the true inhabitants of a world in which traditional values have been uprooted. From ancient mythology and 'historical' events narrated by Homer to the very contemporary example of "murderous Machiavel", the whole progress of humanity is re-written as a long story of deceptions and betrayals, but what is even more important is that the crook-back will press the seal of his actorial skill to the new order embodied by his own misshapen form:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content!' to that which greve my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.
(3*HVI*, III.ii.182-84)

Such a political program requires an audience⁵. And it requires also the re-fashioning of the conception itself of the 'character' Richard, the utter denial of the past, the building up of a composite identity, in which the old supernatural devilish villain, a snarling and biting

5 Among the Italian scholars focusing on Shakespeare's Richard III, I would like to mention Laura Di Michele, who examines Richard Gloucester as "the player-seducer *par excellence* [...]. He tests "his histrionic skills", relying on "inferior actors (Buckingham) and extras (the Mayor of London). Their backing will validate his play-acting" (1988, 279; 282).

hell-hound, is combined with the mettle of all-powerful Renaissance hero. It is fit that this monstrous creature arises on the slaughtered body of Henry VI, the former king slain by Richard in the Tower:

Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
I had no father, I am like no father;
I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me: I am myself alone
(3HVI, V.vi.78-84)

He is not alone, but shares his political program with the audience, making them complicit in his evil deeds. They will travel with him through time, from stage to stage, from historical chronicle to an ever-shifting present.

In a sense, Richard's soliloquy opening *Richard III* sums up and makes the previous soliloquies more pregnant. The master chess-player must now translate his program into action, he needs a sustained and convincing outcome:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
To set my brother Clarence and the king
In deadly hate the one against the other.
(RIII, 1.1.32-35)⁶

Yet, the first deceptive performance in *Richard III*, which Gloucester himself self-complacently and narcissistically praises, deals with an inflamed declaration of love and the seduction of Lady Anne, the widow of Prince Edward, Henry VI's son and his legitimate successor. He will try to double the trick in 4.4. by convincing Queen Elizabeth, Edward IV's widow, whose relatives he exterminated, to persuade her daughter Elizabeth to marry him. Beyond the political scheming, the extremity of eros is a coherent side of Richard's will for power. Likewise, the repeated breaking of family ties is

6 All quotations are from The New Cambridge Shakespeare *King Richard III*. 2009, ed. Janis Lull.

not simply a way for him to make short shrift of his rivals to the throne, but the ideological sign that his new order does not rely on old blood relationships or traditional friends. After the seduction of Anne, Richard Gloucester sends Clarence to the Tower spreading fake news about a conspiracy his brother is involved in against Edward IV, rewards two murderers who will kill him, takes advantage of Edward's death, is appointed Lord Protector, and, by abusing his authority, obliterates his youngest relatives, and his somewhat reluctant allies (Hastings, Buckingham). "Thou cam'st to earth to make the earth my hell" (IV.iv.167), thus says his mother, the Duchess of York, speaking also for Queen Margaret, while Queen Elizabeth bitterly scolds him. But Richard seems to tolerate, even to enjoy, the cursing of a feminine trinity whose political influence has been broken down.

On the other hand, despite his secret manoeuvring, Richard tries to make his tricks effective in public, as Shakespeare needs to test the reaction of an audience in order to be sure of the effectiveness of *his* plot. Thus, in *Richard III*, public official events are carefully staged: in his meeting with the two royal princes, Edward's sons, Gloucester is eager to play the affectionate uncle, ready to bear their sarcasm on his grotesque – bear-like indeed – body:

PRINCE EDWARD

My lord of York will still be cross in talk.

Uncle, your grace knows how to bear with him.

YORK

You mean to bear me, not to bear with me.

Uncle, my brother mocks both you and me:

Because that I am little, like an ape,

He thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders.

(*RIII*, III.i.128-31)

Later (III.iv.), in the Council held in the Tower, in which the day of Prince Edward's coronation should be decided, Richard suddenly charges his former ally Hastings with witchcraft, through the spectacular exhibition of his withered arm in front of the frightened lords. He becomes "the physical representation not only of a monster, but of a deformed body politic" (Besnault and Bitot 2002, 110). In the following long scene (III.vii.), set in and around Baynard's Castle,

he disguises himself as a deeply religious man, in pious conversation with two bishops, indifferent to the crown offered to him by his stooge Buckingham, who has the difficult task to raise the enthusiasm of the overcautious Londoners. About Richard's fake devout behavior, Greenblatt astutely remarks: "Some [among the audience] might have still recalled that Queen Elizabeth kissed a Bible during her coronation procession" (2010, 77).

"A hell-hound that does hunt us all to death" (IV.iv.48), "hell's black intelligencer" (IV.iv.71), in Queen Margaret's words, echoed by Queen Elizabeth's curses ("That bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad" [IV.iv.81]), and yet a staunch defender of the holiness of the crown he has desecrated, Richard produces his best performance before the battle of Bosworth, when, in his speech to his dwindling army, he lucidly exposes the dangers of a foreign invasion:

Remember whom you are to cope withal:
A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,
A scum of Bretons and base lackey peasants,
Whom their o'erclayd country vomits forth
To desperate adventures an assured destruction.
You sleeping safe, they bring you to unrest;
You having lands, and blest by beautiful wives,
They would restrain the one, distain the other.
(*RIII*, V.iii.317-24)

Pity that his evil behaviour was the first cause of this unfortunate outcome. Richard's oration reminds us of the slogans poured down by Goebbels's Nazi information sources while a revengeful Red Army annihilated Berlin's final defense, in search of Hitler's underground bunker (Mari 2021). After his speech Richard reverts to the brutal origins of a primeval warrior. I don't agree with Lull on this point: "Shaken by the ghosts of his victims, Richard recovers the bravery he showed in *3HenryVI* and dies fighting fiercely" (2002, 97). During the battle of Bosworth Richard does not deserve a great speech like the one uttered by Macbeth, before the ultimate duel with Malcolm. Richard's obsession with horses reminds us of the brave, foolish, Percy Hotspur in *1Henry IV*, but we should also remember that no horses were allowed on the Elizabethan scene. Ironically, Richard's last words are utterly useless, even comical:

A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!
 [...]

 A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!
 (*RIII*, V.iv.7; 13)

A deadly shadow in the nightmare haunting Clarence before his murder, a boar whose dream should awaken Hastings to the dangers of his cautiousness, in the final act of *Richard III*, the former crook-back prodigy himself is visited by the ghosts of his victims before the battle of Bosworth. The same victims will bless Richmond, his rival. But not even the allegorical medieval frame built by Shakespeare as another experiment in dramatic History, can encompass or cage such a polymorphic creature, firmly grounded in our imagination. The reincarnations of Richard's grinning mask have achieved a cultural relevance, that some of the best modern actors on the stage or in the movies have retrieved. In 1979 the British historian J. H. Plumb wrote about Hitler:

[In 1979] the trauma of Hitler stretched over fifteen years for my generation, breaking lives, destroying those one loved, wrecking my country [...] Even now when I recall that face and hear that terrifying, hysterical, screeching voice, they create a sense of approaching doom, disaster and death (Harris 1994, 198)

It is a critical commonplace to insist on the fact that Richard Gloucester, as a dramatic character, lacks the psychological depth of Macbeth's tormented language:

MACBETH
 Strange things I have in hand that will to hand,
 Which must be acted before they are scanned.
 [...]

 Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
 Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;
 We are but young in deed.
 (*Macbeth*, III.iv.138-39; 141-43)⁷

7 The quotation is from Braunnmuller's 1997 New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth*.

What Macbeth perceives as a harrowing erasure of moral conscience, an uncanny, dehumanizing process leading him towards the unknown territory of hell, is to Richard a natural, predatory sequence of feral deeds.

With the nocturnal soliloquy in V.iii, Richard locks the door of his conscience to any kind of redemption, fully acknowledging his historically established role as arch-villain:

What? Do I fear myself? There's none else by.
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.
 Is there a murderer here? No, Yes, I am.
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why.
 (RIII, V.iii.185-88)

We detect here a sort of meta-theatrical device. The playwright admits he is not ready to probe into an evil creature's psychological abyss. We must satisfy ourselves with the monstrosity of Richard's body, as a cause for his loneliness, his ambition, although Gloucester is from the beginning one of the strongest warriors in the circus of civil war and, at least in *Richard III*, a self-confident seducer⁸.

On the other hand, can Hitler's biographers – or Himmler's, or Eichmann's – effectively dig into the psychology of their subject? Does a family or a social background, the careful survey of the younger years, of peculiar relationships or ideological influences, fully account for the fanatical mind of the Nazi leaders more than Richard's deformity and greed for power?

As stressed by Phyllis Rackin, "Shakespeare's audience knows from the beginning that this is a providential universe and that Richard will fall. The audience came into the theater knowing Richard's history and they came to see a play called *The Tragedy of Richard III*" (1990, 64). And yet, the fact remains that the theatrical medium employed by Shakespeare to revisit the historical past of England challenged a coherent ideological or religious pattern (Rackin 1990, 27). In his experiments the Elizabethan playwright is as tricky as his devilish character.

8 In *A Life of the Mind* Hannah Arendt mentions Richard's soliloquy as the perfect example of a dialogue with oneself "when your soul is not in harmony, but at war with itself" (Arendt 1971, 189).

III

No comforting supernatural frame helps us justify the tragedy of a whole people, the mass-murder disciplined procedures followed by the Einsatzgruppen in the Eastern front, the advanced technology tested in the gas chambers.

According to Alvin H. Rosenfeld (1980, 22-23) no literary text written before the Final Solution was implemented could imagine the obliteration of the moral conscience inflicted by the perpetrators, although E. A. Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" and Frank Kafka's "In the penal colony" and *Metamorphoses* did move towards the perception of a senseless and indiscriminate slaughter. Yet Rosenfeld ignored the transformative power of a dramatic text: at the end of the performance the dead arise on the stage – the villains as well as the good characters – ready to re-enact the same story in a different historical or cultural context.

Thus, Shakespeare's tragic language captures the abyss of grief and incredulity in which a father plunges, realizing that a human being, his daughter, is not worth more – as Arendt wrote, as we have seen, immediately after the war – than the life of a dog or a cat:

LEAR

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
 And thou no breath at all? O thou'll come no more.
 Never, never, never, never.
 (KL, V.i.304-07)⁹

But what about the prolonged agony of the Final Solution, a collective process in which millions of innocent individuals were tortured and lost their life? We do know that the real witnesses could not report – as Primo Levi memorably wrote in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986) – their terminal experience of life in a gas chamber or under the fire of the death squads. The ghost of Hamlet's father denies his son the terrifying knowledge of the afterlife, "But this eternal blazon must not be / To ears of flesh and blood" (*Hamlet*, I.v.21-22), although, in order to achieve revenge, he is willing to inform him about his murder.

9 The quotation is from Foakes's 1997 Arden Shakespeare edition of *King Lear*.

We do know that *Hamlet* was among the books brought to Theresienstadt, the model concentration camp deceptively established by the Nazi in Czechoslovakia in 1941, where a certain amount of freedom was allowed to outstanding Jewish individuals and their families, before they were dutifully dispatched to a death camp. One of the surviving prisoners, Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann, has written on this precious legacy and its survival: "[...] in the summer of 1945, the still remaining clothes and the large supply of books were made available to us as part of our return luggage, provided generously by the liquidating team of the Red Cross workers and inmate volunteers". Also the collected works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, and other great authors were among them (Guthmann Opfermann 2001, 205). Thus, in a sense, Shakespeare himself had to be rescued and had to adapt himself to the new post-Holocaust age. What we cannot doubt is that the perusal of and the admiration for Shakespeare as well as for the German literary masterpieces could go hand in hand with the extermination job: "We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (Steiner 1967, ix). We must accept Shakespeare's inadequacy, or rather the historical burden of a new perverted vision of human life, poisonously flowering from the Nazi ideology, with its advanced technological instruments of death and the widespread approval of the so-called "Hitler's people" (Evans 2025). In our days, while the word "genocide" is so easily misused by self-appointed moralists, it is fair, even necessary, for everybody to remember the different forms of evil that Twentieth century historical and ideological processes have generated, among them the Shoah. To-day, in the clouds over his head, a Hamlet, belonging to my generation, would detect not the shape of funny animals, but the mile-long column of the atomic mushroom or the ash-grey vapours hovering over an Auschwitz crematorium.

In "'More Light, More Light!'", published in the collection of poems *The Hard Hours* (1967), dedicated to Heinrich Bluecher and Hannah Arendt, Anthony Hecht compares two different episodes of torture and cruelty. In the first scene the reader finds himself in a Medieval, or maybe Elizabethan, London Tower, where a victim, uttering his innocence and imploring God's mercy, is burnt alive:

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
 [...]
 And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
 Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
 And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
 That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquillity.
 (Hecht 1990, 64)

"We move now to outside a German wood". Here a SS perpetrator who, with no visible identity except for the Luger gun he handles, sadistically enjoys the despair and terror of two Jews and one Pole, who will be buried alive in a grotesque dehumanizing game in which they exchange place and help digging their graves. At the end, the Pole "was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death":

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
 Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
 Ghosts from the ovens, lifting through crisp air,
 And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.
 (Hecht 1990, 65).

The voice of the poet, the invisible witness in the German wood, cannot be silenced.

At the end of the XX century novels and narratives on the Shoah in many visual media were granted a popular reception at least in the American world, and Shakespeare was part of the picture, for instance, in Leslie Epstein's controversial *King of the Jews* (1979), where an ambitious and unscrupulous Jewish leader is compared to Macbeth (Schwartz 1999, 278-79). "There is an infinite number of stories to be told about the Holocaust" (Franklin 2011, 19), and Shakespeare is a key player in the crucible of post-WW2 dehumanizing history. When his characters step on a stage, new meanings will be forged. One word is enough, and the Shoah implodes into our minds, no matter how willing we are to forget, or to ignore the past.

On 15 January 2020 Wyndham's Theatre in London produced *Leopoldstadt*, written by Tom Stoppard, possibly the contemporary English playwright more deeply concerned with reworking Shakespearean plots and characters. Spanning more than half a century, *Leopoldstadt* focuses on ten episodes involving a wealthy, large, middle-class Jewish family, living in Vienna, in a tolerant and intellec-

tually stimulating milieu where old and young ones happily share the same expectations. The opening scene is set in 1899. When three survivors, Rosa and her two nephews, meet in 1955, what is left from the past is a paper reconstructing their family tree:

ROSA
Emilia died in her own bed.
LEO
Hermann, suicide.
ROSA
Passover, 1939.
LEO
Gretl?
ROSA
Braintumour. December 1938.
LEO
Jacob.
ROSA
Suicide, 1946.
LEO
Eva.
ROSA
She died on the transport, 1943.
LEO
Ludwig.
ROSA
Steinhof, 1941.
LEO
Pauli.
ROSA
Verdun, 1916.
LEO
Nellie. The Blitz. Aaron. Artillery fire, Vienna. Wilma.
ROSA (*correcting*)
Vilma. She died.
LEO
Ernst.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
LEO
Hanna.
ROSA
Auschwitz.

LEO
 Kurt.
 ROSA
 Dachau, 1938.
 LEO
 Zacharia.
 NATHAN
 Death march. Nowhere.
 LEO
 Sally.
 ROSA
 Auschwitz.
 LEO
 Mimi.
 ROSA
 Auschwitz.
 LEO
 Bella.
 ROSA
 Auschwitz.
 LEO
 Hermine.
 ROSA
 Auschwitz.
 LEO
 Heini.
 ROSA
 Auschwitz.
Pause.
Leo folds the paper
 [...]

The scene fades out
 (Stoppard 2020, 104-05).

1483-1485: Richard III's reign.

27 January 1945: The Liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination camp.

2025: Today

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1971. *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego-New York-London: Harcourt, Inc.
- . [1946] 1994a. "The Image of Hell." In *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn, 197-204. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- . [1963] 1994b. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin Books.
- . [1950] 2017. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Ascherson, Neal. 2025. "Ordinary Germans." *The New York Review of Books*, March 27, 6-10.
- Besnault, Marie-Hélène, and Michel Bitot. 2002. "Historical Legacy and Fiction: The Poetical Reinvention of King Richard III." In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, edited by Michael Hattaway, 106-125. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloom, Harold. [1998] 1999. *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Cesarani, David. 2004. *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*. London: William Heinemann.
- Deasy, Oliver. 2019. "Thought and Judgement in Hannah Arendt and *Hamlet*". *New Critique*. <https://newcritique.co.uk/2019/01/11/thought-and-judgement-in-the-works-of-hannah-arendt-and-hamlet-oliver-deasy/>
- Di Michele, Laura. 1988. *La scena dei potenti. Teatro Politica Spettacolo nell'età di W. Shakespeare*. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.
- Evans, Richard J. 2025. *Hitler's People. The Faces of the Third Reich*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Franklin, Ruth. 2011. *A Thousand Darknenses. Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, Oxford: OUP.
- Garber, Lev. 2022. "The Slaughter of Six Million Jews: A Holocaust or a Shoah?" <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-slaughter-of-six-million-jews-a-holocaust-or-a-shoah>
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2010. *Shakespeare's Freedom*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Guthmann Opfermann, Charlotte. 2001. "When the Printed Word Celebrates the Human Spirit." In *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, edited by Jonathan Rose, 201-205. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Harris, Robert. [1986] 1994. *Selling Hitler*. In *The Media Trilogy*, 187-588. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hattaway, Michael. 1990. "Introduction." In *The First Part of Henry VI*, edited by Michael Hattaway, 1-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hecht, Anthony. 1990. "'More Light! More Light!'" In *Collected Earlier Poems*, 64-65. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hillesum, Etty. 1996. *An Interrupted Life. The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Kogon, Eugen. 2006. *The Theory and Practice of Hell (Der SS-Stadt, 1946)*, translated by Heinz Norden. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Revised edition.)
- La Capra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History. Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lull, Janis. 2001. "Plantagenets, Lancastrians, Yorkists, and Tudors: 1-3 Henry VI, Richard III, Edward III." In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, edited by Michael Hattaway, 89-105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2009. "Introduction." In William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, 1-51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mari, Giovanni. 2021. *La propaganda nell'abisso. Goebbels e il giornale nel bunker*. Torino: Lindau.
- Orwell, George. [1942] 1980. "The Rediscovery of Europe." In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 2, 1940-1943, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 229-240. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Pagetti, Carlo. 2020. "Hetty Hillesum: 'La piccola cronista' di Westerbork." In Claudia Rosenzwein *et al.*, *Autobiografia ebraica. Identità e narrazione*, Consonanze 22, 137-47. Milano: Ledizioni.
- Rackin, Phyllis. 1990. *Stages of History. Shakespeare's English Chronicles*. London: Routledge.
- Reinhard Lupton, Julia. 2011. *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rose, Jonathan, ed. 2008. *The Holocaust and the Book. Destruction and Preservation*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rosenfeld, Alvin H. 1980. *A Double Dying. Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schwartz, Daniel R. 1999. *Imagining the Holocaust*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

- Scurati, Antonio. 2025. *M. La fine e il principio*, Milano: Bompiani.
- Shakespeare, William. 1982. *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen. (The Arden Shakespeare)
- . 1991. *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, edited by Michael Hattaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)
- . 1993. *The Third Part of King Henry VI*, edited by Michael Hattaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)
- . 1997a. *King Lear*, edited by R. A. Foakes. Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Nelson and Sons. (The Arden Shakespeare)
- . 1997b. *Macbeth*, edited by A. R. Braunmuller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)
- . 2009. *King Richard III*, edited by Janis Lull. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)
- Shelden, Michael. 1991. *Orwell. The Authorized Biography*. London: Heinemann.
- Steiner, George. 1967. *Language and Silence*. New York: Atheneum.
- . 2008. *My Unwritten Books*. New York: New Directions.
- Stone, Dan. 2010. *Histories of the Holocaust*. Oxford: OUP.
- Stoppard, Tom. 2020. *Leopoldstadt*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Traverso, Enzo. 2004. *Auschwitz e gli intellettuali. La Shoah nella cultura del dopoguerra*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

MISCELLANY

Shakespeare and Social Crime: Legality and the People's Justice

Paola Pugliatti

The idea of “social crime” was first developed by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who defined as “social” those crimes which “have a distinct element of protest in them”, and are therefore supported by the community’s consensus as crimes of necessity. Though potentially fertile, however, the notion of “social crime” was quenched by the partial disagreement of another Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, who objected that such definition would imply a distinction between “good” and “bad” criminals, overlooking the fact that all criminals occupied the same disadvantaged social group. The present article examines three Shakespearean texts where the idea of social crime is differently represented: *Coriolanus*, the Hand D pages of *Sir Thomas More* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The citizens’ revolt in the first scene of *Coriolanus* is probably the most relevant theatrical representation of a social crime in Shakespeare’s plays. Not only are the Roman Citizens represented in it as performing a conscious action of protest dictated by need; but, as has been noted, the play has an apparent topical feature, for it was written a year after the Midlands Rising (1607), a protest against enclosures which Shakespeare re-reads, in *Coriolanus*, as a food riot. The “Ill May day scenes” in *Sir Thomas More*, instead, are presented as the instance of an irrational protest against foreign labourers which, being dictated by mere xenophobia, cannot be justified as “social” crime. Even less can the “disparagement” Falstaff performs in *Merry Wives* by poaching in the lands of JP Shallow. Falstaff and his gang of friends are indeed “bad” criminals who profit from their vicinity to the *nouveaux riches* to perform an offense that should have been prosecuted at the highest degree, that of the Star Chamber, but is instead celebrated with a venison dinner.

Keywords: *Coriolanus*, *Sir Thomas More*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, social crime, protest

1. Representing the law

On 3 September 1562, William Tyldesley, a Buckinghamshire Justice of the Peace (JP), wrote a letter to Secretary Cecil complaining about the laxity and incompetence with which, in his opinion, certain crim-

inal cases were prosecuted (while others were utterly disregarded) by those appointed to administer justice. He relates that “of late” an enquiry about “sertayne penall statutes” had been urged by a letter from the Council, that the letter had “caused in some shyres A littil to be done, & in some shyres nothing at all”, and that, after a while, also those that had “begone to do partlye well” had started “to wexe [...] cold”, probably because they “had conferens with the Justices of other shyres” (Tawney and Power 1935, 1:330), who tended to overlook or even ignore the Council’s dictate. Thirty-four years later, on 25 September 1596, Edward Hext, a Somerset JP, wrote to Cecil an even more dramatic letter. Hext was mainly worried by the increase in crimes, especially those committed by “wandering suspycyous persons”, but he also points out certain drawbacks in the system for, he says, it often happens that criminals “are delyvered to simple Constables and tythingmen that sometimes wylfullye other tymes negligently suffer them to escape” (Tawney and Power 1935, 2:340). The letters seem to reflect real concerns, for they were sent by scrupulous JPs to the most powerful civil servant of the reign; and, although they were written at a considerable distance of time, in both cases the incompetence of the officers in charge of administering justice seems to constitute their main concern¹.

