

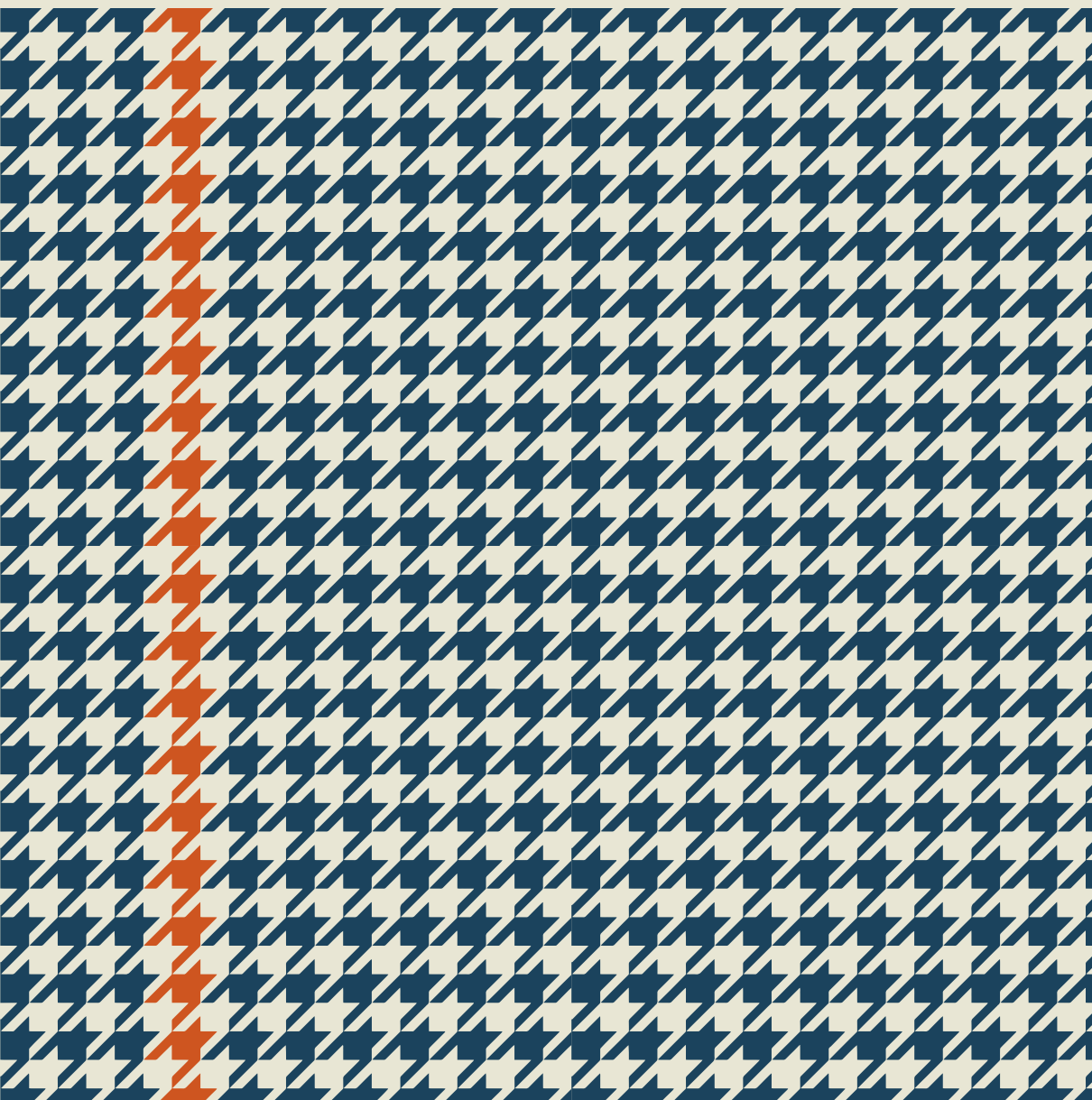
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Early Modern Scepticism and the Culture of Paradox

Edited by
Silvia Bigliuzzi

Introduction

Silvia Bigliuzzi (Università degli Studi di Verona, Italia)

That early modern England was an age of contradictions whose extent and cultural pervasiveness proved unprecedented is the tacit premise of all investigation of scepticism in a period whose cultural contours may be summed up by two epidemics: *Pseudodoxia*, as Thomas Browne put it in his famous treatise (1646), and *Paradoxa*, as Colie (1966) labelled it drawing inspiration from Browne. In an epoch of dramatic transition from one cultural system to another, when the remains of a late medieval frame coexisted with new and uncontrollable drives towards the refashioning of the entire *episteme*, paradox as a mode of thinking and configuring experience came to mirror the volatilisation of received knowledge at the roots of an increasing epistemological instability. Competing world-pictures favoured a growing perception of contradiction at the foundations of a fast changing reality whose irreconcilable views made stable knowing and judgment impossible. When in 1531, in his *The Book Named the Governour*, Sir Thomas Elyot offered a choreutic and harmonious picture of the universe and its cosmic dance, that universe was already taking a new shape with the «Copernican paradox» (1536); and while in 1596 Sir John Davies dedicated to that old world-view the 131 stanzas of his *Orchestra or a Poem of Dauncing*, scientific and literary paradoxes were penetrating and radically modifying that view. Within few years several discoveries would shatter the old system to pieces, opening it up to hosting infinite worlds and unveiling the emptiness of an Aristotelian dense universe which proved dense no longer.

All this caused euphoria as well as dismay. In his *First Anniversary* (1611) John Donne famously charged the «new philosophy» with calling all in doubt. Yet, at the same time, in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyear he reconciled the new heliocentric astronomy with religion. But later, in his *Devotions* (1624), he also wrote that «Mere vacuity, the first Agent, God, the first instrument of God, Nature, will not admit» because «Nothing can be utterly emptie» (Donne 1624, p. 93; see also Bigliuzzi 2011). His continuous sway between opposite stances is epitomic of the sense of disorientation of those early modern generations, who responded to the rapid overthrowing of certainties with equal uncertainty. It is not coincidental that the continental genre of the paradoxes and problems took root on Brit-

ish soil precisely in those years, giving a literary garment to questions that in other quarters were beginning to be called with the name of scepticism.

Going slightly back in time, at the end of the sixteenth-century Sextus Empiricus's thought had been summarised and circulated by Raleigh's short tract *Sceptick* (to be published later in 1651), where an awareness of the mutability of opinions and the unreliability of appearances contributed to engendering an acute sense of the epistemological crisis which was then taking place. The ten modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy, underlining indeterminacy and instability in value judgment, and more generally in knowing, agreed with the sensibility of the time. In the same years, the soon Englished Montaigne voiced in the vernacular a radical perception of doubt (and self-doubt) as the fundamental mode of apprehending experience, thus destabilising human condition. The intellectuals' reaction was one of anxiety and ambiguity: taken aback by a new awareness of what they perceived to be an intrinsically absurd universe, they often advocated the power of paradoxical thinking to sustain unclear ideological commitment, thus imperceptibly shifting the focus from epistemic to moral questions. Indeed, the step from epistemology (what we can know) to ethics (what is good and bad, right and wrong) was not a long one, and taking that step meant making up one's mind as to the degree of self-commitment in moral disputes as well as in philosophical debates. A sceptical attitude came often to be the response in such cases, as the fit correlate to the contradiction that spurned doubt. In turn, the case of conscience was handled as the necessary locus of interrogation of subjectivity, to which decision-making was demanded through an individual probation of circumstances, no longer subjected to a solid moral rule. In religious casuistry, for instance, the Protestant William Perkins argued that goodness and rightness are relative concepts in order to demonstrate that, contrary to common opinion, cases and circumstances were to be weighed individually:

Good things are of two sorts. Some simply good, in, and by themselves; as vertues, and all morall duties; and these are not to be eschewed. Some again are good only in some respects. Of this sort are things indifferent, which be neither commanded nor forbidden, but are good or evill in respect of circumstances. And these may be eschewed, unlesse we know that they be good for us. Now, persecution being of this kind, that is to say, not simply good, but only by accident, may be avoided; because no man can say that it is good or bad for him. (Perkins 1606, p. 370; see also Catchart 1975, pp. 5-7)

On the same premises of moral indeterminacy, John Donne sustained in *Biathanatos* (composed between 1607 and 1608, but published posthumously in 1644) the paradox or thesis that committing suicide «is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise» (frontispiece).

Scepticism, in other words, was the philosophical outcome of the logical impasse of paradox, which, combined with a pervasive rhetoric of contraries, sneaked into all forms of artistic or argumentative discourse, under the guise now of a new vogue of literary mock encomiums, now of logical nonsenses and figures of doxastic contradiction. For sure, it acquired a fundamental role in the writings of the age, providing a link between a new sensibility of doubt and its conceptual and discursive articulation.

Criticism has often discussed these issues, providing, especially in recent years, a quantity of information on both the hystorical context and the production of major writers. The solid reappraisal of Renaissance paradoxical thinking, bridging literary and non-literary expressions of the early modern cultural crisis, may safely be dated from 1966, when it was strongly advocated by Colie's seminal study published in that year. Although the issue had already aroused occasional interest in individual essays before then (Rice 1932, Wiley 1948, Burrell 1954, Miller 1956, Malloch 1956), it was Colie in fact who laid a peculiar emphasis on paradox as an intellectual and artistic form of political subversion and epistemological reconfiguration, laying the ground for further investigation in the following years (for instance Rabkin 1967, Vickers 1968, Peters 1980, Neill 1981; for references to Shakespeare and paradox see Platt 2009, p. 45 ff.). Close on the heels of its publication, in 1967 Yates's critiqued her excessive facility in finding paradoxes everywhere without adopting convincing discerning criteria. Then, after exactly thirty years, in 1996, an even heavier blow than Yates's was levelled by Paul Stevens who, bringing to its extremes the assumption that paradox dehistoricises and depoliticises those who use it (Bristol 1985, pp. 11 ff.; see also Platt 2009, p. 47), contended that the paradoxes Colie talked about were at best forms of equivocation, or falsidical paradoxes, and that paradox itself «has no essence or ideal significance»; what is worst, «it is a figure of self-contradiction that may be deployed to quiet political unrest every bit as to challenge orthodoxy or to suggest the incomprehensibility of God» (Stevens 1996, p. 214). In other words, it is a tool at the service of political quietism. This position has more recently been debated by Platt (2009), who, pace Stevens, has reappraised Colie's interpretation of paradox as «involved in dialectic», «challenging some orthodoxy», thus providing «an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or absolute convention» (Colie 1966, p. 10). Through a re-reading of Quine's discussion of the Liar's paradox (1966), used by Stevens to discard Colie's position, Platt in fact boomerangs Steven's own argument against itself and concludes that in fact «paradox poses a challenge to the doxa», further assuming that «there is no reason to limit this threat to the world of rhetoric» (p. 48) (see also Montrose 1996 and its discussion in Platt 2009, p. 51).

These few references to the political and ideological implications of paradox and the critical debate around it show how hot the topic still is and how varied the responses to its multiple forms and implications may be,

favouring research in ever new directions. While interest in the widespread contradictions of nothingness has spurred fresh inquiry in both philosophical and semiotic terms (Caygill 2000; Bigliuzzi 2005), a reappraisal of an articulated tradition of paradoxes has recently prompted further investigation in the dissemination of models (Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007); the question of typologies and effects, firstly raised by Yates against an indiscriminate use of the word paradox, has instead prompted new research in its performative function in drama, distinguishing paradox from both general figures of contraries and literary and rhetorical uses (Bigliuzzi 2013), thus bringing the question more distinctly within the realm of performative studies in ways that bear on the implications raised above.

The culture of paradox looked at as an articulated and dynamic system of interlaced thoughts, views, practices, writings, policies, and behaviours, evoked by the title of this journal issue points precisely to the complexity of a topic irreducible to individual issues considered out of context. Epistemological, political, ideological, aesthetic and performative uses of contradiction intertwine within a cultural system where outright debate on unsolvable opposites paved the way to a sceptical engagement with knowledge. Scepticism – whether Academic or Pyrrhonist (‘no knowledge is possible’, or ‘there is insufficient evidence to determine if knowledge is possible’) – is one side of a coin showing paradox on the other. If paradox favours indeterminacy and «denies commitment» (Colie 1966, p. 38) it is because it suspends knowledge. Paradox denies received notions of the universe, causes awe and wonderment (Puttenham called it «the wonderer», p. 189), contradicts the logic of things known, offers undeniable truths against assumed evidence; yet once its truth is endorsed, it ceases to be a paradox. For a statement to be deemed a paradox, it must remain suspended in its contradiction (logical or doxastic, not semantic, as in the oxymoron – a figure of ‘cross-coupling’, not of nonsense; Puttenham 1589, p. 172), because paradox affirms and denies at the same time, asking for suspension of judgment, while not suffocating questioning. Indeed, it is precisely within a culture of paradox, where all the issues recalled above interact, that, contradictorily, scepticism best flourishes as an epistemological and political form of disengagement, yet also of commitment, as Colie argues with reference to paradox itself («failure to commit is a form of commitment», p. 38). It is not coincidental that in recent years essays and book-length studies of paradox and scepticism have separately but almost concomitantly appeared. In close succession the thoroughgoing works of Spolsky (2001), Bell (2002), Popkin (2003 – revised and expanded edition of 1979), Cavell (2003 – update edition of 1986), Bertram (2004), Hamlin (2005), and Cox (2007) have redrawn the outlines of studies of scepticism, while Platt, in turn, has shortly afterwards rediscussed the role of paradox (2009, 2011).

Our aim here is to look at how scepticism interacts with, a culture of paradox, in order to explore the diverse ways in which an increasingly

sceptical frame of mind in early modern England coupled with, and was expressed by, new literary forms, shaping up a culture of contraries that traversed, and joined together, different areas of intellectual and popular productions: from drama to poetry and literary paradoxes, as well as to theoretical writings. Several diverse questions will be raised in the following essays, examining various forms of paradox and their relation with sceptical stances. Spanning from the early sixteenth century to the Caroline period, the interrogation will embrace, through selected texts and authors, issues concerning the analysis and estimation of god-language (chapter 1); paradox as a carnivalised form of scepticism (chapter 2); the mock encomium as the reverse of eulogy in a culture of patronage (chapter 3); the language of paradoxical excess in metaphysical poetry (chapter 4); inwardness and the contradictions inherent in the theatrical expression of the self (chapter 5); two different versions of paradox and scepticism in Shakespeare (chapters 6 and 7); the staging of paradoxes of mathematics and geometry and the reaching of scepticism unto nihilism (chapter 8); finally, the dissolving of the sceptical tensions of metaphysical paradox into a more serene neoclassical «mixture of wit» with the advancing of time (chapter 9). The essays do not mean to offer an exhaustive panorama; they rather wish to provide significant, albeit individual, examples of how scepticism and paradox start taking the same path at the beginning of the sixteenth-century, and then gradually get adjusted to a new sensibility following the extraordinary theatrical and poetic season of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages.

More specifically, the first essay («God-Language and Scepticism in Early Modern England: An Exploratory Study Using Corpus Linguistics Analysis as a Form of Distant Reading») offers a broad corpus-linguistics exploration of god-terms in a 250-year time span corresponding to the EEBO corpus of printed texts (1473-1700). Here William Hamlin tests the potential of «distant reading» - quoting Moretti on 'becoming digital' - and interrogates the mined data by raising questions that look to an integrated approach repositioning 'close reading' within the scope of the overall research. Cautiously admitting to the temporariness of his conclusions due to the incompleteness and implementability of the analysed corpus, Hamlin compares different corpora and sub-corpora (for instance Shakespeare's *Folio* and Montaigne's *Essays*), and by way of a thorough diachronic analysis, including keyword frequency and collocations, finds out that religious discourse deploys a sharp decline in the 1590s and 1600s, significantly underlining the rise of a moral preoccupation and doubting precisely when «Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and other English playwrights wrote a substantial portion of their plays».

With the following essay («Radical Carnivalisation of Religion in Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*»), the journal gets back to close reading and the discursive and cultural implications of paradox in a context of Christian

scepticism, offering a full discussion of Erasmus's multifaceted mock-encomium of Folly. With a tour-de-force analysis of the carnivalesque features of Erasmus's discourse, Sarbani Chaudhury evokes paradox as a subversive stylistic format and a flexible tool for the accomplishment of the antiauthoritarian transgressive potential of the text. By delving into the inverted relation between worldly wisdom and Christian folly as a response to Christian scepticism, and then examining Erasmus's affinity with sectarian movements (such as Anabaptism) as well as his attempt to inscribe the «'lowlest of the lowly' within the realm of high literature», Chaudhury frames an inquiry into a carnivalised religion within the boundaries of radicalism and conflict, on the one hand, and containment and reconciliation, on the other, showing the signifying drive of indeterminacy and instability in Erasmus's discourse.

Along the same lines of a mock encomium, however ingeniously concealed under the guise of eulogy, the third essay («Of Lords and Stars: Spenser's Paradoxical Praise of Essex in the *Prothalamion*») leads us to an appreciation of Edmund Spenser's poetical dismantling of the politics of patronage, subtly and bitterly unveiling the crisis of Tudor's court culture. Patrizia Grimaldi-Pizzorno analyses the amphibological strategies at work in the poet's 1596 *Prothalamion* by closely examining the double-edged catasterism of the figure of Essex addressed by Spenser via the ambiguous symbolism of Vesper/Lucifer and the myth of the falling Phaeton, which eventually turn him into an icon of the vanity of a world doomed to vanish soon. Deeply and secretly, almost hermetically, encrypted within the poem, Spenser's transgressive voice has nothing of the immediate joyous laughter of Folly, but reveals the mourning accents of a death-bell audible only by those who know how to listen to them.

The contiguity between scepticism and paradox forms the core of Carmen Gallo's subsequent investigation of John Donne's poetics of excess in his amorous poetry as a way to compensate for the loss of religious certainties. In «The Logic of Excess: Religious Paradox and Poetical Truth in Donne's Love Poetry», Gallo concentrates on the ways the once-reliable jargon of religion Donne borrows in his poems is turned upside-down to serve the purpose of erotic seduction. The reason-defeating fallacy of the paradoxes of the Word subsumed by the mystery of transubstantiation is explored in the *Songs and Sonnets* where it appears to be appropriated and translated into the fallacy of falsidical worldly paradoxes, in a continuous shifting of signification from the sacred to the profane and back. Manipulated for the sake of persuasion and amazement, the linguistic arbitrariness of these compositions mirrors the emptying out of *Logos*, thus reinforcing the perception of an epistemological crisis that affects communication itself, reduced to a rhetorical arena for exhibiting the final irreducibility of all opposites: an awareness that undermines Donne's precariously attained poetic truth through «witty unreliability» and the «logic frailties of language».

Paradox is at the root of the sceptical awareness achieved by the characters of John Marston's and Thomas Middleton's revengers in Lucia Nigri's investigation of the theatricalisation of inwardness («Sceptical Responses in Early Modern Plays: from Self-knowledge to Self-doubt in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*»). Largely disputed since the 1980s along drastically diverging lines (the self is or is not an issue in early modern time), the articulation of inwardness is explored here through an interrogation of how role-playing asks for socially constructed masks clashing with an opaque sense of selfhood, and how these diverse masks activate competing identity stances in the genres of tragicomedy and tragedy. The essay concentrates on the revengers' laboriously and painfully achieved awareness that selfhood is something both identical with, and other than, the fabricated mask. In a continuous interplay between private and public self-questioning, the final, and dismal, understanding they acquire is that the sole self-knowledge attainable is identical with Pyrrhonist self-doubt.

With Alessandra Marzola's essay on *Othello* («Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief: The Case Of *Othello*») the discussion reverses the sceptical overtones of paradoxes looked at so far into an exploration of the paradoxical effects of scepticism. Starting off in Cavell's wake and building on his philosophical and psychoanalytic premises, the essay copes with the tragic effects of disowning knowledge, showing its different repercussions on male and female characters caught in a drama of projections and introjections that destabilise the self, as a response to the equally destabilising awareness of an unredeemable cleavage inhering in language. The paradoxical effects of the infection of a scepticism that makes for self-dispossession by pushing to an utter possessing of the other are here revealed to have both gender and racial consequences. Marzola interrogates the play by delving into the paradoxes of the Moor's culturally-colonised self, only precariously safeguarding his hollowness from being exposed; at the same time, the author encapsulates within a larger discourse on masculine narcissism and scepticism the potentially subversive 'inclining' Desdemona, whose symbolic 'obliqueness' gestures both to patriarchal submission and death, and to a transgressive challenge of masculine sceptical verticality.

Paradox is the outcome of a sceptical attitude towards knowing also in Alessandra Squeo's reading of *The Tempest* («“For thou must now know farther”: Representation, Illusion, and Unstable Perspectives in *The Tempest*»), where a paradoxical visuality is taken as proof of «the inconsistency of human perceptions» and the ensuing epistemological crisis. The essay is grounded on an investigation of the intersections between the play and the sceptical writings of the time, with special attention to Pyrrhonism and its circulation via Sextus Empiricus. Thus framed, the play's relativistic use of narrative proves akin to its extraordinary voco-visual and auditory spectacularity in emphasising indeterminacy and contradiction as the sole, yet unreliable, epistemological and cognitive modes. The problematisation of vision

and hearing, first astoundingly carried out in the tempest scene, is examined in its various possibilities and in relation to both nature and art, eventually leading to the unveiling, in the masque scene, of the make-believe artificiality of all human constructs, linear perspective included: a device showing what is and what is not in a spectacular pageant of unsolvable ambiguities.

Visuality and geometry as (dis)orienting modes of knowing heavily loaded with ideological implications feature also in Benjamin Bertram's study of one of the grimmest tragedies of the age, close in time to the *Tempest*: Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* («Webster's Geometry; or, the Irreducible Duchess»). As the author suggests, affinity may be perceived with both Donne's and Montaigne's scepticism, although paradox here does not lie on the way to transcendence, leaving little room for hope and «intimations of immortality». Logical aporias and «curious perspectives» undermine confidence in epistemological and ontological truths, while mathematical computations in the hands of Bosola become instruments of power to oppress women as well as «tools for protest». In a tragic context where redemption has no place and nihilism is the likely prospect of utter scepticism, questions of identity recalling the dramatisation of inwardness in chapter 5, provide the paradoxical antidote: the irreducibility of the Duchess to the nothing which is her doom in death, eventually leaving us with the feeling that «any affirmation of being, permanence, and truth must be paradoxical».

The final chapter («'Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den': Animals, plants and paradoxes in Abraham Cowley's writings») jumps ahead to a later period, providing a fair example of the relative quenching of sceptical implications in domesticated paradoxical wit. Through an extensive discussion of animal paradoxes in the poetry of several authors writing over a span of a few decades, from Donne to Marvell and Lovelace, with a focus on Cowley's «mixt wit», Milena Romero Allué follows paradoxical writing down to the Caroline age, providing a link between the late sixteenth century and the Civil War. The selected poems are peculiarly devoted to animals normally unincluded in the canon of poetic diction, such as grasshoppers or mice, here treated as figures of a humanity conceived of as 'amphibious' – man and beast, corporeal and heavenly, in Thomas Browne's famous definition. The subject itself belies Cowley's attempt to ally witticism with scientific concerns as well as with an ideal of sobriety and rural life. This choice is also good testimony of the poet's bridging two ages, the Metaphysical and the Neoclassical, favouring a tempering of anxiety, within the still vital energy of paradoxical thinking, through rural serenity. Thus scepticism appears defanged and, on the whole, toned down. Moral preoccupation and doubting seem now to belong to a different age, and the nihilistic prospect of radical questioning already far behind. Whether this was consistently true for the whole period is a question the journal passes down to the reader for further investigation.

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God-Language and Scepticism in Early Modern England

An Exploratory Study Using Corpus Linguistics Analysis as a Form of Distant Reading

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Abstract This essay incorporates new trends of corpus linguistics research within an investigation of sceptical thought, particularly in the period of roughly 1580 to 1620. The analysis uses several standard texts, such as the Shakespeare First Folio (1623), the Florio translation of Montaigne (1613 ed.), the collected plays of Marlowe, Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), etc., juxtaposed against larger reference corpora, such as a fully-keyed collection of several thousand English books printed between 1580 and 1620. Such juxtapositions enable contrastive analysis using various techniques of collocation, proximity, and syntactic pattern examination.