1 For Tyldesley, see Jones 2015, 84; 97-98; for Hext, see Sharpe 1999, 63; 64; 265. Lack of space prevents me from dealing adequately here with a vital aspect of public life during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods: the willing participation of large sections of the population in the administration of justice. Though law enforcement was officially entrusted to justice officers (Constables and JPs essentially), it was also characterized by a remarkable popular participation which reflected the community’s moral and social visions of crime. Mark Goldie contends that “[g]overnance was not something done from on high to the passive recipients of authority, but something actively engaged in by the lesser agents of government: and every citizen was in some measure a lesser agent of government” (2001, 155). Steve Hindle, in turn, observes that “recent scholarship has suggested that magistrates’ labours would have been fruitless without the active co-operation of inferior officers and sections of the public at large” (2000, 97). Crucial in determining certain active attitudes towards the impositions of authority was the fact that people knew very well that what they experienced was a form of “self-government at the king’s command” (206; the expression was coined by A.B. White, as the title of his 1933 book). They knew very well, that is, that “Effective government could not do without the willingness of men to act

Shakespeare was certainly interested in those charged with administering justice and keeping the peace. Between the impeccable and inflexible Lord Chief Justice in *2Henry IV* and Lear's imagined "rascal beadle" (*King Lear*, IV.vi.145)², a wide range of magistrates and lesser officers is iconically represented in his plays, often characterized by the ineptitude Tyldesley and Hext complained about. Gloucestershire Justice Robert Shallow in *2Henry IV* is the most famous and the most emblematic of the company. He is inept and unscrupulous, and also vain and boastful. As we shall see in the following pages, he will appear again in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a less senile and weak-minded version, but again as a person for whom the administration of justice is the least of his worries. On the contrary, Dogberry and his partner Verges in *Much Ado About Nothing* are much concerned with their task as town watchers. But Dogberry, for whom "to write and read comes by nature" (III.iii.11-12), does not possess either these 'natural' gifts, or that of clearly expressing his meanings, and, least of all, that of appropriately applying the law's requirements; Fang and Snare in *2Henry IV*, who are responsible for maintaining law and order in the city, embody the prototype of inefficiency that, as Hext complains, allows criminals to escape. They prove their ineptitude and cowardice when called by Mistress Quickly to arrest Falstaff in

as agents of central institutions" (Herrup 1987, 205-06). Tim Stretton provides a useful synthesis of the general features of this kind of involvement in a contribution to the administration of law: "People from all backgrounds reported and prosecuted crimes and appeared as witnesses at trials; members of the community acted as constables; yeomen and gentlemen served on grand and trial juries in the complex process that governed the path from accusation to verdict and sentencing. Each of the individuals involved could exercise discretion, observable in witnesses who chose to turn a blind eye to certain offences or offenders, constables and magistrates who decided not to assist a prosecution, and jurors who reduced the value of stolen goods to attract a lesser penalty or risked judicial sanction by voting to acquit an offender they thought was guilty" (2017, 213-14). The so-called "social crimes" that will be discussed in the following pages were among those infractions about which ordinary people "exercised discretion". In a similar fashion they expressed dispassionate reactions to the "wanderynge suspicious persons" mentioned by Hext, which constituted instead one of the obsessions of the political power.

2 Unless otherwise stated, Shakespeare quotations are from Shakespeare 2016.

II.i³. Elbow in *Measure for Measure* is “the poor Duke’s constable” (II.ii.45, meaning ‘the Duke’s poor constable’, of course); like Dogberry, he is characterised by malapropisms, equivocations and incapability, though he boastfully declares to have been “[e]leven years and a half” (II.i.219) a constable. A beggar (“Thou robèd man of justice”) and a Fool (“his yoke fellow of equity”) are entrusted by Lear with the imaginary arraignment of his daughters; and a servant (the disguised Kent) is “of the commition” (*King Lear*, III.vi.30-32). Other characters representing the law are only designated by their role: the Sheriff of Wiltshire in *Richard III*, the Sheriff of Herefordshire in *1Henry IV*, the Provost in *Measure for Measure* and others. There are officers who enter the stage to take some characters into custody, or to accompany others to execution. Some of their actions are perceived as dictated by respect for the law, others as a breach of (poetic) justice.

2. “Popular legalism”: authority and resistance

Law officers, however, did not have an easy task, for they had to cope with the fact that the people were not simply the passive receivers of rules imposed from above. Indeed, as Christopher Brooks argues, law was “deeply ingrained into everyday life”, for its effects permeated the life of “most men, and many women, from country squires to seamen and urban wage labourers”, who “regularly used legal instruments to record many of the most important transactions in their lives” (2008, 307; 308). Steve Hindle defines “popular legalism” as the “general familiarity with, and desire to use, judicial structures and processes” (2000, 97). This familiarity with justice determined, in turn, opinions and attitudes which were not always those of obedience and deference. In fact, Tyldesley’s and Hext’s ideals of efficiency and good management were not the only benefits the people expected to experience from the administration of justice; especially as concerned certain kinds of crime. There was in fact disagreement about what was to be considered crime and what was not, and where the

3 This scene is often quoted as expressing the limited efficiency of the Chief Justice’s intervention. On the one hand, he is unrealistically depicted as going to the Eastcheap suburb and taking part in Mrs Quickly’s rescue, but on the other, he fails to accomplish this simple mission.

law should draw the line of demarcation between the two. As John Brewer and John Styles say, "All men assumed that the law should work *pro bono publico*, but one man's view of the public good was often regarded by another as a flagrant instance of private interest" (1980, 16). Consequently, those who took up the office of JP, either out of a sense of duty, or from a desire for social promotion in their community, found themselves bound to a double allegiance: on the one hand, to the dictates of the law and, on the other, to the need to keep the people's consent. This meant that they often found themselves in the position of mediators, for "the majority of the people [...] possessed some degree of agency in constructing the terms of their inferiority" (Griffiths *et al.* 1996, 5).

Discussing these "two concepts of order", Keith Wrightson illustrates the position of those magistrates who were charged with enforcing the law, especially in small communities:

[e]nshored at the point where national legislative prescription and local customary norms intersected were the wretched village officers, the much-tried, sorely abused, essential work-horses of seventeenth-century local administration. (1980, 21-22)

Theirs was an uncomfortable position, because of the people's capability to exercise social control, but also because of the pressure exerted by the contextual circumstances. JPs were the essential link and mediators between the people – both victims and offenders – and the Assize judge who was charged with pronouncing a sentence. But, while the judge, being an outsider, was unaware of the dynamics of the social context in which he performed his intermittent office, the JP inevitably experienced "the tension between the order of the law and that of the neighbourhood [...] For the very complexity of relationships [...] made it exceedingly difficult to judge the behaviour of an individual without bringing into play a host of personal considerations" (25). One discrepancy between legal and popular views of the law concerned certain recreational activities like gaming, tippling and drinking, which were unlawful in the eyes of the law, but were considered "'good fellowship and a good means to increase a love amongst neighbours' in the eyes of villagers" (25)⁴.

4 The text quoted is Dent 1607, 165-66.

3. *The idea of "social crime"*

Recreational crimes, however, were not the only ones on which different evaluations were expressed. Indeed, "several forms of conduct classified as criminal by the courts and the statute book were regarded as legal, or at least justifiable on quasi-legitimate grounds, by large sections of the population at large" (Sharpe 1999, 175). Discussing those that have been defined as 'social crimes', Sharpe suggests, for instance, that "Rioting [...] can be understood in terms of collective actions of defence of what were perceived as rights", as were also "some aspects of poaching, especially when [...] poachers were acting in accordance with what they felt were their rights to hunt game" (198; 199).

The idea of banditry as a form of social crime was elaborated by E. J. Hobsbawm in his 1959 book *Primitive Rebels*. He says that "in one sense banditry is a rather primitive form of organized social protest", and that "in many societies [it] is regarded as such by the poor, who consequently protect the bandit, regard him as their champion, idealize him, and turn him into a myth" (2017, 17). In this work, Hobsbawm does not use the expression 'social crime'. He introduced it for discussion at a Conference held at the Polytechnic of Central London on 20 May 1972. We only have short versions of the speakers' contributions on that occasion, but Hobsbawm's definition of "social criminality" is clear:

'Social criminality' [...] occurs when there is a conflict of laws e.g. between an official and an unofficial system, or when acts of law-breaking have a distinct element of protest in them, or when they are closely linked with the development of social and political unrest. (1972, 5)

This definition implies a distinction between 'bad criminals', whose crimes do not have a social justification and 'good criminals', whose crimes are justified as some form of social protest and are endorsed as such by the community. It was precisely this distinction that, on the same occasion, was disputed by E. P. Thompson. Thompson suggested that we should "draw the distinction cautiously and with reservations" for we should consider that good and bad criminals "inhabit – although perhaps at different edges of it – a common culture, that of the exploited labouring poor" (1972, 11).

This early disagreement seems to have intimidated historians, so much so that discussions of the potentially fertile notion of "social

crime" have not produced meaningful results. When the formula is mentioned, it is usually followed by the cautions expressed by Thompson on that occasion, on the basis of the general statement that to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' criminals would mean to ignore that all criminals were part of the same disadvantaged social group. Thus, only timid attempts at reviving the notion of social crime have been produced. Apart from the brief but useful treatment in Sharpe 1999 (176-198), we may quote an article in which J. L. McMullan mentions a few books (Hay et al.'s *Albion's Fatal Tree*, 2011; Brewer and Styles's *An Ungovernable People*, 1980; and Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, 1975) where, he says, "[t]he authors make strong cases for viewing some illegal acts as 'social' crimes", that is, more as "a measure of resistance and protest than deliberate spite of the law". McMullan mentions certain "'victimless' crimes such as tipping, gambling, prostitution and swearing", but also "poaching, wrecking, smuggling, coining, rioting, gleaning, and pilfering", which "were often regarded by their perpetrators and the citizenry as legitimate expressions of common rights and tradition" (1987, 255). More often, in assent with Thompson's warning, scepticism and reservations prevail. John Styles, for instance, observes that the distinction between 'social' and 'normal' crimes which tends to describe certain "illegal activities as forerunners of popular political movements" on the basis of the popular support which they enjoyed is "exceptionally dubious" (1980, 245)⁵.

The disagreement between Hobsbawm's and Thompson's views, however, was less radical than it appeared. Indeed, a year before the London Conference took place, Thompson had published an essay en-

5 An attempt at reviving the idea of social crime within the ample framework of property crimes is presented in a book by Drew Gray published in 2016. Gray affirms that "[i]n recent years, social crime as an idea has all but disappeared from the historiography", though the "class-based interpretations of history" which inspired the notion in works by such Marxist historians as Thompson and Hobsbawm "have fallen out of fashion". Gray then argues that, though seen and interpreted within a perspective different from that of class struggle, "an understanding and critique of social crime and banditry remain useful" (131). Gray also devotes a few paragraphs to a discussion of the problems which have made the idea of social crime controversial, and concludes, not differently from its first commentators, that "the borders between normal and social crime were easily crossed, and the exact topography of both is difficult to map" (135).

titled "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd" in which he discusses his idea of "moral economy" in connection with eighteenth-century food riots. Those riots, he says, were characterised by the presence of some "legitimising notion"; that is, by the rioters' consciousness that they "were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community". It is evident that Thompson's concept of "moral economy" has much in common with the idea of "social crime". Eighteenth-century food riots, he argues, were justified by moral and social, rather than legal, motivations. They were legitimised as riots of necessity and as customary rights, not only allowed by tradition, but also supported by passages in the Scriptures. Thompson also discusses the manner and degree of political consciousness of these eighteenth-century popular actions: "While this moral economy cannot be described as 'political' in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common" (1993, 188). Can it be held that the same "passionately held notions of the common" were present also for the people in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods as well, at least when they were engaged in such survival crimes as food riots?

Let us read what Tim Harris says about the difficulty (and even, perhaps, the unsuitability) of establishing the date of birth of the political awareness of a certain "mass political activism":

Those who might have believed that crowd activities and other forms of collective protest prior to the industrial revolution were essentially pre-political clearly need to think again. The idea that public opinion first came into being in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, or the notion that the masses first became actively engaged in politics during the 1640s as a result of the upheavals of the civil war, also appear to be in need of re-examination. (2001, 21)

It is in a text like Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* that the representation of an organised and politically conscious early form of dissent can be discerned⁶.

6 On Thompson's idea of 'moral economy' and *Coriolanus*, see Cheng 2010. Cheng convincingly argues that Thompson's model, though constructed for the eighteenth-century food riots, may be applied to Jacobean England as well (2010, 20).

4. 'Good' and 'bad' rioters

4.1. The food riot as social crime in *Coriolanus*

To my knowledge, the first critic to read *Coriolanus* in the light of the 1607 Midland Rising was E. C. Pettet in an essay published in 1950⁷. Once established, however, this topical connection, which was strengthened by the probable date of the play's composition (1608), was deemed worthy of further elaboration in subsequent writings; and it also triggered reflections on the relationship the play is thought to illustrate between the early years of the Roman Republic and those of Jacobean politics. This critical trend tended to emphasize the issue of Shakespeare's intentions and contributed significantly to establishing a radical critique of the Coleridgean idea of Shakespeare's conservatism (though not extinguishing it) which was, for instance, perceived in the text of Philip Brockbank's influential edition of the play (1976)⁸.

My attention will be focalized on the play's first scene and, in particular, on the commoners' actions and attitudes as active and conscious protagonists of the social crime of food riot and as the recipients of the political power's response.

The main source of *Coriolanus* is "The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus" in Thomas North's translation of Amiot's French version of

7 The Midland Rising took place in 1607 in the Counties of Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire. It was essentially a protest against enclosures. For specific attention to the Midland Rising in connection with the composition of *Coriolanus*, see, among others, Zeeveld 1962, Patterson 1989 (120-53), George 2004 and especially Hindle 2008. The final pages of Hindle's article (41-51) present an excellent analysis of the play's first scene.

8 The most theatrical (in all senses of the word) of these disputes was that between Günter Grass and Bertolt Brecht (*in absentia*). According to Grass, Brecht's Berliner Ensemble performance of his *Coriolan* adaptation in 1952-53 in West Berlin had misrepresented Shakespeare's play with the "intention of transforming the original [...] into a play of partisanship" (Grass 1966, xx). Grass's idea was, on the contrary, that Shakespeare's play embodies a conservative vision of the events staged. In an address given at the Berlin Academy of Arts and Letters on 23 April 1964, Grass recalled Brecht's refusal to offer support to the East German uprising of 17 June 1953. Grass represented Brecht's refusal to grant support to the rioters in his play *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* (Grass 1966). See, on this issue, Brecht 1964; Patterson 1989, 121-22; 129, and Heinemann 1994.

Plutarch's *Lives* (see North 1579). As always with Shakespeare's 'historical' plays, it is vital to consider how he altered his sources. In Plutarch, the riot is determined by "the sore oppression of vsurers" (North 1579, 239). In the play, instead, the reason for the rebellion is food:

FIRST CITIZEN

You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?

ALL CITIZENS

Resolved, resolved!

(*Coriolanus*, I.i.3-4)

The citizens know that Caius Martius is "chief enemy to the people" (5-6), and the First Citizen advocates killing him. But he points out: "I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" (18-19).

Shakespeare's decision to shift from usury to dearth has been rightly seen as one of the elements connecting the composition of *Coriolanus* with the events of the Midland Rising. As Hindle says, by modifying his source,

Shakespeare in effect conflated two historical rebellions (the usury riots which led to the creation of the Roman tribunate in 494 BC and the corn riots of 491 BC) into a single fictional one which, like the Midland Rising, was caused fundamentally by dearth. (2008, 41)

The Citizens who, in I.i, gather in a street of Rome, armed with agricultural weapons⁹ have in mind a project which is distinctly political: they know that it will be impossible to get grain at the right price as long as Caius Martius opposes them; therefore the rational sequence of their actions must be first to remove the main cause of the food scarcity, i.e. Coriolanus, and then negotiate with the Senate to set the right price for the grain. Hindle comments on the rationality of the Citizens' plan saying that

the actions of the 'company' represented in the opening scene of *Coriolanus* resemble less the wild irrational fury of the 'many-headed monster' repeatedly described by Martius [...] than the disciplined and orderly crowd actions in defence of the moral economy reconstructed by Edward Thompson (2008, 43).

9 The caption "Enter a Company of Mutinous Citizens, with Staues, Clubs, and other weapons" is in F1, which is the play's first edition.

Anne Barton was probably the first to attribute full political consciousness to these citizens. She argues that, while in the plays he wrote before *Coriolanus*, including *Sir Thomas More*, "it would be hard to claim that Shakespeare displays much sympathy for urban crowds", *Coriolanus*, "is unique in the canon for the tolerance and respect it accords an urban citizenry" (2004, 70). The rationality and consciousness of the rebels' action is clearly expressed by the First Citizen when he motivates their claim for what – for the rich – is "superfluity" (I.i.14).

The events of the play's first scene establish the question of the commoners' demands, their different positions with regard to the actions to be undertaken and the contrary reaction of the patricians. Later, we will hear from the Third Citizen a considered and mindful explanation of the 'many headed monster', an expression usually meant as derogatory¹⁰. The citizenry is indeed many headed, in that each of its components has an opinion of their own:

We have been called so [many-headed multitude] of many, not that our heads are some brown, some black, some abram, some bald; but that our wits are so diversely coloured. And truly I think, if all our wits were to issue out of one skull, they would fly east, west, north, south, and their consent of one direct way should be at once to all the points o' th' compass. (II.iii.13-17)

Clearly, however, they have a common grievance and they know they must reach a common decision about how to address it. Furthermore, a deeper and more pondered form of consciousness of these citizens is their awareness that their power is only formal. While they are deliberating whether or not to give their "voice" to Coriolanus to gratify his ambition to become Consul, a short exchange shows that they know that State politics is going to prevail:

FIRST CITIZEN

Once if he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him.

SECOND CITIZEN

We may, sir, if we will.

THIRD CITIZEN

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power we have no power to do. (II.iii.1-4).

10 The derogatory meaning is expressed by Coriolanus in his comment: "With every minute you do change a mind" (I.i.164). On the issue of the 'many-headed multitude', see Patterson 1989, 130-31.

Even their crucial conquest, the establishment of the Tribune, which was certainly vital in the early years of the Roman Republic, turns against them, for the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus prove to be more interested in keeping their power than in defending the interests of the plebeians. It is their manipulatory action that reduces to zero the several “wits” of the rioters; and, especially, the prospect of an imminent war is fatal in decreeing the disruption of the commoners’ protest: not only because it drives the attention away from domestic problems, but also because it is considered as a means to get rid of those who foment troubles. When notice is given that “the Volsces are in arms”, Martius’s reaction is: “I am glad on’t; then we shall ha’ means to vent / Our musty superfluity” (I.i.208-10). As Curtis Breight comments,

[t]o vent Rome’s superfluity is a forthright policy, albeit curiously phrased, to exterminate Roman citizens [...] *Coriolanus* epitomizes what Shakespeare gradually, and hence safely, reveals over the course of the *Henriad* – common men as victims of war, common women and children as collateral damage. (1996, 237; 238)

But the politics of the Roman Republic, as Patterson contends, also calls into question certain aspects of the Jacobean politics:

Coriolanus seems clearly to address [a] stage of crisis brought to the public attention by the Midlands Rising of 1607, but involving larger questions, of the distributions of power in the state and of the nation’s resources.

Patterson also remarks that “several times in 1605 and 1606 James himself referred to the opposition leaders in the Commons as tribunes of the people”. Furthermore, she adds,

Only if one perceives how this crucial moment in the development of Rome as a republic marked the convergence of class interests and constitutional theory does the choice of the *Coriolanus* story seem inevitable for Shakespeare, at this stage of his development and that of the Jacobean state. (1989, 123)

Indeed, Patterson concludes, “for the first time, Shakespeare’s audience is invited to contemplate an alternative political system” (127).

4.2. Menenius and the belly fable

The political and conceptual difference between the 'good' rioters in *Coriolanus* and the 'bad' rioters we will meet in *Sir Thomas More* is illustrated by the arguments deployed by the defenders of legality to appease the rebels: Menenius in *Coriolanus* and More in *Sir Thomas More*¹¹. But they also appear in the dialogues among the rioters themselves.

In the brief first exchange between the Citizens in *Coriolanus*, the argument of the mutiny is clearly introduced by three parties: First Citizen, Second Citizen and All Citizens. The argumentative structure of the exchange is that of *antithesis*, a rhetorical device which allows the display, in the same communicative context, of distinct opinions on a given issue. First Citizen and All Citizens have the same idea about their present tribulation: they are "resolved rather to die than to famish" (I.i.3); and are also firm in blaming Coriolanus for the high price of grain. First Citizen is resolute, and All Citizens agree: "Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price" (I.i.8). Second Citizen, at this stage, presents an antithetical opinion about how to proceed: he invites his companions to consider Coriolanus's military merits: "Consider you what services he has done for his country?" (I.i.22). In this exchange, the antithesis between these two visions is not solved, but the issue has been clearly set, and the mutiny has been presented as an instance of social insurrection. Menenius, who arrives while the Citizens are resolving to go to the Capitol, knows well what the audience also perceives at this point, that is, that the Citizens' dissent is based on plausible grounds (indeed, the plausible grounds of their 'moral economy'). Being conscious of the complexity of the situation, Menenius tries various verbal registers and different rhetorical and narrative strategies. One thing to be noted is the way in which Menenius's forms of address are distributed in his first encounter with the Citizens. He is obliged to sound captivating to confirm his reputation as "one that has always loved the people" (I.i.38-39). The first address he uses is "my countrymen" (I.i.41), a form that tends to create a mood of collaboration on an equal footing. The sharp reply of Second Citizen (note that Second Citizen, who had been the most accommodating,

11 Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori note that More's speech to the rebels is "[u]sually compared with Menenius's speech in *Coriolanus*" (1990, 102n).

starts to get hostile after Menenius's first inquiring speech) triggers a more profuse (and thus more devious) chain of addresses: "masters", "my good friends", "mine honest neighbours" (47) before he utters an apparently friendly warning which is also readable as a threat: "Will you undo yourselves?" (I.i.48). It is again Second Citizen's reply, "We cannot, sir. We are undone already" (49), which catches Menenius off-guard. Addressing the Citizens as simply "friends" (50) and trying to absolve the patricians of responsibility for the dearth they are suffering from, he is forced to appeal to an unconvincing religious argument: "For the dearth, / The gods, not the patricians, make it" (57-58). Again, Second Citizen enumerates with ruthless precision the patricians' and the Senate's abuses. Menenius's following reference to the citizens is the unfriendly designation "wondrous malicious" (71). At this point, he resorts to the 'belly fable', playing the card of his cultural and rhetorical superiority to show that the State (the belly) is not, as the Citizens seem to believe, the body organ that swallows all the food to its sole profit, but "the store-house and the shop / Of the whole body" (115-16), which, the belly says,

MENENIUS

[...]

I send [...] through the rivers of your blood
 Even to the court – the heart – to th' seat o'th' brain;
 And, through the cranks and offices of man,
 The strongest nerves, and small inferior veins
 From me receive that natural competency
 Whereby they live.
 (I.i.117-22)

It is worth noting that, while according to Plutarch-North "these persuasions pacified the people" (North 1595, 238), in the play the telling of the fable is frequently interrupted by Second Citizen with impatient comments ("You're long about it", 108; "Ay, sir, well, well", 124) and that nowhere the Citizens manifest assent to its argumentation. Furthermore, Second Citizen points out that the simple tale is meaningless unless a proper interpretation of the text is provided: "It was an answer. How *apply* you this?" (129, my emphasis), he says. At this stage, Menenius has run out of patience, and his language reveals his true feelings. Second Citizen is a "rascal" and "worst in

blood to run", 141); and the whole company are Rome's "rats" (144). Indeed, far from placating the commoners' protest, as Andrew Gurr says, Menenius's fable

is an extraordinary demonstration of his contempt for his hearers and his faith in verbal smokescreens that he should offer this defence of the Senate to citizens whose whole complaint [...] is that the Senate is refusing to distribute its stores [...]. Menenius is not offering a rationale of the state as a single natural organism so much as conducting a cynical delaying action until help in the form of his fellow patrician Caius Marcius arrives. (1975, 67).

In the following action of the play, Menenius will have ample space to show his contempt for the commoners, overlooking the fact that their resistance was crucial for obtaining the institution of the Tribune¹².

4.3. "the worst may day for the strangers" (Sir Thomas More, 1.143)

The Ill May Day Riot of 1517, as staged in *Sir Thomas More*, was not determined by hunger¹³. It was, instead, a violent explosion of xenophobia against the Lombards (or Flemish, or French), fuelled by the fact that one of them, Barde, had attempted to ravish Doll Williamson, the carpenter's wife, and another, Cavaler, had taken from Doll's husband a pair of doves the carpenter had bought; but the strangers are also accused indiscriminately of other offences determined by their mere presence: for taking away work, food and money from the locals, even for importing unwholesome food and spreading strange infections (6.11-16; 14-21)¹⁴. "Must these wrongs be thus endured?"

12 W. G. Zeeveld comments on the institution of the Tribune saying that the tribunes "are the one clear structural innovation in *Coriolanus*. For good or ill, in them is embodied a new power in the commonwealth, and a threat to its traditional balance" (1962, 323).

13 The main source of the play is Raphael Holinshed's *Third Volume of Chronicles* (1586). In this source, however, the role played in the riot by More is almost null. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from *Sir Thomas More* are from Munday et al. 2011. References are by Scene number followed by line number(s).

14 Jowett's comment in the footnote to 6.14-15 is: "The effect of the foreigners' diet on the body is correlated with the xenophobic idea that their presence infects the body politic." For the Londoners' xenophobia and the Ill May Day Riot, see Archer 2000, 30-31. Sharpe reports a comment by a Venetian ambassador about

says John Lincoln (1.37-38). Clearly, in *Sir Thomas More*, the revolt is not an action of “defence of what [are] perceived as rights” (Sharpe 1999, 198). The rioters know well that their action is illegal and that it is a violation of the principle of obedience¹⁵. Furthermore, while the revolt in *Coriolanus* is represented as an organised uprising, that of the citizens in *Sir Thomas More* is undetermined as regards both their complaints and the action to be undertaken. Also the kind of offences the citizens believe to be suffering is not clearly expounded: even price increases are seen as a future possibility, not as a present predicament. It is again Lincoln who poses the issue clearly:

LINCOLN

[...] He that will not see a red herring at a Harry groat, butter at eleven pence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.

followed by a comment in agreement by George Betts:

GEORGE BETTS

It will come to that pass *if strangers be suffered*. (6.1-6, my emphasis)

But, apart from the motivations at the basis of the revolt, there are also other elements which hinder an interpretation of the play's Ill May Day Riot as a social crime: none of the rioters' rights has been imperilled; rather, it is the community of foreign labourers that is being threatened with expulsion. Also Doll's role in the play is at odds

a trait of the character of the English: “One of their salient features was their xenophobia” (Sharpe 1988, 4).

15 Interestingly, Jowett notes that, in Shakespeare's revision of Sc. 6, “the strangers have ceased to be arrogant abusers of privilege and are presented instead as victims of prejudice” (2011, 47). Indeed, in *More's* suasive speech, they have become the “wretched strangers” (6.85). The most convincing argument to illustrate this changed perspective has been offered by Giorgio Melchiori. Melchiori takes into consideration what he believes is an “inconsistency”, notable especially in the three pages attributed to Shakespeare. In spite of the remarkable coherence of the text as a whole, Melchiori argues, while in the original version of the manuscript “in the hand of Anthony Munday the London citizens are shown as justified in their resentment against the aliens”, they “become in the hand D addition an irresponsible rabble in the hands of a clownish demagogue” (1986, 170; 171).

with what we know of women's participation in riots at the time. Peter Clark says that the explanation of women's active role in riots

is probably two-fold: firstly, women enjoyed greater general immunity from the law than men; secondly, there may have been a special immunity for women who were unable to fulfil their familial role of feeding their household because of food shortage. (1976, 376-77)

On the contrary, Doll joins the protest (indeed, she seems to have initiated it) because her honour, and therefore also that of her husband, has been offended. Nonetheless, she is the most eloquent in her praise of More's condemnation of the rioters' "mountainish inhumanity" (6.156)¹⁶, and is won over by the sole assurance of obtaining the king's pardon:

DOLL

Well, Sheriff More, thou hast done more with thy good words than all they could do with their weapons. Give me thy hand. Keep thy promise now for the King's pardon, or, by the Lord, I'll call thee a plain cony-catcher. (6.187-191)

But how did More win the commoners' approval? What was his (rhetorical) strategy compared with Menenius's? If we look at the appellations More employs to address the citizens, we note that, unlike Menenius, he is not trying to ingratiate himself to obtain their sympathy. The first, neutral, appellation is to Lincoln, the rioters' leader: "You that have voice and credit with the number" (6.60); then, seeing that Lincoln is unable to pacify the rebels, he comments on Lincoln's followers as performing a "rough" and "riotous" action (6.64). The most favourable address he uses ("Good masters", 6.66) is only slightly more accommodating. After chiding them for the disturbance of the peace, he receives from John Betts the contents of their request, which is

GEORGE BETTS

[...] the removing of the strangers, which cannot choose but much advantage the poor handicrafts of the City. (6.80-82)

16 The adjective "mountainish" represents the solution of a textual crux, for the manuscript presents "momtanish". On the emendations which have been suggested, including the present "mountainish", see Wentersdorf 2006.

Betts's reply suggests to More the following argument to be developed, that of the consequences of the strangers' removal. The strongest argument deployed by More is not the moral consideration that the strangers deserve the rioters' pity, but the clearly political consideration that the rioters' action will in the end turn to the detriment of the local labourers' rights for, he says, with their inhumane request, they "had taught / How insolence and strong hand should prevail, / How order should be quelled" (6.91-93). Doll's comment: "Before God, that's as true as the gospel" (6.99) suggests to More the development of the religious argument. But, unlike Menenius, who irrationally evokes "the gods" as being responsible for the dearth, More develops the political argument of disobedience, for being disobedient to the king means to "rise 'gainst God" (6.120). More then depicts what would be the citizens' case if they found themselves, as traitors, in a foreign country "that not adheres to England" (6.145): "This is the strangers' case / And this your mountainish inhumanity" (6.155-56), he concludes. More's harangue unequivocally qualifies the Ill May Day rebels as 'bad' rioters. After all, protesting against the inhuman patricians as in *Coriolanus*, or against other commoners as in *More* are by no means equally defensible. The *More* rioters, it appears, cannot be justified as performing an organized form of 'social' protest. The introduction of a fictional comic character, Clown Betts, further abases the political standing of the protest. No legitimising notion can justify the rioters in the Ill May Day Riot scene of *Sir Thomas More*.

5. *Property and justice*

In 1975, E. P. Thompson published a book on the "Black Act", an exceptionally severe law that was passed in May 1723, whose core was the punishment for poaching, that is, illegal hunting and fishing as performed by armed and masked men. The "Black Act" notably tightened previous statutes, broadening the cases in which the death penalty was formerly prescribed. Thompson opened the Introduction to his book with a general statement on the legislation concerning property: "The British state, all eighteenth-century legislators agreed, existed to preserve the property and, incidentally, the lives and liberties, of the propertied. But there are more ways than one of defending property" and, in the early years of the eight-

eenth century, "[i]t was still not a matter of course that the legislature should, in every session, attach the penalty of death to new descriptions of offense" (1975, 21).

One of the legends of Shakespeare's biography is the story that he left Stratford for London following his illegal killing of a deer on the property of Sir Thomas Lucy. If he was really involved in this deed, then it must have left a faint memory in his mind, for the crime of poaching appears with some prominence only once in his plays, and in a textual context which is apparently the least apt to represent a crime that, even before the "Black Act" was issued, was punished with exceptional severity. The play is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, one of the merriest and seemingly least problematic of Shakespeare's comedies.

The Merry Wives of Windsor is one of Shakespeare's plays which have a marked *in medias res* beginning. There are three characters at the opening of the action, who we are going to know as Shallow, a JP in Gloucestershire, Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh Priest, and Abraham Slender, Shallow's nephew. The first words are pronounced by Justice Shallow: "Sir Hugh, persuade me not. I will make a Star Chamber matter of it" (I.i.1). What follows in the same exchange gives us further information about what has been discussed before the opening of the play: "it" seems to refer to an abuse, and the perpetrator is probably Sir John Falstaff, named here for the first time by Evans: "If Sir John Falstaff have committed disparagement unto you [...]" (24), while the victim is "Sir Robert Shallow, Esquire" (3). The content of the abuse seems to be serious, for Shallow is determined to have his offense avenged at the highest degree, that of the Star Chamber. We will soon know that the "abuse" was Falstaff's poaching on the private lands of Shallow.

Opening speeches in plays are usually crucial in view of the future developments of the action. The most evocative of Shakespeare's *in medias res* openings is probably Antonio's first speech in *The Merchant of Venice*: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (I.i.1). Antonio further elaborates his meaning saying that sadness and melancholy seem to him not to have a palpable reason, which makes the friends to whom he is talking, and who seem to have previously questioned him about his melancholy, suggest various plausible reasons for his sadness. Though the enigma is not solved in the same scene, a significant future development is clearly foreshadowed.

As regards *The Merry Wives*'s incipit, we are misled into thinking that the event to be made into a Star Chamber issue is going to receive a significant development. After all, Shallow – as we will know from what follows in the same exchange – is not only the abused person, but also a man of justice and a man of honour, a JP and an Esquire with a regular coat of arms, and he seems to be determined to avenge the offence he has suffered, the “disparagements” (24) “Sir John Falstaff have committed” (23-24): “the Council shall hear it; it is a riot” (27), Shallow threatens¹⁷.

Soon after, in fact, rather incongruously, Shallow's purpose is dismissed, qualified by Evans as “pribbles and prabbles” (43) and substituted by what Evans introduces simply as “another device in my prain” (33), the suggestion that Shallow's nephew Slender should marry Anne Page¹⁸. When Master Page, Anne's father, enters, the issue of the “disparagement” is resumed, although indirectly. Master Page greets Shallow by thanking him “for my venison” (57-58); Shallow replies with a rather ambiguous statement: “I wished your venison better; it was ill-killed” (60), which may mean that it was not killed in the proper manner or that it had been taken illegally, that is, by poaching.

But the exchange also serves to outline a certain social context. As Christopher Hill says, “[v]enison became a social and prestige symbol. It was essential to hospitality, and for giving as gifts” (1996, 103). Manning, in turn, says that “gifts of venison [...] allowed a magnate to display his power and largesse” (1993, 6). The *nouveau riche* Page also possesses a hunting dog which, unfortunately, having been set on a deer, had been outrun. Slender introduces the dog saying: “How does your fallow greyhound, sir? I heard say he was outrun on Cotswold” (I.i.66-67). The legal possession of a hunting dog was itself a mark of privilege: “No one without a sufficient estate was allowed

17 The Star Chamber seems to have been commonly used for prosecuting the crime of poaching. As Roger Manning says, “uring the reigns of James I and Charles I [...] the Court of Star Chamber saw a veritable flood of prosecutions for hunting offences” (1993, 1).

18 Patriarchy and matriarchy are at difference as concerns their idea of Anne's most convenient marriage match. Anne's father, backed by Evans, inclines towards Shallow's slow-witted nephew Slender, while her mother endorses the cause of Doctor Caius, a choleric French physician. In the end, both father's and mother's will are going to be defeated by Anne's independent decision.

to keep a hunting dog which had not been 'lawed' or expediated. This meant amputating either three claws of anterior feet or the left claws of all four feet" (Manning 1993, 71). This practice, Thompson says, meant "lamming the dog so badly that it could not chase deer" (1975, 31)¹⁹. Hunting was actually a highly discriminatory social and economic privilege: "The qualified person", established by rank and income, "could [...] hunt where he wished, while the unqualified could not even take game on his own land" (Sharpe 1999, 180). Breaking the game laws, when performed by the poor, can therefore be described as a social crime because, by poaching, the poor man "asserted a set of attitudes to at least one form of property which was at variance with that of his social superiors" (181), not least because the common property of wild animals was advocated by the Bible (Gen. 1: 25-28). In fact, as Manning says,

Despite the many attempts by monarchs and aristocrats to preserve beast, fish, and fowl for their own sport, the popular belief persisted that wild animals could not be possessed and the places where they lived or swam should not be enclosed. (1993, 61)

Though his analysis is devoted to game in the eighteenth century, some of Douglas Hay's reflections may be considered as general issues. He argues, for instance, that "the great majority of men in rural England considered the game laws rank injustice", and that "[t]he conviction of middling men that an arbitrary property qualification was oppression was undoubtedly held also by the mass of labourers and cottagers" (2011, 207). As Andy Wood says, poaching, as well as "the right to glean for scraps of corn [...] after the harvest had been taken" were considered by the poor as customary rights which "sometimes extended into enclosed, privately held land" (2002, 83-84). On the contrary, as Manning points out, for the law

a trespass was committed when a hunter broke the pales and entered another person's deer park, and this was actionable. Tumultuous hunting by three or more persons constituted a riot, and the Court of Star Chamber always took an interest in any breach of public order. (1993, 59)

19 Incidentally, Thompson devotes Part 1 of his *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) to hunting in Windsor Forest, which is where the events of *Merry Wives* take place.

But in the context in which the events of *Merry Wives* develop, Falstaff's stealing of a deer, far from being considered as a social crime, is considered as a personal insult and as an attack on a social privilege²⁰.

When Falstaff appears, Shallow pronounces his accusation: "Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge" (I.i.85-86), to which Falstaff, backed by Nym, Pistol and Bardolph, though confessing to having committed the crimes of which Shallow accuses him, replies by displaying an array of linguistic tricks and equivoques. In addition, it appears that Shallow's nephew Slender has also been made drunk and then beaten by the gang. This, too, Falstaff confesses: "Slender, I broke your head. What matter have you against me?" (I.i.95-96). As the confession is pronounced in the presence of a JP, it manifests Falstaff's assurance of his impunity. Shallow, in turn, being a JP himself, should have reacted not only for having been personally offended, but also as an officer used to hearing accusations of poaching.

What kind of social scenario does *Merry Wives* I.i. present to its audience? It is clear that Falstaff and his companions have not committed a social crime owing to their consideration of game laws as an instance of "rank injustice". They are 'bad' normal criminals, for their illegal hunting is not, as Jeffrey Theis says, an act "about finding dinner" (2001, 47), or an act which "directly challenges one of the foundations of the aristocracy – the right to hold and control land in the form of private property" (53). Rather, as we know from 1 and 2*Henry IV*, Falstaff is a social stereotype, that of one who profits from his vicinity to the monarchy, the aristocracy and, now, the *nouveaux riches* who have succeeded in attaining the hunting privilege.

It should be pointed out, however, that the riot Falstaff and his gang performed by breaking into Shallow's property is all the more serious for it challenges the sovereign's authority in the person of a magistrate. But for the magistrate who prides himself on being the keeper of the rolls ("Custalorum" and "Rotulorum": I.i.5, 6), the office is mainly a mark of social promotion, with no duty attached. Master Page, in turn, is anxious to display his privilege, shown by the gift of deer he has received from Shallow, and therefore he puts

20 Manning says that "many of the recipients of royal game keepers' warrants were undoubtedly justices of the peace" (1993, 65).

a stop to any possible further altercation, saying: "I hope we shall drink down all unkindness" (I.i.151-52). Thus, Falstaff's victim and he, the offender, accept Page's invitation to enjoy the "hot venison pasty to dinner" (150-51) at his table, eating the "ill kill'd" deer (60). It is clear, at this point, that the initial trouble is not going to become a Star Chamber issue. After all, as JP Tyldesley complains, there will be "no punishment to the Redress" of unlawful shooting (Tawny and Power 1935, 1:331). Disguising a complex social problem with the vesture of satire, Shakespeare may seem to belittle the complex issue of illegal poaching and its social and criminal implications. But satire is a biting though humorous vehicle of censure, and the audience cannot but perceive that few of the comedy's characters are immune to its bite.

Allusions to poaching, however, remain disseminated throughout the text as verbal reminders of the gang's riot. Such allusions appear after the topics of hunting and poaching seem to have been dropped. Though now located in a non-specific linguistic or semantic context, they may not have escaped the audience's perception precisely owing to the people's familiarity with legal issues. Simple says, for instance, that Shallow's nephew Slender "hath fought with a warrener" (I.iv.22), that is, with a keeper of a game park; which means that he, too, was presumably caught poaching. Pistol's definition of hope in II.i.84 ("Hope is a curtal dog in some affairs") alludes to the amputation of dogs' claws to render them unfit for hunting. The exclamation of the Host in II.iii.68: "Cried game?" is equivalent to 'The hunt is up'. While he is waiting in the forest for the arrival of Mrs. Ford, Falstaff, disguised, considers his situation as follows: "I am here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i'th' forest" (V.v.9-10). Arriving at the appointment, Mistress Ford welcomes Falstaff saying: "Art thou there my dear, my male deer?" (V.v.13), to which Falstaff replies: "My doe with the black scut" (V.v.14). When Mrs Page also arrives, Falstaff believes he may manage both women: "Divide me like a bribed buck" (V.v.18), he says (here "bribed" means "stolen"). Later, Mistress Ford's appellation to Falstaff is: "I will always count you my deer" (V.v.10708). Finally, Falstaff's last speech: "When night-dogs run, all sorts of deer are chased" (V.v.206) seems to set the scenario for the gang's future "disparagements".

6. Conclusion

The “Statute of Artificers” was issued in 1563, one year after Tyldesley wrote his letter of complaint to Cecil. It had been preceded by many norms concerning work, labourers, wages, training, etc. It was probably also following such complaints as Tyldesley’s that a comprehensive law was drawn up, “digested and reduced into one sole lawe and statute” (Tawney and Power 1935, 1:338). It gave to justice officers a freer hand to prosecute labourers who did not comply with its norms and to labourers a worse freedom of movement and a stricter assessment (downwards) of pay rates²¹. There was more than enough to provoke the social crime of riot.

Though the texts I have been discussing present different forms of social crime, they have in common the essence of their medium: they are neither ‘historical’ in the full sense of the word, nor fully fictional. They tend, rather, to construct imaginatively (at least in part) facts which *may have happened*. The relationship between history and fiction, or imagined reality, in historical writings has been amply discussed by historians, producing a notable range of reflection which is however far from settled. I will quote the thoughts of two historians who have reflected on this issue. Their influence transpires in many ways throughout the storyline of the present article.

In the Introduction to a collection of essays in which he considers the categories of “true”, “false” and “fictive”, Carlo Ginzburg suggests that, instead of blurring “the borders between fictional and historical narrations”, we should view “the relation between the two as a competition for the representation of reality” (2012, 2). He, then, discusses the possibility of “isolating fragments of truth”, even of a deeper kind of truth, disseminated by either voluntary or involuntary traces in a novel or in a romance. Certain works of fiction, therefore, if “not as historical documents,” may be read “as texts impregnated with history” (4).

Christopher Hill, in turn, affirms that “[m]ost state papers are work of fiction”, and that “[g]overnment statements are usually intended to deceive”. Therefore, in order to give a voice to the majority of the people who “were inarticulate and remained silent”, “those who had no share in making laws, who were legislated against”, we should turn

²¹ The Act was repealed only in 1813.

to such texts as “ballads, plays and other popular literary forms neglected by real historians”, which may “provide fresh insight” (1996, 4). Literary, or quasi-literary texts, therefore, may be read as *alternative sources*, differently, but no less ‘historical’ than state documents.

It is evident that what is found in such documents as the JPs’ letters to Cecil or those encountered in the pages of the “Statute of Artificers” are dictated by variously prejudiced points of view, various intentions to deceive, in Hill’s words. A wish to appear overdiligent in the performance of their duties may have coloured the JPs’ letters to Cecil both by an excess of concern and by a harsher description of crimes and criminals. (We know, for instance, that Hext’s fraternities of “wandering suspicious persons” are an invention of pamphleteers.) And in the statutes, on the government’s part, the need to be (and to appear as) strict defenders of the public good may have suggested a similar excess in alarming the people about criminals and in decreeing penalties. State papers, as Hill says, “at best [...] make assumptions which it is difficult for us to recover now” (1996, 4).

The events in *Coriolanus* and *Sir Thomas More* are proved true by historical sources, but in those texts we encounter “a deeper kind of truth” precisely when historical sources are modified, or elaborated. The concentration of various events and the alteration of Plutarch’s report on the motivations of the revolt in *Coriolanus* and the expansion of More’s role as compared with Holinshed’s report in *Sir Thomas More* represent voluntary attributions of meanings which the source had not intended.

Merry Wives, instead, is one of a small number of Shakespeare’s plays (together, for instance, with *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Tempest*) for which no convincing possible source has been identified. All the same, the comedy is “impregnated with history”, or disseminated with traces of contemporary topicality. The political relevance of the issue of poaching, though introduced in a comedic context, is shown by the fact that, though seemingly obscured after the first scene, it remains disseminated throughout the text until the last of Falstaff’s speeches: “When night-dogs run, all sort of deer are chased” (V.v.206). Indeed, an authoritative remark seems to confirm my reading: “[t]he first act of *Merry Wives* alone contains more life and reality than all German literature” (Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, 1873; quoted in Taylor *et al.* 2016, 1757).

In the last scene of the play, a luminous act of disobedience obfuscates the display of opportunism and social aspirations that constitutes one of the action's subtexts: Anne refuses both the pretenders her parents want to force on her and imposes her will to marry Fenton, the "poor" gentleman she loves.

References

- Archer, Ian W. 2000. "Popular Politics in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries." In *Londinopolis. Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, edited by Paul Griffiths and M. S. R. Jenner, 26-46. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Barton, Anne. [1985] 2004. "Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*." In *Shakespeare and Politics*, edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander, 67-90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. "Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*." In *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett, 252-64. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bright, Curtis. 1996. *Surveillance, Militarism and Drama in the Elizabethan Era*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press.
- Brewer, John, and John Styles, eds. 1980. *An Ungovernable People: The English and the Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Centuries*. London: Hutchinson.
- Brockbank, Philip, ed. 1976. *Coriolanus*. London: Methuen.
- Brooks, Christopher W. 2008. *Law, Politics and Society in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheng, Elyssa. 2010. "Moral Economy and the Politics of Food Riots in *Coriolanus*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 36 (2): 17-31.
- Clark, Peter. 1976. "Popular Protest and Disturbances in Kent, 1558-1640." *The Economic History Review, Second Series* 29 (3): 365-82.
- Dent, Arthur. 1607. *The plain mans path-way to heaven [...]*. London: Printed by Ja. Young, for G. Lathum.
- George, David. [2000] 2004. "Plutarch, Insurrection, and Dearth in *Coriolanus*." In *Shakespeare and Politics*, edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander, 110-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 2012. *Threads and Traces. True False Fictive*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Goldie, Mark. 2001. "The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England." In *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850*, edited by Tim Harris, 153-94. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Grass, Günter. 1966. *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising. A German Tragedy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Gray, Drew D. 2016. *Crime, Policing and Punishment in England, 1660-1914*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Griffiths, Paul, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle, eds. 1996. *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Gurr, Andrew. 1975. "'Coriolanus' and the Body Politic." *Shakespeare Survey* 28: 63-69.
- Harris, Tim, ed. 2001. *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Hay, Douglas. [1975] 2011. "Poaching and the Game Laws on Cannock Chase." In Hay *et al.* 2011, 189-253. London: Verso.
- Hay, Douglas, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson, and Carl Winslow. [1975] 2001. *Albion's Fatal Tree. Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*. London: Verso.
- Heinemann, Margot. 1994. "How Brecht Read Shakespeare." In *Political Shakespeare. Essays in Cultural Materialism*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 226-54. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Herrup, Cynthia. 1987. *The Common Peace. Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, Christopher. 1996. *Liberty Against the Law. Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies*. London, Allen Lane: The Penguin Press.
- Hindle, Steve. 1996. "The Keeping of the Public Peace." In *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, edited by Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle, 213-48. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- . 2000. *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2004. "County Government in England." In *A Companion to Tudor Britain*, edited by Robert Tittler and Norman Jones, 98-115. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

- . 2008. "Imagining Insurrection in Seventeenth-Century England: Representations of the Midland Rising." *History Workshop Journal* 66: 21-60.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. 1972. "Distinctions Between Socio-Political and other Forms of Crime." *Society for the Study of Labour Bulletin* 25: 5-6.
- . [1959] 2017. *Primitive Rebels*. London: Abacus.
- Jones, Norman. 2015. *Managing by Virtue. Lord Burghley and the Management of Elizabethan England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Manning, Roger B. 1993. *Hunters and Poachers. Social and Cultural History of Unlawful Hunting in England 1485-1640*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McMullan, J. L. 1987. "Crime, Law and Order in Early Modern England." *The British Journal of Criminology*, 27 (3): 252-74.
- Melchiori, Giorgio. 1986. "The Corridors of History: Shakespeare the Re-maker." *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72: 167-85.
- Munday, Anthony, et. al. 1990. *Sir Thomas More*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Munday, Anthony, William Shakespeare, and Henry Chettle. 2011. *Sir Thomas More. The Arden Shakespeare*. London: Bloomsbury.
- North, Thomas. 1579. *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*. By [...] Plutarque of Chaeronea. Translated out of Greek into French by James Amiot [...] and out of French into English, by Thomas North. London: Printed by Richard Field.
- Patterson, Annabel. 1989. *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Pettet, E. C. 1950. "Coriolanus and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607." *Shakespeare Survey* 3: 34-42.
- Shakespeare, William. 2016. *The New Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works. Modern Critical Edition*. Edited by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus and Gabriel Egan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharpe, J. A. 1988. *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550-1760*. London: Edward Arnold.
- . 1995. "Social Strain and Social Dislocation, 1585-1603." in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, edited by John Guy, 192-211. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . [1984] 1999. *Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750*. London: Longman.