My purpose in this essay is to describe and reflect upon a preliminary exploration of the value of corpus analytic techniques for the study of ideological change during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Specifically, I have made an investigative foray into the evolution of god-language in English printed texts from this period, focusing especially on the spread of epistemological and religious scepticism in multiple discursive realms.¹ By 'god-language' I mean language which registers the ways in which human beings – including fictional characters – imagine, describe, and discuss their conceptions of divinity, as well as the locutions upon which they rely as they address, worship, petition, doubt, or condemn divine beings (along with the affiliated concepts, assumptions, and institutions underwritten by presumed divine authority). Early modern scepticism, meanwhile, is a topic that has been extensively studied by many scholars over the past fifty years, so before I began my inquiry I already had a strong sense of what

1 When I speak of ideological change, I do not wish to limit ideology to forms of false consciousness. Rather, I follow Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, David Hawkes, and others in broadening the term so as to include systems of belief characteristic of a particular class, culture, or social group, as well as systems of illusory beliefs. I am nonetheless particularly intrigued by assumptions, claims, and convictions which are non-falsifiable. See Williams (1977, pp. 55-71); Williams (1983, pp. 153-157); Eagleton (1991, pp. 1-31), and Hawkes (2003, *passim*, esp. pp. 1-14, 15-37). See also Stephen Greenblatt's comments on the frequent insensitivity of modern discussions of ideology (2001, pp. 45-46).

I was likely to learn.² But because I am a literary historian rather than a computational linguist, I came to this project with methodological biases and levels of technical ignorance which have predisposed me to investigate topics and interpret results in ways that may seem peculiar, even counterintuitive, to scholars with greater expertise in digital humanities methods and computer-assisted discourse analysis.³

I must also preface this essay with several caveats. First of all, the digital corpus with which I have primarily worked is the pared-down version of EEBO-TCP housed within the CQPweb processor at Lancaster University.⁴ This corpus is currently comprised of 44,422 fully-keyed texts, just under two-thirds of the total number of documents eventually slated for complete digital transcription by EEBO-TCP. Nonetheless, the corpus is broadly representative of EEBO's full coverage; it contains increasingly large numbers of texts within the unfolding decades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and altogether it comprises a total of more than 1.2 billion words.⁵ I should note, however, that the method of 'tokenization' used in its CQPweb conversion has allowed for typographic entities other than alphabetic units (e.g., punctuation marks and numerical digits) to count as 'words' – a practice that presents drawbacks as well as undeniable advantages.⁶ Finally, while this corpus has been curated so as to provide a significant degree of word-level annotation, it cannot be queried in some of the ways that other curated corpora currently enable (e.g., the Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama sites in WordHoard). It also displays a small number of residual transcription errors. Nonetheless, the CQPweb version of EEBO constitutes a massive digital database of English printed

2 See, e.g., Popkin (2003); Schmitt (1972); Larmore (1998); and Hamlin (2005). Williams (1983) still stands as a classic model of the discussion of denotative evolution and cultural relevance for specific English words, e.g. «ideology».

3 Two recent essays from which I have learned a good deal are each co-authored by Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore (2014, 2010). I take the term «distant reading» from its various iterations in the work of Franco Moretti – most recently in his monograph of that title (2013). See Moretti (2005, pp. 1-2).

4 I am much indebted to Professors Paul Rayson, Andrew Hardie, and Alistair Baron, who introduced me to CQPweb during my visit to the University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language (UCREL) at Lancaster University during May and June of 2013. CQP is an acronym for Corpus Query Processor; EEBO-TCP is the common abbreviation for *Early English Books Online - Text Creation Partnership*. At the time I gathered my evidence for this study, EEBO-TCP offered a database of 40,061 keyed full texts, but that number has now risen considerably. CQPweb's Version 3 of EEBO-TCP, meanwhile, offers a database of 44,422 fully keyed texts. But that figure, too, will rise when Version 4 is loaded to the processor.

5 To be precise: 1,202,214,511 words. Decades are calculated in CQPweb not from 1 to 0 but from 0 to 9; for example, the 1580s run from 1580 to 1589 rather than from 1581 to 1590.

6 For a description of the development of the CQPweb version of EEBO, see Pumfrey, Rayson, Mariani (2012, esp. pp. 401-406).

documents ranging from 1473 to 1700, and its query processor allows for an array of search and analysis techniques which can generate vast batches of quantitative and statistical information with impressive speed.

After spending an initial few days conducting miscellaneous searches and becoming familiar with CQPweb, I decided that my first substantial task should be the creation of a stable lexicon of ‘god-terms’ and ‘doubt-terms’ that I could then study in depth through scrutiny of such forms of data as the following: (1) diachronic distribution of words and phrases across the full EEBO time-span, (2) dispersion of terms within multiple texts (and groups of texts), (3) keyword frequency comparisons within juxtaposed corpora, and (4) collocation and proximity analyses (again attending to diachronic change among specific collocates). I thus prepared a preliminary list of 175 relevant words which I then reduced through a process of elimination to a final list of 104; this reduction was based upon scores of keyword searches, extensive examination of specific attestations, and frequent recourse to the Oxford Historical Thesaurus. The word «lord», for instance, cannot serve usefully as a god-term in early modern English because it is too often employed as a form of address (e.g., «good my lord»); similarly, «pray» and «curse», despite their apparent promise as god-verbs, must be disqualified for similar reasons, «curse» being too secular in general usage and «pray» figuring too often in locutions such as «pray tell» and «I pray you, madam». Indeed, many words which function simultaneously as nouns and verbs (e.g., «curse», «grace», «sacrifice», «minister», «host», «spirit», «elect») prove ultimately unsuitable for a god-lexicon, their very flexibility rendering their denotative range too broad for a study such as mine. And many more specific religious terms – «rosary», «atone», «conventicle», «ordain», «absolution», «manna», «eucharist», and so on – appear with such comparatively low frequencies that their usage tends to be less valuable from a statistical perspective than that of other, more common, words.⁷

Here, then, are the god-terms and doubt-terms I have chosen for my lexicon (see Tables 1 and 2). Table 1 presents these terms using spelling variations and statistical data derived from EEBO-TCP in its current iteration; Table 2 presents the same terms using analytic techniques and spelling regularisation software available in Version 3 of EEBO on CQPweb. I wish to stress that this is a provisional list, and that I expect to modify it as I move forward. It is also profoundly Christian in orientation – and predictably so, given the verbal corpus from which it is derived. At the same time, it is capable of reflecting shifts in attitude towards other religious

7 God-phrases, meanwhile (e.g. «holy ghost», «grace of god», «eternal soul», etc.), are far too numerous to limit to a stable lexicon, but I have nonetheless attempted to keep track of roughly forty such phrases through multiple distribution and collocation searches. With a few major exceptions («christ[s]», «mahomet[s]», «satan[s]», etc.), I have excluded proper names from my god-lexicon.

outlooks. The words «faith(s)», «religion(s)», and «doctrine(s)», for instance, have the potential to be deployed in non-pejorative ways regarding non-Christian forms of devotion or spirituality, and varying frequencies in such terms as «heathen(s)», «pagan(s)», «infidel(s)», and «heresy(ies)» can also expose attitudinal shifts. For the words «god» and «heaven» I have included separate statistical computations for singular, plural, and conjoined forms, but it is crucial to remember that in each case the plural spelling also comprehends large numbers of the singular possessive (i.e., «god's»), since the typographic use of the possessive apostrophe was uncommon until the later decades of the seventeenth century.⁸ I have presented all initial letters in lower-case format, and indeed all my searches have been non-case sensitive. Finally, the lexicon moves gradually towards more secular terms at the end, so that ideological developments of the sort that interest me have a better chance of making themselves visible.

A few preliminary comments are in order. First, it is abundantly clear, though scarcely surprising, that early modern English is saturated with religious language. The word «god», for instance, surfaces at least once in 78% of all printed texts dating from 1473 to 1700, and in those texts it displays an average frequency of 121 appearances.⁹ Words such as «faith(s)», «soul(s)», «sin(s)», «church(es)», and «heaven(s)» are likewise extremely common, all of them manifesting themselves in more than half the period's documents. «Christ(s)», «jesu(s)», «saint(s)», «christian(s)», «priest(s)», «prayer(s)», «worship(s)», «scripture(s)», «gospel(s)», «eternal(ly)», «angel(s)», «devil(s)», and «hell(s)» each appear in more than a third of all printed texts, «righteous(ly)», «almighty(ies)», «salvation(s)», «saviour(s)», «providence(s)», «rejoice(s)», «jew(s)», and «heathen(s)» in more than a quarter, and the adjective «holy» is used with far greater frequency than the adjective «natural» (both in raw numbers and in rates of dispersion). It will of course be news to no one that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English is much more oriented towards religious concerns than the English of today, but numbers such as those in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate this fact with decisive clarity.

Attending to the diachronic distribution of god-terms across the nearly 230-year time-span covered by EEBO yields results that, once again, will be largely unsurprising to scholars familiar with the period. I should

8 For most other nouns I have used a combined singular/plural search; a search for «soul» and «souls», for example, is represented as «soul(s)».

9 My figure of 78% was derived from an EEBO-TCP search on 23 January 2014. At that point there were 40,061 fully-searchable texts within the database, though as noted earlier this figure has now risen. Version 3 of EEBO on CQPweb, by contrast, currently provides access to 44,422 fully-searchable texts, and «god» appears in 77.35% of them. Searching for «god(s)» across all relevant decades, I find the highest frequency in the 1530s (95.35%) and the lowest in the 1680s (71.96%). Version 3 of EEBO also employs a spelling regularization program called «VARD», designed by Professor Alistair Baron at the University of Lancaster.

reiterate, however, that the CQPweb version of EEBO currently includes fewer than two-thirds of the roughly 70,000 texts eventually planned for complete digitisation; when the full body of digitised texts is incorporated within the CQPweb processor, the resulting numbers will differ from those I offer here. Nonetheless, I believe that my current figures are broadly indicative of major trends within the two centuries under examination. Terms such as «jesu(s)», «scripture(s)», «gospel(s)», «sabbath(s)», «rejoice(s)», «amen(s)», «jew(s)», «blaspheme(s)», «sinner(s)», «heresy(ies)», and «purgatory(ies)», for instance, display a sharp rise in incidence during the 1520s, 1530s, and 1540s, a fact that makes perfect sense given the growth of English Reformation polemic during precisely these years. Similarly, such terms as «church(es)», «prayer(s)», «conscience(s)», «spiritual(ly)», «baptise(s)», «baptism(s)», «jew(s)», «heathen(s)», «blasphemy(ies)», «unholy(ily)», and «unnatural(ly)» occur with distinctly increased frequency during the 1640s and 1650s, very likely in concert with social anxieties surrounding the English Civil War, the rise of presbyterianism, the abolishment of the episcopacy, and the establishment of the Commonwealth.¹⁰ The terms «heaven(s)», «rejoice(s)», «hell(s)», «devil(s)», «antichrist(s)», «heathen(s)», «blaspheme(s)», and «blasphemy(ies)» exhibit declining levels of usage during the latter half of the seventeenth century, while the terms «reason(s)», «scepticism(s)», «sceptical(ly)», «uncertain(ly)», «perhaps», and «possible(ly)» show gradual rates of increase during the same period. The 1590s and 1600s, meanwhile, present something of a puzzle insofar as they reveal a sharp decline in the use of certain terms along with a sharp increase in the use of others. The words «god(s)», «christ(s)», «jesu(s)», «faith(s)», «almighty(ies)», «holy(ily)», «scripture(s)», «gospel(s)», «salvation(s)», «amen(s)», and «sabbath(s)», for example, all show strikingly diminished rates of usage during this twenty-year period (and particularly during the 1590s), while the words «hell(s)», «despair(s)», «damn(s)», «infidel(s)», and «doubtful(ly)» all display a distinct rise in incidence. How may we account for this? Are such results related to *fin de siècle* English monarchical anxiety? Are they based on flawed data – too few documents, for instance, or skewed textual representation within the two decade sub-corpus? At the moment I cannot answer these questions, but my strong suspicion is that the statistical figures for the 1590s and 1600s, even though they will change when we have more thorough information, are nonetheless indicative of slight ideological shifts during the period. Intriguingly, moreover, these are precisely the decades when Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and other English playwrights wrote a substantial portion of their plays.

10 The Thomason Tracts are included among the keyed full texts from the 1640s, and thus the total number of published texts from that decade greatly exceeds that of previous decades.

But let us return to the evidence. One useful way to move forward from broad-based keyword distribution analysis is to juxtapose the presence of specific keywords in multiple sub-corpora. As an example of such investigation I have examined the frequency of two dozen keywords across sixteen separate texts published between 1583 and 1623, among them Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1583), Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1599), Montaigne's *Essays* (1613), Raleigh's *History of the World* (1617), Shakespeare's *First Folio* (1623), and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596). Fourteen of these texts are individual printed volumes such as those just listed, but two are amalgamations: one of them a compilation of the various first editions of Marlowe's seven plays, and the other a massive corpus of 4716 separate works published between 1580 and 1619 which currently comprise the section of fully-transcribed digital texts in CQPweb's Version 3 of EEBO.¹¹ This latter corpus serves in essence as a control text against which the other fifteen corpora may be juxtaposed. Thus, for example, the keyword «god(s)» appears at a rate of 4093.56 instances per million words ('ipmw') in the forty-year corpus of texts dating from 1580 to 1619 (hereafter '1580-1619'). In Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1604), however, it appears at the much higher rate of 6222.23 ipmw (52% more frequently), while in Montaigne's *Essays* (1613) it displays a rate of only 1038.82 ipmw (74% less frequently).¹² Similarly, the keyword «hell(s)» has an ipmw frequency of 163.01 in the broad 1580-1619 corpus, but in Marlowe's plays its frequency is a stunning 727.85 (446% higher), while in Bacon's *Advancement* (1605) its frequency is only 10.54 (93% lower). Hell tended to occupy Marlowe's thoughts far more than it did Bacon's.

11 In addition to the titles and corpora just listed, I have also included the following volumes among my sixteen texts: Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1604), Jonson's *Workes* (1616), Plutarch's *Philosophie* (1603), Seneca's *Tenne Tragedies* (1581), and Sidney's *Arcadia* (1593). As for my compilation of Marlovian drama, I have drawn on the 1590 edition of *Tamburlaine I and II* (STC 17425), the 1594 edition of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (STC 17441), the 1594 edition of *Edward the Second* (STC 17437), the 1594 edition of *The Massacre at Paris* (STC 17423), the 1604 edition («A-Text») of *Doctor Faustus* (STC 17429), and the 1633 edition of *The Jew of Malta* (STC 17412). Readers will note that I rely both on first editions (e.g., Shakespeare's *First Folio*, 1623) and on second or third editions (e.g., Montaigne's *Essayes*, 1613), depending on the texts currently available in Version 3 of EEBO-TCP on CQPweb. I use John Florio's spelling, *Essayes*, for Montaigne's book; I know from close scrutiny that the 1603 and 1613 editions are almost identical in substance, the second merely correcting some of the more egregious typographic errors of the first, as well as introducing various new errors. I had hoped to include one of the early editions of the Authorized ("King James") Version of the Bible, but none of the printings from 1611 to 1619 are currently held within EEBO Version 3 on CQPweb.

12 For the twenty-year period of 1590-1609, however, the ipmw figure is 3571.42, a drop of about 12.75%.

Analysis of this sort is consistently intriguing and occasionally surprising – but also extremely time-consuming despite the speed of the CQPweb processor. One might easily have predicted that the ipmw rates for such keywords as «christ(s)», «faith(s)», «scripture(s)», «holy(ily)», «sin(s)», and «damn(s)» would far exceed 1580-1619 averages in a work like Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1583), and that the same keywords – with the exception of «damn(s)» – would fall far short of those averages in Shakespeare's First Folio. Similarly, one is unlikely to be struck by the fact that works such as Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* and Montaigne's *Essays* display much higher-than-average frequency rates for the keyword «custom(s)». But that «custom(s)» appears still more often in Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* than in Montaigne's *Essays* is perhaps less predictable, as is the fact that Hooker's use of «reason(s)» in both verb and noun forms far exceeds Montaigne's, as well as Bacon's in the *Advancement*. Sidney's *Arcadia* (1593), meanwhile, exhibits strikingly lower frequency rates for multiple god-terms than do either Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Shakespeare's First Folio – but strikingly higher rates for such words as «doubt(s)», «reason(s)», and «nature(s)». May we therefore regard it as a more secular text? How, if at all, does this fact challenge us to recalibrate our sense of the general secularity of Shakespeare?

A useful variant of this form of analysis lies in the direct comparison of keyword frequency rates in pairs of corpora. In essence, CQPweb allows us to study the relative frequencies of specific words as they appear in juxtaposed bodies of text, and it ranks these words according to the magnitude of the disparity between their rates of usage. The specific statistical measure of disparity chosen by the CQPweb designers for this purpose is referred to as a «log-likelihood»: it contrasts observed frequencies with expected frequencies, using a logarithmic formula which takes into account the size (in total numbers of words) of the juxtaposed texts.¹³ Thus, for instance, a comparative keyword analysis of Shakespeare's First Folio and Montaigne's *Essays* reveals that the pronoun «you» is the word which exhibits the most striking degree of disparity between the two corpora. Specifically, this word appears only 765 times in Florio's Montaigne, whereas it makes 13,577 appearances in the Folio – a rate of almost nine times greater relative frequency.¹⁴ This translates to a log-likelihood figure

13 The log-likelihood calculator used within CQPweb is presented and explained at the following site: <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard>. A log-likelihood of just 3.84, for instance, represents a disparity between observed and expected keyword frequencies that ranks in the 95th percentile for statistical improbability; a log-likelihood of 15.13 represents a statistical improbability ranking in the 99.99th percentile. Most of the log-likelihoods I record in the following pages are much higher than 15.13: many of them in the hundreds, and some in the thousands. They thus represent instances of extraordinary lexical disparity between the textual bodies being contrasted.

14 To be precise, 8.764 times greater relative frequency. The 1613 edition of Montaigne's

of 6617.87, which essentially indicates the colossal improbability that such a common word as «you» would nonetheless appear at such vastly differing rates as it does in Shakespeare and Montaigne. As students of early modern literature we immediately recognize that the reason for this difference is fundamentally a matter of genre: a playwright is more likely to deploy pronouns with great frequency than is an essayist or moral philosopher writing in sustained expository prose. And indeed we find that various other first- and second-person pronouns follow «you» in displaying high log-likelihood figures in the Folio: «your», «I», «thou», «thy», «my», «thee», «me», «thine», and «yours». Interestingly, however, third-person plural pronouns such as «their», «they», «them», and «themselves» appear with greater relative frequency in Montaigne than in Shakespeare. Without examining individual attestations in systematic detail I can only speculate as to why this is true, but my guess is that the demand in playwriting for third-person pronouns is comparatively lower than in expository prose because the very nature of dramatic composition foregrounds presence over absence, mandating a greater need for second- than third-person speech forms.

My concern at the moment, however, lies with god-language, and I therefore wish to point to a few of the more intriguing results in my specific searches. Since none of the early editions of the King James Bible (1611, 1612, 1614, etc.) are included as fully-transcribed texts in CQPweb's Version 3 of EEBO, I have relied instead on the 1561 edition of the Geneva Bible as an example of an early modern text dense with god-terms.¹⁵ Thus, for instance, when we juxtapose keywords in the Geneva Bible against those in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1583), we find that «lord», «god», «altar», «tabernacle», «covenant», «rejoice», «righteous», «angel», and «sabbath» all display log-likelihoods revealing huge levels of disparity between observed and expected rates of frequency. Moving in the other direction, however, we see that «bishop», «church», «pope», «christ», «christians», «christian», «popes», «churches», «faith», «holy», «doctrine», «scripture», «priests», and «heresies» appear with much greater frequency in Foxe than in Geneva, which in turn confirms our sense of Foxe's book as one deeply embedded in the doctrinal controversies of its day. Jumping forward two decades to the 1604 edition of Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, we discover that far fewer obvious god-terms predominate in Geneva, while far more such terms appear with high log-likelihood values in Hooker. Some of these are identical to those in Foxe, such as «scripture», «church», «churches», and «christian», but others are new, among

Essayes is comprised of 514,047 words, while the 1623 First Folio is slightly more than twice that size, at 1,041,042 words. Bear in mind that 'words' include digits, punctuation marks, and other non-alphabetic signs.

¹⁵ I.e., STC 2095. The first edition of the Geneva Bible, published a year earlier in 1560, is identified as STC 2093.

them «divine», «apostle», «apostles», «saint», «papists», «savior», and «reformation». A further comparison between Foxe and Hooker would clearly be useful, as would comparisons between such histories as those of Holinshed and Raleigh, or such fictions as those of Sidney and Spenser. But in the interests of displaying the nature of largely religious versus largely secular language in the decades under consideration, I turn now to more striking juxtapositions: those between Montaigne and Geneva, Geneva and Shakespeare, and Shakespeare and Montaigne – the last of these with additional reference to the small corpus of Marlovian plays as well as to the much larger corpus of 2395 texts from the twenty-year period of 1590-1609.¹⁶

In the first of these juxtapositions we find, not surprisingly, that the Geneva Bible exhibits massively greater frequencies in the use of such words as «god», «christ», «jesus», «holy», «church», «priest», «sin», «prophet», «temple», «pray», «blessed», «heaven», and «faith». Montaigne's *Essays*, meanwhile, display a similarly massive lopsidedness with respect to «reason», «fortune», «opinion», «natural», «virtue», «nature», «custom», «senses», «divers», «imagination», «body», and «experience». Indeed the only god-term in Montaigne that exceeds its equivalent in Geneva by a log-likelihood factor of 200.00 or higher is «divine». And when we turn to a comparison of the *Essays* with the twenty-year period of 1590-1609 (the period during which Florio's translation was prepared, mainly from about 1595 to 1603), a similar picture emerges, despite the significant drop in god-language during the 1590s. «Christ», «god», «church», «faith», «sin», «holy», «jesus», «pope», «doctrine», «prayer», «heaven», and other similar terms are still hugely predominant in the broader corpus, while terms such as «judgement», «self», «fortune», «philosophy», «natural», «imagination», «reason», «custom», «discourse», «health», «science», «fantasy», «women», and «uncertainty» predominate in Montaigne. There are in fact no god-terms from the *Essays* among the top 600 most disparate words in the juxtaposed corpora. Does this warrant a claim that the *Essays* bear greater lexical resemblance to Geneva than to 1590-1609? Perhaps. My supposition, however, is that it suggests that both Geneva and 1590-1609 differ vastly from the *Essays* in overall lexical character – and in ways that may underline common features in their deployment of god-language. A comparison of Geneva and 1590-1609 reveals that only 32 of the top 600 most disparate words are god-terms (5.33%), but that the log-likelihood figures throughout this list are extremely high, none of them falling below 200.00. Clearly this is a juxtaposition that requires further investigation.

¹⁶ The 40-year corpus of 1580-1619 would be more revealing and valuable here, but at present it is too large for keyword juxtaposition analysis on CQPweb; it is comprised of more than 100 million words.

With Shakespeare's First Folio the case is somewhat different. Comparing Geneva and the Folio we find that while many of the former's god-terms are still dominant (e.g., «god», «christ», «jesus», «church», «temple», «holy», «sin», «doctrine», and so on), a few have dropped from prominence (e.g., «blessed», «heaven», «faith»), and others have become dominant in Shakespeare, among them «hell», «damned», and «devil». With plays such as *Othello* and *Hamlet* in mind it is not difficult to imagine why this is the case, but the fact is nonetheless striking. When we compare the Folio to 1590-1609 more broadly, however, we note that «hell», «damned», and «devil» have vanished from high predominance in the Folio, while «heaven», «jew», and «fiend» have taken their places. «God», «christ», «church», «religion», «doctrine», «sins», «jesus», «holy», «salvation», and «spiritual», meanwhile, all retain enormous log-likelihood dominance within the 1590-1609 corpus. If the 1606 ban on religious language in stage-plays had any significant impact, then perhaps we see evidentiary traces of that impact in indications such as these from the Folio.¹⁷ But my guess is that the ratio between published plays and the full textual corpus – particularly with respect to absolute numbers of words – is so low that any inferences regarding the consequences of the 1606 ban are fraught with statistical difficulty. The steep decline in god-language during the 1590s, moreover, presents further vexing complications for any study of Shakespeare's god-lexicon relative to the period during which he composed the majority of his plays.