- Stretton, Tim. 2017. "The People and the Law." In *A Social History of England*, edited by Keith Wrightson, 199-220. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Styles, John. 1980. "'Our Traitorous Money Makers': The Yorkshire Coiners and the Law." In *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Centuries*, edited by John Brewer and John Styles, 172-249. London: Hutchinson.
- Tawney, R.H., and E. P. Power, eds. 1935. *Tudor Economic Documents*. 3 vols. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Theis, Jeffrey. 2001. "The 'ill kill'd' Deer: Poaching and Social Order in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43 (1): 46-73.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1972. "Eighteenth-Century Crime, Popular Movements and Social Control." *Society for the Study of Labour Bulletin* 25: 9-11.
- . 1975. *Whigs and Hunters. The Origin of the Black Act*. London: Allen Lane.
- . [1971] 1993. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." In Id., *Customs in Common*. London: Penguin Books, 185-258.
- Wentersdorf, Karl P. 2006. "On 'Momtanish Inhumanity' in *Sir Thomas More*." *Studies in Philology* 36 (2): 178-85.
- White, A. B. 1933. *Self-Government at the King's Command*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wood, Andy. 2002. *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wrightson, Keith. 1980. "Two Concepts of Order: Justices, Constables and Jurymen in Seventeenth-Century England." In *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Centuries*, edited by John Brewer and John Styles, 21-46. London: Hutchinson.
- Zeeveld, W. Gordon. 1962. "'Coriolanus' and Jacobean Politics." *The Modern Language Review* 57 (3): 321-23.

On the Rigorous Writing of Evil in Beckett and Sade

Davide Crosara

This article aims to trace the echo of Sade in Beckett's dealing with evil in *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Mediated by translation and editorial projects, Beckett's longstanding interest in Sade peaked in the postwar years, nurtured by his interest in the Sadean readings of Bataille and Blanchot, where the shade of the Holocaust looms large. The rigorous, almost implacable shape of Beckett's novels and novellas found in Sade's inquiry into evil a catalyst for the reconfiguration of language as vagrancy (the novellas), paralysis (*Watt*) or disintegration (*The Unnamable*). Confronted with Sade's ruthless and numbing narratives, Beckett's writing of evil will find in the voice a new organizing principle, profoundly indebted to his first experiments with the new media.

Keywords: Beckett, Sade, evil, language, voice

In his post-*Trilogy* interview with Israel Shenker (1956), Beckett famously expressed¹ the fear of having reached a point of "disintegration" in his work. This aesthetic standstill is also the result of an intense dialogue with the writings of Sade, for whom disintegration is the ultimate epiphany of evil. Taking the cue from this issue, this article aims to trace the echo of Sade in Beckett's dealing with evil in *Watt* and *The Unnamable*².

1 "In the last book, *L'Innomable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on". Beckett to Israel Shenker, *New York Times*, 5 May 1956.

2 Critical attention has particularly focused on a programmatically Sadean novel such as *How It Is* (1964); this article will investigate Beckett's intertextual dialogue with Sade in less explored texts such as *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Dates of composition always refer to the English version of Beckett's texts, even when these are preceded by a French version.

Beckett's dialogue with the writings of Sade spans over forty years. The first mention appears in a letter to Thomas MacGreevy on 8 September 1934 dealing with the paintings of Cézanne; Beckett is fascinated by the absence of human agency in the views of Mont Ste. Victoire. In his opinion, Cézanne finds "landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms" (Beckett 2009a, 223). He then directly challenges Sade: "Could there be any [...] irritation more *mièvre* than that of Sade at the impossibilité d'outrager la nature"³ (Beckett 2009, 223). The term "mièvre", employed by Beckett to "suggest something soft and effeminate" (Rabaté 2020, 2), is quoted from Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1930), which he had read in the original taking extensive notes, as testified by his *Dream Notebook* (Beckett 1999). Beckett shares Praz's interpretation of Sade as a writer affecting Decadent Western literature for two centuries, from neo-Gothic Romanticism to late Symbolism. This view is aligned with Beckett's strong attack on contemporary artists, still indebted to an anthropomorphic idea of nature. Beckett's sarcastic remarks depict Sade as a writer frustrated by the impossibility of reproducing nature's destructive agency. At that time, however, Beckett's knowledge of Sade was still quite superficial; this changed in 1938, when he was asked by Jack Kahane, director of the Obelisk Press, to translate *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

In the course of his deep engagement in the translation, Beckett expanded his view of Sade well beyond his reading of Praz, with an understanding that will last for the rest of his life: "The obscenity of surface is indescribable. Nothing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. The composition is extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante's... [...] The dispassionate statement of 600 'passions' is Puritan [...]" (Beckett 2009a, 607)⁴. Here two issues emerge: for Beckett, Sade tries to convey a dark metaphysics and a disenchanted epistemology through a rigorous, almost implacable, "Puritan" form⁵. In some ways this is an image of Beckett's own strategy, and it is no surprise that he confessed, some forty years later,

3 In his letters Beckett often alternates French and English. There's no question mark in the original.

4 Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 21 February 1938. Emphasis mine.

5 The letter also testifies Beckett's unceasing interest in Dante.

that at that point of his life he was part of “Sade’s boom”⁶. Starting from Apollinaire’s groundbreaking study *L’Oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* (1909), French Surrealists considered Sade their precursor. Among French intellectuals such interest did not wane in the following years. Among others Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Maurice Heine, Simone de Beauvoir read in the scandalous writer an advocate of freedom against censorship, an innovator of language, a post-Nietzschean thinker. Beckett had an intense dialogue with them.

Although he ultimately decided to turn down his translation of *The 120 Days*⁷, immediately after the War he planned a special ‘Sade issue’ of the journal *Transition* together with Georges Duthuit. The volume was never printed, but the preliminary materials have been recently rediscovered and partially published in a special issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (31.1, 2022). From Beckett’s intense correspondence with Duthuit on the subject in late 1950, we know that he “started to read, compile, and translate selected French language texts” related to Sade (Krimper 2022): he translated four letters by Sade, reviewed a translation of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), and provided translated excerpts of the seminal studies⁸ by Georges Bataille’s *Vice is Perhaps the Heart of Man*⁹ and Maurice Blanchot’s *Sade and the Sovereign Man*¹⁰. Bataille’s¹¹ and Blanchot’s¹² argument that Sade’s work foresees the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust reverberates in Beckett’s postwar fiction. Sade seldom speaks of evil; he rather talks of “vice”, “crime” or “God”:

6 Beckett to George Reavey, 24 August 1972.

7 Beckett probably did not want to be associated with a publisher which promoted, together with provocative writers such as Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, explicitly pornographic literature.

8 Beckett also included in the dossier his translations of Pierre Klossowski’s *Sade mon prochain* (1947), Maurice Heine’s introduction to the *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribond* (1930) and *Le Marquis de Sade et le roman noir* (1933).

9 His Preface to *Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1950).

10 An excerpt from *Lautréamont et Sade* (1949).

11 Beckett took extensive notes on Bataille’s Sade while working on his *Textes pour rien* (completed in 1951, first published in 1955).

12 Beckett considered *Lautréamont et Sade* an excellent study: “There are some very good things in it” (letter to Georges Duthuit, December 1950, precise date unclear).

By a divine will that defies comprehension, virtue was bound to yield to the machinations of the wicked. (Sade 2012, 67).

The meticulous performance of Sade's tormentors hides the notion of evil, which finds substitutes in a Godot-like absent or malignant God, as well as in crimes perfectly attuned to the Law of Nature:

'But the man you describe is a monster.'

'The man I describe is Nature's own.'

'He is a wild beast.'

'Well, is not the tiger or leopard of which this man is the image, if you like, created like him by Nature and created to fulfil the intentions of Nature? The wolf that devours the lamb accomplishes the will of our common mother, like the wrongdoer who destroys the object of his vengeance or of his lubricity'¹³. (Sade 2012, 142-43)

The laws of an alien, indifferent Nature are the only governing principles of Sade's fiction; absolute annihilation is its ultimate, though unattainable, goal. Such perspective acquired new resonances after the Holocaust, finding an echo in Beckett's translation of Bataille. Having read the report of a survivor, Bataille was the first to trace the conflation of language, violence, and silence in Sade. He tried to imagine the same relation with the persecutor, and he could not refrain from laughing at the switch between victim and tormentor; the words sounded improbable and far-fetched. Victim and executioner share the same linguistic impotence: one must speak the unspeakable, the other embodies the cold logic of power, and does not need to speak at all: he "speaks the language of the State. And if he is swayed by passion, the silence in which he delights affords him a more secret pleasure"¹⁴ (Bataille 2022, 53). The executioner can rely on the hypocrisy of public silence and the private enjoyment of violence. But Sade's writing goes in the opposite direction. His fiction, faced with the task of portraying both the absolute solitude of man and the absolute denial of the victim, is necessarily committed to silence: "it is true that plenary violence, which nothing can arrest, implies this entire negation of the victim. *But this negation is contrary to the fact of*

13 Particularly fascinated by the word, Beckett employed "lubricity" both in his *Proust* (1930) and in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932).

14 All excerpts from Bataille and Blanchot are provided in Beckett's translation.

language”¹⁵ (Bataille 2022, 54). Hovering on the limits of language, Sade tends towards the inhuman: “Sade’s language must be defined as one repudiating the relationship between him who speaks and those to whom he speaks, repudiating, that is, language itself, which is essentially that relationship” (Bataille 2022, 55). Thanks to Beckett’s translations of Bataille and Sade, such scenario will find its way into Beckett’s postwar fiction, but also in his nonfiction.

After the ‘German Letter’ of 1937¹⁶ (Beckett 2009, 516–21), Sade’s system of evil reappears in Beckett’s meditations on the painting of Bram Van Velde (1946), “the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act” (Beckett 2001, 143). Incarnated in the paradox of the necessity and the impossibility of expression, evil becomes for Beckett a formal and ethical problem. In the aftermath of War, the word ‘evil’ is consistent with Beckett’s vocabulary of lacuna and reticence. This strategy is employed in *The Capital of the Ruins* (1946)¹⁷, the only war script Beckett ever wrote. In the description of the city of Saint-Lô, “bombed out of existence in one night” (Beckett 1995, 277), the radical evil¹⁸ of the Shoah is never mentioned (the term “war” itself is mentioned only once, in relation to “German prisoners of war”) (277). Beckett describes with meticulous accuracy the Irish Hospital, its organization, structure and equipment, but, as in Sade’s enclosed spaces, nature is excluded from the scene¹⁹. Human bonds undergo a similar treatment: local inhabitants have no chance of recovering social links; the problem is “so arduous and elusive that it literally ceased to be formulable” (277)²⁰.

Beckett’s final reference to the survivors from the Saint-Lô massacre sounds like a programme for his future writing:

15 Emphasis in the original.

16 Beckett to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937.

17 Commissioned to Beckett by the Irish radio, it was meant as a report of the Irish Red Cross activities in the Norman city of Saint-Lô. It probably was never broadcast.

18 The notion of ‘radical evil’ was notoriously the crux of Hannah Arendt’s thought.

19 The only exception is the “grass slope” now covered by the hospital.

20 Beckett’s considerations clearly evoke Agamben’s meditations on the “unsayability of Auschwitz” (Agamben 2012, 157).

I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of *humanity in ruins*, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. (Beckett 1995, 278)²¹

Beckett's postwar fiction (namely his short stories, *Texts for Nothing* and *Watt*) portrays this "humanity in ruins". Evil is expressed by means of permanent homelessness: Beckett's tramps or survivors are exiled from their original dwelling, and forced to roam across uncharted territories, cathedrals in ruins, fields, hospitals:

I would have done better to spend the night in the cathedral, on the mat before the altar, I would have continued on my way at first light, or they would have found me stretched out in the rigor of death, the genuine bodily article, under the blue eyes fount of so much hope, and put me in the evening papers. (Beckett 1995b, 70)²²

These nomadic characters share some features with Sade's Justine, an innocent character travelling from town to town and village to village only to find new forms of evil, as shown in the following passage: "One day Madame Desroches came to tell me that she had finally found a household where I would be warmly welcomed, as long as I behaved myself well" (Sade 2012, 21). The fate of Beckett's and Sade's characters is inscrutable: being born appears to be their only sin (the reference to Nietzsche is obvious, as in *Waiting for Godot*)²³. To Sade's dungeons, prisons and castles Beckett replies with a sequence of shelters, abodes, sheds:

What he called his cabin in the mountains was a sort of wooden shed. The door had been removed, for firewood, or for some other purpose. The glass had disappeared from the window. The roof had fallen in at several places. The interior was divided, by the remains of a partition, into two unequal parts. If there had been a furniture it was gone. The vilest acts had been committed on the ground and against the walls. (Beckett 1995c, 89)

These ruins bear traces of "the vilest acts" of a humanity in ruins.

21 Emphasis mine.

22 Beckett, *The Calmative*.

23 See in particular the Satyr's 'wisdom' about the curse of being born in *The Death of Tragedy*.

Watt. *The Issue of Language*

The breakdown of humanity is a scenario exploited by both authors to challenge the flaws of rationalism. Beckett's contemporaries saw in Sade a forerunner of Adorno's and Horkheimer's defiance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Kant devised a perfect epistemological system where Reason had to conform only to its own laws, Beckett's *Watt* is built as a perfect epistemological machine doomed to derail. It is the question raised by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, written in the same years (1944-47). They argue that Sade's libertinism is an enlightenment project with a vengeance: it liberates individuals from taboos, the oppression of the law and religion, but it turns pure reason into a pleasure principle (*Justine*) or death drive (*The 120 Days of Sodom*). As in the world of Sade, dominated by systems and order, Europe in ruins was a clear indictment of the inhumanity of this "rationalistic absolutism".

The precisely coordinated modern sporting squad, in which no member is in doubt over his role and replacement is ready for each, has its exact counterpart in the sexual teams of Juliette, in which no moment is unused, no body orifice neglected, no function left inactive. [...] The special architectonic structure of the Kantian system, like the gymnasts' pyramids in Sade's orgies and the formalized principles of early bourgeois freemasonry [...] prefigures the organization, devoid of any substantial goals, which was to encompass the whole of life. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 69)

The statement is consistent with Beckett's perfect theatrical machinery, from *Footfalls* (1975) to *Quad* (1981), which will stage Watt's sharp and relentless calculations equating human bodies to lines and planes. This negative epistemology²⁴ can also be interpreted as negative theology. In Sade's Castle of Silling God can be nominated only to be cursed; "The name of God shall only be pronounced accompanied by insults and curses and shall be repeated as often as possible"

24 *Watt* shares with *The 120 Days of Sodom* several thematic affinities: the journey, the closed spaces, the master-slave relationship. However, the formal similarities are even more significant, and reinforce the Kant-Sade-Beckett triangulation. The two novels share a digressive structure, characterized by intratextual elements (digressions and comments), metanarrative insertions (notes by the author, asides, asterisks) and paratextual elements (the *Addenda*).

(Sade 2016, 54). Mr Knott's household is equally dark and mysterious. But Knott, invisible and unknowable, embodies a sadistic God, an absent centre for Watt's perceptions which in fact disintegrate:

Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even perceived the forms that they upheaved, or obtained the least useful information concerning himself, or Mr Knott, for he did not. But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for a head. Little by little, and not without labour. (Beckett 2009b, 99)

Epistemological failure leads to partially divergent outcomes in the two novels, but some striking similarities are retained. Watt's inability to understand Knott entails a perceptive and linguistic paralysis; the servant's final vicissitudes are embedded in ataraxy and aphasia: he needs a witness to translate his disturbed language for the reader. In turn, Sade's persecutors, looking forward to utter indifference, need to erase all traces of affection or sensitivity, as shown by Madame Duclos: "My goodbyes were soon said: my heart had no regrets, for it did not know the art of forming attachments" (Sade 2016, 176). Paralysis and indifference are transferred to the novels' configuration of space. A natural setting is almost never mentioned in either novel: the bleak, enclosed spaces of the castle and of the house bear no sign of rebirth and regeneration. Watt's vision of Knott in the garden leads to the servant's paralysis of language and perception²⁵. Mr Knott reveals himself only to create distraction. The two most striking similarities between *Watt* and the *120 Days of Sodom* are located in passages holding a satanical inversion of Rousseau's natural utopias. In the last part of Beckett's novel Watt finds himself in an asylum akin to a death camp. Here he meets Sam, who recalls the story of their shocking pastime in the institution's fenced lawns. Their violence is first directed at birds:

Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight to pursue, with stones and clods of earth. Robins, in particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed in great numbers. And lark's nests, laden with eggs still warm from the mother's breast, we ground into fragments, under our feet, with peculiar satisfaction, at the appropriate season of the year. (Beckett 2009b, 132)

25 Watt speaks inverting the words in the sentences, or the sentences in the paragraphs.

Then at the rats:

But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt by the stream. They were long and black. We brought them such titbits from our ordinary as rinds of cheese, and morsels of gristle, and we brought them also bird's eggs, and frogs, and fledgelings. Sensible of these attentions, they would come flocking round us at our approach, with every sign of confidence and affection, and glide up our trouserlegs, and hang upon our breasts. And then we would sit down in the midst of them, and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog, or a baby thrush. Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative. It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God. (Beckett 2009b, 132-33)

The passage is clearly tied to Sade's Addenda to the *120 Days of Sodom*, the first of the *Supplementary Tortures* in the novel:

By means of a pipe, they introduce a mouse into her cunt; the pipe is withdrawn, they sew up the cunt, and the animal, unable to escape, devours her intestines. They make her swallow a serpent which will in turn devour her. (Sade 2016, 397)

References to cannibalism (sometimes expressed in the desecration of the holy wafer) are not infrequent in both novels. In these passages a self-predatory attitude is transferred from language to creation: rats eat their offspring in Beckett; in Sade they devour the female womb. Creation enacts a cycle of destruction where natural evil is the manifestation of God. The actions of these characters constitute, as stated by Blanchot, "a negation which is realized on a multitudinous scale, which no particular case is able to satisfy, [...] essentially destined to transcend the plane of human existence" (Blanchot, 2022, 48). The garden of Eden is turned into an annihilating machine, humankind into bare life²⁶. In this rigorous aesthetics of the negative the target is a debased creation where the author himself is a disturbing agent. For the author of *The 120 Days* the creative act is always criminal, writing itself is an infection. In *Watt* writing holds the traces of an obscure historical catastrophe.

26 To the concept of "bare life" Giorgio Agamben devotes his *Homo Sacer* (see Agamben 1995).

The 18th century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la Raison*. I've never understood that; they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak. The Encyclopedists want to know everything. [...] But that direct relation between the self and – as the Italians say – *lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken. (Beckett to M. Haerdter, quoted in Fehsenfeld and McMillan 231)

The works Beckett completed in the Sixties will retain the orderly form and implacable logic of the *120 Days*, but Sade's illusion of a united, almost Nietzschean selfhood (the "Unique One" of Blanchot) capable of exerting absolute domination over his characters and his narratives, is doomed to fail. Beckett's Sadean fictions and plays, from *The Unnamable* (1959) to *What Where* (1983), incorporate the theme of evil into an odyssey of disembodied voices.

The Unnamable. The Disintegration of Language

Beckett's experiments with drama arise from the speaking voice of *The Unnamable* (1959). In the novel the word "evil" (a term which, as with Sade, seldom appears in Beckett's corpus) refers to the obscure origin of his condition:

What puzzles me is the thought of being indebted for this information to persons with whom I can never have been in contact. Can it be innate knowledge? Like that of good and evil. This seems improbable to me. (Beckett 2010, 8)

Information about his whereabouts, the dim light surrounding him, the stories he is forced to utter, may come from other voices, his "delegates" (Beckett 2010, 7) talking about his mother, or God: "They told me I depended on him, in the last analysis" (Beckett 2010, 9). According to Elsa Baroghel:

The theme of evil may be said to encapsulate the tension between the gnostic view of the world as a conflict between light and dark, or good and evil, and the occasionalist²⁷ concept of pre-established harmony, according to which 'evil' is a constitutive limitation of the human condition – a limitation re-

27 Beckett took extensive notes on Occasionalist philosophy, showing a specific interest in the work of Geulincx, Berkley and Leibniz. See Feldman 2006.

garded as being of divine origin and which, therefore, operates a reversal of 'evil' into 'good' – or, rather, 'perfect'. (Baroghel 2018, 293)

The Unnamable deconstructs both Predestination and Free Will through the disruption of character (he has no human body), story, space. The protagonist operates in an infernal space implicitly alluding to Satan's Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*: "I am Matthew and I am the angel, I who came before the cross, before the sinning, came into the world, came here" (Beckett 2010, 11). Both narrator and protagonist sometimes feel "an existential void" when left to their "own devices without any divine supervision. If God exists, he does not care about human existence or fate and is indifferent to human chagrin". (Jęczmińska 2020, 40). On other occasions the Unnamable occupies, Sun-like, a central position, with other characters (Mahood, Worm) and other voices orbiting around him. Or he feels, as a fallen God (Orpheus or Dionysus) his body dismembered and dispersed in the four corners of the world²⁸. In many respects the narrative retains Sadean features: a character without sex, arms and legs, whose existence is only testified by physical sensations (the feeling of tears trickling down his cheeks), the Unnamable could represent Sade's final dystopia. This half-human figure also recalls the presence of a master (the narrator, or Beckett himself) who directs or creates the voices he hears:

The master in any case, we don't intend, listen to them hedging, we don't intend, unless absolutely driven to it, to make the mistake of inquiring into him, he'd turn out to be a mere high official, we'd end up by needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to. (Beckett 2010, 91)

The undefined identity of Beckett's character matches Sadean descriptive strategies, as the description of Durcet in the *120 Days*:

Durcet is 53 years of age: he is small, short, fat, very stocky, with a pleasant and fresh face, very fair skin, his whole body and particularly his hips and buttocks exactly like a woman's, his arse is fresh, fleshy, firm and plump, but gapes excessively from habitual sodomy, his prick is extraordinarily small,

28 An adaption of John Donne's Holy Sonnet *At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow*.

barely 2 inches around by 4 inches long; he absolutely never gets hard any more, his climaxes are rare and very painful, far from plentiful and always preceded by spasms which throw him into a kind of frenzy that drives him to crime [...] (Sade 2016, 20)

This passage can be compared to Beckett's ironic description of the Unnamable's identity:

But my dear man, come be reasonable, look at this photograph, what, you see nothing, true for you, no matter, here, look at this death's-head, you'll see. You'll be all right, it won't last long, here, look, here's the record, insults to policemen, indecent exposure, sins against holy ghost, contempt of court, impertinence to superiors, impudence to inferiors, deviations from reason, without battery, it's nothing, you'll be all right, you'll see, I beg your pardon, does he work, good God no, out of question, look, here's the medical report, spasmodic tabes, painless ulcers, I repeat, painless, all is painless, multiple softening, manifold hardenings, insensitive to blows, sight failing, chronic gripes, light diet, shit well tolerated, hearing failing, heart irregular, sweet-tempered, smell failing, heavy sleeper, no erections, would you like some more [...] (Beckett 2010, 93-94)

Durcet's description is repeated, with slight variations, forty pages later (Sade 2016, 61). As in *The Unnamable*, the character's ambiguous sexual identity, his physical impairments and moral flaws are reinforced in the new narrative. The task of replacing the agency of God and the regulating action of nature is doomed to failure. Sade and Beckett fill their novels with metanarrative insertions: plans, cast descriptions, lists and rules which reinforce the text's inadequacy. This is explicitly mentioned in Sade's notes, which state:

Notes.