With Shakespeare and Montaigne, as I have noted, the word «you» surfaces as the most striking lexical anomaly between the two corpora – at least with regard to disparities among single word frequencies. In terms of god-language, however, the corpora exhibit comparatively little differentiation. Only nine god-terms occur among the top 600 most disparate words between the Folio and the *Essays* (1.5%), six of these in Shakespeare («heaven», «hell», «devil», «faith», «blessed», «worship»), and the remaining three in Montaigne («religion», «divine», «divinity»).¹⁸ Even here

17 The «Act to Restrain Abuses of Players» (27 May 1606) stipulates that «if at any time or times, after the end of this present Session of Parliament, any person or persons do or shall in any stage play, interlude, show, May game, or pageant, jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, which are not to be spoken but with fear and reverence, such person or persons shall forfeit for every such offence by him or them committed, ten pounds»: quoted in Pollard (ed. 2004, p. 328).

18 By contrast, a juxtaposition of the First Folio with the seven-play corpus of Marlovian drama reveals eighteen god-terms among the top 373 most disparate words (the list stops at 373 since the log-likelihood figure has dropped by that point to 15.13, indicating that any further words would exhibit something lower than a statistical improbability in the 99.99th percentile). All eighteen of these terms appear with hugely greater frequency in Marlowe than in Shakespeare. In order of rank within the full list of 373, these terms are as follows: «jew», «christians», «lucifer», «soul», «jews», «christ», «pope», «friars», «hell», «heaven», «religion», «christian», «nun», «friar», «eternal», «damned», «divine», and «devils».

the evidence is qualified, since in Shakespearean plays «faith» and «worship» appear quite often in non-religious contexts, «faith» as an interjection and «worship» as a form of address. Doubt-terms, meanwhile, along with words commonly found in epistemological discussion, occur with massively greater frequency in Montaigne than in Shakespeare – words, that is, such as «reason», «natural», «knowledge», «opinion», «custom», «certain», «experience», «senses», «nature», «appearance», «belief», «memory», «ignorance», and «perceive». What we have, then, are a pair of corpora which exhibit striking similarities in their common absence of god-language (i.e., compared to the broad norms of 1590-1609), but striking dissimilarities in their deployment of the language of epistemological discourse. And since Montaigne's book is one that thousands of readers have felt is deeply sceptical about multiple forms of authority, knowledge, and custom, may we begin to decipher its lexical signature, so to speak, in such verbal constellations as those I have isolated through sequential juxtapositions against other contemporary corpora? As for Shakespeare, how should we interpret the comparative absence of epistemological vocabulary? Does it tell us anything significant about Shakespearean scepticism – or, indeed, about Shakespeare more broadly? My immediate reaction to this question is largely negative: no, we have far too little information at this point to make any such inference. Yet at the same time these statistics regarding lexical configuration obviously mean *something*. The relevant questions would seem to be these: what do such figures mean, how do we determine their meanings, are these meanings in fact important, and what new ways of thinking about the intersections of ideological history and computational analysis might be prompted by such forms of investigation?

Leaving Shakespeare and Montaigne behind for the moment, I would like to turn to a separate set of corpus juxtapositions. In this instance I have generated keyword frequency lists for sequential pairs of decades from the 1500s to the 1690s, again ranking words in terms of disparity based on log-likelihood calculations. Thus in Table 3 I present a series of nineteen specific juxtapositions: the 1500s against the 1510s, the 1510s against the 1520s, and so on. In each case I have examined the top 300 most disparate terms within relevant pairs of decades, isolating god-language in the process. Since the CQPweb spelling regularisation software does not work with this form of query, I have to some extent abandoned the constraints of my initial god-lexicon (i.e., the master list of terms provided in Tables 1 and 2), admitting both variant spellings and other relevant terms (e.g., «catholyque», «presbyters») not included in the main lists. We therefore see, for instance, that in the 1530s «cryste», «israel», «crysten», and «sauyour» all exhibit log-likelihood dominance, whereas in the 1540s we find that «christ», «israell», «christian», and «saviour» are highly predominant. But once we filter out orthographic anomalies of this sort, we are positioned to observe significant lexical disparities between juxtaposed decades. Perhaps most

prominent among these are the comparatively low levels of god-language in the 1520s, 1550s, 1570s, and 1590s. Another way of expressing this, of course, is that the surrounding decades – i.e., the 1510s, 1530s, 1540s, 1560s, 1580s, and 1600s – all exhibit much higher-than-average frequencies with respect to the broad god-lexicon. Either way, however, the results are perplexing. Why would it be the case, for instance, that among the 300 most disparate words between the 1590s and 1600s, 37 are god-terms (12.33%), and *all* of them predominate in the latter decade? Why does religious discourse exhibit such a sharp decline during the final years of Elizabeth's reign? Again, I have no ready answer to this question, but I suspect that the best way to begin addressing it is systematically to examine the 1046 printed texts from the 1590s against the 1349 printed texts from the 1600s.¹⁹ In other words, something akin to 'close reading' may be the best strategy for solving a particular conundrum brought to our attention by 'distant reading'.

Elsewhere in Table 3 it is mildly gratifying to witness the emergence of various familiar god-terms during successive decades: «ungodly», «heretykes», and «heresie» in the 1530s, «papists» in the 1550s, «righteousness» in the 1560s, «equivocation», «romanists», «popish», and «exorcistes» in the 1600s, and «presbyterian», «episcopacy», «church-government», and «synods» in the 1640s. A database including more than the top 300 most disparate terms would no doubt yield further satisfactions. But my suspicion is that until the CQPweb processor allows for more sophisticated searching – and especially for multi-variable constellations of lexical traits – we will not be able to move very far towards the isolation of statistically-convincing patterns of ideological change across sequential decades. At present I think that CQPweb is a tremendous resource for examining such matters as connotative variation over time: why, for instance, does «heathen(s)» exhibit declining levels of usage during the later decades of the seventeenth century, while «pagan(s)» and «infidel(s)» both show slight rates of increase? Similarly, I suspect that keyword juxtaposition analysis might be valuable in displaying detailed lexical differences between Protestant and Catholic styles of discourse, perhaps in poetic works such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596) or Southwell's *Saint Peter's Complaint* (1595), but still more likely in devotional polemics of the sort that Chloe Preedy has examined in her recent book on Marlowe (2012). With regard to epistemological and religious scepticism, however, I am at present unsure how corpus investigative techniques of the kind I have here employed can help in further sharpening our sense of the gradual erosion of god-language and related forms of religious discourse during the early modern era, particularly from the late sixteenth century forward.

¹⁹ These numbers represent the current totals available in EEBO Version 3 on CQPweb; they will rise when subsequent versions are installed.

I turn now to one final tactic of investigation which is somewhat more complex than the forms I have hitherto discussed: rates of lexical co-occurrence derived from proximity and collocation analysis. Using fourteen high-frequency terms drawn from my current god-lexicon, I have generated individual collocation tables for each term as it appears in ten consecutive decades from the 1550s through the 1640s. Each of these 140 tables, in turn, lists a minimum of 150 collocates, and some of them as many as 500. The collocates are ranked, once again, in terms of log-likelihood value, so that the most common (and thus the most statistically improbable) collocations appear at the top of each list. To give just one example, the highest-frequency collocate for «holy» in all ten decades is the word «ghost», which registers astronomical log-likelihood figures ranging from 13,629.64 in the 1550s to 113,827.29 in the 1640s.²⁰ To put this another way, «ghost» co-occurs with «holy» at a rate far exceeding that of any other word during each of the decades under consideration. The «holy»/«ghost» conjunction may thus be said to exhibit extraordinary collocational strength between 1550 and 1649. As for the parameters I have chosen for collocational analysis, they are simply the default settings currently provided within CQPweb: namely, a collocate must appear no further than three words to the left or right of a specific search term, and it must occur a minimum of five times in the relevant subcorpus to be considered valid for inclusion in the table.

Many other examples of consistent collocational strength might be offered. With «christ(s)», for instance, the words «jesus», «blood», and «saviour» are collocates which display tremendous prominence and consistency across the ten-decade span; with «soul(s)», such collocates include «body» and «salvation»; and so on with the following keywords: «scripture(s)» («holy», «canonical»); «christian(s)» («true», «religion»); «heaven(s)» («earth», «kingdom»); «nature(s)» («law»); and «god(s)» («almighty», «word»). Four of my fourteen god-terms are verbs («sin», «believe», «doubt», and «reason»), and in each case I have conducted my search using the following set of six conjugational forms: first-, second-, and third-person present tense (e.g., «sin», «sins», «sindest», «sindesth»), simple past tense («sinned»), and gerund («sinning»). Thus, in the case of «sin(s)», collocates of high prominence and consistency include «remission» and «original»; with «believe(s)», such collocates include the pronouns «I» and «we»; and with «doubt(s)», «I» and «no» top the list for consistency from 1550 to 1649.

More interesting than collocational stability, however, is collocational variation over time. And it is within this sphere that we can once again

20 For «holy» as a keyword I have relied (as I have throughout this study) on the EEBO-TCP variant list, which in this case includes «holier», «holiest», and «holily» as well as the base term «holy».

begin to gather evidence for ideological change, although extreme caution must be used in the effort. Returning to the keyword «holy», for instance, we note that prominent collocates (besides «ghost» and «scriptures») include «martyrs», «communion», «sacrament», and «trinity». Only with the last of these terms, however, do we observe significantly increased rates of frequency during the ten-decade span under consideration. Similarly, we can note striking increases in «reformed» as a collocate for «church(es)» and in «instinct» as a collocate for «nature(s)». Still notable, but less impressive rates of increased collocational strength may be found with the following terms: «people» and «blessing» (as collocates for «god[s]»); «love» (as a collocate for «christ[s]»); «church» and «liberty» (as collocates for «christian[s]»); and «because» (as a collocate for the verb «reason»). The word «hell», meanwhile, displays a sharp rise in frequency as a collocate for «heaven(s)», which leads me to wonder whether the expression «heaven and hell» grew in popularity during the century from 1550 to 1649.²¹ «Truth» and «sinful», on the other hand, show only slight rates of increased collocational strength with respect to the keywords «doubt(s)» and «nature(s)». Finally, «experience» gains prominence as a collocate for the verb «reason» - but only in the 1630s and 1640s. Prior to that point the word fluctuates considerably in its levels of collocational strength, achieving significant gains in the 1590s but decreasing precipitously in the 1610s and 1620s.

Decreased rates of co-occurrence also appear with «christ» (as a collocate of «church[es]»), «kingdom» (as a collocate of «god[s]»), «against» (as a collocate of «reason(s)»), «passion» (as a collocate of «christ[s]»), «frail» and «against» (as collocates of «nature[s]»), and «deadly» (as a collocate of «sin[s]»). There is no question, in other words, that the phrase «the seven deadly sins» underwent marked decline (at least in its printed deployment) during the ten decades from 1550 to 1649. «Gospel», «christ», and «jesus», meanwhile, all exhibit slight decreases in collocational strength with respect to the verb «believe(s)». And in the 1610s and later, similarly slight decreases may be observed in the collocates «damned» (with respect to «soul[s]») and «religion» (with respect to «faith[s]»). Quite intriguingly, the collocates «up» and «down» both show gradual diminishment in collocational strength with regard to the keyword «heaven(s)» - a fact that may suggest a comparably slight diminishment in the degree to which «heaven» was imagined and described in distinctly spatial terms over the century under review. Finally, the collocate «vengeance» declines markedly in its rates of co-occurrence with the keyword

21 A quick 'string of words' search in CQPweb's Version 3 of EEBO suggests that this is indeed the case; i.e., the ipmw rate for «heaven and hell» is twice as high during the 1640s as it is during the 1550s. The rate fluctuates in the intervening decades, but is particularly low during the 1560s and 1570s, and particularly high during the 1600s, 1610s, and 1620s.

«god(s)». But lest we conclude from this fact that during the ten decades from 1550 to 1649 the notion of divine retribution – particularly within a Christian context – diminished significantly in its frequency of expression, we should note that the collocate «wrath» displays no comparable decrease in frequency with respect to «god(s)» as a search term. And this, I think, serves well as an illustration of why we must proceed with great caution in drawing inferences about potential ideological change from evidence of diachronic collocational variation such as that presented here. Synonyms and near-synonyms, for example, must be queried intensively so as to ensure that rates of variation point not merely to inevitable linguistic shifts over time, but to genuine alterations in structures of thought and belief.

In the end there can be no substitute for the close reading of individual texts. Distant reading through corpus analytic techniques can provide fascinating data-sets and reveal patterns of language use that might never be detected even through the trained intuitive discernment of the most accomplished and erudite scholars. Further forms of computer-assisted calculation, moreover, can sharpen the quality of the initial linguistic evidence and thus enrich and prolong the period during which an investigator might examine vast swaths of data and statistical assessment. One of my own goals in this regard would be to chart multiple vectors of diachronic collocational change by programming a computer not merely to assemble lists of collocates but to track log-likelihood variations over sequential decades and then to display results in visual form, presumably in graphs which juxtapose particularly intriguing examples. This, I believe, could bring us a step closer to discerning subtle patterns of ideological change through large-scale tactics of corpus linguistics analysis. Still, the questions raised by distant reading will always send us back to close reading – although with a more well-rounded perspective and with newly-conceived strategies of potential investigation. Indeed, we will rely upon close reading as long as we practice and value ‘close writing’: that is, the meticulous word-by-word composition of verbal artifacts which attend to the concerns of specific audiences and which display emotional sensitivity, reasoned argument, lexical innovation, irony, metaphor, humor, and all the other elements of advanced cognitive expression that may ultimately evade the interpretive reach of distant reading even in its unknown future forms.

Table 1. God-Words and Doubt-Words (EEBO-TCP Analysis [1473–1700]).

This is a list of the words I have currently selected for examination. The words are presented in lower-case spelling; all of my searches are non-case sensitive. The Word-Class column uses the following abbreviations: «v» for verb, «n» for noun, «pn» for proper noun, «int» for interjection, «adj» for adjective, and «adv» for adverb. The Variants column indicates the total number of spelling and verb-tense variants identified by EEBO-TCP.²² Dispersion has been calculated by dividing the number of records in a specific search by the total number of full-text records available in EEBO-TCP at the time I undertook that search (40,061). Density has been calculated by dividing the number of matches (or 'hits') by the number of records; this yields the average number of appearances of a given word in each text where it appears. I do not have a means to indicate the frequency of a word in terms of 'instances per million words' (as in CQPweb), since I do not know how many million words were included in the 40,061 fully-keyed texts available in EEBO-TCP at the time I compiled this table. But the dispersion and density figures should be roughly equivalent in this table and in that derived from CQPweb data (Table 2).

Word	Word-Class	Variants	Matches	Records	Dispersion	Density
faith(s)	n; int	9(5+4)	660,107	20,532	51.25%	32.15
religion(s)	n	20(13+7)	413,765	20,834	52.00%	19.86
church(es)	n	10(10+7)	1,388,972	23,868	59.57%	58.19
doctrine(s)	n	11(6+5)	329,604	15,249	38.06%	21.61
divinity(ies)	n	13(11+2)	50,532	9142	22.82%	5.52
divine(s)	n; v; adj; adv	42	317,190	19,141	47.77%	16.57
sacred(ly)	adj; adv	5(3+2)	92,228	14,294	35.68%	6.45
spiritual(ly)	adj; adv	27(20+7)	237,860	14,058	35.09%	16.91
righteous(ly)	adj; adv	27(21+6)	85,971	10,036	25.05%	8.56
almighty(ies)	n; adj	19(16+3)	67,373	13,034	32.53%	5.16
holy	adj; adv	25	676,527	20,597	51.41%	32.84
unholy	adj; adv	11	4606	2098	5.23%	2.19
pious(ly)	adj; adv	5(3+2)	38,125	8882	22.17%	4.29
impious(ly)	adj; adv	9(4+5)	17,928	5434	13.56%	3.29
piety(ies)	n	8(6+2)	55,765	10,188	25.43%	5.47
impiety(ies)	n	8(6+2)	22,385	6180	15.42%	3.62
idol(s)	n	16(7+9)	56,171	8131	20.29%	6.90
sabbath(s)	n	9(3+6)	58,912	5516	13.76%	10.68
god	n; pn	3	3,794,456	31,248	78.00%	121.43

22 Thus, for nouns, I have selected all spelling variants for singular and plural forms. For verbs I have chosen to include variants for the first, second, and third person in the present tense (e.g., «sin», «sins», «sinnest», «sinneth») along with the simple past tense («sinned») and the gerund form («sinning»). For adjectives I have chosen to include adverbial forms (e.g. «sceptically» as well as «sceptical»).

gods	n; pn	8	624,625	20,167	50.34%	30.97
god(s)	n; pn	11(3+8)	4,419,081	31,884	79.58%	138.59
christ(s)	n; pn	12(9+3)	1,725,023	18,578	46.37%	92.85
jesu(s)	n; pn	9(5+4)	375,362	14,758	36.83%	25.43
saviour(s)	n	18(12+6)	191,440	13,294	33.18%	14.40
holyghost(s)	n; pn	40(12+[9+7])	124,470	9822	24.51%	12.67
trinity(ies)	n	9(1+8)	33,723	5830	14.55%	5.78
christian(s)	n; pn	14(9+5)	502,912	19,528	48.74%	25.75
saint(s)	n	23(10+13)	367,967	17,533	43.76%	20.98
soul(s)	n	18(9+9)	736,640	22,346	55.77%	32.96
conscience(s)	n	19(10+9)	279,063	19,605	48.93%	14.23
prayer(s)	n	11(5+6)	321,547	18,329	45.75%	17.54
providence(s)	n	8(6+2)	90,826	13,204	32.95%	6.87
salvation(s)	n	27(23+4)	193,113	12,308	30.72%	15.69
scripture(s)	n	22(10+12)	462,939	15,399	38.43%	30.06
bible(s)	n	5(3+2)	30,020	7219	18.02%	4.15
gospel(s)	n; v	9(5+4)	292,121	14,274	35.63%	20.46
pastor(s)	n	7(2+5)	65,350	6676	16.66%	9.78
priest(s)	n	18(7+11)	283,209	15,118	37.73%	18.73
altar(s)	n	8(4+4)	77,573	8935	22.30%	8.68
sacrament(s)	n	10(4+6)	167,686	9080	22.66%	18.46
baptism(s)	n	10(8+2)	113,558	7226	18.03%	15.71
baptise(s)	v	17	28,812	4183	10.44%	6.88
bless(es)	v; n	27	340,524	22,519	56.21%	15.12
worship(s)	v; n	80	256,065	15,365	38.35%	16.66
rejoice(s)	v	47	92,547	12,837	32.04%	7.20
amen(s)	int; adv	2(1+1)	44,126	8973	22.39%	4.91
eternal(ly)	adj; adv	14(9+5)	195,710	15,108	37.71%	12.95
everlasting(ly)	adj; adv	22(13+9)	94,153	11,431	28.53%	8.23
heaven	n; pn	9	426,093	20,468	51.09%	20.81
heavens	n; pn	14	65,171	10,585	26.42%	6.15
heaven(s)	n; pn	23(9+14)	491,264	21,232	52.99%	23.13
angel(s)	n	18(7+11)	205,618	15,139	37.78%	13.58
hell(s)	n; pn	5	144,458	14,410	35.97%	10.02
purgatory(ies)	n; pn	8(6+2)	23,907	3722	9.29%	6.42
devil(s)	n	43(22+21)	244,890	16,196	40.42%	15.12

satan(s)	pn	4(2+2)	101,414	8946	22.33%	11.33
lucifer(s)	pn	2(2+0)	5637	2161	5.39%	2.60
antichrist(s)	n; pn	10(5+5)	48,815	5089	12.70%	9.59
sin(s)	v; n	34	1,044,021	20,350	50.79%	51.30
sinner(s)	n	6(2+4)	119,253	9659	24.10%	12.34
blaspheme(s)	v	25	17,299	5486	13.69%	3.15
despair(s)	v; n	51	44,647	9676	24.13%	4.61
damn(s)	v; int	15	42,614	8630	21.54%	4.93
blasphemy(ies)	n	17(11+6)	30,338	6997	17.46%	4.33
heresy(ies)	n	13(7+6)	73,785	8210	20.49%	8.98
pagan(s)	n; adj	6(3+3)	26,256	4851	12.10%	5.41
heathen(s)	n; adj	5(3+2)	75,130	10,090	25.18%	7.44
infidel(s)	n; adj	10(4+6)	24,007	5573	13.91%	4.30
jew(s)	n; pn	14(5+9)	231,156	13,088	32.67%	17.66
mahometan(s)	n; pn; adj	8(4+4)	9187	1920	4.79%	4.78
mahomet	pn	7	17,345	2492	6.22%	6.96
atheist(s)	n; adj	8(3+5)	15,538	4656	11.62%	3.33
atheism(s)	n	4(3+1)	10,050	3455	8.62%	2.90
sceptic(s)	n; adj	17(8+9)	1406	728	1.81%	1.93
scepticism(s)	n	8(4+4)	714	351	0.87%	2.03
sceptical(ly)	adj; adv	3	527	357	0.89%	1.47
pyrrhonian(s)	n; adj	10(5+5)	124	79	0.19%	1.56
doubt(s)	v; n	57	228,865	20,994	52.28%	10.92
doubtful(ly)	adj; adv	19(10+9)	30,275	8327	20.78%	3.63
appear(s)	v	77	441,016	25,826	64.46%	17.07
appearance(s)	n	18(11+7)	50,506	10,598	26.45%	4.76
perceive(s)	v	74	132,854	14,826	37.00%	8.96
perception(s)	n	6(4+2)	5080	820	2.04%	6.19
experience(s)	n; v	17	111,669	15,911	39.71%	7.01
experiment(s)	n; v	7	25,925	4455	11.12%	5.81
believe(s)	v	96	529,492	22,631	56.49%	23.39
belief(s)	n	17(12+5)	49,394	9113	22.74%	5.42
unbelief(s)	n	23(18+5)	19,371	3644	9.09%	5.31
knowledge(s)	n	29	272,262	19,032	47.50%	14.30
science(s)	n	7(4+3)	38,232	7201	17.97%	5.30
opinion(s)	n	21(12+9)	283,323	18,245	45.54%	15.52

dogma(s)	n	2(1+1)	877	466	1.16%	1.88
dogmatism(s)	n	2(2+0)	4	2	0.00%	2.00
dogmatic(al)	adj; adv	7	2181	960	2.39%	2.27
custom(s)	n	15(7+8)	146,319	15,302	38.19%	9.56
customary(ily)	adj; adv	5(3+2)	5403	2307	5.75%	2.34
perhaps	adv	8	97,969	12,620	31.50%	7.76
possible(ly)	adj; adv	10(3+7)	136,620	17,141	42.78%	7.97
reason(s)	v; n	34	773,554	25,879	64.59%	29.89
certain(ly)	adj; adv	45	492,805	23,051	57.53%	21.37
uncertain(ly)	adj; adv	44(25+19)	34,375	8856	21.10%	3.88
nature(s)	n	5(2+3)	613,447	22,957	57.30%	26.72
natural(ly)	adj; adv; n	15(8+7)	283,213	17,897	44.67%	15.82
unnatural(ly)	adj; adv	14(8+6)	16,086	6044	15.08%	2.66

Table 2. God-Words and Doubt-Words (CQPweb Analysis).

This is a basic CQPweb examination of the god-words and doubt-words listed in Table 1. Version 3 of EEBO on CQPweb currently contains a total of 44,422 fully-keyed texts, amounting to 1.2 billion words. Frequency is calculated according to instances per million words (i.e., within the corpus of 44,422 texts). Dispersion is the number of texts in which matches occur divided by the total number of fully-keyed texts. Density is the number of matches divided by the number of texts (this figure can be compared to the density figure derived from EEBO-TCP so as to gauge the relative compatibility of my results). My searches here incorporate spelling variants derived not from EEBO-TCP but from the VARD spelling regularization software developed by Dr. Alistair Baron at Lancaster University: (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/vard/>).