Do not deviate in the slightest from this plan, everything within it has been worked out several times and with the greatest precision.

Describe the departure. And throughout add above all some moral instruction to the suppers.

When you come to copy it all out have a notebook, in which you will place the names of all the principal characters and all those who play an important role, such as those with numerous passions and those of whom you have spoken several times, like the one of Hell; leave a large margin by their names and fill this margin with everyone you find who resembles them as you make your copy – this note is utterly essential and it is the only way you will be able to see your work clearly and avoid repetitions. (Sade 2016, 396)

Similarly, in Beckett's novel one can find:

But this question of lights deserves to be treated in a section apart, it is so intriguing, and at length, composedly, and so it will be, at the first opportunity, when time is not so short, and the mind more composed. Resolution number twenty-three. And in the meantime the conclusion to be drawn? That the only noises Worm has had till now are those of mouths? Correct. (Beckett 2010, 70)

The final "correct" in the text stands for a tentative confirmation of the conclusion as well as an injunction to amend the written text. These narrators dream of a perfectly ordered world, but they cannot avoid deviations and rewritings. Evil to them is primarily a linguistic fall into the materiality and contingency of language. However, these are not only narratives of evil, but also 'evil narratives', where saying is always 'ill saying'. The logical protocols which have dominated Western culture since the Enlightenment have been touched by evil; as a consequence, writing, with its organising codes, has become akin to violence and torture. In order to achieve the disintegration of language, Sade and Beckett must come to terms with the disturbing presence of a voice.

The Swerve to the Voice

Sade's ultimate dream lies in the testimony of absolute destruction of humankind, to whom writing inflicts the last torture. Yet, storytelling is also the apex of pleasure for Sade's masters, as the narrator of *The 120 Days of Sodom* indicates:

It is accepted among true libertines that the sensations communicated by the organ of hearing excite more than any others and produce the most vivid impressions. (Sade 2016, 28)²⁹

The most precious vice, therefore, is the pleasure of listening to stories, to other voices. *The Unnamable* also finds in the fleeting texture of the voice a persistent preoccupation. The origin and status of the voice is his main concern:

²⁹ Passions must be "described to them in order and in the greatest detail" (Sade 2016, 28).

May one speak of a voice, in these conditions? Probably not. And yet I do. The fact is all this business about voices requires to be revised, corrected and then abandoned. (Beckett 2010, 49)

Disembodied and yet forced to utter³⁰, Beckett's voice must speak of things of which the author himself cannot speak. A ghostly voice is the great theme of *The Unnamable*: the search for a voice torn between "the self that 'utters' and the 'not I'" (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 611). Faltering and barely audible, the voice must continue to utter while trying to stop uttering. After Beckett's engagement with the new media, the voice is the veritable protagonist of his last phase: as is true in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the main character of *The Unnamable* vibrates like a tympanum. In the late works other characters will embody a panting breath in the mud, such as Pim in *How It Is*³¹ (1964), a novel explicitly built around "sadism pure and simple" (Beckett 2009, 54). Or the eyelid of *Il See Ill Said* (1981), where the devouring gaze of the observer is forced to tears by the impossibility of retaining the image. Reconfiguring *King Lear*'s "vile jelly"³² (Beckett 1986, 73), the eye turns into the source of all evil: "And from it as from an evil core [...] the evil spread" (Beckett 1986, 5). Beckett radicalizes Sade's inquiry into evil through the invention of shades perpetually in ruin, whose voices rely on lacunae and oblivion, and just because of this can survive. From this perspective Beckett's postwar writing is at the same time a writing of evil (as in Sade) and an evil writing³³, the transgression of Adorno's imperative to cease³⁴, in "the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence" (Beckett 2010, 69).

30 The other emerging from the fracture of the self is immediately rejected, but it is this fracture that "becomes the substance of testimony" (Anderton 2016, 77). All the prosthetic voices that inhabit *The Unnamable*, his "puppets", attest of his residual subjectivity.

31 *How It Is*, with Pim's 'education', is probably the clearest example of Sadean fantasy in Beckett.

32 Beckett is obviously quoting Cornwall's eye-gouging of Gloucester in *King Lear*, III.vii.100.

33 A further example of Beckett's 'evil writing' (and of his dialogue with Shakespeare) is *Worstward Ho* (1981).

34 The reference is to Adorno's considerations on poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno devoted to Beckett several writings. As shown by Shane Weller (Weller, 2010), he also left notes on *The Unnamable*.

The question remains whether silence ushers in a disowning of language altogether or rather provides a necessary function in Beckett's final shift towards the music of poetry.

References

- Ackerley, C. J., and S. E. Gontarski. 2004. *The Grove Companion to Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought*. New York: Grove Press.
- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Adorno, Theodor. 2010. "Dossier: Adorno's Notes on Beckett." Translated by Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller. *Journal of Beckett Studies* 19 (2): 157-78.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 1999. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.
- Anderton, Joseph. 2016. *Beckett's Creatures. Art of Failure after the Holocaust*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Baroghel, Elsa. 2018. *Beckett, with Sade: Sadean Intertext and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Works*. PhD diss., New College, University of Oxford.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1986. *Mal vu mal dit, Ill Seen Ill Said, Mal visto mal detto*. Traduzione inglese di Samuel Beckett; versione italiana di Renzo Guidieri. A cura di Nadia Fusini. Torino: Einaudi.
- . 1995. *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*. New York: Grove Press.
- . 1995a. "The Calmative." In *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, edited by S. E. Gontarski, 61-77. New York: Grove Press.
- . 1995b. "The Capital of the Ruins." In *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, edited by S. E. Gontarski, 275-78. New York: Grove Press.
- . 1995c. "The End." In *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, edited by S. E. Gontarski, 78-99. New York: Grove Press.
- . 2001. "Three Dialogues." In *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited and with a foreword by Ruby Cohn. London: John Calder.

- . 2009. *Beckett's Dream Notebook*. Edited by John Pilling. Reading: Beckett International Foundation.
- . 2009a. *Watt*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2009b. *How It Is*. Edited by Édouard Magessa O'Reilly. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2010. *The Unnamable*. Edited by Steven Connor. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bataille, Georges. 2022. "Vice is Perhaps the Heart of Man." Translated by Samuel Beckett. *Journal of Beckett Studies* 31 (1): 51-55.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 2022. "Sade and the Sovereign Man." Translated by Samuel Beckett. *Journal of Beckett Studies* 31 (1): 42-50.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha, and Douglas McMillan. 1988. *Beckett in the Theatre*. New York: Riverrun Press.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha, and Lois More Overbeck, eds. 2009. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume 1, 1929-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha, Lois More Overbeck, et al., eds. 2016. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume 4, 1966-1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, Matthew. 2006. *Beckett's Books. A Cultural History of Beckett's "Interwar Notes."* London: Continuum.
- Gontarski, S. E., ed. 1995. *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*. New York: Grove Press.
- Jęczmińska, Kinga. 2020. "The Unsaid in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: The Subject and the Mind." *Litteraria Copernicana* 35 (3): 35-45.
- Krimper, Michael. 2022. "Introduction. The Lost Volume of Transition: Beckett, Duthuit, Sade." *Journal of Beckett Studies* 31 (1): 1-5.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2000. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Praz, Mario. 1930. *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*. Firenze: Sansoni.
- . 1970. *The Romantic Agony*. Translated by Angus Davidson, with a new foreword by Frank Kermode. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michel. 2020. *Beckett and Sade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sade, Marquis de. 2016. *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Translated and with an introduction by Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn. London: Penguin.
- . 2012. *Justine*. Translated with an introduction and notes by John Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. London: The Arden Shakespeare.
- Shenker, Israel. 1956. "Moody Man of Letters; A Portrait of Samuel Beckett, Author of the Puzzling 'Waiting for Godot.'" *New York Times*, May 6, 1956, sec. A, 129. <https://www.nytimes.com/1956/05/06/archives/moody-man-of-letters-a-portrait-of-samuel-beckett-author-of-the.html>.

REVIEWS

Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Claudia Olk, *Shakespeare and Beckett. Restless Echoes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2023, 251 pp.

Even if Shakespeare and Beckett have come to signify theatre itself in current culture, very few comparative monographs have been devoted to these two towering figures in the history of drama. Claudia Olk's study is the first volume consecrated to the Shakespeare-Beckett connection after Ann Marie Drew's *Past Crimson Past Woe*, published in 1993. The Twentieth Century, from T.W. Adorno to Peter Brook, has taught us to read Shakespeare through Beckett and Beckett through Shakespeare. Olk's analysis, however, is more than a mere remapping of Shakespearean and Beckettian intertextualities; it is a productive, challenging study which offers new insights and interpretations of a vital relationship. Her main assumption is that "Shakespeare's and Beckett's texts exhibit their aesthetic strategies and reflect on them at the same time" (p. 4). If, as a young Beckett signalled, "the danger is in the neatness of identifications", the two playwrights position their works on shifting foundations, on a territory where "self-reflection often becomes its own form of creation" (p. 4). This 'natural perspective' defies the confident, cataloguing gaze of the critic. Writing from the margins of two ages of transition, Shakespeare and Beckett retell for modernity the myth of Echo, which becomes the main subject of Olk's meditation and at the same time a problematic aesthetic principle.

This "restless" nature of echo is particularly evident in Chapter Three ('Some remains': *Beckettian and Shakespearean Echoes*), but it informs Olk's study as whole:

An echo creates a divided presence. It is not an exact repetition, a recurrence of the same, but rather a critique of the idea of mere repetition or sameness. In an echo the sound waves that are reflected back to the listener from some distant surface suggest familiarity and closeness, yet they harbour the notion of difference and deferral. (p. 74)

In this context *Happy Days* – analyzed in chapter three – is a tragicomic version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Denying any possibility of tragedy, Beckett, when confronted with Shakespeare, operates by means of a tragicomic mode. Even if one is farcical and the other tragic, Winnie and Juliet are both figures of entombment, characters interred from the very beginning, who literally become their own echo: “just as Romeo and Juliet, who cannot live their love, are constrained by custom and appear as a proto-Beckettian couple, so Winnie and Willie, who can no longer reach each other, present themselves as a post-Shakespearean couple” (p. 86).

But the notion of echo reverberates in many other chapters. It operates as pause or deferral in Chapter Four (‘Purgatory and Pause – *Dante, Shakespeare and the Lobster*’) where Olk reinterprets Beckett’s view of Purgatory through Joyce’s treatment of *Hamlet* in Book Six of *Ulysses*. The tragedy of the father becomes a way to reread Beckett’s Joycean heritage, his inescapable bond with the Penman. Pause, “the wavering and hesitancy before the completion of a task” that “is central to the structure of *Hamlet*” (p. 103), animates Belacqua’s stance in *Dante and the Lobster*, a short story that resonates with *Hamlet* and with Stephen Dedalus’ ‘*Hamlet theory*’. A character which focuses all his actions on the rhetoric of pause, Belacqua inaugurates, through Shakespeare and Joyce, Beckett’s “programmatic deferral of syntactic closure” (p. 117). A deferral investing the patrilineal notion of literature and tradition too.

Echo shapes the “still lives” of Shakespeare’s and Beckett’s late plays in Chapter 5 (‘[It is] winter/Without journey’ – *Still Lives in Beckett and Shakespeare*). As Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, many of Beckett’s late plays begin and end in brief theatrical *tableaux vivants*. The creatures inhabiting these late stages enact “a notion of a being that is simultaneously lifeless and alive”, recalling Walter Benjamin’s idea of dialectics as a standstill, a condition “driven towards finality” (p. 123) and yet resisting the idea of an end. As Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, the character of Speaker in *A Piece of Monologue* experiences a “purgatorial non-death” (p. 128).

In some instances echo is the tool of a radical metatheatrical process, as in *The Tempest* and *Endgame* (see Chapter Six, *Endgames*). Contrasting the traditional, Adornian reading of *Endgame* as a re-writing of *King Lear*, Olk finds many Beckettian echoes in *The Tempest*. Both plays are dominated by sea imagery and are located in close, insular spaces. But, more importantly, they offer a profound meditation on “artistic autogenesis” (p. 159), with characters creating their stories and at the same time being created by the same narratives. While they appear as masters of the dramatic action, Hamm and Prospero are inextricably bound to a role which originates from the mimesis dictated by their lines from the very beginning, an act of self-creation which replies to the suffocating self-sufficiency of the worlds they inhabit.

There are many other engaging suggestions in Olk’s volume; for example the stunning continuity between the protagonist of Beckett’s short prose *Lessness* and Shakespeare’s Timon. These characters embody “trajectories of dispossession, of shrinking, reduction and contraction” (p. 136) which replicate the decomposition of the dramatic arc. Or Beckett’s extraordinary miniaturization of Shakespeare’s Globe in *A Piece of Monologue*, where the spherical lamp – a glimpse of light in a pitch-dark stage – “casts the theatre, the globe, into a place where a faint form of life, the actor, coming from nowhere and going nowhere, can be observed” (p. 129), as in *Macbeth*’s final soliloquy. A shadowy presence (or perhaps a Dantean ‘shade’) which foreruns the analysis of the rhythms of sleeping and waking imbued in plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Cascando*, *Nacht und Träume*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* in chapter seven (“Theatres of Sleep”). Here ghostliness becomes a key exegetic element, a formal category which rekindles the notion of echo as an oscillation between being and non-being; a liminal state that generates a meta-dramatic stance, in which Shakespeare’s and Beckett’s theatre experiment with the creation of stage presences that also affect the experience of the audience, forced to wait on “the rip word” (Beckett 1984, 269).

I would like to conclude this short review focusing on a further – and somehow dizzying – cogitation suggested by Olk’s comparative study. It concerns the status of imagination. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the poet is described as giving life to an “airy nothing”,

while in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra recreates Antony in mythical terms, a figure which brings imagination “past the size of dreaming” (“Nature wants stuff / To vie strange forms with fancy, yet t’ imagine / An Antony were nature’s piece ’gainst fancy, / Condemning shadows quite.” [*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.120-24]). Olk aptly notices how Shakespeare’s tragedy entails another Shakespeare-Beckett-Joyce triangulation. Joyce highlighted the “Cleopatra-like” (p. 49) quality of Shakespearean metamorphosis in *Ulysses*, where Shakespeare is described – through Coleridge – as “a myriadminded man”. It is hard to tell if the imagination is a limit or an excess, something missing or exceeding (as Joyce seems to suggest) the figure it evokes. In both cases Shakespeare and Beckett are entangled in the paradigm dictated by *Imagination Dead Imagine*: like Echo’s voice, the imaginative flight dies the very moment the text is born. Or perhaps, in an equally unsolvable conundrum, the death of the imagination is the permanent, inherent condition of a work of art.

DAVIDE CROSARA, Sapienza University of Rome

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1988. “Trying to Understand Endgame.” In *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett’s Endgame*, edited by Harlod Bloom, 9.40. New York: Chelsea House.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, transl. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Drew, Anne Marie, ed. 1993. *Past Crimson, Past Woe: The Shakespeare-Beckett Connection*. New York, London: Garland.
- Gontarski, S.E. 1985. *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett’s Dramatic Texts*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Grady, Hugh. 2000. *Shakespeare and Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2001. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton, NJ, Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Garber, Marjorie, *Shakespeare in Bloomsbury*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2023, 392 pp.

Yes, I strongly recommend reading *Shakespeare in Bloomsbury* by Marjorie Garber. It is a profoundly intelligent and very well written book, an extremely entertaining work of investigation and a superb exercise in literary criticism. Garber explores with great ease and verve the different relationships that the members of the Bloomsbury Group, each and every one of them, held with Shakespeare. Of course, they all loved Shakespeare – that should not come as a surprise – because Shakespeare was the inventor of modern literary English, as any educated person in England, even in Europe, would understand. And all of them were, of course, educated people, so they all loved Shakespeare. In England *then* – I underline *then*, that is, at the beginning of the century they inaugurated, the twentieth century, the Modernist epoch – learned people would read Shakespeare and feel Shakespearean... (nowadays, I don't know, I am not so sure.)

But then, it was so. Then, in those times, the 'Bloomsbury people' knew and felt that Shakespeare had "invented" not only English but humanity, in the Bloomian sense that through his plays he taught readers and theatregoers how to feel and how to be human. In other words, Shakespeare offered them a spectrum of passions – from love to hate to fear, anguish, envy and jealousy – and a range of modes to interpret those emotions. One could recognize oneself in love like Juliet, one could hate like Iago, feel jealousy like Othello...

Especially deep and to the point is the chapter Garber dedicates to Virginia Woolf's enchantment with Shakespeare. Of course, we who read and love Virginia Woolf, the great modernist writer, know how much in love with Shakespeare she was. We know that because her love of Shakespeare is in everything she writes. Yes, Shakespeare influences her: Shakespeare is there, is everywhere inscribed in her novels, Shakespeare inspires her writing, even when she writes a letter Shakespeare guides her pen to find the right metaphor. Put simply, Shakespeare feeds her imagination. Shakespeare feeds her language.

Garber guides us with great clarity and sureness of touch through the many quotations Woolf scatters throughout her writings. So much so that we realize just how extensive her knowledge of Shakespeare was and how that knowledge reflected her love for him. Could she

have written *The Waves*, one wonders, and *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, had she not read Shakespeare?

But not only that: through Garber's book we get to know more precisely how all the artists and writers of the Bloomsbury Group adored Shakespeare, and frequently discussed Shakespeare in person and by letter. For all of them, in their various fields of work and expression, in their own writings and creative works, in their conversations, Garber shows, Shakespeare proved to be deeply influential, deeply nourishing.

From the outset, Garber insists on informing us readers that her book is "a book about Shakespeare in Bloomsbury – about the role Shakespeare played in the lives of a remarkable set of writers, artists, and thinkers whose influence is still strongly felt today." And she delivers, in the sense that Garber teaches us how many roles the Bard "would come to play: as a cultural inheritance and social code; as an inspiration for work in genres as apparently different as fiction and biography, art history and economics; as a vehicle for expressing – and also for masking – personal opinions; as a structure of feeling and a structure of thinking."

Here, precisely, is what I found most interesting in her analysis: I share with Garber the notion that reading Shakespeare for the Bloomsbury figures is not simply paying a debt to Tradition, it is learning a language to express emotions, feelings, thoughts. In this sense, the experience of reading Shakespeare is unforgettable for them, it is the forging of a language.

Garber's research starts with Shakespeare in the Victorian Era; when, emerging from his recognition as one amongst many of England's famous poets and dramatists, he became the 'greatest' in the minds of many. The latter half of the nineteenth century witnesses, precisely, Shakespeare's elevation to greatness, a greatness unrivalled by any English writer past and present, as Garber shows. And it is from this perspective that we come to the Shakespeare of Virginia Woolf, and of the men and women of the Bloomsbury Group. How much the men and women of Bloomsbury, with their complicated and refined minds, delighted in Shakespeare, is explored in their literary corpus and letters.

One by one, we recognize how important Shakespeare was for them all: for Lytton Strachey, how he was another great unqualified lover of Shakespeare, very much like Virginia Woolf; and for the

famed economist John Maynard Keynes, whose love for Shakespeare was such that it led him to become a member of the Shakespeare Society as he wrestled with the crisis of the Great Depression and helped transform modern economics. Keynes's love for Shakespeare grew ever more when he fell in love with Lydia Lopokova, whom he eventually married. Lydia was an accomplished dancer and theatre performer who graced the stage of several adaptations of Shakespeare. An artist like Roger Fry, an art critic like Clive Bell, the publisher Leonard Woolf, Virginia's husband; all of them proved instrumental in ensuring Shakespeare's literary legacy.

Finally, we are treated to Shakespeare the poet with the Bloomsbury poets: John Lehmann, Rupert Brooke, and T. S. Eliot (though he was never a proper member of the Bloomsbury Group). Of particular interest is Rupert Brooke's Shakespeare, since Brooke had such high praise for Shakespeare while also demeaning him at the same time. "Brooke's comments about Shakespeare," Garber writes, "varied in tone depending upon his audience." Among women and lay audiences, Brooke was "instructive and tutorial." Writing in private, though, he mixed reverence with irreverence, such as when he wrote in his Grantchester notebooks, "This glutton, drunkard, poacher, agnostic, adulterer, and sodomite was England's greatest poet." Brooke wouldn't let facts dissuade him from telling a grand story for rhetorical and performative shock – but in that sense he really did follow in the footsteps of Shakespeare, who took artistic license with historicity for the same purpose.

"In discussing the writing of the Bloomsbury Group and their followers, I have alluded in passing to something I called Bloomsbury Shakespeare," writes Garber. "But what might be meant by such a phrase?" Garber insists that their passionate amateurism is something we need to recover in our day and age, and I concur. There is nothing wrong with 'amateurism' and we should be willing and courageous to follow in those same footsteps. "The Shakespeare they admired, read, and quoted, and sometimes performed was a poet, a stylist, a wordsmith, and a thinker. What they valued above all was his language." All fine and good.

But just how did their interest in Shakespeare enrich their lives, one might ask? The answer is in the book Garber presents to us like gift. With meticulous patience, she narrates the previously untold story of Shakespeare's profound influence on Virginia Woolf and the

rest of the Bloomsbury Group. She tells us how they went to the theatre, discussed performances, and speculated about Shakespeare's mind. As poet, as dramatist, as model and icon, as an elusive 'life', Shakespeare haunted their imaginations and made his way, through phrase, allusion, and oblique reference, into their own lives and their art. For the men and women of the Bloomsbury Group, Shakespeare was a constant presence and a creative benchmark. Not only in the works they intended for publication – the novels, biographies, economic and political writings, stage designs and reviews – but also in their diaries and correspondence, their gossip and small talk, they turned regularly to Shakespeare. They read his plays for pleasure in the evenings, year after year.