Word	Matches	Texts	Frequency	Dispersion	Density
faith(s)	765,161	23,322	636.46	52.50%	32.80
religion(s)	417,846	23,011	347.56	51.80%	18.15
church(es)	1,378,480	25,452	1146.62	57.29%	54.15
doctrine(s)	345,481	17,200	287.37	38.71%	20.08
divinity(ies)	50,037	9992	41.62	22.49%	5.00
divine(s)	327,483	21,156	272.40	47.62%	15.47
sacred(ly)	94,988	15,706	79.01	35.35%	6.04
spiritual(ly)	254,679	15,841	211.84	35.66%	16.07
righteous(ly)	91,411	11,199	76.04	25.21%	8.16
almighty(ies)	71,620	14,363	59.57	32.33%	4.98
holy	710,705	22,720	591.16	51.14%	31.28

unholy	3896	1787	3.24	4.02%	2.18
pious(ly)	39,058	9776	32.49	22.00%	3.99
impious(ly)	18,163	5809	15.11	13.07%	3.12
piety(ies)	58,917	11,365	49.01	25.58%	5.18
impiety(ies)	23,599	6822	19.63	15.35%	3.45
idol(s)	53,513	8777	44.51	19.75%	6.09
sabbath(s)	66,003	6447	54.90	14.51%	10.23
god	4,174,430	34,362	3472.28	77.35%	121.48
gods	640,962	21,958	533.15	49.43%	29.19
god(s)	4,815,392	35,069	4005.43	78.94%	137.31
christ(s)	2,017,605	21,116	1678.24	47.53%	95.54
jesu(s)	400,008	16,554	332.73	37.26%	24.16
saviour(s)	204,465	14,871	170.07	33.47%	13.74
holy ghost(s)	127,862	10,995	106.36	24.75%	11.62
trinity(ies)	33,493	6358	27.86	14.31%	5.26
christian(s)	523,211	21,808	435.21	49.09%	23.99
saint(s)	381,857	19,500	317.63	43.89%	19.58
soul(s)	798,232	24,854	663.97	55.94%	32.11
conscience(s)	295,099	21,826	245.46	49.13%	13.52
prayer(s)	345,667	20,415	287.53	45.95%	16.93
providence(s)	97,236	14,649	80.88	32.97%	6.63
salvation(s)	213,900	13,984	177.92	31.47%	15.29
scripture(s)	492,901	17,396	409.99	39.16%	28.33
bible(s)	31,333	7961	26.06	17.92%	3.93
gospel(s)	297,482	15,983	247.45	35.97%	18.61
pastor(s)	66,300	7343	55.15	16.53%	9.02
priest(s)	269,469	16,522	224.14	37.19%	16.30
altar(s)	74,599	9624	62.05	21.66%	7.75
sacrament(s)	164,356	9969	136.71	22.44%	16.48
baptism(s)	116,211	7887	96.66	17.75%	14.73
baptise(s)	80,305	7226	66.80	16.26%	11.11
bles(s)es	411,712	25,506	342.46	57.41%	16.14
worship(s)	263,488	17,014	219.17	38.30%	15.48
rejoice(s)	98,664	14,310	82.07	32.21%	6.89
amen(s)	47,515	10,079	39.52	22.68%	4.71
eternal(ly)	211,672	16,901	176.07	38.04%	12.52

everlasting(ly)	102,753	12,947	85.47	29.14%	7.93
heaven	503,504	23,384	418.81	52.64%	21.53
heavens	49,058	8480	40.81	19.08%	5.78
heaven(s)	552,562	23,970	459.62	53.95%	23.05
angel(s)	216,767	16,619	180.31	37.41%	13.04
hell(s)	152,342	15,762	126.72	35.48%	9.66
purgatory(ies)	24,703	4069	20.55	9.15%	6.07
devil(s)	249,749	17,907	207.74	40.31%	13.94
satan(s)	111,697	10,254	92.91	23.08%	10.89
lucifer(s)	5999	2422	4.99	5.45%	2.47
antichrist(s)	51,499	5553	42.84	12.50%	9.27
sin(s)	1,136,736	22,538	945.54	50.73%	50.43
sinner(s)	133,298	10,926	110.88	24.59%	12.20
blaspheme(s)	17,954	6039	14.93	13.59%	2.97
despair(s)	44,569	10,336	37.07	23.26%	4.31
damn(s)	44,855	9444	37.31	21.25%	4.74
blasphemy(ies)	31,169	7799	25.93	17.55%	3.99
heresy(ies)	71,587	8949	59.55	20.14%	7.99
pagan(s)	25,582	5197	21.28	11.69%	4.92
heathen(s)	80,020	11,248	66.56	25.32%	7.11
infidel(s)	23,609	6034	19.64	13.58%	3.91
jew(s)	221,198	13,882	183.99	31.25%	15.93
mahometan(s)	2954	963	2.46	2.16%	3.06
mahomet	3676	930	3.06	2.09%	3.95
atheist(s)	15,772	4960	13.12	11.16%	3.17
atheism(s)	10,676	3849	8.88	8.66%	2.77
sceptic(s)	542	328	0.45	0.73%	1.65
scepticism(s)	606	312	0.50	0.70%	1.94
sceptical(ly)	467	319	0.39	0.71%	1.46
pyrrhonian(s)	105	72	0.09	0.16%	1.45
doubt(s)	231,710	23,083	192.74	51.96%	10.03
doubtful(ly)	29,839	8905	24.82	20.04%	3.35
appear(s)	444,838	28,597	370.02	64.37%	15.55
appearance(s)	51,958	11,642	43.22	26.20%	4.46
perceive(s)	128,414	16,285	106.81	36.65%	7.88
perception(s)	5053	791	4.20	1.78%	6.38

experience(s)	119,185	17,821	99.14	40.11%	6.68
experiment(s)	26,747	4785	22.25	10.77%	5.58
believe(s)	540,076	24,924	449.23	56.10%	21.66
belief(s)	48,807	9638	40.60	21.69%	5.06
unbelief(s)	15,057	3128	12.52	7.04%	4.81
knowledge(s)	283,926	21,220	236.17	47.76%	13.38
science(s)	38,663	7700	32.16	17.33%	5.02
opinion(s)	283,917	20,113	236.16	45.27%	14.11
dogma(s)	1985	894	1.65	2.01%	2.22
dogmatism(s)	5	3	0.00	0.00%	1.66
dogmatic(al)	1602	790	1.33	1.77%	2.02
custom(s)	144,185	16,611	119.93	37.39%	8.68
customary(ily)	5369	2485	4.47	5.59%	2.16
perhaps	99,958	13,917	83.14	31.32%	7.18
possible(ly)	139,568	18,929	116.09	42.61%	7.37
reason(s)	803,264	28,695	668.15	64.59%	27.99
certain(ly)	489,537	25,675	407.20	57.79%	19.06
uncertain(ly)	35,312	9631	29.37	21.68%	3.66
nature(s)	648,449	25,680	539.38	57.80%	25.25
natural(ly)	296,675	19,925	246.77	44.85%	14.88
unnatural(ly)	16,508	6442	13.73	14.50%	2.56

Table 3. God-Word Juxtapositions in Sequential Decades (CQPweb EEOB Version 3).

This table offers preliminary evidence for the development of god-language over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in English printed texts. Using log-likelihood statistics for the top 300 most disparate words between pairs of adjacent decades, I provide ranked lists of the predominant god-terms within each juxtaposed pair. Spellings are not regularized (unlike those in Table 2), and thus some of the contrastive terms merely reflect changes in orthography.

Decade	Predominant God-Terms
1500s	god, sin, holy, confessor, hell, confession, heaven, crysten, synner, church, dampned, faith, cryste, penance, blyssed, lord, salvation, paradyse, devil, confess, ihesu
1510s	feythe, monastery, providence, heuyn, mynysters, monasterye
1510s	soul, ihesu, ghostly, charity, grace, holy, blessed, monastery, souls, smote, dyuyne, providence, prayer, devout, mynysters, prayers
1520s	christ, faith, christen, scripture, believe
1520s	pope
1530s	god, israel, jesus, christ, moyses, soul, jerusalem, priests, sin, heaven, ungodly, holy, blessed, disciples
1530s	cryste, israel, saint, crysten, iesvs, heuyn, friar, church, purgatory, heretykes, iesv, sayntes, lord, spyryte, byleued, heresies, altar, catholyque, byshop, sauyour, soul, heithen
1540s	gods, christ, godly, spirit, israell, phariseis, scriptures, doctrine, baptism, heathen, salvation, fayeth, christians, christian, saviour, heavenly
1540s	lord, jesus, god, moyses, ghospell, gospel, spirit, phariseis, israel, israell, disciples, faith, christ, host, jews, preestes, sin
1550s	sacrament, catholic, heuin, saluioir, papists, nature, synnis, mass
1550s	christen, saluioir, heuin, christin
1560s	pope, church, lord, bishop, bishops, luther, gods, israel, righteousness, popes, psalme, ecclesiastical, communion, bishoppes, priest, churches, sacrifice, canons, priests
1560s	isral, lord, sacrament, mass, luther, bishop, priest, bishoppes, church, israel, sacrifice, christ, chrystes, catholic, priests, pope, bisshops, holy, ghospell, blessed, ordanit, communion, synod, psalme
1570s	[no god-terms appear in this sample]
1570s	[no god-terms appear in this sample]
1580s	church, moyses, jesuits, christis, israel, luther, god, soul, iesus, catholic
1580s	god, christ, church, holy, gospel, doctrine, jesus, bishop, faith, scriptures, apostles, heretikes, scripture, sacrament, epistle, gods, salvation, lord, beleue, catholic, godly, pope, luther, moyses
1590s	[no god-terms appear in this sample]
1590s	[no god-terms appear in this sample]
1600s	pope, jesuits, popes, catholic, protestants, church, faith, religion, parsons, doctrine, scripture, gods, papists, christis, cardinal, christ, christian, priests, catholikes, religious, christians, luther, iesuit, holy, equivocation, sacrament, catholics, sin, baptism, mass, romanists, canon, bishop, popish, catholickes, presbyters, sacrifice
1600s	papists, protestants, jesuits, religion, exorcistes, popish, sacrament, scriptures, catholic, sheol

1610s	god, israel, lord, iesvs, sin, presbyters, moors, shrive, spiritual, apostle, bishops, diocesan, spirit, blessed, heaven
1610s	moyses, shrive, lord
1620s	iehovah, protestants, saint, arian
1620s	pope, israel, iehovah, popes, saint, priests, bishoppes, parsons, jesuits
1630s	sabbath, spirit, christ, heavens, catholiks, nature
1630s	saint, iesus
1640s	covenant, churches, god, ministers, lords, reformation, believers, presbyters, church, presbytery, religion, congregations, congregation, gospel, baptism, presbyterian, apostles, sectaries, episcopacy, church-government, israel, synods, anabaptists, saints, baptised, protestant, judas, jesus, worship, presbyteriall, excommunication
1640s	church, churches, religion, reformation, prelates, ecclesiastical, bishops, presbyteriall, sectaries, papists, god, synods, popish, psalme, conscience, brownists, saint, protestant, congregations, presbyters, presbytery, gods, popery, church-government
1650s	quakers, nature, sin, unbelief, faith, natural
1650s	christ, baptism, christs, baptised, gods, covenant, grace, believers, jews, sin, faith, apostle, gentiles, gospel, baptize, sacrament, baptizing, saints, psalme, scripture, godly
1660s	experiment, bishop, religion, popes, liturgy, ecclesiastical
1660s	god, gods, israel, godly, sins, saint, psalm
1670s	quaker, cardinal, quakers, divine, righteousness, jesuits
1670s	christ, sin, righteousness, quakers, god, grace, faith, scriptures, gods, quaker, christs, covenant, scripture, holiness, saints, knowledge, nature
1680s	church, bishops, protestant, popish, bishop, popery, sacrament, protestants, churches, religion, communion, papists, reformation
1680s	church, gods, sacrament, papists, popery, protestant, christs, communion, transubstantiation, worship, popish, pope, protestants, eucharist, saint, popes, catholic
1690s	righteousness, quakers, god, nature, covenant, trinity, synod

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Radical Carnivalesque of Religion in Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*

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Abstract This article delineates the conceptual, thematic and structural links of Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* to popular culture and the dynamics of this incorporation that subsumes moral righteousness in riotous wonder (Gordon 121) and lends an anarchic quality to the text despite authorial attempts to inscribe it within the framework of orthodox Christian scepticism. The inability of the 'professed' programme to contain and channel the means adopted for its propagation generates a hectic spill-over and highlights the possibility of unearthing repressed implications gravitating towards an acknowledgement of conflict and social dissonance. It also forwards a general critique of social, moral and intellectual hierarchy and privilege through the use of parodic travesty in the first two sections of the book. More significant is the paradoxical insistence on material life divested from the ideological referentials stipulated by established religion in the first part and the climactic evocation of a popular festive non-hierarchical Christian existence as the ultimate manifestation of collective desire. Taken together, Folly's triptych – celebration, castigation, and renunciation – exemplifies a deliberate foregrounding of the faultlines of the accepted schema and of proposing a positive, plebeian antidote. The complex use of laughter, in both its conciliatory and destructive role, as the principal mode of expression (and response) further problematises the issue. Contrary to the common assumption of an irreducible dichotomy between laughter and philosophy, «laughter is recuperated as philosophy» in *The Praise of Folly* and constitutes «a way of knowing the truth about the world that is accessible neither to solemn academic discourse nor to the reduced genres of personal satire» (Michael D. Bristol). The article illustrates how the evocation of grotesque, popular, festive laughter by Folly's 'learned' ignorance and her self-referential self-ridicule is, in effect, a 'carnivalesque' of religion that seems to be the only mode of attaining truth.

Sung by a bastard in an alien land with the ostensible purpose of self-amusement, *The Praise of Folly*,¹ written by Desiderius Erasmus in 1509, highlights the fact that the impulse towards an overall re-structuring of religio-social framework pre-dates the Reformation, which is only the foremost among numerous projections of this desire for change. Erasmus's advocacy of the twin movement towards *ad fontes* and *ad res* – to the sources and to reality – reiterates the Petrarchan conjunction between classical learning and Christian praxis: «The arts, moral philosophy, rhetoric are ac-

1 The ensuing discussion limits itself to English translations of *The Praise of Folly* and does not incorporate Greek and Latin editions.

quired to this end – that we may understand Christ and celebrate his glory» (Erasmus [1703-1707] 1962, col. 1026B). The Platonic-Plautine inclinations of early English humanists echo this faith in the Christian purpose of classical texts. Together they focus on the need to return to the roots – the ancients and the Bible – to wrest true piety from empty ceremonies. The prospect of new management in France (Francis I), Spain (Charles I) and England (Henry VIII) at the turn of the century seems to auger well for the Erasmian vision of a Christian Europe cleansed of old demons. The suppressed excitement and fervent anticipation that permeates *Moria*, as Erasmus prefers to call his work, is reflected in the heady mix of contraries in its thematic and stylistic features – mock-classical declamation, satire, Epicurean philosophising, Christian precept *et al.* The delay in publication (1511, from Paris not England) and the deliberate suppression of authorial involvement in the process are perhaps symptomatic of the subsequent disillusionment in both spheres but that is not our immediate concern here.

The very history of survival of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* can be summed up by the paradox 'lasting trivia'. Controversial and infamous in its own time, *Folly's* encomium has elicited wide-ranging responses in subsequent ages as well – from the «spiritual dynamite» of Victorian Froude and a damp, journalistic «theological squib» for the twentieth century critic of *Times Literary Supplement* («Book Review» 1936, p. 570; the critic quotes J.A. Froude's opinion in his article) to «an extended stand-up comedy routine» in more recent times (Wolfe 2004-2005, n.p.). The contrariness of the work reflects the personality of its creator. Erasmus with his consistent denunciation of meaningless rituals, superstitions and hypocritical religiosity is indeed partially responsible for «laying the egg that Luther hatched» (Dods 1891, p. 2). But then he turns upon the chicken and reiterates his orthodox yet naively optimistic dream of a refurbished Christendom without a break from the Catholic Church. His tenacious clinging to Latin as the sole medium of expression runs contrary to his persistent advocacy of the vernacular Bible. Labelled «an ornament to this realm» by Ascham's England, Erasmus is also the self-proclaimed vulgariser writing for «boys and blockheads» (Nichols 1904, epistles 555, 415, n.p.). Dods's description of «a man not of the very first order» (Dods 1891, p. 13) contrasts with Himelick's praise of Erasmus's «sense of human dignity» which makes him reject all «overwhelming simplicities of conviction» (Himelick 1970, p. 24). M.M. Phillips's astute observation on the polymerous personality of Erasmus is perhaps closest to the mark:

The Erasmus who worshipped learning and proclaimed the right of reason to its own judgement, and yet feared and despised intellectual subtlety, is the same Erasmus as we find calling the Cambridge carriers and the Channel boatmen by hardest of names, refusing to use any vernacular, and generally drawing his cloak round him with a fastidious gesture, and yet

writing in the tenderest and most understanding vein about the lives of girls, boys, mothers and simple men. (Phillips 1949, p. 91)

The tortuous illogicality of *The Praise of Folly* which yet manages to transmit an atypical cogency deeper than many rational, cohesive texts echoes the non-syncretic, protean quality of its author.

Himelick's exposition of the complex nuances of Renaissance and Reformation and the dogmatic orthodoxy of the latter simultaneously highlights the dislocated, lonely voice of Erasmus. His preference for «the equable middle register of emotional pitch», and the ability to see several sides to an issue could not align itself with the either/or fanaticism demanded by both the Inquisition and the Reformation. A man who could challenge Lutheran principles and equally earnestly intercede for Luther's life, could criticise Catholic practices and yet uphold the institution, was an incomprehensible misfit in an age looking for «the thrill of absolutes» (Himelick 1970, pp. 18, 26, 32-33). A more acute sense of dislocation permeates the modern critical response to *The Praise of Folly*. Douglas's dismissive appraisal of its «fundamental incoherence» and unconvincing aesthetics (Douglas 1970, p. 96), Kaiser's insistence on including it within an established literary format (Kaiser 1964, p. 49), or Reborn's anxiety to dispel the notion of a «flawed masterpiece» by emphasising the «dialectical and dynamic unity and meaning» of the text betray a fundamental discomfort regarding the discursive discourse of the text (Reborn 1974, pp. 463-464).

The difficulty owes partly to the ability of ironic discourse to generate fiction. Speaking of *Fiction and Folly in Early Modern Literature*, Duprat points to Folly and fiction's shared «capacity of creating alternative representations» which enables them to re-figure «the world depicted by reason or history» and also their shared paradoxical structure which lends a volatile instability to «their speech acts, which deny, suspend, or do not seriously guarantee the truth of their statements» (Duprat 2008, p. 141). This facility of generating fiction whose veracity is always somewhat suspect allows Folly to continually shift her ground with reference to both content and form. As Erasmus states in his reply to Martin Dorp in 1516, *Moria* is the comic complement - *sub specie lusus* - of *Enchiridion* and therefore, equally serious in purpose (Miller 1979, p. 143). But it is also a game indulged in by a sick man as Erasmus vouches in his prefatory letter to More: «I was simply playing with pawns for my own amusement» (Miller 1979, p. 3). While propagandist intent jostles with private diversionary aspect throughout the work, the subject shifts from human lapses to crime to sublimation in a divine Other beyond the mortal Self. Children, women, drunkards, aged people, bachelors, couples, lawyers, scholars, priests, princes, Christians - the whole sea of humanity is compressed within a survey that changes its perspective faster than a chameleon. The moods convey tolerance, irony, anger, laughter, derision, patience, irritation, exasperation,

deception, joy, gravity *et al.* Reborn reads in Folly's encomium, a grand «fabula» of life shifting from a «comedy» built on illusory hope and self-delusion, to the «tragedy» of horrifying reality and finally to the ultimate realm of «unreasoning joy» that transports one beyond the impermanence of comedy and the pain of tragedy (Reborn 1974, p. 469). Even this most extensive formulation of the three-part structure traditionally associated with *The Praise of Folly* cannot contextualise the protean variety offered in Folly's encomium.

Containment is truly a major problem of the text and extends well beyond the matter of content. Quintilian and Athonian paradigms sit uncomfortably over Folly and seem like stiff, dowdy overcoats deliberately preventing the eyes from feasting on a flamboyant, riotous array of colours and designs (Hudson 1946, pp. 129-142; Kaiser 1964, p. 49). 'Paradoxia epidemica' only answers for the classical orientation of the text. The medieval tradition of folly and estate satire; classical irony; mock encomium; Greek, Latin and vernacular proverbs; anti-clerical satire; utopian critique; salutary advice and sheer exuberance of language come in a now Epicurean, now macabre, now jocose nonsense. The inability of the **professed** programme to contain and channel the means adopted for its elucidation generates the impression of a hectic spill-over and highlights the possibility of unearthing **repressed** meanings embedded in the text. These repressed implications gravitate towards an acknowledgement of conflict and social dissonance and a general critique of social, moral and intellectual hierarchy through the use of parodic travesty in the first two sections of the book. Taken together, Folly's triptych – celebration, castigation, and renunciation – exemplifies a deliberate design of foregrounding the faultlines of the accepted schema and of proposing a positive, plebeian antidote to it. The assumption of radical intent ingrained in *The Praise of Folly* is substantiated when posited alongside the 1515 *Adagia* where the compilation of four thousand proverbs is not only headed by a proverb with a levelling impetus – «Between friends all is common» – but also vested with the classical authority of Pythagoras, to whom the proverb is attributed, and Plato, who promote the idea of a shared collective existence. According to Eden this «signals the protreptic aim» of the entire *Adagia* collection that calls for «*communitas* in the radical sense» and «invites its readers to join a community where all things are held in common (*commune*) including material property and, more to the point, what we would call intellectual property» (Eden 1998, p. 407).

However, the Erasmian passage that Eden cites for corroboration makes no mention of «intellectual property» focusing instead on concrete material concerns and their Christian lineage:

Not only was Pythagoras the author of this saying, but he also instituted a kind of sharing of life and property in this way, **the very thing Christ wants to happen among Christians**. For all those who were admitted

by Pythagoras into that well-known band who followed his instruction would give to the common fund whatever money and family property they possessed. (Philips 1982, p. 30; my emphasis)

The positive insistence on material bodily principle contrary to the ideological stipulations of the established order is also instanced in the first part of *The Praise of Folly* but the climactic evocation of a festive non-hierarchical sublimation as the ultimate Christian goal adds a carnivalesque quality to collective apotheosis. According to Gordon,

The nonsense reaches its culmination at the close of the speech in Folly's paean to an ecstasy the meaning of which is unfathomable and where the self loses its psychological awareness in the Other. At this moment of climax, sense vanishes within the infinite, **the moral is lost in wonder, and righteousness is overwhelmed by the riotous.** (Gordon 1970, p. 121; my emphasis)

The subsuming of moral righteousness in riotous wonder lends an anarchic quality to the text that transforms the very definition of **true** Christianity by drawing it outside all institutional practices.

The carnivalisation of religion is reinforced by Folly's complex use of laughter as the principal mode of expression and response. Erasmus's definition of his work as «this *jeu d'esprit* of mine» in his prefatory letter to More (Miller 1979, p. 2), aligns it with the medieval topos of *ridendo dicere verum* [to speak truth with laughter].² Laughter's instinctive association with low life, its incompatibility with serious philosophical statements, dictates the ambience of *The Praise of Folly*. But Erasmus's dual deployment of laughter both as a disruptive and a conciliatory force deepens the text's ambiguities. Juvenalian satire bears down harshly upon theologians, kings and courtiers, and spiritual overlords. Thus the most «deadly enemies» of the church are, «impious popes, who allow Christ to fade away in silence, who bind him with mercenary laws, who defile him with forced interpretations, who murder him with the pestilent wickedness of their lives» (Miller 1979, p. 113).

On the obverse side, her conciliatory hand works against severance of relations: «the everyday life of married couples», for instance, «is supported and sustained by flattery, laughing things off, taking it easy, being deceived, pretending things are not as they are» – all of which are Folly's domain (Miller 1979, p. 33). This Janus-faced laughter defies fixity of location. Even more unique is that Erasmian laughter, at least in *The Praise of Folly*, defies its natural associations. Bristol illustrates how, contrary

2 See Curtius ([1953] 1990) and Barolsky (1978) for further elaboration.

to the common assumption of an irreducible dichotomy between laughter and philosophy, «laughter is recuperated as philosophy» in *The Praise of Folly*: «Laughter [...] built into the fictional mise-en-scène of Folly's oration» constitutes «a way of knowing the truth about the world that is accessible neither to solemn academic discourse nor to the reduced genres of personal satire» (Bristol 1985, p. 130). For Donald Watson, the evocation of grotesque, popular, festive laughter by Folly's learned **ignorance** and her self-referential self-ridicule is, in effect, a **carnivalisation** of literature that indicates the plebeian connection of this work (Watson 1979). In this context it must be noted that among the early humanists located in England, Erasmus was the only self-acclaimed vulgariser writing in the popular mode (albeit in Latin) and that two of these works - *The Praise of Folly* and *Colloquies* - were completed during his sojourn in England. The third, *Adagia*, was a life-long involvement.

However, to impute a «radical social theory», which completely rejects the basic sixteenth-century norm of the «Chain of Being», to the work and its author, as Margo Todd does, would be too ambitious and sweeping a generalisation (Todd 1987, p. 185). Any exploration of the work's topicality, implication and impact, major and minor concerns and stylistic devices will reveal that this extremely sophisticated production of Renaissance humanism has proved more disturbing than placatory. But its volatility owes more to the constant oscillation of perspective, and shifting, unreliable narrators rather than to a conscious inherent politics. Established order and dominant ideology are subverted obliquely through the eulogising of impermanence, flux, instability, inconclusive conclusions, **becoming** rather than **being**. It leaves us with a lasting impression of an invigorating shake-up of a moribund edifice. Moreover, the nature and object of destabilisation are modified by the factors of timing, reception and topicality. With *The Praise of Folly* in particular, even the early history of its reception indicates that «literature is [...] a troubling and indeed troublesome institution» (Bristol 1985, p. 13). The structuring of his narrative as a **re-counting** and not an **invention** by Erasmus in order to minimise authorial responsibility indicates his apprehension of adverse response from powerful quarters. But he had not foreseen the fundamental political and religious upheavals that would make his book explosively subversive and force retraction.³

The context of reception is crucial to the present interrogation which engages primarily with the translated version. The appearance of the first English translation made by Thomas Chaloner in 1549 during an intensely Protestant phase of English administration under another youthful sovereign, Edward VI, underscores this **Catholic** text's accessibility to Reformist

3 Erasmus's letter to Martin Dorp, May 1515, disavows any frivolous work written before that date, «I would not want anything that I have written, even in jest, to detract from Christian piety in any way whatsoever» (Miller 1979, p. 161).

interpretations. The appropriating intent of the translator is evident in his prefatory letter to the readers, where he speaks of bestowing an «englisshe liuery vpon this latine boke» (Chaloner's «Preface», in Miller [1549] 1965, p. 3). Chaloner's negotiation of the original text operates at multiple levels. Vernacularising aims at transcending the limits of elite reception and appealing to a wider audience. Erasmus's foregrounding of Christ and of religion as a **state of mind** as opposed to external conformity, signals the potential for **Protestant** popularisation. However, the radicalism implicit in the complete breakdown of hierarchy celebrated by the text is beyond the scope of the Anglican **re-formation** of Christianity. Chaloner's emphasis on the status of the translator («knight») and his covert appeal to the gentle reader are attempts at controlling the subversive dynamism of the text (Chaloner's «Preface», in Miller 1965, p. 3). Chaloner admits that he is «moued to englisshe it, to the end that meane men of baser wittes and condicion, myght haue a maner of comfort and satisfaction in theimselfes [...] without aspyryng to things aboue theyr reache» (Chaloner's «Preface», in Miller [1549] 1965, pp. 4-5). Yet the language and content of the translated product combine to defy such restrictive popularisation in the interests of the new power elite. Chaloner's rendition thus occupies «a wonderfully ambiguous social space» which, as Baker elucidates, is epitomised by the metaphor of «englisshe liuerey»: «Chaloner's bestowal of an 'englisshe liuerey' identifies his translation with the trappings of both feudal service and urban corporations. It will become clear that Chaloner uses Folie to reinforce the necessity of a hierarchy, but, as a livery, the vernacular could also blur social distinctions» (Baker 1996, p. 5). This duality is manifested in Chaloner's rendition despite his recourse to Erasmus's revised version of *The Praise of Folly* which tries «to make the paradox of Christian folly more guarded and less open to the charge of blasphemy» (Miller's «Preface», in Miller [1549] 1965, p. xiv).

The positive creed of «**carnal** peace and quiet» – which generates similar discomfiture in Luther and for which he upbraids Erasmus (Packer, Robinson trans. 1957, p. 92; my emphasis) – is best exemplified by the material utopia foregrounded in the opening section of *The Praise of Folly*. The disordered topsy-turvydom of Folly's domain is denoted by her alleviation of human suffering through the promotion of Self Love, Flattery, Forgetfulness, Laziness, Pleasure, Madness, Luxury, Rowdiness and Sleep (Miller 1979, p. 17): the very elements traditionally associated with chaos and confusion. Unlike More and Bacon's industrious and disciplined utopias, Erasmus celebrates a more ancient but thriving, hedonistic and popular notion of happy existence that aligns itself with the fourteenth-century satire, *Land of Cockayne*, the pictorial depiction of surfeit by Heironimo Bosch in his images of gluttony, Gonzalo's earthly heaven in *The Tempest*,

the Rabelaisian universe⁴ and the dream vision of Chaplin and his sweetheart in *Modern Times*. A.L. Morton, distinguishing between the elite and plebeian conceptions of ideal life, exemplifies the essential contradiction between the two. The former envisages a structured, cohesive hierarchic state free from want and exploitation and based on honest labour. The latter, engendered by an everyday experience of starvation, drudgery and expropriation, dreams of an unstructured state-less life of indolence and wasteful abundance (Morton 1968, pp. 15-45). Folly's creed of self-indulgent delusion, unrestrained pleasure and the undercurrent of compassion for the lowly, the weak and the unempowered – women, children, aged, drunkards, cuckolds, fools – reiterates the plebeian connection of these sophisticated Latin trivia.

The non-conformist ambience of Folly's world is witnessed particularly in the representation of the women.⁵ An important aspect of the re-allocation of power and the general shaping of identities during the Renaissance is the fashioning of secular male selfhood. Attempts to reconceptualise 'manhood' generates an uneasy dynamics of power in which sexual anxiety vis-à-vis women is a predominant factor. The region-centric construct of the nation, for example, is deeply etched with sexual-political tensions during the Elizabethan rule in England. The humanist concern for **beleaguered masculine identity** negotiates the sexual threat by either denying the female presence, as in Erasmus's own pedagogical writings like *On Civility in Boys* (1530), or by projecting a conciliatory model of woman's subordination mutually agreed to by the sexes (Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano*), or by adopting the orthodox Christian notion of woman as an intransigent, personification of wantonness to be kept on a tight leash (Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man*). *The Praise of Folly* accepts the essentially negative function of women but then goes on to «create a strange model of substitute power: the power of the women to create the conditions [...] [of their] own subordination» which becomes an oblique signifier of «a failing of masculinity» (Corelli 1990, pp. 246-247, 244). Erasmus's gender construct restricts woman to the private domestic sphere where she epitomises folly and her very being is defined by the demands of the opposite sex: she exists to «season and sweeten the sourness of the masculine mind with her folly» (Miller 1979, p. 28). Innately foolish, vain, capricious, and preoccupied with physical beauty, self-delusion and conjugal deceit, she is associated in every way with the lowly, trivial and reprehensible, and yet this woman-representation focuses on the subversive **material consequences** of the man-woman encounter. The weaker sex is able to exploit the du-

4 Kaiser (1964) is one of the most forceful exponents of the link between Erasmus, Rabelais and Shakespeare as 'the Praisers of Folly'.

5 The following discussion of Erasmus and gender is inspired by Corelli (1990).

ality and ambivalence of the gendered power structure precisely because of her lowly attributes. Her beauty and seeming youth are validated solely as objects of male desire yet they allow her to usurp the male function of domination and «tyrannise [...] over tyrants». She is further empowered to affect the superior male in an adverse, reductionary manner, alter his «inward cogitation» and re-fashion him in her own image: «consider how childishly men talk, how frivolously they act when they have decided to indulge in the pleasure to be found in women» (Miller 1979, pp. 29-30).

The figuration of pre-nuptial and post-marital unfaithfulness conforms to the traditional notion of intrinsic female deviancy. But the prolonging of marital bliss through successful feminine deception also denotes the inability of masculine authority to contain female sexuality (Miller 1979, p. 33). It is interesting to note that the sage whose exhumed body bore traces of syphilis⁶ identifies sexuality as the major source of female empowerment: even old women «are as hot as bitches in heat» (Miller 1979, p. 48). Her material body is the object that subjects her to the male exercise of power and simultaneously enables her to transgress, contest and invert male superiority. The issue of gender ascendancy is deliberately problematised by refusing to locate **real** and **virtual** power within a single hierarchic model. Female prerogative is, in fact, surreptitiously and obliquely extended beyond the domestic to the macropolitical arena first by reiterating Folly's female identity in the context of woman's foolishness and secondly by encapsulating the history of human generation in the foolish and sexual act of copulation (Miller 1979, pp. 18-19).

Just as the female body is an important determinant of the woman's position in society, the physical body is the site where Folly successfully combats her adversaries: Reason and Intellect. Reason is limited «to the **narrow confines** of the head» whereas the rest of the body is given over to passion. Besides, against «solitary reason» are set «two most fierce tyrants»: «anger, which occupies **the citadel and very fountain head of life**, the heart; and passionate desire, which holds wide sway over the rest, **all the way down to the genitals**» (Miller 1979, p. 28; my emphasis). The spatial primacy of emotion over intellect within the human body determines Folly's ubiquitous sway over human relations (most of which are affective) and by extension, over social formations. Inverting the common association between unreason and chaos, Folly asserts that all social formations and individual relationships cohere because of her benign interception:

In short, without me no companionship among friends, no blending of lives in marriage can be either pleasant or stable. The people would no

6 Correlli refers to the team of German pathologists who actually conducted the investigation (Corelli 1990, pp. 244, 260 n. 12).

longer tolerate their prince, nor the master his servant, nor the maid-servant her mistress, nor the teacher his pupil, nor one friend another, nor the wife her husband, nor the landlord his tenant, nor a soldier his barracks-buddy, nor one messmate another, if in their relations with one another they did not sometimes err, sometimes flatter, sometimes wisely overlook things, sometimes soothe themselves with the sweet salve of folly. (Miller 1979, pp. 33-34)

The typical Erasmian blend of radical perception and conciliatory strategies of containment is observed in all its complexity in the above instance. Most individual and collective affiliations are viewed as hierarchic power relations involving an irrevocable conflict of interest between the authorised and the subordinate and the disruptive potentiality of an immediate confrontational intercourse. Folly's participation neither resolves the contradictions nor creates real conditions for the removal of exploitation. Instead, her placatory strategies involving error, deflection, flattery, self-praise, deceit, amnesia and a myriad of other diversionary tactics merely reinforce the status quo. She connives with the established order to invoke appeasement, but the method of reducing to absurdity all serious action undermines the hegemony of that order. The complex ambivalence of Folly's interventionary role is exemplified by the fact that her positive participation as a healer of social friction is conservative in nature but hinges upon a kind of negative radicalism. The indiscriminate application of the strategy of ridicule subverts impartially both the forces **for** and **against** social transformation. While indeterminacy per se cannot be deemed progressive it definitely associates itself with the dual aspect of carnival laughter which seems to permeate the treatment of human foibles in *The Praise of Folly*.

Conciliatory laughter, aimed at marginalising social tension, also of necessity accommodates an awareness of social unease. When amity and cohesion are achieved through inversion, as in the **fools' paradise** created by Folly, there is the suggestion of a levelling out of hierarchic distinctions. The claim to privileges on the basis of moral and intellectual superiority in the divine and human order is exposed as farcical imposture. The Olympians engage in unrestrained Bacchanalian revelry after forcibly ejecting Momus, who «was always rudely disturbing the happiness of the gods with his wisdom» (Miller 1979, pp. 26-27). All «ivory-tower philosophers», from Socrates and Theophrastus to Plato, and specially philosopher-kings such as Brutus, Cicero, Demosthenes and Marcus Aurelius, are declared totally «inept in absolutely all the activities of human life» (Miller 1979, pp. 36-39). Nestor's drunken stupidity is life-saving while the superior intellect of a Diogenes or a Chiron pushes them to suicide (Miller 1979, pp. 21, 47-48, 51). «Theologians starve, physicians freeze, astronomers are ridiculed, logicians are ignored» while the Stoic wise-man purged of emotions is actu-

ally a dehumanised figure (Miller 1979, pp. 45-46). The standard against which superior gods and men are judged and found wanting is a **material** one, not a spiritual or a transcendental one. This inversion of the evaluating apparatus and the exaltation of human frailty, weakness and deficiency as essentially regenerative, dispels the fear and intimidation generated by official imposition. Folly's assertion of an abundant, material, Epicurean existence is in effect a Latinate, classically sophisticated version of carnival laughter's endorsement of a joyous irreverent, popular utopia, every aspect of which subverts the structures of monolithic officialdom. Bakhtin notes that such laughter creates a sense of freedom in the midst of restrictions especially during the Renaissance, «A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal cultures» (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, p. 4.)

Huizinga and Kaiser's contemptuous dismissal of the significance of the procession of fools in authority in the middle section of *The Praise of Folly* is an arrogant and arbitrary denial of the history of critical response to the text down the ages.⁷ Ironically, it is also an admission (although by omission) of the persistent volatility of this section and its stubborn refusal to yield any 'deeper' meaning. Scholars have noted the 'souring of the grin' as it were in this section with the shift in focus from folly to vices, from sympathetic tolerance to scathing invectives.⁸ Dorps' anxiety over the «great disturbance» caused by *Moria* even among the «most devoted admirers» of Erasmus (Nichols 1904, epistle 304, n.p.) presents us with a cue to the hostile contemporary response to *The Praise of Folly* that intensifies with the burgeoning Reformation and is still capable of generating irate reaction as with Tangelder: «It is a cold-blooded, deliberate attempt to discredit the church, and its satire and stinging comment on ecclesiastical conditions are not intended as a healing medicine but a deadly poisons (Tangelder 2009, n.p.). The theological speculations ridiculed by Folly might raise a ripple of laughter from the modern reader at their exaggerated absurdity but Miller demonstrates the «wicked accuracy» of Erasmus acerbic volleys by tracing them to specific theologians except for the transubstantiation of Christ into a devil, a cucumber or a piece of flint (Miller 1974, pp. 499-511).⁹ Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Godefroid de Fontaine were variously involved in discussing how «original sin is transmitted to Adam's posterity», what time Christ took to be «fully formed in the Virgin's womb», whether Christ could have turned himself into a woman or an ass (Miller 1979, p. 88). Jean

7 Huizinga designates it as an «ordinary satire on human folly» while Kaiser dismisses it as a «simple satire that is mere invective» (Huizinga 1952, p. 74; Kaiser 1964, p. 50).

8 See Smith 1962 for a detailed history of responses to Erasmus' works in general and to *The Praise of Folly* in particular.

9 More detailed and specific instances are cited throughout Miller 1979.

Buridan, a teacher at the University of Paris in the 1590s, had raised the question whether «God the Father hates the Son» (Miller 1974, pp. 500-501). The citation of pertinent passages from Augustine and Gratian to demolish men who follow the letter rather than the spirit of the law, the ridiculing of Aquinas's diktat on worshipping the charcoal sketch of Christ, references to Innocent III and William Durandus's emblematic interpretation of ecclesiastical vestments to remind wayward bishops of their true duty (Miller 1979, pp. 90, 92, 110) infuriated Erasmus's enemies because «he knew where to look for the weak points in their invincible and irrefragable armor» (Miller 1974, p. 502).

The illusion of leisure-time amusement that Erasmus continuously claims for the work is stretched to its limits by homing in on specific targets even while discussing generalities. His aversion to merchants presented as perjurers, cheats, and usurers can be retraced to the traditional medieval denunciation of profiteers. But in their wake come «flattering friars who stand in awe of them and openly call them 'venerable' clearly for no other reason than to get a little share of their ill-gotten gains» (Miller 1979, p. 77) which points an accusing finger at Bernadino of Siena and Fransiscan Antoninus of Florence, who spent «much time and effort explaining how necessary and useful 'mercatio' is and under what circumstances profit may be taken from the exchange of goods or money» (Miller 1974, p. 503). The epithet «rickety old man» used to describe warmongering popes who reduce «all human affairs, laws, religion, peace, to utter chaos» alludes to the highly combative Pope Julius II (1503-1512), whom Erasmus attacks more extensively in *Pope Julius II Excluded from Heaven* written in 1513 and published in 1517 (Miller 1979, p. 114).

Unlike Dryden, or even Ben Jonson during the *Poetaster* controversy, Erasmus is not engaged in a game of one-upmanship with his detractors. The predominance of dead celebrities among those denounced sustains this assumption. Ironically, after establishing the need of role-playing to maintain the illusion of happiness, Erasmus's own mask of folly starts slipping and any doubts about his earnestness vanishes. The world-as-theatre *topos* also changes its context: the arena of make-believe is transformed to one of action where real participants will change the course of the narrative. Having delineated the characters and dreams of the common public, the self-appointed reformer moves on to classify the hindrances towards achieving the common good by pinpointing as accurately as possible the regions that require careful scrutiny and alteration. The specific citations - now of authorities, now of texts or individuals - are merely illustrative instances of a larger negative pattern that needs to be discarded for a healthy commonwealth.

Derisive laughter aimed at spiritual and secular governors is ill-fitted to the requisites of an encomium as Folly herself admits towards the end of this section. Although close to the destructive Juvenalian satire in tone, this sec-

tion also draws heavily upon the popular medieval literary tradition of estate satire to critique the perceived medieval vestiges of moribund scholasticism, theology and philosophy in his times as irrational superstition. Erasmus's conception of society as «a large complex, interrelated organism» is a great advance on the haphazard shapeless catalogue of different estates evidenced in contemporary complaint literatures like the enormously popular Brant's *Ship of Fools* identifying, according to Miller, only two broad categories, academic and social: the academics include «grammarians, poets, rhetoricians, writers of books, lawyers, dialecticians, philosophers, theologians, and monks» while the social class incorporates «kings, courtiers, bishops, cardinals, popes, and priests» (Miller 1974, pp. 503-504).

A slight modification of the Millerian model cited above would highlight how such simplified demarcation makes for a very special kind of estate satire. First, accepting the application of 'class' in a very loose sense, it would perhaps be more accurate to designate the second group of kings, courtiers etc. as a 'political' rather than a 'social' class responsible for the administration of the nation. Conventional estate satire considers all degrees of hierarchy and satirises the disparity between the ideal and the actual at every level tracing it primarily to the refusal to maintain one's degree. Erasmus's narrow focus limits itself to the **officially endorsed shapers** of collective destiny. The academics forge the human mind as instructors to intellect; conditioning the access to and utilisation of knowledge. And knowledge, according to the early humanists is the key to a new beginning, a new conscious fashioning of the self. Similarly, the **political** group monitors social and individual actions. Thus between them the two groups have complete control over *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* of all mankind.

Erasmus's confines the investigation of deviant behaviour to the empowered class perceiving a direct connection between the superiority of one's position and his potency as an evil doer: «As if the church had any more deadly enemies than impious popes, who allow Christ to fade away in silence, who bind him with mercenary laws, who defile him with forced interpretations, who murder him with the pestilent wickedness of their lives» (Miller 1979, p. 113). The princes whose «whole concern is to lead a soft life [...] raise thoroughbred horses [...] make a profit by selling appointments», usurp citizens' wealth unlawfully; courtiers who don the «symbols of virtue and wisdom» such as gold, gems and robes, but yield to others «the endeavor to put these qualities into actual practice»; bishops who have forgotten the implication of their title «namely, painstaking labor and concern» and are obsessed with «casting their nets for money»; cardinals who act as lords, not «ministers of spiritual gifts»; priests who «fight for their [...] tithes with sword, spear, stones, with every imaginable sort of armed force» – all denote authority, lay and clerical, whose individual aspirations and their manifestations run counter to their designated social responsibility (Miller 1979, pp. 109, 110, 114).

Erasmus's rhetoric of condemnation pre-figures closely the post-Reformation counsellors' voices in Henry VIII and Edward's time. Like Latimer, Brinkelow and Crowley, he is invoking the stewardship theory of possession and warning all transgressors that «they will soon have to give a most exact account» (Miller 1979, p. 110; see, for instance, Cowper 1874; Cowper 1872; Corrie 1884). His admonition is indistinguishable from theirs, except perhaps in intensity. This continuity between the medieval, humanist and post-Reformation critique of social order is occasioned by their sharing of the notion of primitive Christian community. More crucial, and reflected in Erasmus alone, is the awareness of the legitimising power of authority. The princes usurp citizens' wealth only after forwarding «suitable pretexts so that downright injustice may at least have some appearance of justice» (Miller 1979, p. 108). The battle-lust of spiritual leaders is hailed as religious «zeal, piety, fortitude» and the consequent «loss of much Christian blood» is valorised as «the very way to defend apostolically the church» (Miller 1979, pp. 113-114). For Erasmus, the gravest threat posed by the ruling elite is not the contravention of socio-political obligations for self-aggrandisement, but their manipulative re-construction of universally applicable laws of justice and morality, which distorts human values and perception beyond recognition. The official ordination of this antipodal frame of reference ensures a truly grotesque dance macabre that can culminate only in destructive chaos. In a way their powers supersede those of Folly: her oscillations foster the possibility of multiple alternatives and thus **expand** human knowledge whereas the monolithic imposition of warped signification by dominant authority obliterates the very memory of other choices.

The unusually narrow focus on the topmost level in the identification parade organised to expose the **enemy of the people** and the deliberate specificity of personal salvoes leaves no doubt among his contemporaries that Erasmus is bombarding in deadly earnest, the very citadel to which he belongs. Entrenched authorities were not entirely off the mark in interpreting Erasmus's emendatory zeal as demolishing mania. Full implementation of the Erasmian programme of rehabilitating Christianity would have sounded the death knell of all orthodox institutions. Neither Erasmus nor his adversaries are ignorant of the fact. Folly's materially powerful retinue is branded as criminal, not foolish and her response is shame and anger not tolerance. Critics marvelling at the perpetual wavering generated by Folly's encomiastic mode of articulation tend to ignore the stylistic volte-face in this section: fiction-making is displaced by proof-mongering, irony and paradox give way to diatribe and invectives, fixity replaces flux and ambivalence and «rhetorical *action* actually lead to a real *mimesis*» (Duprat 2008, p. 144) as Folly mounts an uncharacteristically clear-cut endorsement of a non-exploitative social structure. She herself acknowledges this wide divergence from the encomiastic scheme in a studiedly abrupt closure of the exposé of empowered deviants, underscoring the deployment

of satire through ostensible denial: «But it is no part of my present plan to rummage through the lives of popes and priests, **lest I should seem to be composing a satire rather than delivering an encomium**» (Miller 1979, p. 115; my emphasis). In a French sottie by Juleville, Mother Folly is entitled «la Reformeresse» and Enid Welsford invokes this association to describe Folly's denunciatory rather than accommodating stance in the «roll call of social types» (Welsford 1969, pp. 102, 104). This castigation, placed alongside the celebration of the *Weltanschauung* of the marginalised in the preceding section and the formula for a new empowerment that would transcend material inequalities in the concluding pages, brings the suppressed subversiveness of the text close to the surface and allows the incendiary potential of unlicensed carnival to take over.