I repeat: Shakespeare provided them with a common language, a set of reference points, and a model for what they did not hesitate to call 'genius'. Among these brilliant friends, Garber shows, Shakespeare was in effect another, if less fully acknowledged, member of the Bloomsbury Group. What she, what all of them find in Shakespeare is the regenerative power of his language. And a sense of recognition and surprise, of release and identification. They think through him. Exactly as Virginia Woolf says: "Shakespeare is speaking our own thoughts."

It is precisely when we get to Woolf, that we lovers of her works and mind and imagination, feel so grateful to Garber's book. Because she offers us wonderful insight into Woolf's writings through the role and influence of Shakespeare over her. So much so that it becomes more and more clear reading Garber's book – although we knew it in essence from the beginning – that to read Virginia Woolf without perceiving and realizing Shakespeare's luminous influence over her is to not know Virginia Woolf at all. To know Virginia Woolf, as Garber shows, "is to know her relationship with Shakespeare." Not by chance, all her life, Virginia Woolf made entries about Shakespeare in her journals and diaries and kept up a lively correspondence about the plays with her friends.

Quite rightly, then, the chapter dealing with Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare is at the heart of the book.

In this light, the considerations Garber shares with us in the coda to her scrupulous and remarkable book on how Shakespeare's language nourished the mind, life and work of Bloomsbury, are extreme-

ly interesting. What they did with Shakespeare is unrepeatable, she writes. Such an experience, we come to understand, is and will remain unique. Why? First, because they were unique themselves. And their relation to Shakespeare, to his language, absolutely inimitable. Second, because that experience took place in an epoch before cinema, radio, and television became dominant sources of entertainment; an epoch when reading Shakespeare aloud in the evenings was still a popular recreation in upper and upper-middle-class households. Lytton Strachey read Shakespeare to Carrington and their friends at Tidmarsh and Ham Spray. Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband exchanged lines from *Richard II*.

Even I remember in the late Eighties of the last century evenings in Cambridge with my late husband Tony Tanner reading *Antony and Cleopatra* aloud. After all, he was named Antony after that play. But all that is over, I believe... How sad!

Coming back again to Garber, yes, her book is an outstanding critical performance, and its very special achievement lies precisely in the way she teaches us to recognize how the knowledge of Shakespeare, of his dramatic and poetic language, forges and nourishes the language of Woolf the writer.

NADIA FUSINI, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

Amanda Bailey, *Shakespeare on Consent*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023, 248 pp.

Shakespeare on Consent is a six-chapter volume, framed by an introduction and a coda, in which Amanda Bailey displays an alternative perspective on the concept of consent. She grounds her theory in controversial legal cases concerning crimes where the abuse was perpetrated against unconscious victims or when consent was not clearly expressed or vitiated by the circumstances of an unbalanced relationship. Bailey believes that Shakespeare's work shows the crisis of consent norms, thus can be seen as "a rich, untapped archive of our current consent norms" (p. 7). The springboard of Bailey's theory is a provocative statement: consent is an illusion that projects the idea that all subjects possess equal agency. Instead, consent functions as a privilege reserved

for those empowered by race, gender, and class. Departing from such a premise, the author wishes *Shakespeare on Consent* to serve as a guide for scholars, teachers, and students to think beyond the binary of consent and coercion, proposing an alternative framework of thought.

In the introduction, titled "Equity without Justice," Bailey departs from the observation that, despite the #MeToo movement, which made people aware of the idea of consent, the very notion of consent "has been a casualty of the movement" (p. 5). Instead, the notion of consent is "intersectional" and requires deeper exploration of its multiple implications. The author focuses her critique on the university setting, as it appears to be emblematic of how equity is frequently reduced to bureaucratic procedures that on the one hand offer protection to some students, while, on the other hand, exacerbate inequities for others. At this intersection stand two Shakespearean scenes: Shylock, who was forced to declare "I am content" in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Isabella's silenced response to the Duke's marriage proposal in *Measure for Measure*. For Bailey, these moments dramatize the paradox embedded in consent given under coercion, showing the entanglement of the human body and political subjection. Both scenes, she argues, "understand consent to be grounded in the broader social and cultural valorisation of bodily sovereignty, and the supposition that control over and ownership of one's body is an inherent right" (p. 20).

In Chapter One, entitled "Rape of a Nation", Bailey discusses consent as an institutionalised abstract concept. The discussion starts by exposing the protests that broke out after the Jerry Sandusky abuse revelations at Penn State University. Bailey views this as a case where the focus shifted from the bodies of the victims to the university institution, which became the violated entity. Bailey links this case to *The Rape of Lucrece*, where the female body symbolises Rome's moral integrity. Then her analysis moves back to the United States, showing how rape becomes a cultural topos. She examines D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* film as racist propaganda where white female vulnerability is exploited as an excuse for racial terror. Bailey links this narrative to Shakespeare's Tarquin and, provocatively, to Donald Trump's rhetoric of "bad hombres" (p. 39). Bailey argues that Shakespeare's plays often use the image of the white female victim to justify acts of racialized violence, such as Prospero's treatment of Caliban in *The Tempest* and the vengeance pursued by Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. According to

Bailey, these portrayals reflect deep anxieties about race, gender, and power, which later shaped cultural narratives like *The Birth of a Nation*, where the supposed threat of a Black man violating a white woman becomes a tool to legitimize racist violence (p. 42). The chapter then comes back to a close reading of *The Rape of Lucrece* to show how the female body is exploited as a fetish both by Tarquin and Brutus for political purposes; thus, consent, initially posited as an expression of free will, turns into a means of triggering people's emotions to defeat tyranny (p. 47). Bailey discusses the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal of the 1990s, drawing also on Toni Morrison's essay (1998, 32) that famously dubbed Clinton "the first Black president" and links the politics of impeachment to America's enduring fear of racial and sexual contamination. Bailey suggests that Clinton was symbolically racialized as "the nation's first black president," cast as a "threat to the 'ancient and persistent configuration of American power and ideology' (p. 52)

Chapter two, titled "Stamped by shame", explores how shame and racialization intersect in views of sexual consent. Using early modern concepts of purity and inheritance, Bailey connects Shakespeare's imagery to current ideas about the "blackened" sexual body. She shows that purity fiction sustains racial hierarchies and that consent is a legal fiction that relies on excluding those seen as incapable of self-ownership. The chapter spans contemporary #MeToo culture, classical Shakespearean tragedy, and feminist theories to ask: What does it mean to bear the mark of sexual shame, and can such a mark be reclaimed? Bailey brings up Monica Lewinsky's case and its connections with the #MeToo movement as the main example to discuss sexual shame in public. Bailey presents shame as "embodied alienation," (p. 62), a term coined by cultural critic Dariack Scott (2010, 13). Shame, she argues, reveals a "body-psyche nexus" (p. 62) in the injured subject. For Bailey, #MeToo reverses the logic of shame, making it a force for solidarity instead of silence. Bailey underpins her theory with Shakespeare's plays, where the language of shame appears in several plays. In *Richard III*, Richard's term "rudely stamped" becomes an example of embodied disgrace and shows how self-perception and social judgment depend on each other. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, sexual stigma functions as both a metaphor and a physical mark: "To be shamed by sexual assault is to be stained or un-whitened" (p. 66). In Shakespeare, the binary of black and white is a key paradigm:

whiteness means sexual innocence, while blackness means corruption, as appears in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Hero is accused of infidelity and described as having “fall’n / Into a pit of ink” or being “foul-tainted” (p. 67). Bailey then discusses silence and its interrelations with shame in the cases of women who have suffered from sexual violence. Like Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, whose tongueless body signifies unspeakable violation, victims are often denied speech and agency. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Cressida is passed among the Greek generals like a prize. Bailey situates this last episode within its performance history, looking at Howard Davies’s 1985 production (p. 69) and Gregory Doran’s 2018 version (70), where Cressida, “marked as dark”, demonstrates how staging choices reveal the enduring racial and sexual hierarchies embedded in the text: “As a prisoner of war Cressida’s volition has no meaning. Like a slave, she has no right of property in her own person, and she serves as a possession to be traded among the men who racialize her” (p. 71).

Chapter Three, entitled “While you were sleeping”, discusses how consent is treated when the victim is physically incapable of expressing it. Bailey opens with the 2012 Steubenville rape case, when social media made the shocking image of an unconscious teenage girl’s body being carried by her rapists circulate. Bailey highlights how, in this case, incapacity was viewed as a proxy for consent, referring to Larissa Brian’s definition of incapacity as a “twisted surrogate for consent” (2020, 154). Through legal case studies, among which is that concerning Bill Cosby’s trial for the crime of abuse against several women, Bailey discusses the phenomenon of somnophilia (p. 89) and how women’s passive submission due to unconsciousness is idealised and aestheticized by Western culture, and how women’s silence is intended as a form of consent that justifies the exploitation of their bodies. Bailey reinterprets Shakespeare’s sleeping female characters, citing several works as examples of her perspective, including *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Cymbeline*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, making the reader aware that all these plays evoke this theme (p. 93). In particular, Bailey discusses the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, comparing it to Ovid’s *Pyramus and Thisbe* and to *Frayre de Joye Sor de Plaster*, which are the basis for the Sleeping Beauty tale. By linking these narratives, Bailey argues that romantic idealization and sexual coercion are structurally intertwined within the Western literary canon

since the male characters, even if declaring their love, actually rape the sleeping beloved (p. 93). She deepens this issue by interpreting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the lens of the crime of date-rape, which is a crime of abuse perpetrated by a person known by the victim. Indeed, the author shows how the play's enchantment depends upon incapacitation through drugs that make characters incapable of free consent and self-determination.

In Chapter Four, entitled "I May Destroy You", Bailey looks at the consequences of sexual violence both in the physical and political spheres. Departing from Michaela Coel's TV series, she moves again to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. The bed is interpreted as both a symbolic and a material site where consent, agency, and memory converge. Bailey discusses the case of Emma Sulkowicz, whose performance, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, reclaims the bed as public testimony, transforming private shame into a collective witness. Bailey also revisits the Lorena Bobbitt case, examining how the bed serves as a symbol of memory. The analysis then turns back to Shakespeare's "beds", tracing how, on the stage, this piece of furniture is the space of domination and psychological strife. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio adopts a "timing strategy" that consists of depriving Katherine of sleep, so the bed turns into an "unsafe space" of intimidation and "physical harm" (p. 112). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bailey identifies another manipulative logic: Theseus's boast that he "wooed Hippolyta with his sword" is a reminder for Hippolyta about "the blurred line between marital and martial conquest" (p. 113).

In Chapter five, titled "Make sex great again", Bailey examines the tension between consent and desire, asking whether "great sex", as an experience culturally imagined and idealised, can coexist with expressed consent and ethical approach. Bailey takes into consideration California's 2014 "Yes Means Yes" bill, which codified the notion of "affirmative consent as 'affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement'" (p. 130), and she reflects upon the notion of desire and expressed consent. Drawing on contemporary popular culture, feminist theory, and early modern drama, Bailey examines how the fantasy of spontaneous, uncontrollable passion continues to undermine the principles of affirmative consent that modern feminism promotes. The chapter opens with the comic absurdity of a *Curb Your Enthusi-*

asm episode in which Larry David's attempt to practice "affirmative consent", which turns to parody. Then Bailey turns to *Romeo and Juliet* and suggests that Shakespeare's tragedy, which is celebrated as the pinnacle of romantic love and passion, is a play where such feelings are intertwined with violence, lack of consent, coercion, and rape. The lovers' "star-crossed" passion embodies the myth of irresistible desire as a force that absolves moral responsibility (p. 135).

Chapter Six, entitled "Why We Love (to Hate) Weinstein," extends this investigation into institutions of power, commenting on the Harvey Weinstein case in the context of the history of patronage that links the Renaissance stage to contemporary media and film industries. Bailey demonstrates the continuity between early modern patronage and the contemporary film production system, using Weinstein's *Shakespeare in Love* as an example. Bailey coined the term "Shaxwood" to describe the intersections between Shakespeare and the Hollywood system since "the film lays bare the foundational conditions of a patronage system sustained by power asymmetries and reliant on the cultural work of romance to buttress and obscure inequities" (p. 157). In the section "The Brand is Shakespeare", Bailey examines how Weinstein exploited Shakespearean prestige as means of concealing his abuses through the aura of high art (p. 168).

The Coda, titled "Refusal is the first right," concludes *Shakespeare on Consent* with a meditation about Johnny Depp and Amber Heard's defamation trial. The author analyses how credibility and madness are intertwined, wondering if Heard's mental instability, which was certified during the trial by a forensic psychologist, was but a strategy of "rejection" of the condition created in her marriage (p. 179). Turning to Hamlet and Ophelia, Bailey rereads both as allegories of refusal, as "non-performance," (p. 180). In the subsection "Consent Not To Be", Bailey calls for a shift from contractual to relational ethics, grounded in care and interdependence rather than autonomy. Institutions, she insists, must move "away from correction and toward repair" (p. 186). In the final pages, Bailey delivers a reflective conclusion that situates readers within what she calls "diseased time" (p. 184), characterized by overlapping crises: the pandemic, systemic racism, political unrest, violence, and injustice. She proposes a shift toward a "poetics of relation," which, according to Anjali Prabhu (2005, 76), is inspired by the idea that "the entire totality within which specific concepts and interactions

become coherent" (p. 185). Bailey's hope is that through a communicative and care-based approach, it will be possible to apply a politics that aims to repair rather than correct. Indeed, Bailey calls readers and institutions to action and to rethink Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Consent Culture not as discrete, bureaucratic initiatives, but as collective, transformative practices, even though the same author asks whether her vision is utopian, "crazy," and "mad" (p. 186).

In conclusion, Bailey's book is dense with intriguing intuitions and compelling theories, which are supported by detailed descriptions of striking legal cases of abuse that have occurred between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thereby enflaming the public debate. Her aim of overturning the perspective on consent to propose a "care-based" approach is fascinating. As the threshold between consent and coercion is blurred, she asks for a change of approach in treating these cases of abuse, since it is precisely in this grey area that legal cases are discussed and the law appears to lack a remedy to achieve equitable justice. To strengthen her theory, the author, in each chapter of the book, takes a controversial legal case concerning crimes as her starting point and then, on this basis, reinterprets Shakespeare's plays and characters. However, this reviewer wonders whether the title of the book, *Shakespeare on Consent*, may lead readers to expect a more focused exploration of how the complexities of consent are represented in Shakespeare's theatre. The detailed examination of contemporary legal cases may overshadow literary analysis, and the constant shifting between real-world examples and close readings of Shakespeare's plays may produce historical or contextual displacements.

SIMONA LAGHI, Sapienza University of Rome

References

- Brian, Larissa. 2020. "After Steubenville: Incapacitated Bodies, Rape, and a Theory of Sexual Subjectivity Beyond Consent." *Feminist Media Studies* 20 (2): 153-167.
- Hutson, Lorna. 2016. "The Shakespearean Unscene: Sexual Phantasies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Journal of the British Academy* 4: 169-195.

- Morrison, Toni. 1998. "Talk of the Town." *New Yorker*, October 5: 32.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2012. *Citadels of Pride: Sexual Assault, Accountability, and Reconciliation*. New York: Norton.
- Prabhu, Anjali. 2005. "Interrogating Hybridity Subaltern Agency and Totality in Post-Colonial Theory." *Diacritics* 35 (2): 76-92.
- Scott, Darieck. 2010. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: New York University Press.

Minier, Márta, Montironi, Maria Elisa and Cristina Paravano (eds), *Local/Global Shakespeare and Advertising*, New York, Routledge, 2024, 267 pp.

"It pays to advertise", the old saying goes. But what does this catchy phrase mean when applied to Shakespeare? Does it suggest that "Shakespeare" (forgive the shorthand of the inverted commas to mean his oeuvre as well as his mythical persona) has been so successfully advertised in his own country over time to be transformed into the 'national poet'? Or rather that "Shakespeare"'s renown, or celebrity status, has been growingly used in non-British cultures as an effective advertising tool? Since the late 1980s, critics in the field of cultural materialism – from Graham Holderness (1988) and Michael Dobson (1992) to Barbara Hodgdon (1998), but especially Douglas Lanier (2002, 2014), and more recently Dominic Shellard and Siobhan Keenan (2016) and others – have investigated on Shakespeare as both a British and a global icon, pointing out how its immensely grown cultural capital has turned all things Shakespearean into status symbol and desirable commodity. This timely volume focuses on a specific aspect of commodification: advertising. Stemming from the innovative work of a research group based at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo' – the Shakespeare Advertising and Propaganda Network – the book solidly builds on the relevant but still comparatively small critical literature on the matter – which is usually limited to English speaking countries – to bring the debate on Shakespeare and advertising to a new level of awareness and sophistication.

Considering the evidence of the extensive and transnational use of Shakespeare's name and quotes in advertising, the three editors,

Márta Minier, Maria Elisa Montironi and Cristina Paravano, start their argumentation by highlighting that “Shakespeare is a byword for both language and emotion” (p. 1), a combination that sells. As the market well knows, advertising talks us into believing that we need a certain product because it will gift us with a positive emotional reward. And what can be more emotionally persuasive and compelling than Shakespearean language? The very word advertising, as the editors remind us, derives from the Latin “*ad-vertere*” – “to turn toward” – implying the ability “to direct people’s attention to something or someone” (p. 2). Shakespeare’s language draws people’s attention, and when used in advertising it nudges it toward what is convenient or desirable they turn to. Since the Eighteenth century “Shakespeare” has become synonymous not only with sophisticated language, but also with symbolic capital: from David Garrick to date, his silhouette and words have been used not only to sell books and performances, which would be fair enough, but also gadgets, beverages, cars, clothes, jewels, and what you want, including political ideals. Approaching Shakespeare not as a static, cultural monument but as a living agent in contemporary consumer culture, the editors pose a number of thought-provoking questions: what has the practice of advertising to do with a playwright who lived in England over four centuries ago, when capitalism was still in its infancy? When did “Shakespeare” become a successful “advertising formula,” and why? How has the attractive power of his brand evolved over time? What, precisely, constitutes the somewhat blurry concept of “Shakespeare brand”? Which industries have been most eager to rely on it to attract customers? But, above all, is it possible to map the phenomenon, thus adding a spatial dimension to it?

Tracing the paths of Shakespeare’s marketability on the geo-historical map is perhaps the most innovative aspect of the volume, in thorough coherence with the inclusion of the local/global categories within its title. Perfectly aware that a productive transnational reception has transformed “Shakespeare” from *the* English national poet into a global icon for all seasons, the editors insist on the need to leave behind the understanding of globalization as a process of “Westernization”, in order to fully embrace the cultural complexity of today’s spatiality and consider instead “the large spectrum between the micro-‘local’ or hyperlocal and the sweepingly ‘global’” (p.

3). Thus, Minier, Montironi and Paravano felicitously complicate the concept of “glocalization” introduced by Victor Roudometof (2016) combining it with Pierre Bordieu’s idea of cultural field in order to contend that as far as the word “global” is concerned “regional dimensions may hold relevance” and when “local” is evoked “there is more to this issue than the centre-periphery or the urban-rural debates”. To further stress the problematization of the phenomenon of glocalization, they acutely make us aware that:

the majority of the word “g/local” is “local”. From “global” only the “g” is borrowed, so when used for our purposes, “glocal” stresses the fact that Shakespeare’s texts and image/biography are “used” to apply to, speak to a variety of contexts. It helps us avoid the uncomfortable connotation of the spread of monoculturalism and international capitalism carried by the “globalization” (p. 4)

Importantly, the book also advocates the inclusion of “Shakespearian ads” within the current academic interest in “transitory text types, genres and microgenres” (p. 10): fragments of “Shakespeare” are taken by the advertising practice either from his works or his biographical myth, and creatively put in new cultural contexts and media environment, to which they adapt, thus producing still more meaning. As transient texts, “Shakespearean ads” are therefore surprising intermedial objects.

Within this theoretically rich framework, the volume displays three interconnected sections, each addressing a different dimension of the research: “Historical Perspectives”, “Culture Specific Perspectives” and “Vistas From Industries”.

The first part reconstructs the genealogy of the Shakespeare brand from the early modern period to present. Roberta Mullini’s opening essay revisits the advertising environment of early modern England when forms of “promotion” were already practiced through theatrical bills, pamphlets, and public spectacle. Her analysis of persuasion within Shakespeare’s language puts together the rhetorics of a character like Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale*, with that of the editors of the First Folio, Heming and Condell, brilliantly demonstrating the active and passive meaning of “advertising” Shakespeare in his own time. Anna Anselmo and Marco Canani continue this historical trajectory by revisiting Garrick’s 1769 Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon, convincingly framing the

event as the moment when the Bard became a marketable icon. Jan Marten Ivo Klaver's essay on Cassell's *Illustrated Shakespeare* (1864) extends this line into the Victorian age, examining how print culture and publishing industries contributed in transforming his work into both a pedagogical and commercial commodity, an intangible and durable counterpart to the tangible monument that was to be erected for his three hundredth anniversary. Fabio Ciambella concludes the section by tracing the fate of "To be or not to be" across international advertising, demonstrating how Shakespeare's "adspeak" (p. 71) functions as a globalised idiom of persuasion.

"Culture-Specific Perspectives," the second part, shifts from time to space, exploring how the Shakespeare brand has been specifically appropriated and repurposed across national cultures and different ideologies. The critical discourse here acquires what the editors, captivantly, call "an academic accent" (p. 5). Roberta Zanoni analyses Italian campaigns (from Alfa Romeo to Levi's), highlighting how Shakespeare is translated into a language of style and irony that proves "the presence of a culture-specific interpretation existing along the universally shared connotations usually attached to Shakespearean references in advertising" (p. 104). Christa Jansohn's study on Weimar situates Shakespeare within the German classical canon and its transformation into a locus of heritage tourism. Tomasz Kowalski focuses on post-1989 Poland, where market liberalisation fostered playful and subversive uses of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Selusi Ambrogio turns to China, reading Shakespeare as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Finally, Niyanta Sangal explores the use of Shakespeare in social and environmental activism, where his authority is mobilised not to sell but to critique.

Finally, "Vistas from Industries," that hosts the contributions of the three editors, expands the discussion to Shakespeare's presence within the creative industries – from broadcasting and automotive marketing to fashion, music, and theatre promotion. Paolo Caponi investigates Shakespeare's afterlife on Italian radio, situating broadcast adaptations within the dialectic of local and global culture. Maria Elisa Montironi analyses how Shakespeare is used in car advertising to negotiate gender roles and patriarchal constructs, functioning simultaneously as a marker of timeless cultural authority and as a fluid, market-driven sign open to reinvention, "a potential for imagining a

challenge to patriarchy which is, nevertheless, never fully realized" (p. 206). Cristina Paravano's contribution focuses on fashion advertising, a field of enquiry she convincingly shows to be worthy of further exploration, where Shakespearean quotations and iconography lend cultural prestige and emotional depth to luxury branding, enabling us to see "many new and unexpected faces of Shakespeare in the twenty-first century" (p. 224). Stephen M. Buhler turns to music, tracing how artists from Duke Ellington to Rufus Wainwright have invoked Shakespeare as a strategy of self-legitimacy. Finally, Márta Minier analyses the role of Shakespeare in promoting theatre-going, choosing to present the case of theatre marketing for *Romeo and Julie*, a Welsh rewriting of the play performed at the National Theatre and at the Sherman Theatre; Minier argues that advertising materials, and in particular printed programmes for the performance, act as paratexts that extend performance through memory, creatively capitalizing, in this case, on Welshness and social class. Across these five essays, the section articulates a nuanced panorama of how the Shakespeare brand operates within contemporary creative economies, where the boundaries between art, commerce, and identity are continuously renegotiated.

Local/Global Shakespeare and Advertising contributes to the growing body of scholarship investigating Shakespeare as a "rhizomatic system" (p. 6), following in the wake of critics like Douglas Lanier (2014, 29), who is also the most referenced in the book. By focusing on advertising as both a commercial and identity building practice, the editors and contributors present a number of original case studies with a wide diachronic scope and a refreshing geo-cultural diversity. Together, they reveal the intermedial quality and the resilience of Shakespeare's afterlife, inviting future research to further map the intersections between academic criticism, creativity and industrial practice. Adapting and appropriating "Shakespeare" in the advertising industry is yet another social activity that keeps his word alive: it validates its endless creative power by relying on cultural memory and on the pleasure of "repetition without replication", as Hutcheon notoriously put it (2013, 7).

And yet a question stands there, hovering over the book and disquieting the brave contributors: is this a thoroughly riskless activity? The authors are very cautious and, though demonstrating once

more that the passing of time and the change of space cannot deplete Shakespeare's "infinite variety", their case studies also leave us pensive about the effects of extracting precious linguistic fragments from their context employing their power to blaze and arrest the attention to serve a precise economic purpose. Perhaps, Shakespeare's language when experimented with in the context for which it was born, theatre – which, let us not forget, also was a commercial enterprise – does not stop human attention for a few seconds to re-direct it towards objects to be possessed to promote one's own identity. It makes it stay with it and explore the deep. In the naked essentiality of one's own embodied self.

MADDALENA PENNACCHIA, Roma Tre University

References

- Dobson, Michael. 1992. *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hodgdon, Barbara. 1998. *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Holderness, Graham. 1988. *The Shakespeare Myth*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. with O'Flynn, S. [2006] 2013, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Lanier, Douglas. 2002. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value." In *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, edited by Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, 21-40. New York: Palgrave.
- Roudometof, Victor. 2016. *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Shellard, Dominic, and Siobhan Keenan, eds. 2016. *Shakespeare's Cultural Capital: His Economic Impact from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Joel B. Altman, *Shakespeare the Bodger. Ingenuity, Imitation and the Arts of "The Winter's Tale"*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 232.

Since its first documented performance at the Globe Theatre on Wednesday, 15 May 1611, *The Winter's Tale*, seemingly "grounded on impossibilities" (Dryden 1672, 163) or, in Ben Jonson's words, "drolleries" (Jonson 1641, "Induction"), has captivated audiences, actors, readers, and academics, not least because it resists any attempt at categorization. Reflections among English dramatists regarding the possibility to create a mixed genre, one that could successfully merge tragedy and comedy, were stimulated by the renewed interest of sixteenth-century Italian humanists in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Halliwell 1987, 1; Shakespeare 2010, 15).

That this play demands the audience's, and obliquely the readers', active participation in its wondrous stage machinery becomes strikingly clear in the final act, when the midwife-priestess Paulina, before revealing the statue of the presumably deceased Queen Hermione, requires the bystanders to "awake" their faith: "It is required / You do awake your faith. Then all stand still" (V.iii.94-95). King Leontes himself, at the very end of the performance, invites the audience members as well as the other characters (on and offstage) to engage with the play's uncertainties:

LEONTES
 [...] Good Paulina,
 Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
 Each one demand and answer to his part
 Performed in this wide gap of time since first
 We were dissevered.
 (*The Winter's Tale*, V.iii.151-55)

Emma Smith has observed how epilogues in a number of Shakespeare's plays "direct audiences to make up their own minds" and how the dramas' "gappiness and their ambiguities produce creative readings" (Smith 2019, 322).

It can certainly be argued that Joel B. Altman's brilliant monograph, reviewed here, effectively contributes to filling this epistemological "gap" by providing insightful views on what is still regarded

as “a sprawling, unwieldy, improbable and tonally discordant play” (Ko 2025, 48).

The subject of *Shakespeare the Bodger. Ingenuity, Imitation and the Arts of “The Winter’s Tale”*, as its intriguing title suggests, is the playwright’s “ingenuity, particularly as it is exercised in the composition of his late play *The Winter’s Tale*” (p. 5). However, it emerges early on that the volume aims at a broader purpose: it sheds fresh light on Shakespeare’s playmaking whilst also illuminating practices of imitation, translation, and “bodging”, or “botching” (pp. 5-6), in the early modern English Renaissance. The two latter terms, related to the clothing trade, “signified taking up and stitching together disparate patches of second-hand text to form a fabric of one’s own” (p. 6). In this sense, Shakespeare himself is a “bodger”, or tailor, a craftsman of dramatic art ingeniously basting the materials of others.

Among the most compelling features of this book is the fact that Altman brings the sixteenth-century Italian architect and painter Giulio Romano, Raphael’s favourite pupil, back into the centre of the discussion on *The Winter’s Tale*. The author investigates in a thorough and fascinating way how Giulio Romano’s work is “patched through verbal allusion” (p. 7) into Shakespeare’s text since Act I, that is well before a Gentleman announces that a statue of the late Queen Hermione “is in the keeping of Paulina, a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master Giulio Romano” (V.ii.93-5). In fact, the anachronistic mention of the Italian artist, better known as a painter, architect, and designer, rather than a sculptor, has long been regarded as evidence of Shakespeare’s ignorance. In the words of Stephen Orgel, the Elizabethan dramatist “knew so little about him that he made him a sculptor” (Orgel 2011, 239). Besides, Simon Forman’s failure to record the reappearance of Hermione in his *Booke of Plaies and Notes therof per forman for Common Pollicie* (1611), which documents his observations on some performances he attended at the Globe Theatre between April and May of that year, has sparked scholarly debate regarding the possibility that the scene is a later authorial addition, presumably devised on the occasion of the Palatine Wedding (Ioppolo 2013, 152).

The book is structured as follows: the Prologue, which offers a detailed overview of the topics that will be explored throughout, is followed by five main chapters. The discussion is completed by an

Epilogue. The twenty-two figures that accompany the volume (from Classical and Renaissance sculpture, but also engraving and painting) enable the reader to fully appreciate the way Shakespeare employs the rhetorical device of ekphrasis (*descriptio*, in Latin) in order to “place before the eyes” various works of visual art.

To discuss Shakespeare’s practices of imitation and boding by resorting to the document containing the earliest known allusion to the Stratfordian dramatist is particularly apposite. Chapter 1 begins by considering the pamphlet *Groats-worth of witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592), allegedly written by Robert Greene on his death-bed, but later attributed to the printer Henry Chettle and to the dramatist Thomas Nashe. Here, the author addresses three fellow poets, notably a “famous gracer of Tragedians”, a “byting Satyrist”, and a writer “driven [...] to extreme shifts” (possibly Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele), warning them against “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, [...] in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country” (*Greene’s Groatsworth*). As Altman highlights, pseudo-Greene’s criticism, just like Thomas Nashe’s attack on “grammarians-turned-poets” (p. 4), tackles matters of plagiarism and artistic usurpation, while also reflecting coeval material changes, specifically the rise of popular and commercial theatre in contrast to the elitist production of university-trained dramatists. The chapter also explores Shakespeare’s multifaceted relationship with Robert Greene’s works, namely *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* (1588), *Mamillia* (1583-1593), *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592), and *The Second Part of Conny-Catching* (1592).

By dismantling the traditional view of ekphrasis as a mere verbal description of visual art, Chapter 2 reveals instead how this rhetorical device “can be an important instrument for the representation of subjectivity” (p. 7). After retracing its literary-critical tradition in Greek and Roman oratory through a wide array of sources, Altman shows how ekphrasis – described by Erasmus in *De copia verborum ac rerum* as something that “draws the hearer or reader outside himself as in the theater” (p. 53) – has a considerable role even when the hearer is already a spectator.

Building upon the distinction between the two dramaturgical entities of *dramatis persona* and *character* (Altman 2010), the author discusses how “[a character’s] subjectivity is often expressed in concrete language that assumes a distinctive *colore*” (p. 7). Such vivid, detailed,

coloured theatrical speech produces “ekphrases” (p. 7). Central to this chapter is the psychology of phantasia, which the author explores through classical and early modern texts in order to understand how the dramatist’s imagination transformed different elements into a unified theatrical experience.

That Shakespeare was aware of the power of ekphrastic description to reveal the subjectivity of his characters is eloquently demonstrated by numerous examples drawn from his plays, namely *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*. Such instances lay bare the Aristotelian tenet that “images in the mind are there because experience put them there” (p. 47) and therefore create a powerful “subjectivity effect” (p. 57) even when the subject is describing something else.

This chapter also offers incisive insights into a more revealing means of depicting the subject of ekphrasis, that is, when a speaker “glosses” an object which the public also sees. This recalls a passage from Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (8.3.64-65), where the rhetorician considers the imaginative potential of details left unspoken by the orator. Such a dynamic, Altman argues, is exemplified in the figure of King Leontes. Thus, the concluding sections of Chapter 2 narrow the field of investigation down to *The Winter’s Tale* by focusing on two of the drama’s most debated moments: Leontes’s unaccountable jealousy in Act I, Scene ii, which precipitates the play’s tragic consequences, and the striking reference to Giulio Romano.

The originality of Altman’s contribution to the ongoing debate lies in the fact that the author highlights how, among other reasons, Shakespeare invokes Giulio Romano’s reputation for producing life-like, mimetic art in Act V (“had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom”, V.ii.95-97) in order to counterpoint Leontes’s imaginary works of art. These shall be understood as the ekphrastic constructions produced by the Sicilian king while observing what the text presents as the decorous behaviour of his wife Hermione and his friend Polixenes in Act I, Scene ii. As Altman puts it, “[t]he two figures [Leontes and Giulio Romano] are linked by the remarkably lifelike representations each can create, which deceive the eye and confound the mind” (p. 63). Significantly, by adding his own “glosses” to what he sees – such as the imagined “paddling palms and pinching fingers” (I.ii.115) – the King of Sicily fabricates images that exist solely in his imagination.

These function as “subjective ekphrases”, which, as Altman notes, “persuade no one but the speaker” (p. 63).

In Chapter 3, the author seeks to respond to two questions which scholars have pondered for centuries: “what did Shakespeare know about Giulio Romano and what did he expect his audience to know?” (p. 82). That Giulio di Piero Pippi de’ Giannuzzi, better known as ‘Romano’, was renowned in early modern England as one in a network of artists and writers such as Parmigianino, Baldassarre Castiglione, Titian, Tintoretto, and Pietro Aretino, has long been established (Gombrich 1986; Magri 2004; Sokol 1994). As Altman rightly reminds us, Shakespeare might also have been familiar with the anonymous epitaph in Latin allegedly written on the occasion of Giulio’s death and quoted by Giorgio Vasari in the first edition of *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a’ tempi nostri* (1550). Here the Italian architect and painter is praised as a sculptor whose works create the illusion of life to such an extent as to cause Jupiter’s anger:

Jupiter saw *sculpted and painted* bodies breathe, and the dwellings of mortals made equal to those in heaven, through the skill of Giulio Romano. Angered, [...] he called a council of all the gods, and swept him from the earth. (Vasari 1991, 2: 837, trans. Altman, p. 63; emphasis added)

As we know from the words of the Third Gentleman in *The Winter’s Tale*, Giulio Romano has indeed “put breath into his work” and “would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape” (V.ii.96-97). Even though Vasari did not quote the same encomium in the second edition of *Le Vite* (1568), it is nonetheless true that Shakespeare might have read it and inferred that Giulio was also a sculptor whose statues “deceptively resembled life” (Gombrich 1986, 160; see also Magri 2004, 58). Through the close reading of excerpts from the 1550 and 1568 editions of *Le Vite*, Altman eloquently proves that the playwright might well have consulted both versions of Vasari’s masterpiece to elaborate his portrait of Giulio Romano, a practice which lies “at the heart of the art of bodging” (p. 84).

As Altman himself makes clear, however, the above considerations do not satisfactorily illuminate the reasons why Shakespeare would choose precisely Giulio Romano, when other artists (Raphael and Titian, among others) were praised for their ability to create mi-

metic works of art. The author once again offers a compelling (and, to my knowledge, yet unexplored) hypothesis by arguing that the “rare Italian master” (V.ii.94-95) actually “makes a silent entrance” (p. 8) quite early in the play, that is in Act I, Scene ii when Leontes comments upon the courtly exchanges between Hermione and Polixenes. In the author’s view, the king’s ekphrastic description of the scene is informed by Giulio Romano’s erotic drawings which were engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi and published, accompanied by Aretino’s *Sonetti lussuriosi*, in a volume entitled *I Modi* (*Postures*, in English). The scandalous publication, issued in the 1520s, circulated among Shakespeare’s contemporaries (p. 8).

Even more significantly, another work of art makes its ekphrastic appearance in the play – prior to the unveiling of Hermione’s statue – and is once again connected with Giulio Romano. This is *The Transfiguration of Christ*, the last commission of Raphael of Urbino, brought to completion by Giulio Romano and Giovan Francesco Penni, and of which several early copies are now visible in different venues: the Sistine Chapel, the Prado, and the Dulwich College Chapel, outside London. The painting resonates most clearly in Act V, Scene ii, during the courtiers’ awed description of the off-stage reunion between the two royal families at the court of Sicily, a scene described in iconographic terms as a *painting*, a *dumb show*, and a *staged play* (p. 102) and suffused with a language of religious miracle (“a world ransomed, or one destroyed”, V.ii.15). Here Shakespeare appropriates the painting’s thematic richness and gestures to “bodge up” a scene that would otherwise remain invisible to the audience (p. 8). By meticulously tracing the provenance of the copy of the painting now hanging in the chapel of Dulwich College, attributed to Giulio Romano, Altman documents that it appears to have been in possession of English collectors as far back as the early seventeenth century, possibly even belonging to King Charles I.

Having established Shakespeare’s ingenuity at bodging two art forms, engraving (*I modi*) and painting (*The Transfiguration of Christ*), into the text of *The Winter’s Tale*, in Chapter 4 the author moves on to consider how the playwright incorporates another visual medium, that is sculpture, into his drama. Striking evidence is offered supporting the fact that Giulio Romano was indeed a designer of sculpture (p. 131). A particularly noteworthy feature

of this chapter lies in Altman's ability to guide the reader towards a visualization of Hermione's statue, despite the absence of a concrete visual description in the play itself. As is discussed, Shakespeare does provide indirect cues regarding the statue's appearance. More particularly, Altman demonstrates how allusions to the four marble women of the Strozzi funeral monument in Mantua, designed for Pietro Strozzi, inform the play's most enigmatic moment. Although the identity of the work's designer and sculptor remains uncertain, well-documented connections with Giulio Romano exist (pp. 136-37). Drawing on modern art historical research, Altman elucidates in meticulous detail the artist's known "interest in painted and carved figural sculpture" (p. 140). To cite just one instance, the reader's attention is drawn to the oil on canvas picturing Ceres/Abundance (*Dovizia*), now at the Louvre and attributed to both Giulio Romano and Raphael (c. 1515). The goddess's posture, as Altman foregrounds, is strikingly reminiscent of the sibyls painted by Giulio Romano in the fresco *The Baptism of Constantine* (Sala di Costantino, the Vatican) and of the Hellenistic figure carved on the Strozzi monument (p. 139). This visual correspondence is particularly noteworthy since it reinforces the well-established symbolic significance of Ceres to the thematic structure of *The Winter's Tale* (Romero Allué 2016; Zamparo 2022).

Further testifying to the playwright's ability to adapt Italian materials, including Vasari's *Le Vite*, Chapter 5 illustrates how the dramatist draws extensively upon Italian dramatic writings and theory, notably Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio's *Ecatommiti*, *Epizia* and *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie*, as well as Battista Guarini's *Il pastor fido* and *Compendio della poesia tragicomica*. Through detailed and nuanced analyses of the so-called "problem plays" (*Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*), the author ultimately contends that *The Winter's Tale* emerges as Shakespeare's innovative version of Giraldi Cinzio's *tragedia di fin lieto*. Most interestingly, in the light of the latter's assertion that one of the defining characteristics of this kind of drama is that the "spectator should be held in suspense but not always in the dark" (p. 187), the Epilogue lays emphasis upon Paulina's paramount role. As Altman posits, the Sicilian lady is a "behind-the-scenes dramatist", who offers the public "the unique pleasure of participating in a *tragedia di fin lieto*"

(p. 198). In other words, through Paulina's agency, "the audience is getting a behind-the-scenes look at what they have been enjoying all along: theatrical craft" (p. 206).

This volume stands out as an exceptional, and at times demanding, contribution, owing to the author's erudition, which skilfully combines the tools of literary criticism and art history with a scrupulous attention to primary sources, both Classical and from the early modern period. It is therefore an invaluable homage to Shakespeare's artistry and to one of his most experimental plays.

MARTINA ZAMPARO, University of Udine

References

- Altman, Joel B. 2010. *The Improbability of "Othello": Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Dryden, John. 1672. "Defence of the Epilogue. Or, An Essay on the Dramatique Poetry of the Last Age." In *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards. In Two Parts*. London: Printed by T. N. for Henry Herringman.
- Gombrich, Ernst H. 1986. *New Light on Old Masters*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Halliwell, Stephen, ed. 1987. *The "Poetics" of Aristotle*. Duckworth: London.
- Ioppolo, Grace. 2013. "Shakespeare: From Author to Audience to Print, 1608-1613." In *Late Shakespeare, 1608-1613*, edited by Andrew J. Power and Rory Loughnane, 139-157. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jonson, Ben. 1641. *Bartholomew Fayre*. In *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*. Vol. 2. London: Printed for Richard Meighen.
- Ko, Yu Jin. 2025. "The Performance History: *The Winter's Tale* in Performance from the Ends of Opposed Winds." In *The Winter's Tale: A Critical Reader*, edited by Peter Kirwan and Todd Andrew Borlik, 47-76. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Magri, Noemi. 2004. "Italian Renaissance Art in Shakespeare: Giulio Romano and *The Winter's Tale*." In *Great Oxford: Essays on the Life*

- and Work of Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford 1550-1604, edited by Richard Malim, 50-65. Tunbridge Wells: Parapress.
- Orgel, Stephen. 2011. *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books, and Selves in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Romero Allué, Milena. 2016. "What you do still betters what is done. Arte, mito e natura in *The Winter's Tale*." In *Immagini della mente. Scrittura e percezione visiva nella letteratura inglese del Rinascimento*, 46-95. Venezia: Università Ca' Foscari.
- Shakespeare, William. 2010. *The Winter's Tale*. Edited by John Pitcher. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Methuen.
- Smith, Emma. 2019. *This is Shakespeare. How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright*. London: Pelican.
- Sokol, B. J. 1994. *Art and Illusion in The Winter's Tale*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Vasari, Giorgio. 1991. *Le Vite de' piú eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a' tempi nostri* (1550). Edited by Luciano Bellosi and Aldo Rossi. 2 vols. Torino: Einaudi.
- Zamparo, Martina. 2022. *Alchemy, Paracelsianism, and Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale"*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Abstracts

Shakespeare and the Boundaries of Human Kindness

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, ideas of predetermination and divine election constitute, especially in the gradual establishment of Puritan culture, the main frame of reference of the theology and ethics of evil, which, on principle, removes from the self any potential source of pleasure or seduction by excluding free will and, therefore, individual choice. Yet the experience of evil-doing does not end in this closure of the subject within a fideistic perspective. Contemporary theatrical culture problematises the question by exploring in tragic play and participation in theatrical gameplay the limits and potential of freedom as an act of will recognisable in the assumption of guilt-as-doing as the foundation of one's being. Shakespeare explores a whole range of possibilities of doing evil as cases of conscience as well as in relation to the reactions to evil done (or being done), from fear to terror and horror. It has been noted that the experience of horror threatens not just individual human lives, but the very essence of what it means to be human – rooted in the singular vulnerability of each embodied person. This encompasses the full range of violence, from overt atrocities like massacres and torture to more subtle, insidious forms of harm. In this sense, violence on the body has been interpreted as a violation of the human condition. This article explores how Shakespeare probes the boundaries of the human condition through the experiences of horror in *Macbeth* – distinct from fear and terror – focusing on the psychological, ethical, and symbolic dimensions at the outer limits of tragic catharsis.

Keywords: Shakespeare, evil, horror, catharsis, *Macbeth*

'This it is when men are ruled by women'. The Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare

ELIZABETH BRONFEN

In fairy tales the wicked stepmother ultimately finds a terrible death to punish her for her evil deeds. The Queen in Shakespeare's late romance *Cymbeline* fits the bill. But something similar happens to Tamara in *Titus Andronicus*, who takes revenge on her martyred son. Indeed, queens in these plays are targeted as monstrous whenever they insist on following their political ambitions. In the history plays Queen Margaret is slandered by the Yorkists, because she will not cede to them the throne that she believes is rightfully her son's. Lady Macbeth, in turn, is called a "fiend-like queen" by Duncan's son Malcolm, after he has reclaimed the throne. In all cases – as my article will demonstrate – the notion of evil is used as a weapon to harness, manage and contain feminine power.

Keywords: Shakespeare's plays as series, evil queens, patriarchy, misogyny, Elizabeth I

Metamorphoses of Evil in Contemporary Adaptations of The Tempest

MICHELA COMPAGNONI

As the supreme master over his heterotopic microcosm, Prospero embodies the ethical ambivalence of power at the heart of early modern debates on sovereignty, master-slave relations, and proto-colonial dynamics. His regime, built on total surveillance and absolute dominion, is a fantasy of omnipotence that challenges early seventeenth-century conceptions of divine authority. Caliban, long seen as the embodiment of savage monstrosity, disrupts and complicates Prospero's dominion, whose evil evokes early modern anxieties about scientific progress, divine foreknowledge, predestination, and the crisis of subjectivity also spurred by new geographical discoveries. This article explores how Prospero's tyranny and theatre of revenge have been reimagined as metaphors for omnipresent control systems in three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed* (2016), Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Ghost in the Machine" (2023). By casting Prospero as the primary evil-doer and probing the ethical implications of his art, these works confront pressing issues such as the rise of artificial intelligence, the debate on free will and determinism, shifting definitions of humanity, the reinforcement

of privilege, and emerging systems of control. As we shall see, these reinterpretations testify to the enduring potential of Shakespeare's play, in which the embryonic forms of today's ethical debates can be glimpsed.

Keywords: *The Tempest*, Prospero's art, control, revenge, adaptation

On the Rigorous Writing of Evil in Beckett and Sade

DAVIDE CROSARA

This article aims to trace the echo of Sade in Beckett's dealing with evil in *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Mediated by translation and editorial projects, Beckett's longstanding interest in Sade peaked in the postwar years, nurtured by his interest in the Sadean readings of Bataille and Blanchot, where the shade of the Holocaust looms large. The rigorous, almost implacable shape of Beckett's novels and novellas found in Sade's inquiry into evil a catalyst for the reconfiguration of language as vagrancy (the novellas), paralysis (*Watt*) or disintegration (*The Unnamable*). Confronted with Sade's ruthless and numbing narratives, Beckett's writing of evil will find in the voice a new organizing principle, profoundly indebted to his first experiments with the new media.