The transition from brusque dismissal of the catalogue of rogues to eulogistic iteration of Christian life is mediated by an oft ignored passage on the folly-wisdom dialectic. Manetti, Pico and even Erasmus in his educational writings, express deep faith in man's self-fashioning abilities, specially his capability to metamorphose himself into a godlike superior being (Rebhorn 1974, p. 467). Although Erasmus foregrounds this **divine metamorphosis** against a Christian backdrop as in *Enchiridion* or *The Colloquies* - man will create himself in the image of God as per Christ's directives - it nevertheless implies a positive faith in human reason and intellect. Rebhorn cites Folly's derogatory comparison of wise men to Titans - «types of unregenerate pride in the Renaissance» - to illustrate the text's rejection of humanism's homocentric confidence (Rebhorn 1974, p. 467) but limits his investigation of Folly's anti-wisdom, pro-nature sallies to the first section of the book. However, the double condemnation of «the pursuit of wisdom as a sign of spiritual pride and as a threat to concord» (Rebhorn 1974, p. 467) runs throughout the book. Wisdom-seekers are «fools twice over» because they transgress their station and «aspire to the life of the immortal gods» and «wage war against Nature with the **engines of learning**» (Miller 1979, p. 54; my emphasis). Philautia or 'self-love' is considered Folly's closest ally as she activates the process of social bonding: from self-love begins the love for others (Miller 1979, pp. 34-35). But for those aspiring after knowledge, self-love culminates in self-pride and social distancing. Folly's main charge against the «died-in-the-wool stoic» is that he is «uniquely self-satisfied [...] thinks he alone is rich, he alone is healthy, regal» and proceeds to transform himself into «some new sort of divinity [...] completely deaf to all human emotions» (Miller 1979, pp. 44-46). Learning, knowledge and wisdom thus lead to a truncated metamorphosis, a monstrous divinity, responsible for social discord. As Folly's harangue further illustrates, self-endorsed superiority of the political elite yields similar results.

Dominant ideology and authority have always deployed **superior knowledge** for self-legitimation and to obscure the truth. Montaigne, in his essay

Of Experience, speaks of the distorting and refractory power of knowledge, «so many interpretations dissipate and confound all Truth» (Florio [1603] 1910, p. 325). Implicit in this anti-intellectual stand is the plebeians' experience-acquired distrust of wisdom as a tool of exploitative obfuscation as exemplified in Jack Cade's paranoia regarding lawyers (4.2.64-68) and educators (4.7.25-38) in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI*. Folly echoes this popular apprehension almost verbatim when she quotes Saint Paul and Saint Bernard as her authorities for believing that «Lucifer established his throne [...] [on] the mountain of knowledge» (Miller 1979, pp. 130-131). Her final salvo against wisdom, in keeping with her earlier interpretation of the myth of the Golden Age and the Fall, is both a fundamental rejection of the humanist principle of self-elevation and an extension of the plebeian utopia based on «nature, artless and carefree» rather than civilisation (Miller 1979, pp. 118-121; see also pp. 47, 50-51). Sifting through classical and scriptural authority, Folly arrives at the double conclusion that «mankind is foolish, the title 'wise' applies to God alone» (Miller 1979, p. 130). There is still a paradoxical play between the worldly-wise and the foolish-wise but the essential concept is that of the Christian fool which bears an ancient legacy of being subjected to contradictory interpretations. On the one hand it has served to underscore a way of life that turns away from the material world for a transcendental, sublime reunion with the Holy Spirit. On the other hand the reiteration of the superior position of the have-nots in the spiritual hierarchy has been translated into a scriptural sanction for a just crusade for the material rights of the peripheralised. One has only to look back to the medieval peasant revolts or even to the series of Tudor rebellions that used religious symbols to validate their demands: the banner of five wounds adopted by the Pilgrimage of Grace is one obvious instance. This tension between radical and transcendental Christianity permeates the concluding section of *The Praise of Folly* which strives hard to accommodate the pluralities and marks no clear distinction between the material and the spiritual.

The ultimate solution forwarded by Folly therefore, is not a glorious apotheosis of «transcendent, mystical theolepsy» through the paradigm of the Christian fool as Kaiser or Rebhorn would have us believe (Kaiser 1964, pp. 89-90; Rebhorn 1974, p. 472). The tortuous route undertaken by Folly to first attack wisdom and reason to delineate **true** faith and then replace it with **true** religion may be traced to the humanist prioritisation of *ad fontes* - a return to the roots (Christians 1998) which, in this encomium, paradoxically undercuts the humanist belief in individual potential by propagating the **loss of self** as a necessary precondition for absolute self-realisation and aligns itself with the anti-authoritarian strand of medieval sectarian Christianity like that of the peasant leader John Ball who, as early as 1381, resorts to the scriptures to question social hierarchy, "We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve: whereby

can they [i.e. lords and noblemen] say or show that they be greater lords than we be?" (Anderson 1963, p. 161). The genuine dilemma of balancing the dual strategies of conversion implicit in the notion of the Christian fool – the radical and the transcendental – leads Erasmus to a carnivalesque concoction of millennial aspirations and plebeian leveling with Pauline scepticism and Anabaptist articulations to promote a highly unstable Christian apotheosis infused with apocalyptic volatility. Christ's condemnation of «savants who rely on their own wisdom», his unrelenting attack on scribes, Pharisees and doctors of law in the gospels as opposed to his befriending of the «ignorant populace [...] simple people, women and fishermen» (Miller 1979, pp. 128-129) is a dual reference to Christ's association with the foolish **and** the weak and his alienation from the empowered. The antagonism between divine and material power is made explicit through the emblematic use of animal associations. Christ chose to ride an ass when he could have mounted a lion, the Holy Spirit descended in the shape of a dove, not an eagle or a hawk (Miller 1979, p. 129). Folly's intentional highlighting of this calculated rejection of animals symbolising worldly authority and the primary characteristic of the Christian fools – «they throw away their possessions» (Miller 1979, p. 132) – could be read as a call for radical realignment of the existing social order with an **ideal** spiritual one.

Erasmus's advocacy of the special piety of the lowly and the ignorant is not without precedence. The basic impulse towards humility and material dis-empowerment embedded in the Christian narrative has been frequently recognised even by mainstream hermeneutics. Nevertheless such emphasis, particularly in a powerful climatic section following closely on the heels of a catalogue of corrupt authority, religious and secular, is not congruent with the hopes of magisterial reform with which Erasmus had landed in England in 1509 nor is it an acceptable alternative to either the Catholic or the Protestant camp. This is amply demonstrated by the contemporary reception of the text. It was posthumously placed on the Index of Prohibited Texts by the Catholics after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) (Rummel 2004, n.p.). Luther's marginalia in his 1532 edition of *Moriae Encomium* published from Basle, registers his disgust: Erasmus had at last «begot a daughter like himself» (Smith 1962, p. 127). That Erasmus himself recognises the dangerous implications of upholding the spiritual supremacy of the marginalised is exemplified by the sudden reversal in the last two pages of the book. Assertive Christian praxis is subsumed by the programme of self-realisation through self-abnegation, foregrounding the concept of Christian folly. Stockard traces the Erasmian formulation of Christian folly to «two distinct but closely related traditions»:

the neoplatonic tradition of mystical vision and the tradition of the «folly of the cross». On the one hand, according to the neoplatonic tradition,

those who experience a mystic vision of a spiritual reality appear foolish to the rest of the world. On the other hand, a central tenet of Christianity is that God bestows his love upon mankind regardless of merit, in an apparently unreasonable or foolish manner. (Stockard 1997, p. 1)

The quasi-platonic subjection of the body to the mind and the ensuing equation of highest mental happiness with the pursuit of the invisible diffuse the socially subversive connotations of the earlier formulation (Miller 1979, pp. 133-135). In the true spirit of Folly, the final empowerment is paradoxically the ultimate disempowerment: man will receive «unspeakable joy from that Highest Good» only when «he is **located outside himself**», when bodily life becomes «a mediation and a certain shadow» (Miller 1979, p. 137; my emphasis). Though the joyous, celebratory nature of man's conclusive metamorphoses is carnivalesque in ambience, it involves the «taming, extinguishing and burying» of all bodily passions (Miller 1979, p. 135) a far cry from the carnival's absolute celebration of the material bodily principle (Bakhtin [1965] 1984; Burke 1978).

The «folly of the Cross» entails the double folly of God who allows his Son to be sacrificed at the altar of human ignorance and of Christ who willingly lets himself be crucified for the deliverance of mankind. It is, as Stockard pronounces, «a gesture of love that is the ultimate foolish act» (Stockard 1997, p. 1) and privileges **Godly folly** as the supreme redemptive act. In exhorting all Christians to emulate this foolish madness Erasmus posits «a kind of vision in the face of which the limits imposed by everyday rationality are themselves only illusory» (Greenfield 1968, p. 244). The inverted relationship between worldly and Christian wisdom which enables Erasmus to develop the theme of Christian folly with such success, as Screech explains, is itself a response to the scepticism directed at it by older European religions:

Christian religion did seem particularly stupid and absurd to both the Jewish and the Gentile worlds in which it first appeared [...]. That God [...] should take man's nature upon himself [...] live really and truly as a man - flew in the face of all mature philosophical and religious assumptions. That this God-Man should then allow himself to be legally executed as a criminal by the properly constituted political authorities, seemed even more insane [...]. Defenders of the doctrines of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of the body in such a hostile intellectual atmosphere tended to insist on the 'foolishness' of what they preached. (Screech 1980, p. 19)

The conjoining of human and divine irrationality and their simultaneous celebration in *The Praise of Folly* is, however, associated with another strand of scepticism closer to home. Erasmus's foregrounding of the «folly

of the Cross» is expressly mediated by Saint Paul, «Even as Paul saith, he was made sin also, to cure and heal the sins of the world: to which sins yet it pleased him to minister none other medicines, than the *Folly of the cross*» (Miller 1979, p. 118). This connection is reiterated in his vexed questioning of the hostile reception to his work. Writing to Martin Drop in 1515 he almost defends himself by passing the buck to Paul of Tarsus, «My words offend the ears of the pious. Then why aren't they offended when Paul speaks of the 'folly of the cross'?» (Radice [1515] 1971, n.p.). «Throughout the latter portion of *The Praise of Folly*, a central tenet emerges in both the Pauline and Folly-esque pronouncements: the curious, almost symbiotic relationship between wisdom and folly» (Tipton 2008, p. 4). Although attracted to this «relativistic religiosity», Erasmus is often troubled by what Tipton terms as Paul's «schizophrenic spiritualism»:

When Folly celebrates Paul's foolishness, she is also mindful of Paul's reluctance to assume the moniker of 'fool' because of his overarching conviction to become the essential foundation for Christian theology. As Folly remarks, Paul wanted to carry forward this conviction «without his words sounding arrogant and offensive, so he made folly his pretext to forestall objections, writing 'I speak as a fool' because it is the privilege of fools to speak the truth without giving offence.» (Tipton 2008, pp. 1-2, 4)

Folly's panegyric of Pauline theology premised upon his declared self-deprecation as a prototypical fool of the Christian variety sits uneasily alongside her exposure of Paul's duplicitous twisting of the «Holy Writ, like a cheverel» to serve his ends as instanced in his elision of several words in an altar inscription during his trip to Athens to propagate the Christian faith (Wilson 2014, n.p.). Such «Janus-faced spiritual machinations» surmises Tipton, «places him squarely within the realm of scepticism» (Tipton 2008, p. 7). I would like to argue further that Paul's opportunistic dialectic of folly combined with Erasmus's own ambivalent response to it begs two vital questions: (a) whether Christian wisdom (or, by extrapolation folly) is largely unconscious or whether it is a consciously adopted stance facilitating proselytism, and (b) to what extent can Logos be disseminated through fallible human beings. The paradox of promoting Christian folly «not through its 'best spokesperson' Jesus, but rather through its loudest bullhorn, Paul» (Tipton 2008, p. 5) generates an even more fractious scepticism regarding the efficacy of the programme.

This self-defeating radicalism that despairs of finding a single truth even as it promotes it and the discomfiture resulting from the allocation of a **suddenly revealed** metaphysical ultimate to an encomiastic pattern fore-grounded in the material world is considerably alleviated if one views the final phase of Folly's oration as a consistent pre-figuring of some major tenets of Anabaptist theology. More than a few scholars have noted

the Erasmian influence on low class sectarian movement. George Williams acknowledges Erasmus as the «patron» of radical Reformation (Williams 1962, pp. 8-16). More specific connection between the early Zwingli and pre-1525 Erasmus is established by Alistair McGrath (McGrath 1987, pp. 48-50) while Kenneth R. Davis reaches the following conclusion: «the most influential leaders [...] such as Grebel, Manz, Reublin, Denck and Hubmaier, were demonstrably and strongly influenced by those aspects of Christian Erasmanism which mediated specifically the basic, lay, ascetic reform principles of the *Devotio Moderna*» (Davis 1974, p. 296). In *The Anabaptists and the Problem of Religious Unity*, Irvin Horst maintains that Anabaptists were closer to Erasmus than to the Reformers in their ideas on the ways of rejuvenating the Church (Horst 1967). This affinity is implicitly sanctioned by Erasmus through his refusal to write against them when asked to do so. He is even accused of being an Anabaptist (Davis 1974, p. 277). The Erasmian notion of Christocentric piety is particularly pervasive among the Anabaptists and scholars have noted the affinity between Anabaptist teachings and the serious works of Erasmus. Leo Jud's Swiss translation of *Paraphrases on the New Testament* and *Enchiridion* influence the Swiss Brotherhood. Castelberger, as early as 1522, seemed to echo passages from *Enchiridion* (Davis 1974, p. 276). Few however reflect on the Anabaptist tendencies embedded in Erasmian trivia.

The transition from lay-oriented reform to a sudden turning away from the material world for a climactic participation in divine life coincides with the **grand design** of social and spiritual reform shared by the early Zwinglians, Swiss Evangelists and the Anabaptist Swiss Brethren. Interested, like Erasmus, in «restoring all things in Christ», they envisage a holier (rather than a moral) community based on gospels and asceticism (Davis 1974, p. 278). It is a shared «design» of a general renaissance to a purer Christianity with practical applications and on a redemptive basis (Davis 1974, p. 278). This assimilation in Christ, which entails the highest joy, locates within a larger theological context Folly's apparently unexplainable turn-around and her sudden rejection of the material for the spiritual. Anabaptists' pre-occupation with the lack of **moral fruitage** in contemporary Christian praxis and their subsequent interrogation of all ostentatious display of authority is anticipated by Erasmus's sustained attack on the pomp and pageantry of highly placed clerical officials who have forgotten the symbolic (and therefore inner) significance of their clothes and ceremonies. His relentless exposure of the hypocrisy and duplicity of the empowered, placed against the apotheosis of the Christian fool, can be construed as an overt summon for the 'Reformation without tarrying for the magistrate', thus establishing a close connection with the non-conformist, if not specifically Anabaptist, agenda. Regeneration, for Anabaptists, is related to inner, personal faith, which, however, must be manifested in outward conduct such as rejection of usury, luxury, gratification of the senses

etc. The Erasmian formulation of the active discipleship of Christ which requires **visible** signs of one's faith such as fasting, restraining passions, controlling anger and pride, is a re-statement of the Anabaptist clauses of regeneration (Miller 1979, p. 135; Davis 1974, pp. 278-281). The positive involvement of the will in the mortification of the flesh and the triumph of the spiritual is endorsed by both Erasmus and Anabaptists and is distinctly separate from the Lutheran conception of passive submission: the *Bondage of the Will*.

Folly's construct of the Christian fool foreshadows three principal and related premises of Anabaptist doctrine (Davis 1974, pp. 283-284). The Anabaptist belief in an absolute disjunction of the true Christian from the material world is embodied in the Erasmian projection of Christian fools: «they throw away their possessions, ignore injuries [...] find satisfaction in fasts, vigils, tears, and labors, shrink from life, desire death above all else» (Miller 1979, pp. 132-133). The two-kingdom concept central to Anabaptism and the clear distinction between the members of the two kingdoms is similar to the ethical dualism of Folly's world where the rest of Folly's followers are clearly demarcated from the Christian fools. The former enjoy the pleasures of the body while the true Christians «escape from its prison», from «the contagion of the body». The antithetical, mutually exclusive relationship of the two spheres is evident in the following observation: in pious people «lower powers harden and atrophy»; in ordinary people «these perceptions are highly developed; the higher ones, hardly at all». Finally, for Anabaptists and Erasmus alike, the body of the true believer constitutes the true church since God inhabits it. Folly praises the condition thus: «the spirit, stronger at last and victorious will absorb the body [...]». Then the spirit will be absorbed by the highest mind of all, whose power is infinitely greater» (Miller 1979, pp. 132-134, 136-137).

The parallelism between Folly's final adherents and the credo of a sectarian movement uniformly ostracised as **low class heresy** together with the reiteration of spiritual as opposed to material hierarchy, reopens the issue of **repressed** meanings. When this subversive religious context is further problematised by equating the perfect metamorphosis with a state of carnivalesque incompleteness, the text's anti-authoritarian, transgressive, popular inclinations come to the fore. Moreover, the mode and effect of the final sublimation in the Other are imbued with radical disruptive potential and dispel any notion of peaceful transcendence. Firstly, it is an **imperfect** union because it involves dismemberment, a loss of power and a chaotic relationship between the mind and the body: «the mind is set on **leaving the body and no longer has perfect control over the bodily organs**» (Miller 1979, p. 136; my emphasis). This discord and atrophy of power are not congruent with the motif of a harmonious monochromatic interrelation between the microcosm and the macrocosm - the self and the state - idealised by the entrenched powers. Additionally, the obvious and

deliberate emphasis on the body/mind dichotomy, that is, misrule at the individual level, re-invokes critically analogous images of covert and wilful misrule by constituted authority in the public, religious and private arena and subjects them to re-scrutiny.

Secondly, «the gathering unto God», far from affecting an Elysian tranquillity, culminates in a crescendo of restless irrationality: the affected are «now happy, now sad, now crying, now laughing, now sighing – in short, they are **completely beside themselves**» (Miller 1979, p. 137; my emphasis). The blurring of all distinctions between divine and demoniac frenzy, the quality of being possessed rather than liberated, the triumph of incoherence over reason and wisdom, and the underpinning of violence point to a novel and inverted mode of empowerment. Whether this unconditional surrender to a supreme agency will be read as a parable advising the subjection of the populace to the highest secular authority or as a revolutionary message for empowering the powerless depends, as demonstrated earlier, substantially on the historic contingencies of the response. But the text does raise the terrifying prospect of indiscriminate violence and permanent disruption of social order by projecting as ideal a transubstantiation that thoroughly conflates sanity with insanity, order with disorder and contemptuously sweeps aside all temporal differences. That this paradox of self-annihilating self-realisation is more a vehicle for registering discontent with the status quo than a cultural apparatus for promoting surveillance is most apparent during a scrutiny of the stylistic devices adopted by the text.

Among those attempting to pin a classical label on Folly's self praise, Colie's *Paradoxia Epidemica* comes closest to the mark (Colie 1966, pp. 15-22). The rhetorical paradox engaged in delivering a mock encomium in a mock classical mode pivots on the principle of inversion. For example, Folly, haughtily declining to follow «the common herd of rhetoricians» (Miller 1979, p. 12) in introducing her subject (i.e. herself), through the traditional oratorical pattern of **definition** and **division** promptly launches into self-advertisement along these very lines. Such constant undercutting of previous positions, evaluations and expectations, disrupts the sense of order and cohesion associated with any successful literary production, and yet, the degree of *Moria's* success is directly proportional to the degree of inversion in the text. Of the numerous classical models available, the author's conscious choice of the paradox, an «inherently subversive stylistic format», to negotiate a series of sophisticated, complex equivocations and self-contradictory positions so that the multiple inversion «folds into itself» establishes a close parallel between the thematic and stylistic features of the text (Colie 1966, p. 11). The complex reader-text relationship is an illustrative instance of the multiple layers of irony involved in each of Folly's propositions.

In the first place, since *The Praise of Folly* is a written text in a declam-

atory mode, we simultaneously occupy the dual position of the reader-auditor. The ambiguity is intensified by the complicated positioning of the different characters associated with the text. Folly's domain of fools includes all mankind. The commoners, administrators and Christian fools catalogued **in** the text and the reader-auditor **outside** the text - all come under her purview. Yet her **creator** is Erasmus who by virtue of being human is her subject! This incessantly shifting location of authority belies all notions of a well-ordered polity grounded upon hierarchic principles and enhances our awareness of it by implicating us (as reader-auditor) in the design. Pavloski elaborates on how the appreciation of the book is enhanced by «the ironic ambiguity of our status»:

like anyone and everyone else, we are fools Folly creates, but we also watch the process of creation from some point outside it while we realize we are reading a speech put together by Erasmus, and put by him into the mouth of his fictional creature Folly [...]. As readers of learned Erasmus' book, we are, of course, intelligent, but since Erasmus [...] aims at edifying us [...] we cannot be completely, fully intelligent [...]. As characters within the work, we obviously are fools, like all men; yet even in this capacity we concurrently contain intelligence and foolishness. (Pavloski 1983, p. 19)

This infinitely elusive nature of the reader-auditor's engagement with the work is highlighted by Folly herself when she acknowledges his applause for her life/pleasure equation: «Your applause has answered for you - I was certain that **none of you is so wise, or rather foolish - no, I mean wise** - as to be of that opinion» (Miller 1979, p. 19; my emphasis).

But Folly occupies no fixed directorial chair as she continuously re-situates her followers. Apart from the three major metamorphoses - from the Epicurean critique of all didactic positions and Juvenalian denunciation of authorised governance to unworldly Christian fool - there are innumerable positional shifts and concurrent enactment of several roles within each of these larger transformations. In the initial stages, for example, Folly is, among other things, the goddess rejuvenating mankind, a Sophist, an enchantress *à-la-Medea*, Circe, Venus and Aurora, an empiricist extolling man as a «mistake-maker» and a social adhesive (Miller 1979, pp. 33-34; see also pp. 9, 10, 24, 28). Without the slightest warning, she changes tack from instinct to self-love to self-deception. Unlike most fictional prototypes, which emerge through a series of assertions, Folly's transportation to Fury, her quintessential protean variety is achieved through a series of subversive cancellations that are accommodated within a biographic order barely equipped to incorporate such irreconcilable binaries. This inversion of the conventional mode of character construction contributes to the «irreducible irony» (Kaiser 1964, p. 38) of Folly's persona and a carnivalesque co-

piousness of character conception which extends the plebeian connection from the text's content to its form.

The centrality of irony is reasserted by the self-referential framework of the mock encomium. Kaiser acknowledges that with the assignation of self-praise to Folly, Erasmus not only introduces sustained irony into European literature but literally invents a «new kind of irony» (Kaiser 1964, p. 37). Folly's arbitrary sway over her dominion allows the creation of wholly internal referential parameters for self-evaluation that becomes in effect a point-by-point inversion of the conventional standards of measuring such discourse. The complete exclusion and defiance of all external and accepted frames of reference initiates the supremely autonomous, topsy-turvy self-legitimation of the carnival world. As the sole initiator and validator of all action within her dominion, her function is analogous to that of absolutist monarchy. But in contrast to monarchy's coercive mechanisms of subjection, Folly enjoys the **natural** allegiance of her self-deluded subjects. More significant is that her magisterial success and control over men's **inward cogitation** spring from her flouting of the established modes of imposing authority. Unlike the prince who wilfully mystifies the distinctions between truth and untruth, justice and injustice, order and disorder, Folly maintains the differences, extols the negative and aims at a carnivalesque debunking of the official norms of legitimisation.

Her endgame, with its abrupt cessation and the rejection of memory - «I hate a listener with a memory» (Miller 1979, p. 138) - is her most spectacular *tour de force*. The lack of formal closure deprives the reader-auditor of experiencing the satisfaction of discovering a climactic joyous utopia via a negative imprint. The abrupt abandonment is complete with Folly's deliberate undermining of her entire exposition through the renunciation of the value of memory. The reader-auditor is not to adopt Folly's wisdom, but to reach his own conclusion through his own devices. As Colie observes: «The discourse stops [...] but in such a way as to stimulate further thought in the reader, even further speculation - Folly cuts off her own discourse, but not discourse in general» (Colie 1966, p. 21). The resultant need to generate a conclusion compels the reader-auditor to actively engage with the text. The essential plurality of this participation - because of the numbers of readers and listeners involved - fosters diversity of discourse and makes possible, in Himelick's brilliant summing up, «a plethora of 'ultimate conclusions'» (Himelick 1970, p. 33). A more trenchant critique of an absolutist framework is embedded in the manner in which the space for multiple responses is engendered. Folly legitimises the participation of numerous voices in the creative process by abjuring her own authority. Placed against this context, Erasmus's transference of the responsibility of defending Folly's self-praise to More, his ostensible reader, seems not an attempt to escape, but an admission of the composite nature of literary production involving among other things - the author, the reader and the

foci of attention. The possibility of stretching the intellectual intercourse to infinity, that is, extending it well beyond textual parameters, and the de-recognition of authorial hegemony dislodges the notion of a finite, single text with the radical concept of a multiplicity of ever continuous texts generated through collective participation.