Keywords: Beckett, Sade, evil, language, voice

Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare's Late Plays

DAVIDE DEL BELLO

This paper examines the workings of evil in Shakespeare's late plays – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* – through the dual lens of the theological *mysterium iniquitatis* and Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil". Unlike the stark dramatization of wickedness in the tragedies, Shakespeare's romances present evil as at once pervasive and insubstantial, mysterious yet mundane. It operates both actively – as a persistent, enduring force – and passively – as evil that is endured, destabilizing conventional dichotomies between passivity and activity, suffering and resistance. Close analysis of key characters and narrative developments shows how Shakespeare not only foreruns Arendt's

insight that evil often arises from thoughtlessness rather than malice, but also suggests that rational demystification alone falls short of containing evil's return. The endurance of evil complicates binary understandings of human responses to iniquity, suggesting that within a redemptive framework, destructive forces may paradoxically catalyze processes of reconciliation and renewal when met with critical thought and moral imagination.

Keywords: Late Plays, *mysterium iniquitatis*, demystification, Hannah Arendt, metatheatre

Shakespeare and the Conscience of Aaron

MARIA DEL SAPIO GARBERO

Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's first Roman play, stages the story of a city which quickly and relentlessly slips from a victorious and Roman 'pious' scenario into one of revengeful horror. Evil, however, emerges as a question, as the play is heading to its closure: when the butchery of a total war seems to have exhausted, the possibilities of horror and a disgraced humanity – like Walter Benjamin's angel – is violently propelled into the future with its "face turned to the wreckage it leaves behind" (Benjamin 1999, 249). This is epitomized by the displacing space of a ruined monastery, the place where the surviving heir of the Andronici's (the general Lucius) and the Moor following the Goths (Aaron) are strategically summoned by Shakespeare as if to an endgame: a challenging dispute on evil and conscience. This essay foregrounds the tangle of issues (religious, theological, philosophical, cultural, racial) triggered by Act 5 and the provocative role this scene assumes within the framework of the play as well as in Shakespeare's tragic canon.

Keywords: *Acte gratuit*, conscience, homeopathic tragedy, performed evil, spectrality

Negative Empathy in Shakespeare and Verdi's Macbeth

STEFANO ERCOLINO, MASSIMO FUSILLO

This essay explores the concept of negative empathy in literature, with a focus on William Shakespeare's theater and Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*. Negative empathy arises when readers or spectators engage emotionally with morally troubling characters, oscillating between identification and ethical distancing. The analysis

begins with a theoretical discussion of the idea of negative empathy and then shifts to literature and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Richard III*, highlighting how characters like Iago and Richard fail to evoke genuine negative empathy due to their (almost complete) lack of inner torment. In contrast, *Macbeth* – both in Shakespeare's play and Verdi's opera – provides a compelling case study. The protagonist's psychological depth, inner conflicts, and mad descent into tyranny generate an aesthetic experience where the audience simultaneously empathizes with and recoils from his plight. Through an interdisciplinary and intermedial approach that combines aesthetic and literary theory with textual and musical analysis, the essay shows how Shakespearean theater creates a space where negative empathy emerges as a powerful, unsettling aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Negative empathy, negative literary characters, Shakespearean theater, *Macbeth* (William Shakespeare and Giuseppe Verdi), moral ambivalence

Touched by Evil: Performing Theodicy in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Adaptations

ANTHONY R. GUNERATNE

In translating a pot-boiler *roman policier*, *Badge of Evil*, into a cinematic meditation of the corrupting wages of power, Welles substituted “touch” for “badge” in his title. Fluent in a number of European languages, Welles understood “touch” in a multiplicity of ways: a dexterous riposte, as in the French *touché*; a quantity barely to be perceived; a tactile, sensory path to knowledge as the empiricists and rationalists of the Seventeenth Century postulated. The present study intends to demonstrate that throughout performing career – as a voice actor in radio and audio recordings, as a stage actor, and as the protagonist of his own films and those of other directors – Welles accepted the existence of evil and strove to illustrate its omnipresence in human affairs. He even demanded that his fellow directors allow him to play characters in his own idiosyncratic manner, and he radically revised plays and novels in order to make his protagonists more morally culpable than they are in his sources. In so doing Welles amplified the ethical conflicts deployed by his favourite authors: Conrad, Dinesen, Cervantes, Kafka, and above all, Shakespeare. Welles's tyrants and supermen owed little to Nietzsche, being more akin to those celebrated by Machiavelli and decried by Vives, Erasmus, and Montaigne. Alive to the philosophical discourses permeating Shakespeare's plays well before their elucidation by today's scholarship, and yet deeply concerned with conveying them to a wide public, Welles paid the price of having many of his Shakespearean projects unrealized. Traces of the latter exist in archives in Torino, München, Michigan and Indiana, and the present

work “touches” on these as well as his extant oeuvre to illustrate the full extent of his theodicy. Jan Kott, Welles’s contemporary, outlived him; but it was Welles who first re-established Shakespeare as “our contemporary.”

Keywords: Orson Welles and Shakespeare, Catholicism, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Jung, adaptation, theodicy

The Mind’s Eye: Seeing Things in Shakespeare

ROGER HOLDSWORTH

This essay discusses Shakespeare’s fascination with delusion, particularly the kind of stubborn self-delusion which results from the habit, famously described by Bacon, of ‘submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind’. Treated initially as a subject for comedy, the rearrangements and distortions of reality this tendency precipitates, and the sense of self-entrapment it brings with them, took on darker and less tractable forms in the plays Shakespeare wrote from the late 1590s onwards, and made inevitable his switch to tragedy as the genre where this subject matter could be more searchingly treated. A late attempt, in *The Winter’s Tale*, to include a self-deluded protagonist whose paranoia equals that of Othello or Macbeth, and yet to rescue him for comedy in the play’s finale, is only partially successful.

Keywords: delusion, hallucination, invisibility, paranoia, *Hamlet*, *The Winter’s Tale*

“Nothing is but what is not”: The Creative Evil of Macbeth

NICHOLAS LUKE

Macbeth comes to life by being summoned by the forces of evil. The weird sisters are given the dramatic force to convulse the cyclical feudal violence of Duncan’s realm and to conjure Macbeth’s imaginative consciousness. On the road to Forres, Macbeth is confronted by a radical intrusion from beyond his world, and, like a dark Saint Paul, he is irrevocably transformed by its call. I suggest that Macbeth exists at the crossroads of poetic creation, rapturous inspiration, and demonic negation of extant being. Macbeth voyages into “what is not” (I.iii.141) and that voyage brings him both to a heightened imaginative life and to deadness and closure. Blurring the boundaries between good and evil, the play opens unexpected connections between poetry, early modern theology, and more con-

temporary philosophy. All these modes – theology, poetry, and philosophy – take us beyond the immediate through a negation of what is. Macbeth suggests that there is something at once animating and potentially evil in the process of negating the world-that-is in favour of a vision of what is not. By giving dramatic life to Macbeth and withholding it from the ‘good’ characters, Shakespeare raises uncomfortable questions about the relationship between poetic creation and evil.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, aesthetics, demonic, negative theology, imagination

Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings

CLAIRE MCEACHERN

This essay argues that those of Shakespeare's plays in which perpetrators of wrongdoing are initially unknown to fellow characters and then conclusively exposed – which is to say plays in which evils are spectacularly made known not only to an audience but to the characters within a play – would have provided a cathartic release for Reformation audiences newly confronted with the dismayingly two-steps forward one-step back nature of soteriological inquiry and identity. The increased prominence and Calvinist torque of theories of predestination and original sin, along with the corresponding prevalence of the notion of reprobacy, and in combination with the waning of pre-Reformation protocols of mitigating sin (e.g., “works”), rendered the naming of sin a peculiarly satisfying experience. In a culture in which one's salvation or damnation was a secret ultimately known only to the deity, the revelation to characters of information known to an audience in advance of said characters would have made its theatrical dénouement a particularly charged dramatic moment.

Keywords: Shakespeare's endings, disclosure of sin, soteriology, suspense, catharsis

“Hell's black intelligencer”: Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz, and Richard Gloucester

CARLO PAGETTI

The theatre of Shakespeare, the artist of the “invention of the human” (Bloom 1999), stands at the opposite side of the dehumanizing practices pursued by the Nazi perpetrators. In an often-quoted statement Arendt portrays Eichmann, one of the main criminal minds behind the ‘Final Solution’ as a petty bureaucrat, far

from the devilish grandeur of Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester, king Richard III. All the more so, since, unlike Richard, Eichmann was doubly subordinate to Himmler, and to Hitler. And yet, I argue, Shakespeare's dramatic experiments in English history can still contribute to our understanding of the radical extremity of the Shoah and of the Nazi leader. By developing the character of Richard Gloucester play after play, Shakespeare explores the experience of the evil king both as "hell's black intelligencer" and as a histrionic orator, who artfully seduces his audience. The tragedy of the Shoah has retrospectively shed a new sinister light on Richard's perverting journey to the throne, witnessing to the shifting mutability of Shakespeare's theatre and to its enduring capacity to resonate with the evil of history.

Keywords: Post-Shoah Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Hannah Arendt, Tom Stoppard, Daniel Hecht

Shakespeare and Social Crime: Legality and the People's Justice

PAOLA PUGLIATTI

The idea of "social crime" was first developed by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who defined as "social" those crimes which "have a distinct element of protest in them", and are therefore supported by the community's consensus as crimes of necessity. Though potentially fertile, however, the notion of "social crime" was quenched by the partial disagreement of another Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, who objected that such definition would imply a distinction between "good" and "bad" criminals, overlooking the fact that all criminals occupied the same disadvantaged social group. The present article examines three Shakespearean texts where the idea of social crime is differently represented: *Coriolanus*, the Hand D pages of *Sir Thomas More* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The citizens' revolt in the first scene of *Coriolanus* is probably the most relevant theatrical representation of a social crime in Shakespeare's plays. Not only are the Roman Citizens represented in it as performing a conscious action of protest dictated by need; but, as has been noted, the play has an apparent topical feature, for it was written a year after the Midlands Rising (1607), a protest against enclosures which Shakespeare re-reads, in *Coriolanus*, as a food riot. The "Ill May day scenes" in *Sir Thomas More*, instead, are presented as the instance of an irrational protest against foreign labourers which, being dictated by mere xenophobia, cannot be justified as "social" crime. Even less can the "disparagement" Falstaff performs in *Merry Wives* by poaching in the lands of JP Shallow. Falstaff and his gang of friends are indeed "bad"

criminals who profit from their vicinity to the *nouveaux riches* to perform an offense that should have been prosecuted at the highest degree, that of the Star Chamber, but is instead celebrated with a venison dinner.

Keywords: *Coriolanus*, *Sir Thomas More*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, social crime, protest

Melville's Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: The Confidence-Man

PAOLO SIMONETTI

This essay explores the influence of Shakespeare on Melville's conception of evil, from the oscillation between innocence and corruption in *Typee*, through the tragic grandeur of *Moby-Dick*, to the satirical skepticism of *The Confidence-Man*. Melville's lifelong engagement with Shakespeare, evident in his marginalia and in the ongoing dialogue with the playwright, sets his work in a tradition that both ridicules and admires villainy while exposing its paradoxical ties to truth. *The Confidence-Man*, the most overtly Shakespearean of Melville's novels, stages a "masquerade of evil" through its shapeshifting, devil-like protagonist, who recalls Shylock and Autolycus yet unsettles the role of villain by pretending to reject Timon's misanthropy. *Timon of Athens* thus emerges as a key intertext, alongside *The Winter's Tale*, whose shifts from tragedy to comedy offer a striking contrast: where Shakespeare turns tragedy into redemption, Melville drives his masquerade toward indeterminacy and overarching obscurity.

Keywords: Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, evil, comedy, skepticism

"Some Women Are Odd Feeders": Male Fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th-Century English Tragedy

JOEL ELLIOT SLOTKIN

The idea of taking a 'frightful pleasure' in things we are not supposed to like is a common feature of early modern literature but a challenge for early modern theories of literature, which typically privileged normative beauty and virtue. Concerns about the appeal of the ugly or evil become even more acute for early mod-

ern writers considering the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want. Male characters in early modern drama often seek to engender disgust for female desires in order to police their potential disruption of the patriarchal order. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling* demonstrate how some early modern playwrights navigated the tension between allowing audiences to take a certain kind of pleasure from disgusting descriptions while reckoning with the use of disgust as a tool of patriarchal control. In these plays, male characters' pervasive descriptions of diseased female desire are almost invariably shown to be fantasies in which the men project their own demonized appetites onto the women and then blame them for it.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling*, female desire, misogyny, perversity, sinister aesthetics

Contributors

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI is Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Verona, where she directs the Skenè Research Centre for Theatre and Drama Studies. Her work focuses on Renaissance poetry, interart studies, performance, translation, and reception studies. Her Shakespeare-related publications include three monographs (*Oltre il genere. Amleto tra scena e racconto*, Edizioni dell'Orso 2001; *Nel prisma del nulla*, Liguori 2005; *Julius Caesar 1935: Shakespeare and Censorship in Fascist Italy*, Skenè 2019) and numerous edited volumes (*Revisiting the Tempest. The Capacity to Signify*, Palgrave 2014; *Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, and Civic Life*, Routledge 2016; *Shakespeare and Crisis*, John Benjamins 2020; *Revisiting Shakespeare's Italian Resources. Memory and Reuse*, Routledge 2024). She has edited and translated into Italian *Romeo and Juliet* (Einaudi 2012) and translated *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells; Carocci 2023). Forthcoming works include *The Chorus in Early Modern English Tragedy* (Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare 2026), *Re Lear* (Rizzoli, BUR 2026), and, with Carla Suthren, *Jocasta* by G. Gascoigne and F. Kinwelmersh (MHRA 2006).

ELISABETH BRONFEN works in the area of cultural analysis. She is an emerita from the University of Zurich and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. Her areas of specialization are: Literature and visual culture, femininity and death, crossmapping as a hermeneutic process, psychoanalysis. Her publications include *Night Passages. Philosophy, Literature, Film* (2013); *Crossmappings. On Visual Culture* (2022), and *Serial Shakespeare. An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama* (paperback 2025). She is also the author of a cookbook, entitled *Obsessed. The Cultural Critic's Life in the Kitchen* (2019). Her most recent publication on serial configurations in Shakespeare appeared in the spring of 2025; *Shakespeare und seine seriellen Motive*.

MICHELA COMPAGNONI is a Tenure-Track Researcher at Roma Tre University. Her research explores Shakespeare and early modern theatre, with a particular focus on representations of monstrosity, paradigms of motherhood, Shakespeare for applied purposes, adapted Shakespeare, and Shakespeare in contemporary British fiction. She is the author of *I mostri di Shakespeare: figure del deforme e dell'informe* (Carocci, 2022), and her work has appeared in *Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Critical Survey*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, and *Textus: English*

Studies in Italy, as well as in edited collections such as *Shakespeare/Nature* (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare) and *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Medieval Institute Publications).

DAVIDE CROSARA is a Research Fellow in English Literature at 'Sapienza' Università di Roma. His main fields of interest are Modernism, Beckett Studies, and Ecocriticism. He has published books and essays on Samuel Beckett and Romantic closet drama, on the relationship between Beckett and Primo Levi, and on the works of W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. He has also written articles on Shakespeare's *King Lear* (2010) and *Twelfth Night* (2021), on plague narratives in Manzoni and Defoe (2022) and on Kae Tempest's 'Urban Ecologies' (2024). He has co-edited two volumes on Samuel Beckett; *Samuel Beckett's Italian Modernisms: Tradition, Texts, Performance* (Routledge 2025) and *Samuel Beckett and the Arts. Italian Negotiations* (Anthem 2024), in which he penned an article on Samuel Beckett and Gastone Novelli. He is contributing to the 2026 Special Issue of *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* with an essay on Beckett ("Tailpieces': Beckett's Oeuvre Through the Lens of his Poems'). An article on Dylan Thomas ('Intermediality and Ecocritical Discourse in *Under Milk Wood*') will appear in the 2026 issue of *Textus*.

DAVIDE DEL BELLO is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Bergamo, Italy. He holds a PhD in English and Rhetoric from Northern Illinois University (USA) and specializes in early modern literature, rhetoric, and literary criticism. His scholarly work includes a monograph on allegory and etymology, *Forgotten Paths: Etymology and the Allegorical Mindset* (2007), as well as collaborative and individual studies on Shakespeare, such as *The Difference of Shakespeare* (2011, co-authored with Alessandra Marzola). He has also explored the intersection of poetry and politics in Elizabethan England, contributing to *The Rhetoric of Courtly Mystification* (2011). His recent monograph, *Reading with Kenneth Burke* (2020), investigates Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories within the broader contexts of literature, rhetoric, and history. Del Bello's current research focuses on rhetoric, early modern drama, and the cultural and literary dimensions of Recusancy in Tudor and Stuart England.

MARIA DEL SAPIO GARBERO is Professor Emerita of English Literature at Roma Tre University (Italy). She is the author of *Il bene ritrovato. Le figlie di Shakespeare dal King Lear ai Romances* (2005) and the editor of *La traduzione di Amleto nella cultura europea* (2002); *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* (2009); *Shakespeare and the New Science in Early Modern Culture* (2016); *Rome in Shakespeare's World* (2018). She has also written extensively on nineteenth and twentieth-century literature and culture. She is co-director of the "Studi Inglesi" series for Storia e Letteratura (Rome). Her latest books include *Eretiche ed esteti* (ESI 2022) and *Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome* (Routledge 2022).

STEFANO ERCOLINO is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He is the author of *The Maximalist Novel* (Bloomsbury 2014 [paperback ed. 2015]; Italian ed. Bompiani 2015), *The Novel-Essay, 1884-1947* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014 [paperback ed. 2016]; Italian trans. Bompiani 2017) and, with Massimo Fusillo, of *Negative Empathy in Literature and the Arts* (Routledge 2026, forthcoming; Italian ed. Bompiani 2022). Along with Francesco de Cristofaro, he edited the volume *Experimental Criticism: Franco Moretti and Literature* (Verso 2026, forthcoming; Italian ed. Carocci 2021). He is a member of the board of directors and treasurer of the Italian Association for the Study of Comparative Theory and History of Literature (Compalit).

MASSIMO FUSILLO is Professor of Comparative Literature at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. He is President of the Italian Association of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature; chair of the Research Committee on Literatures Arts Media of the International Association of Comparative Literature; and member of the Academia Europaea. Among his recent publications: *Empatia negativa* (with Stefano Ercolino), Bompiani, 2022; *Video Art Facing Wagner*, in M. Fusillo, M. Grishakova (eds.), *The Gesamtkunstwerk as a Synergy of the Arts*. Peter Lang, 2021; *L'immaginario polimorfo*, Pellegrini, 2018; *The Fetish. Literature, cinema, visuality*, Bloomsbury, 2017

ANTHONY R. GUNERATNE is Professor of Communication and Multimedia Studies and the Director of the Graduate Certificate in Film and Video at the Florida Atlantic University. His fields of research include historical and contemporary interpretations of Renaissance texts (particularly those of Shakespeare), film history, and the cultural history of aesthetic forms. In the area of Shakespeare Film Studies he is the author of several essays and of the monograph *Shakespeare, Film Studies and the Visual Cultures of Modernity* (Palgrave 2008). He is the editor of *Shakespeare and Genre: from Early Modern Inheritance to Postmodern Legacies* (Palgrave 2012). Forthcoming publications include *Screen Performance and the Shakespeare Film Canon in the Spotlight of Archivision* (September 2026, Anthem Studies).

ROGER HOLDSWORTH has edited plays by Jonson and Middleton, and published many essays on early modern English drama. Until 2017, when the UK government broke its Brexit promise to maintain Britain's participation in the Erasmus student exchange scheme, he was an Erasmus co-ordinator at the University of Manchester, supervising doctoral exchanges with the Universities of Bari and Rome Tor Vergata. He is currently a member of Linacre College Oxford.

NICHOLAS LUKE is an Assistant Professor in the School of English at the University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *Shakespearean Arrivals: The Birth of Character* (Cambridge UP, 2018), and *Shakespeare's Political Spirit: Negative Theology and the Disruption of Power* (Cambridge UP, 2024). He is currently working on a third monograph, *Resurrection Events in Late Shakespeare*, which has been funded by

the Hong Kong University Grants Committee. His work has also been published in journals such as *Modern Philology* and *Shakespeare Survey*. He received his DPhil and MSt from the University of Oxford, funded by a Rhodes Scholarship.

ALESSANDRA MARZOLA was Professor English Literature at the University of Bergamo until her retirement in 2015. She has published and edited essays and books on Shakespeare, twentieth-century British Theatre; the rhetoric of economic discourse in John Maynard Keynes; *Englishness* in twentieth-century Britain; literature, war and violence in twentieth-century Britain. Her books on Shakespeare include *L'impossibile Puritanesimo di Amleto* (1986); *La Parola del Mercante* (1996); *Otello. Passioni* (2015). She is the editor of *L'Altro Shakespeare* (1992) and *The Difference of Shakespeare* (2008) and the co-author with Davide Del Bello of *Shakespeare and the Power of Difference* (2011). She is currently the co-director with Caroline Patey of the Book Series *Prismi. I Classici nel Tempo* (Mimesis).

CLAIRE McEACHERN is Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her most recent monograph is *Believing in Shakespeare. Studies in Longing*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018); she is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Tragedy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014) as well as several editions of Shakespeare's plays, including the Arden 3 *Much Ado About Nothing* (London, Thomas Nelson, 2015).

CARLO PAGETTI, Full Professor of English Literature (Università Statale di Milano), has translated into Italian and edited Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy (Garzanti 1995-1999), *Othello* (Einaudi 2013), *Henry IV, Part One* (Feltrinelli 2024), *Troilus and Cressida* (Mondadori 2025). In 2012 he organized an International Symposium on "Shakespeare in the Maze of Contemporary Culture". The proceedings were collected in a special issue of *Stratagemmi: prospettive teatrali* (December 2012-March 2013). He has extensively published on British and North-American fiction, dystopia-Science fiction, Fantasy and Gothic fiction, children's literature, Cultural Studies, the scientific imagination. Among his recent works: *Il mondo secondo P.K. Dick* (Mondadori 2022).

PAOLA PUGLIATTI taught English literature at the Universities of Messina, Bologna, Pisa and Florence. She has written extensively on Shakespeare, early modern European culture, the issue of literary genres (drama and the novel, their cultural traditions and literary conventions) and modernist literature (Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular). Her present interests are focused on the theme of authorship, with particular attention to the issue of collaboration in early modern English theatre. She is also interested in theoretical investigations on the socially and materially orientated conceptions of textuality which shape and define the ideas of Author, Text, and Meaning. She is general editor, with Donatella Pallotti, of the *Journal of Early Modern Studies*.

PAOLO SIMONETTI is Associate Professor of Anglo-American literature at Sapienza Università di Roma. He has published extensively on U.S. writers such as Melville, Hemingway, Pynchon, DeLillo, Roth, and Auster, with research interests spanning the reconfiguration of historical narratives in postmodernist and contemporary fiction, the intersections of autobiography, postmemory, and the historical novel, and the formal connection between comics and non-graphic literature. He is the author of a monograph on conspiracy in postmodernist U.S. fiction (*Paranoia Blues*, Aracne 2009) and has edited the Italian critical editions of Bernard Malamud's complete works and two volumes of Philip Roth's novels for "I Meridiani" Mondadori. He recently edited and translated the letters of Patrick and Ernest Hemingway (Oscar Baobab, 2023) and Tim O'Brien's latest novel *America Fantastica* (Oscar Mondadori, 2024).

JOEL ELLIOT SLOTKIN is Professor of English at Towson University in Baltimore. His book, *Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature*, was published by Palgrave in 2017, and his essay "A Taste for Slaughter: Stephen Gosson, *Titus Andronicus*, and the Appeal of Evil" appeared in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy* (2018). Besides his work on sinister aesthetics, he has published articles on representations of Islam in early modern English drama, Renaissance arts of memory and cyberspace, humour and authority in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and racial hierarchies and conceptions of the savage in Carlos Bulosan's fiction of the Philippines.