The sense of **spilling over boundaries** also permeates the language of *The Praise of Folly*. Terence Cave, examining *De Copia*, comments on the series of eating and drinking metaphors through which Erasmus conveys his ideas on writing (Cave 1979, pp. 24-31). The abundance of language is celebrated as a form of «positive intoxication» which, Cave observes, occasionally displaces «the hierarchy of values», between ‘true’ and ‘false’, and the two are «allowed to slide together and contaminate one another» (Cave 1979, pp. 25, 30-31). The smudging of boundaries between right and wrong, illusion and reality occurs consistently in Folly’s oration as exemplified by the delineation of divine activity after Momus’s exile:

What endless jokes are provided by Priapus, that worthless fig-wood puppet. What fun is supplied by Mercury with his pocket-picking and magic tricks. Indeed, even Vulcan himself often plays **the clown** at the banquets of the gods, enlivening their drinking bouts by limping around, or making smart remarks, or telling funny stories. Then Silenus, that white-haired wooer, dances a **frisky jig**. Polyphenus stomps around to the **thrum-thrum of a guitar**, and the nymphs pimp about **dancing with bare feet**. The satyrs, human above and goat below, flounce around doing bumps and grinds. Pan makes everybody laugh by singing some silly song, which they would rather hear than a performance by the muses themselves, especially when they are beginning to get soused on nectar. I suppose there is no need to mention what the Gods do after the banquet, when they are quite drunk – such tomfoolery that sometimes its all I can do to keep from laughing out loud. (Miller 1979, p. 27)

This enormously entertaining fantasia, through sheer richness and concreteness of presentation, lures the audience into reversing, not so much their notion of what constitutes godly action, but acknowledging the inherent emptiness of arid, humourless godliness. Folly’s obvious distortion is an exposure, through implicit contrast, of the opaque misrepresentations orchestrated by official propaganda in their own interests. In a similar but more forthright manner, a veritable verbal *festivitas* unmaskes the highest authority in Christendom as an anti-Christ. Folly debates on the consequences in store for the popes in case they truly imitate Christ’s way of life:

who on earth could be more miserable? Or who would spend everything he has to buy that office? Or defend it, once it was bought, with sword, poison, and all manner of violence? How many advantages would these

men be deprived of if they were ever assailed by wisdom? [...] **So much wealth, honor, power, so many victories, offices, dispensations, taxes, indulgences, so many horses, mules, retainers, so many pleasures! [...]** These would be replaced by vigils, fasts, tears, prayers, sermons, studies, sighs, and thousands of such wretched labors. Nor should we neglect another point: so many scribes, copyists, notaries, advocates, ecclesiastical prosecutors, so many secretaries, mule-curriers, stableboys, official bankers, pimps (I had almost added something more delicate, but I am afraid it might sound indelicate to some ears). (Miller 1979, pp. 111-112; my emphasis)

The teeming rush of rhetorical questions followed by a surfeit of analogical images is more convincing than any rational, logical analysis and results in what Cave designates a «rupture» in the texture of the language through which passes a series of «word-things» (Cave 1979, p. 31). For example, in the emphasised section above, the absolute superfluity of words iterates, through their very copiousness, the thoroughly base, material concerns of the pope. It seems as though somewhere along the line the principal idea has abandoned all efforts to maintain a control over the words through which it is expressed. Thus the very «activity of writing asserts itself as a kind of hedonism» (Cave 1979, p. 31).

Cave further notes the Lucianic model advocated by Erasmus in *De Copia* where allusions and allegories take precedence over the imitation of reality (Cave 1979, p. 33). For Erasmus, the most powerful ‘method’ of substantiating one’s proposition is «the force of *exempla*» which «embraces», among other things, «the fabula [...] the proverb [...] the parable, or *collatio*, the *imago* and analogy» (King; Rix 1963, p. 67). The primacy of fables, parables, proverbs and of association over analytical exposition, is however, also intrinsic to ‘low’ literature. In the absence of argumentative and oratorical skills affordable only through sustained academic training, plebeian culture and language often resorts to a series of associated word pictures to state its case. Erasmus’s own citation of the numerous instances of «fables» quelling rebellion more effectively than «philosophical oration» (Miller 1979, p. 38) are testimony to the fact that the uninitiated populace are more responsive to appropriate, preferably familiar, analogical illustrations than to abstract reasoning. In other words, rational exposition and sequential thought processes are alien to marginalised consciousness that moves literally through allegorical and allusive exposition. Folly’s adoption of this popular stylistic device is best evidenced in her wilful conflation of Nemesis and Fortuna and the elaboration of the concept of the fortunate fool through a repetition of proverbs:

From this fact [i.e., Nemesis blesses the fool] Timotheus [...] derived both his name (= ‘honored by god’) and the proverb applied to him

(**'his net catches for him even while he sleeps'**). Then there is that other proverb, **'The owl is flying.'** Quite different are the sayings applied to wise men: **'born on the fourth day,' 'he has got Sejanus' horse,'** or **'the gold of Toulouse.'** But I will stop **propounding apothegms** lest I seem to have rifled the commentaries of my friend Erasmus. (Miller 1979, p. 116)

Chaloner was the first to note the density of proverbs and the difficulty of translating the peculiar flavour they lend to the work (Chaloner's «Preface», in Miller 1965, pp. 5-6). About 285 proverbs and proverbial expressions are sprinkled throughout the 24,500 words (approximately) of the text; an average of one in every eighty six words. The distribution is uneven. But it is interesting to observe that apart from the proem which has one proverb for every forty five words and the «non-epilogue» that has one for every twenty three words; the largest number of proverbs is compressed in the section on Christian folly (Miller 1978, p. 84). Miller associates the profusion of proverbs with Folly's role as a dialectical sophist and a consummate rhetorician. She alternates between a step-by-step illustration of different issues and a large kaleidoscopic tableau of swarming groups to keep the reader off balance but the proverbs are pressed into the service of both – deception **as well as** persuasion. He elucidates the various ways in which Folly alludes to, quotes, extends, fractures, misapplies and modifies maxims and adages to reduce clarity and to assiduously avoid the risk of explaining or qualifying her inconsistent, ambivalent position (Miller 1978 pp. 85-93) but concentrates exclusively on classical proverbial allusions and consequently misses two vital aspects in the shaping of Folly's declamation.

The first is noted by Wesseling who, taking off from Miller, unveils the Dutch connection behind Folly's aphoristic utterances (Wesseling 1994, pp. 351-378). Folly herself identifies the non-classical, native allusion to the foolishness of the Brabanters and the Dutch, but Wesseling discloses the vernacular underpinning of a few more recognisably classical references. Women are conceived as «twice foolish» in Dutch colloquies; Juvenal's mention of cuckold's horns, the citation of the disastrous offsprings of Marcus Aurelius and Socrates and of fortune favouring stupid Timotheus, all mirror vernacular proverbs of equally ancient lineage; and familiar Dutch expressions are rephrased in Latin to deride monks and define Christian insanity (Miller 1979, pp. 23, 29, 33, 38-39, 99, 136; Wesseling 1994, pp. 352-360). Wesseling admits the diminutive size of Dutch contribution especially when compared to classical allusions, but his scrutiny opens up possibilities of exploring the hitherto neglected vernacular links of Folly, for instance, Dutch influence outside proverbs and expressions and linguistic echoes of other native European languages as well. Secondly, it would be worthwhile to remember that literary devices such as maxims, because of their intrinsic quotable quality and brevity, easily percolate from oral to written language and back again into general usage. It is very

likely for such aphorisms to be in common circulation before a Horace or a Catullus hones them for entry into the lofty portals of written literature. Therefore proverbs – classical, biblical or vernacular – are by their nature familiar to the masses. Erasmus not only focuses on «popular currency» as an essential characteristic of the proverbs and expands the definition to include «novelty» and «shrewdness» authorised by «antiquity and erudition» (Philips 1982, pp. 4-7) but also deploys them in a manner that parallels their usage in common parlance to elicit a kind of associative endorsement of her opinions.

The recurrent re-framing of an idea, the multiple fictional re-renderings, the recourse to common repository of accepted wisdom hark back to the oral antecedents of plebeian culture. The inability to comprehend the written word meant that the memory of the uneducated masses had to be activated to register textual presentation. Erasmus's profuse deployment of strategies familiar to oral transmission in a highly sophisticated, complex, satirical propaganda directed at an exclusive audience problematises the issue of appropriation and dissemination. Does the text successfully commission a popular literary device in the service of high literature or does the ploy boomerang and transform the corrective critical orientation of the text into provocative radicalism? Before proceeding further, it must be iterated that *The Praise of Folly*, based on the classical *declamatio* model, highly influenced by Lucian and written in Latin, does not address the illiterate peasant. It directs a revisionist message at the establishment, religious and secular, to restore parity between material and spiritual gradations. Whatever advances his project of Catholic social reformation is pressed into service – popular aspirations and protest formats to humanistic concern for man's material existence and the highly sophisticated critical apparatus of the mock encomium.

Erasmus is at least partially aware of the dangerous game he is playing because he installs two diffusing mechanisms in his controversial text to ensure utmost freedom and mobility – the license of laughter and the *paradoxia epidemica* – both intrinsically linked with the element of play especially during the Renaissance. Huizinga and Bakhtin together view the Renaissance age as the pinnacle of human playfulness and Bakhtin proposes its association with laughter as an essential medium of accessing truth, «Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter» (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, p. 66; see also Huizinga 1955, p. 180). Colie remarks on the non-committal nature of *paradoxia epidemica* (Colie 1966, p. 38) whose playful ambiguity permits Renaissance authors to critique «prevailing institutions and behaviours without committing themselves to any new orthodoxy» (Findlen 1998, p. 250). As the success of Erasmus's reformist agenda hinges upon effective instruction, he resorts to the «Renaissance tradition of *serio ludere* (playing seriously), which viewed play as a divine activity» (Findlen 1998, p. 255) allowing full freedom to Folly's game-plan

in the belief that nothing is «learned better than when it is learned as a game» (Findlen 1998, p. 255).

By mediating his serious intent through Folly's ludic side, Erasmus hopes to contain the fireworks erupting from the clash of apparently indiscriminately picked miscellanies stuffed in Folly's basket. Thus hedonism, Epicureanism, carnival ideology, Christian ethics, medievalism, humanist learning, estate satire, classical oratorical models, irony, paradox, fables, allusions, allegories, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, open-ended resolution jostle against each other till the bag bursts at the seams. The original patent for a **partial revolution** is subsumed by the rampage of sheer abundance and incessant reversals. In the initial stage itself paradoxical inversion combines with carnivalesque topsy-turvydom to generate a complete breakdown of all surveillance gadgets and engender its own radical energy. The very adherence to the stated fictive decorum of encomiastic representation of Folly's attractions, as Fox illustrates, threatens to dislocate the didactic authorial design of propagating a «fixed, determinate moral norm» (Fox 1989, p. 88). Folly's restorative attempts, both as the licensed satirist and as the unworldly sage, insist on the repudiation of existing moral and social absolutes thus creating a crisis on the spiritual and the material plane.

This is exemplified by the simultaneous reversal and invocation of conventional values. It rejects as false, dominant ideology's claim to superiority based on tradition and convention, by positing an alternate and older tradition of social interaction based on the scriptures. The disjunction of official standards of endorsement from a more ancient Christian norm of legitimisation exposes the manipulative utilisation of the concepts of 'tradition' and 'convention' by the ruling elite and deprives it of a major valedictory prop. More crucial is the fact that the text aligns the endorsing authority of time-honoured custom with the popular conception of equitable and just governance. The conjunction of difficult times with Erasmus's inadvertent (or perhaps deliberate?) amalgamation of combustible elements bound to produce an explosive chemical reaction transforms his blueprint for civilisation into a document of contemporary barbarism perpetrated primarily by the ruling elite. The call for new empowerment likewise embodies an unresolved ambiguity: ultimate authority is transcendental but it is vested in the material pauper. Erasmus's humanist critique of the existing status quo is almost perversely polyvalent; twisting and turning every which way to elude any fixity of position. Indeterminacy and instability become the ultimate facet of Christian deliverance, «For now shall you see them of glad cheer, now of as sad again, now they weep, now they laugh, now they sigh, for brief, it is certain that they are wholly distraught and rapt out of themselves» (Miller 1979, p. 128). But given the political and historical context of the work's reception, Erasmus's inscription of the consciousness of the 'lowliest of the lowly' within the realm of high literature can

be read as an act of betrayal parallel to that of Desdemona. Her voluntary submission to Othello had rocked the white citadel from within; as far as *The Praise of Folly* is concerned, Erasmus is, for contemporary authorities, the **enemy within** demolishing it with quips and jokes. If, alongside Bakhtin, we view the historically specific relationship between unofficial laughter and official seriousness in the progress of civilisation as a battle between the competing aesthetics of Carnival and Lent where the graver alternative gradually emerges victorious, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* audaciously transforms Lent into Carnival through the frenzied ecstasy of being subsumed in the glory of God that awaits true Christians:

[they] only know this, as it were in a mist or dream, that they were the most happy while they were so out of their wits. And therefore they are sorry they are come to themselves again and desire nothing more than this kind of madness, to be perpetually mad. And this is a **small taste of that future happiness**. (Wilson 2005, n.p.; my emphasis)

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Of Lords and Stars

Spenser's Paradoxical Praise of Essex in the *Prothalamion*

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Abstract The essay argues that glittering tribute to Essex in the *Prothalamion* is ambivalent and paradoxical. The author focuses on the Ovidian and Virgilian intertexts of the praise and brings to light Spenser's hidden references to Lucifer and Phaethon, mythical emblems of pride. For the generic and stylistic inconsistencies, explicit notes of personal and political concern, and the moral seriousness that run through the poem, the *Prothalamion* is not a mere nuptial song and does not mark Spenser's return to courtly poetry. On the contrary, under its epithalamic façade the poem hides a reflection and meditation on the vainglory of this world. Spenser's last poem, like *Four Hymns*, is a poem of exit that marks the crisis of the Tudor poetics of praise and patronage, as well as Spenser's own project of paidea.

Iam suus inferno processerat Hesperus orbi:
ducitur in thalamum virgo.
(Claudianus, *De raptu Proserpinae*)

1

Edmund Spenser wrote the *Prothalamion* while visiting London from Ireland in 1596 to celebrate the betrothal of the Earl of Worcester's daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset to Henry Gifford, and William Peter, two gentlemen of the Inns of Court. The ceremony took place in the fall of 1596, at the London residence of Robert Devereux, the second earl of Essex, formerly Leicester House. In the course of his stay Spenser most likely wrote also the dialogue *View of the Present State of Ireland*, not published until 1633, and saw through the press, with the reprinting of the *Daphnaïda* and the expanded second edition of *The Faerie Queene*, the *Prothalamion* and the *Fowre Hymnes*.¹

Since the 1950s readers of the *Prothalamion* have brought to light the poem's stylistic and generic incongruences with its shifts from the elegiac to the pastoral and epic with the eulogy of Essex. For its generic inconsistencies, the explicit notes of personal and political concern (ll. 5-10, 131-

1 All quotations to the shorter poems are from McCabe 1999. All quotations from *The Faerie Queene* are from Hamilton 1977.

140, 145-158), the moral seriousness and the allusiveness that run through the poem, the *Prothalamion* remains elusive.² This essay argues that the mystifying allegorical representation of the marriage ceremony hides a paradoxical encomium of Essex the hero of Cadiz.³ Under its ambiguous epithalamic façade Spenser hides a dark poem of *exit* that marks the crisis of the Tudor poetics of courtly praise and his own exalted project of *paidea*: «to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline».⁴

2

An erudite poem, rich in literary self-consciousness that belongs to a sphere of its own, Spenser's prenuptial song has been described as more «auto-referential» and «meta-poetical» than epithalamic and celebrative.⁵ The *Prothalamion* displays almost all the formal characteristics of the classical epideictic, laudatory *epithalamium*, described by rhetoricians from Menander Rhetor to Scaliger. It features a simple plot, a pastoral setting, the choral praise of the nuptial pair, the choice of divinities and the celestial bodies of the zodiac appropriate for the occasion, all arranged, as brilliantly demonstrated by Alastair Fowler, in a coherent «chronographia», or time description, of the «daytime course of the half the circle of the heavens and the zodiac».⁶ Yet, at odds with the classical tradition, the *Prothalamion* does not begin with the *proemium* stating the specific occasion for the nuptial poem, but with a complaint, familiar to Spenser's readers, concerning the state of literary patronage and his own servile condition.⁷ Like the Roman poet Ovid, he laments his isolation and double exile, London and Ireland, but also admits that the celebration of nuptials is not a

2 On the genre of the poem and its supposed tradition see: Norton 1951; West 1974; Smith 1959, p. 175.

3 On Spenser's skillful, ambivalent political representations see the seminal essay by Montrose 2002, and 2006.

4 On patronage, dissimulation and secrecy in Spenser, see: Rambuss 1993; Knapp 2003; Labreche 2010; Brown 1993; Montrose 1986.

5 On Spenser's poetic career and related bibliography see Cheney 2006, and 1993; Woodward 1962; Smith 1959; Fowler 1975, p. 61; Eriksen 1993; Prescott 2001.

6 «Chronographia» as «the counterfeit of time» is the term used by Puttenham 1589, p. 200. See Fowler 1975, pp. 66 ff.; Hieatt 1960 had first pointed out that the twenty-four Stanzas of *Epithalamion* correspond to the twenty-four hours of the wedding day and other readers have found new symmetries in the arrangement of the Stanzas. The *Prothalamion's* chorography has been discussed in Van Es 2002.

7 Spenser begun his career in 1579 in the Leicester-Sidney's orbit and remained deeply bound by the constraints of patronage and courtly politics throughout his life.

fit occasion to relate «old woes».⁸ Nevertheless, the sense of urgency and near physical illness – «empty shadows, did afflict my brain» (*Prothalamion* 1.9)⁹ – introduces a persistent elegiac tone. Likewise, the haunting refrain «sweete *Themmes* run softly, till I end my song» implies the temporal postponement of elegy and undermines the supposed epithalamic genre of the poem. The invitation to Thames/Time to linger substitutes the classical choral chanting *Hymen o Hymenaeae* and inverts the temporality of Catullus's programmatic *epithalamium* 61 (ll. 195-196), where the lyric 'I' spurs the youths to action: «sed abit dies: | Perge, ne remorare» (the day departs: do not linger, move on). In Catullus the acceleration of rhythm denoted the groom's impatience for the beginning of the hymeneal song and the consummation of marriage.¹⁰ In the *Epithalamion*, written for his wife Elizabeth Boyle, as in Catullus, time moves forward, but never too fast for the impatient bridegroom and poet (a rare identity of roles) who, citing Propertius, complained in ll. 265-273 about the long summer hours: «How slowly does sad Time his feathers moue?».¹¹

In the *Prothalamion*, instead, against the prescriptions of Catullus 61, with 62 the most influential lyric model for the Renaissance revival of the genre, the lyric 'I' begs Time/Thames for postponement and delay.

In Stanza 2 the poet enters an idyllic pastoral grove, the classic earthly paradise of Venus, where he «espies» like any *pastor* a group of mossy river nymphs gathering flowers and tying them in garlands. In Stanzas 3 and 4 the poet in an ornate *encomium* praises the two «brides» and represents them as «swans», punning on «brides» and «birds». In Stanza 5, as the allegorical «swans» come down from the River Lee to row up the river's stalled flow to Essex House, they are welcomed not by a chorus of maidens but by «nymphs» with gifts of flowers and «two Garlands bound | Of freshest Flowres» (ll. 83-84).¹² In Stanza 6 one of the nymphs sings the classical *allocutio sponsalis*, with its prayers for happiness, peace, wealth and illustrious progeny. Stanza 7 is choral and, as prescribed by Menander Rhetor, concludes the *ékphrasis of the nymphs* with echoes of their «under-

8 See Rambuss 1993. Ovid's 'exile' in Spenser's time was a current literary *topos*. See, for instance, *As you like it* 3.3.5-6 (c.1600) where Touchstone compares his sylvan exile to Ovid's («I'm here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet honest Ovid was among the Goths» ll. 5-6); see Brink 1996. On Spenser and Ovid see Lyne 2001.

9 Probably a discontented suitor, in 1596 Edmund Spenser was about to return to Ireland.

10 All references to Catullus poems are from Goold 1988. On Catullus and Renaissance English poetry see: McPeck 1939; Blevins 2004.

11 «tu quoque, qui aestivos spatiosius exigit ignes, | Phoebe, moraturae contrahe lucis iter»: Gould ed. 1976, 3.20,11-13. On the sinister undertones of Spenser's *Epithalamion* see e.g. Greene 1957 and Bates 1992.

12 In Catullus 64, ll. 280-285, garlands of mixed flowers are offered at the wedding of Thethys.

song» (l. 110) accompanied by the 'affectionate' murmur of the River Lee.¹³

This allegorical *nymphæum*, as critics have noted, works as a metapoetical *prosopopeia*. The gathering flowers and tying them in garlands mimes the process of writing an epideictic poem from invention and disposition to delivery.¹⁴ As the weavings of Arachne and Athena in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or the wool-spinning of Cyrene's nymphs in the *Georgics*, the garlands of the nymphs made of *flores rhetorici* collected in pretty baskets of «fine twigs entrayled curiously» (l. 25) are a metaphor for Spenser's own arrangement of Shakespeare's «odoriferous flowers of fancy».¹⁵ The significance of the *nymphæum* as a *prosopopeia* of the act of writing celebrative poetry appears to be further complicated by dark mythological allusions to deceptively idyllic landscapes that preface Ovidian tales of metamorphosis and loss. The *Peneus* mentioned in conjunction to the forest of *Tempe* recalls the personification of the river in Catullus 64 (l. 285) on the marriage of Tethys, but also alludes *in malo* to the Ovidian location of the tales of the rape and transformation of Daphne, Io, and the suicide of Cycnus.¹⁶ Allusions to violent sex can be found in classical epithalamia as well. Catullus in 62 addresses the ritual and legal background of marriage and alludes to the violent force of Hymenaeus who carries off (*rapis*) the tender virgin. In the Latin poem a chorus of youths and one of maidens sing alternately the praise and the blame of Hesperus and of marriage. The maidens express their fears and sorrows of separation and defloration and intone: «Hesperus what more cruel fire than thine moves the sky?» (l. 20).¹⁷ Spenser's allusions to Leda, Echo, Proserpina and Eurydice with their tales of violence, rape and death, embedded contrapuntally in the *Prothalamion*, resonate the fears of the maidens of Catullus 62, but they appear to be more literary self-conscious and didactic.¹⁸

13 Spenser might have read Menander in Latin or Italian. On the first reception and translation of Menander Rhetor Περί ἐπιδεικτικῶν in the Latin West from 1400 to 1600 see Harsting 1992.

14 On the metapoetic use of «garland» and «stanzas» as baskets in the *Prothalamion* see Fowler 1975.

15 *Love's Labours Lost* 4.2.116. On the leitmotif and wordplay on «Thames» and «time» see Wine 1962. On classical sources and metapoetic use of rethorical 'flowers' in the poem, see Eriksen 1993.

16 For the fable of Apollo's mad wooing of Daphne see *Metamorphoses* 1.452 ff.; for Jove's rape of Io, mother of Epaphus, Phaëthon's friend see *Metamorphoses* 1.568-779. On the references to Leda, Echo, Proserpina and Eurydice see Eriksen 1993; «Tempe» in *Metamorphoses* 7.371 is *Cycneia Tempe*, the locality of the suicide and transformation of the spoiled boy *Cycnus*, lover of Phylis.

17 «Hespere, qui caelo fertur crudelior ignis?»: Goold 1988.

18 The *ékphrasis* of the myth of Ariadne embroidered on the nuptial coverlet on the marriage bed of Peleus in Catullus 64 has the same function.

The sustained metaphorical mode of the poem, the wordplay and allusions seem to signify a contrary song as the pun on «brides»/«birds», in the «swan» personification allegory, and the allusions to Leda progressively take us from the literal sense to the metaphorical and the moral (Bull 1958). The references to Leda's mythological scandal, in Stanzas 3 and 10, with the comparison of the Earl of Worcester's two swanlike daughters and the «gentle Knights» (l. 169) to Gemini, the stellified twins of Leda mystify us.¹⁹ Likewise, the personification allegory of the brides as white swans brings to mind that the *Cygnus* is a traditional symbol of lascivious love never used to signify virginal purity.²⁰ Moreover, the highly artificial outdoing on the whiteness of brides/swans, originally from *Metamorphoses* 7.373 is overwrought and like the infelicitous word-play in Stanza 3 on fowl/birds and foule/dirt suggests double entendre.²¹

In Stanza 8, the poet's attention shifts from the riverbanks to London's urban skyline, and – viewed from below – to Essex House. Formally in classical epithalamia, as in Spenser's own, this should have been the time of the bride's home return (*deductio domum*): «Now al is done; bring home the bride againe» (l. 242). Here instead, the lyric 'I' relapses to melancholy and turns the feverish anticipation of the classical **return** into an elegiac retrospection. The poet does not describe the joyous arrival of the brides but the poet's own homecoming, his *nostos* after many peregrinations. Like the exiled Ovid, Spenser recollects the illustrious origins of his noble ancestors, his *gens* (*Tristia* 2.111-120):

At length they all to mery *London* came,
 To mery London, my most kyndly Nurse,
 That to me gaue, this Lifes first natiue source:
 Though from another place I take my name,
 An house of auncient fame.
 (ll. 127-131)

and the memory of **his** lost home. A sense of distance and loss of family and friends in Stanza 8 elicits the memory of the past with the elegiac *ubi sunt*:

19 The indirect comparison of the Somerset brides to the sons of Leda and Jove «in guise of the bird with gleaming plumage» (*Amores* 1.10.3) may suggest that the brides who come down the river are twins just like Leda's sons.

20 On the erotic swan and Erato in painting and epithalamic poetry see Baxandal 1965.

21 Perhaps also a reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8,372-8,373: «[...] not yet set in the starry heavens they came riding up [...] both on horses *whiter than snow* [...]». On «foule» (l. 48), «fowles» (l. 61), «foules» (l. 119) see Crossan 1977. The overwrought play on the whiteness of the 'swans' pageant and brides/birds brings to mind, by contrast, the humility of the «lowly Asse more white than snow» upon which rides **much whiter** Una, hidden under a veil in *Faerie Queene* 1.1.4.

There when they came whereas those bricky towrs
 The which on Themmes' brode aged backe doe ryde,
 Where now the studious Lawyers haue their bowers,
 There whylome wont the Templer Knights to byde,
 Till they decayd through **pride**:
 Next whereunto there standes a stately place,
 Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace
 Of that **great Lord**, which therein wont to dwell,
 Whose want too well, now feeles my **friendless** case:
 (ll. 132-140; my emphasis)

This second complaint is not entirely personal since the *descriptio* of the Inns of Court and the contrast of the Nation's historical past to the present introduces an element of historical and political criticism. As the «friendless» poet reaches what used to be the residence of his long time patron and friend, the «great lord» Leicester, the slow flowing temporality of the poem halts and past and present are contrasted in the description of the Inner Temple.²² The description, that only apparently is a digression, introduces a note of moral criticism and mutability. Elicited by the vision of the brick towers of the schools of law built on the ruined buildings of the proud knights of yore, the sense of ineluctable passing of time reverberates on the description of the «high towers» of the «stately palace» (10.1). Like the Inns, the palace is also viewed in the temporal dimension of a 'before' an 'after': built on the ruins of what used to be the garden of the Outer Temple, the palace that **once** was Leicester's residence is **now** Essex House.²³ Closer attention to space-time mapping of the description in the context of the remark «Till they decayd through **pride**» (my emphasis) will reveal the deeper moral level of signification of what should have been, as in classical *epithalamia*, the rhetorical *descriptio* of the bride's home.²⁴

22 In 1588 Essex was admitted at the Inner Temple on whose grounds still stands Temple Church.

23 Essex begun to appropriate Leicester's estates in 1591 and the London residence on the Strand became the heart of his domestic establishment. See Hammer 1999, p. 131.

24 The *Prothalamion* was written in the vein of Leland's *Cyanea Cantio*, Camden's *De Conubio Tamis et Isis*, Vallans's *Tale of Two Swans*, and Warner's *Albion's England*. Topographical river-marriage poetry was a genre that had aroused Spenser's interest in the 1580s when he promised Harvey to write an *Epithalamion Themesis*. He never published such a poem, but used parts of it in *Faerie Queene* 4.11.11-53.

In the *Prothalamion*, as in *Ruines of Time*, *July the Aegloga Septima* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, the allegorical subject of pride is framed by a moralised space-time mapping: before vs after, high vs low. In *July*, for instance, the ‘Aristotelian’ moral debate between the ‘good’ Thomalin and ‘proud’ Morrell is framed within a vale and dale perspective meant to allegorise the hazards of personal ambition and the dangers of ‘climbing’ (Figure 1). Similarly, the *paysage moralisé* of St. Albans with the scattered remains of fallen Verulamion frame the subject of «pride». In *Ruines* (ll. 34-42), pride, the root of all sins, is viewed as the cause of historical and political degeneration and the ultimate cause of decadence of civilisations, whereas in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* the reference to the fall of Lucifer has an universal relevance. Spenser’s consistent moral use of spatial and temporal perspectives (before vs. after; high vs. low) in his symbolic representations of pride suggests that he understood it as *superbia* (hauteur) in the scriptural and etymological sense of *altitudo cordis* (literally ‘haughtiness of heart’) as found in *Isaiah* 9:9 on the prophetic judgment of Israel for their pride:²⁵ «Et sciet populus, omnes Ephraim, et incolae Samariae, | qui dicunt in **superbia et altitudine cordis**» (Calvin 1996). That Spenser understood the sin of pride as *superbia*, both scripturally and etymologically is also apparent in *The Faerie Queene* 1.7.7-9, where the giant *Orgoglio*, personification of pride, before we are told his name, is described in detail as the personification of ‘height’ or ‘tallness’. He is a creature that grew to become

An hideus Geant horrible and hye,
That with his **tallness** seemd to threat the skye,
(1.7.8, my emphasis)

Taller than the Titans who also challenged Olympus, *Orgoglio* personifies *superbia et altitudo cordis*; tall and stout he is persistently associated with earthquakes from birth to death. *Orgoglio*’s Medusa-like death is a *nemesis*: blinded by the shield of Arthur/Perseus, he crumbles down in a heap of rubble like a castle «reared high and round» that has been shaken to the foundations: «Such was this Gyaunts fall, that seemd to **shake** | the steadfast globe of earth, as for feare did **quake**» (VIII.xxiii.8-9; my emphasis). *Orgoglio*’s imagery, in the poetical allegory, owns to the myth of the

25 «Superbia et altitudine cordis» is translated in the Geneva Bible as «pride and presumption of the heart». Isidore of Seville ethymologised *superbia* from «super» (above, upwards, high up): «superbus dictus quia super vult videri quam est; qui enim vult supergredi quod est, superbus est» (Lindsay 1962, 10.248). See the seminal essay on *superbia*: Testard 1987; on Scripture and Spenser see Gless 1994. For an overview of Spenser’s religion see King 2006.



Figure 1. Illustration from *The Shepheardes Calender*, from the John C. Nimmo facsimile (London, 1895) of the British Museum copy of the first edition of 1579.

rebellious Titans, but in the scriptural allegory his «tallness» suggests that the horrible giant personifies pride in the scriptural sense of *superbia et altitudo cordis* of *Isaiah* 9:9. The terms used to describe the destructive effects of *Orgoglio*'s proud rebelliousness and self-righteousness, to himself as to the world, are also scriptural and derive from *Isaiah* 14:4b-21, the taunt-song in five strophes against the exalted pomp of a nameless tyrant of Babylon, compared to Lucifer, the mythical Helel ben Shahar:

They that see thee, shall looke vpon thee and consider thee, saying,
Is this the man that made the earth **to tremble**, and that did **shake** the
kingdomes? (14:16; my emphasis)

As in the passage on the fall of Lucifer, «the Child of Light» in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* (l. 83), the remark «Till they decayd through *pride*» in the *Prothalamion* alludes to scriptural *superbia*. The comparison of the ruins of the proud Templars' towers to the humbler bricks of the Inns of Court and the vision of Essex's high towers and stately palace seem to

allude to the myth of the fall from pride and the ineluctable cyclicity of change. Its tone is monitory and the reference to brick echoes God's reproaches to the Israelites for having thrown down their brick houses to build the magnificent palaces of *Isaiah* 9:10: «The bricks are fallen, but we will build it with hewn stones: the wild sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars» (Geneva Bible). If the description in the *Prothalamion* is moralised and its intertext is *Isaiah* 9:10 then the comparison of Essex's stately palace to the brick towers of the Inner Temple is not favorable. The lodgings of the «studious Lawyers» (l. 134) would not stand, as some argue, for the diminution of the chivalric to the commercial (see Smith 1959, p. 177; Owens 2007, pp. 79-106). On the contrary, the Inns of Court placed temporally and spatially in between the proud Templars' dwellings, now ruined, and the **high Towers** of Essex's **stately palace**, morally stand in the middle between two excesses, just like the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity, praised in the *July Glosse*: «the meane and lowly state, as that wherein is safetie without feare, and quiet without danger, according to the saying of olde Philosophers, that vertue dwelleth in the midst» (McCabe p. 95 ff.).

The elliptical reference to pride in the *Prothalamion* is not therefore a casual remark on the end of proud chivalry nor a prelude to the conclusive epic subject, but, as in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, it refers to Isaiah's definition of 'pride' as *hauteur* and haughtiness of heart. Pride, as scriptural *superbia*, imports in the *Prothalamion* the transcendent vision of the *Hymns* and, as we shall see, it is the key that opens *Prothalamion's* secretoire.

4

Introduced by the insinuating «yet» and the emphatic «now» in Stanza 9 (l. 145) the poet, as if awakened from his dreamlike state of temporal suspension, arrives at Essex House and sees the «noble lord» descending the river steps to receive the brides:

From those high Towers, this noble Lord issuing,
Like Radiant *Hesper* when his golden hayre
In th' *Ocean* billowes he hath Bathed fayre,
Descended to the Riuers open vewing,
With a great traine ensuing.
(ll. 163-167)

As in Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger's (c. 1597) full length portrait of Essex wearing the dress and ensigns of the Order of the Garter, Spenser's «Magnificke Lord» (see the dedicatory sonnet to Essex in *The Faerie*



Figure 2. Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Robert Devereux*, Montacute House, Long Gallery (c. 1597); NPG 4985

Queene) is shown in the colours of the setting sun: the blue mantle of the Order of the Garter over a silk gown in the radiant Devereux-orange-tawny (Figure 2).²⁶

The *catasterism* of Essex as Hesper at the literal level of interpretation is unambiguous: Robert Devereux is compared to the star *Venus* that in its evening aspect of Hesper/Vesper welcomes the brides.²⁷ The sun is setting

26 Essex was very tall and favoured full length portraits. Known for his sartorial taste he liked to dress in the Devereux colours of the sun. In 1581 he paid for a costly «tawney velvet hose & cloke laid on with flames of fiery gold and a doublet of tawney saten [...]». See Hammer 1999, p. 30.

27 Ben Jonson, perhaps remembering the *Prothalamion* in *Cynthia' Revels* 4.3.5-6, wrote: «Hesperus entreats thy light, | Goddess excellently bright» (Rhys [1910] 1915). Performed at court in 1601 on the very eve of the catastrophic events that led to Essex's execution, and meant as an appeal to the Queen on behalf of his patron, Jonson's reference to Essex as the lesser star at the side of the radiant body of Elizabeth, Cynthia the moon, if meant in earnest,

and Hesper (Latin *Vesper*), the appropriately auspicious deity for nuptials, returns to preside over the celebrations and Spenser, like Catullus, sings his praise.²⁸ In its proper epithalamic context, the formulaic **radiant Hesper** is in fact a formal requirement of the genre. The auspicious star of nuptials in classic poetry usually appears side by side with Hymenaeus, the other epithalamic divinity and officiant of the evening rites of marriage. Essex is also represented as both Hesper and Hymenaeus: like the Evening star he descends to the river to welcome the maidens, but like Hymenaeus he also escorts the grooms.²⁹ However, «Hesper», an epithet rarely used in Elizabethan poetry, is not used in its epithalamic function only. Because of the double identity of the planet Venus, otherwise known to the Romans as *Vesper* (or *Hesperus*) when seen in the evening in the west and as *Lucifer* (or *Eous*) when it appears at dawn in the east, the catasterism of Essex as Hesper for its intertextual allusions is paradoxical.

The name Hesperus/Vesper became a favorite conceit of classical poetry and poets made good use of it. Callimachus (*Hecale*, 291, 3) refers to Hesperus/Vesper as tomorrow's Lucifer, the morning star hated by all lovers; in Seneca's *Agamemnon* (820-822), Venus is surprised to be saluted in the morning as Hesper and not as Lucifer; Catullus also plays with the double name of the star and its ambiguous behavior when he represents Hesper as thief of girls in the evening and discoverer of buglers in the morning as Lucifer: «Hesper, the same but with changed name, Eous» (Catullus, 62, l. 35; Goold 2005). Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*, 2.53 lists the various names of Venus: «stella Veneris, quae Φωσφόρος Graece Lucifer Latine dicitur, cum antegreditur solem, cum subsequitur autem Ἐσπερος». Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, the neo-Latin poet known to Spenser, in his epigram *De Stella*, dedicated to his last lover, also played on the different positions and denominations of Venus (*Phosphoron*, *Hesperon*, *Lucifer* and *Vesper*) (Pontani 1514, f 158ab). John Donne, in *Problem XI* (1590 ca.), «Why is Venus Starre multinominous called both Hesperus and Vesper», anatomised the paradoxical and 'ominous' moral meanings of the star Venus, the monarch of love and lust; and in *The Second Anniversary* (ll. 197-198) with Hesper he signified the Morning star (Lucifer).³⁰

appears now over optimistic.

28 In Catullus 62 (ll. 1-2) when Hesper arrives the young men sing the hymeneal song to usher in the bride, «Vesper adest, iuvenes, consurgite: Vesper Olympo | expectata diu vix tandem lumina tollit».

29 On the identification of *Hesperos* and *Hymenaeus* and their similar myths as handsome youths connected to Venus who were cut off in their prime and disappear mysteriously see Diggle 1968.

30 See Peters 1980. Written in the early 1590s, when Donne was a law student, for a small coterie, they were not meant to be circulated outside Lincoln's Inn. Cf. Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007, pp. 96-101. On the paradox epidemics in Elizabethan London in the 1590s following the publi-

Before him John Lydgate had used the name in its truncated form to refer alternatively to the Morning and Evening Star, as we can see in *The World is Variable*: «Esperus [is] namyd the day sterre» (l. 66; MacCracken 1934). The consistent ambiguity of the name returns also in Spenser who in *Epi-thalamion* (l. 95) refers to *Hesperus* as the morning star, but in *Mutabilitie Canto VI* (l. 9) he identifies it clearly with the page at the side of Cynthia, «whom we the Euening-starre intend».

As in that enigmatic passage of *The Faerie Queen* (1.7.29 ff.) Spenser in the *Prothalamion* alludes to the expanded mythology of Hesperus. That the metaphorical epithet *Hesper* in Essex's catasterism is used paradoxically seems suggested by the textual allusion in lines 164-165 to *Aeneid* 8.589-591: «Qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda | quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignis | Extulit os sacrum caelo tenebrasque resolvit».³¹ Here Vergil compares Pallas, the brave but impatient Arcadian youth, to Lucifer the Morning star. Spenser undoubtedly saw that Vergil's oblique reference to the ephemeral rise and sudden disappearance of Lucifer throws on the doomed Arcadian youth a dark shadow.³² The vocabulary of the premonitory catasterism of Pallas as Lucifer therefore carries into the catasterism of Essex/Hesperus the variants of the cosmological myth of the multinominous star of Venus, a myth that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss teaches (1958, p. 240), is after all the sum of its variants which may range very broadly. One of such variants is the myth of the semi-god Phaëthon identified, since the 6th century B.C. with the cosmological myth of Hesper and whose appearances signify the morning star and evening star respectively, as his alternate names *Heosphoros* (or Phosphorus) and *Hesperos* testify.

If we turn once more to the glowing description of Devereux descending to the water steps to receive the brides,

From those high Towers, this noble Lord issuing,
Like radiant Hesper when his **golden hayre**
in th' Ocean billowes he hath **Bathed** fayre,
Descended to the Rivers open vewing,

cation of Ortensio Lando's *Paradossi* in 1593 as *The Defence of Contraries Paradoxes against common opinion* see Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007.

31 «A sight as brilliant as the Morning Star | Whom Venus loves above all stellar fires | When from the bath of Ocean into heaven | He lifts his holy visage, [...]»: Fitzgerald trans. 1983. For Lucifer as a nickname for Essex at court, see McCabe 1999, note to ll.164-165.

32 Note that Seneca in *Agamemnon* plays with the double parable of the planet Venus to hint at the Argive's death. On the connection of the Morning-Evening star and Venus that as his lover kills him in her fiery embrace, see Diggle 1968. Diggle suggests also the identification of Hesperos and Hymen both closely connected to Venus, described as handsome youths cut off in their prime and translated to heaven by her (p. 180).

With a **great traine** ensuing (ll. 163-167; my emphasis)

we may notice that Spenser refers not only to the vocabulary of *Aeneid* 8. 587-591 but also to that of *Metamorphoses* 2.319-322, Ovid's account of Phaëthon's fall. If «ocean» and «billowes» translate Vergil's words «oecani» and «unda», «golden hayre», «bathed» and «great traine ensuing» translate Ovid's «rutilos flamma populante capillos», «abluit», and «longoque per aera tractu»:

At Phaëthon **rutilos flamma populante capillos**
 volvitur in praeceps **longoque per aera tractu**
 fertur [...].
 Etsi [...]
 quem [...]
 excipit Eridanus fumantiaque **abluit** ora.³³ (my emphasis)

In the encomium of Essex Spenser entwines the epithalamic image of flaming Hesperus, with the tragic image of Pallas as he comes brilliantly «blazoned in arms among the horsemen of Aeneas» (8, l. 588) like Lucifer rising from the ocean. The reference to Pallas/Lucifer is in turn entwined with the highly pathetic image of Phaëthon's catastrophe and headlong downfall into the Eridanus, as the flames ravage his red hair leaving a streaming trail of light in the evening sky.³⁴ Playing both Maro and Naso, Spenser paradoxically projects on Essex's epithalamic descent to the watersteps on the Thames the images of the ascent and short-lived brightness of Lucifer/Pallas and the disastrous fall of Hesperos/Phaëthon into the Eridanus.

The *Prothalamion* contains other allusions to the vocabulary of Ovid's account of Phaëthon's story. In Stanza 2 the «louely Daughters of the Flood» (l. 21), in the *ékphrasis* of the nymphs, are in fact described in terms of the Ovidian Nereids, daughters of Doris, or Doridas, born of Oceanus and Tethys (*Metamorphoses* 2.11-12). Ovid represents them sitting in the sun to dry their «green hair» in the marine tableaux on Vulcan's doors of the palace of the Sun, admired by Phaëthon before he enters the *regia solis*. The pun on «Somerset»/«bred of Somers-heat» in Stanza 4 is also Ovidian and comes from «Sole satum» or «bred of Sun-heat» referred to Phaëthon

33 «But Phaëthon, fire ravaging his ruddy hair, is hurled headlong and falls with a long trail through the air [...] Eridanus receives and bathes his steaming faces»: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.319-324, in Miller 1984.

34 Reference is to Arthur Golding's translation (1567): «But Phaeton (fire yet blasting still among his **yellow haire**) | Shot headlong downe, and glid along the Region of the Ayre | Like to starre in Winter nights (the wether cleare and fayre) | Which though it doe not fall in déede, yet falleth to our sight», (my emphasis).

who, after Epaphus's insult, asks his mother Clymene as to his divine parentage (*Metamorphoses* 1.760-771) and she confirms that he was gendered by *Sol*. The reference to Peneus and Tempe, discussed above, contextually refer also to Phaëthon: raped by Jove, Io mothered Epaphus, Phaëthon's friend and indirect cause of his ruin (*Metamorphoses* 1.749-756).

5

If we return to the extended epic praise of Essex's martial deeds at Cadiz in Stanza 9

Yet therein now doth lodge a noble Peer,
 Great **Englands** glory and the Worlds wide wonder,
 Whose **dreadfull** name, late through all **Spaine** did **thunder**.
 And **Hercules** two **pillors** standing neere,
 Did make to **quake** and **feare**:
 Faire branch of Honor, flower of Cheualrie,
 That fillest **England** with thy triumphes fame,
 (ll. 145-151; my emphasis)

we may notice other discordant allusions to pride and hear echoes of the vocabulary of the *Orgoglio* episode of *The Faerie Queene* (1.8.7 ff.) where the awful giant, blinded and beheaded – like Medusa – by the new Perseus crumbles down like a castle as the «noble Pere» Arthur is saluted by the «royall Virgin» as the «Faire braunch of noblesse, flower of cheualrie» (*FQ* 1.8.26). Quoting himself, Spenser hails Essex as the new Arthur, however the vocabulary of the praise is the same used for the damnation of *Orgoglio's* mastodon might in *FQ* 1.7.7-8 and disastrous fall (*FQ* 1.8.23). The name of the hero of Cadiz is like *Orgoglio's* dreadfull and thunders through Spain with such a might that the pillars of Hercules quake and feare. Yet, the discordant quotes from the *Orgoglio's* episode are hushed by the citation of a more sonorous salute, reserved in *The Faerie Queene* for Arthur, the hero of national greatness.³⁵

Critics and historians have linked the elaborate eulogy of Essex in the *Prothalamion* to Spenser's personal concerns and interests in Ireland and to the political dialogue *A View of the present state of Ireland* which he wrote – or at least revised for publication – in late 1596. Spenser at the time was certainly angling for preferment and hoped to better his position

³⁵ Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Essex gives some reason to believe that after Leicester's death, he transferred the compliment to Elizabeth's new favorite in the hope that as a new Arthur he would be a generous patron like his stepfather. Whether Spenser's pursuit of patronage from Essex ever brought any reward has not yet been proved.

in Ireland. In *A View*, hoping perhaps to gain from Essex a prominent position in the political management of the Irish question, he pressed for the total suppression of Irish resistance and complete imposition of Protestant English culture in Ireland and urged the government to appoint a suitable Lord Lieutenant. Irenius's criptic remark, «Suche a one I coulde name upon whom the ey of all Englande is fixed» (Spenser 1596), perhaps alludes to Essex himself. His failure to see his radical *View* through the press while in London in 1596 may suggest that Spenser's pleas to Essex to take an active part in Irish affairs made no impact. As Hammer points out, Essex at the time was eager to control and «establish dominance of military administration and patronage in Ireland, but did not seek any direct entanglement in what he considered a 'miserable beggerly [...] war'; Ireland in his eyes was no fit place for a man who aspired to play a part upon the *stage of Christendom*» (Hammer 1999, p. 137). Spenser must have returned to his estate in Ireland empty-handed: with the controversial *View* unpublished he had gained little or no hope for social and professional advancement in Munster where he held land and a government post (in Hadfield 2001). He was to return to London after the loss of his possessions in 1598 to die indigent «for lake of bread in King Street», on 13 January 1599; and according to William Camden, his first biographer, he was buried at the expenses of the Earl of Essex. However, it seems, Spenser had refused twenty pieces sent to him by Essex, saying «he was sorry he had no time to spend them» (Patterson 1923, p. 17). It is perhaps not without significance that in 1596, in a famous letter to Essex, dated October 4, Francis Bacon had cautioned Essex openly against his *hybris* and military dependence and warned him that hankering for military greatness was bound to offend the Queen: «I demand whether there can be a more dangerous image than this represented to any monarch living [...]».³⁶ It was only after the execution of Essex that in his infamous *apologie* Bacon at last identified that dangerous image with Icarus whose: «two wings which were ioyned on with waxe, and would make him venture to soare too high, and then faile him at the height» (Bacon 1604, p. 19).

We do not know the reasons behind Spenser's encrypted blame of Essex in the *Prothalamion*, but those behind Bacon's warning are well known. The year 1596 had witnessed the successful naval expedition against Cadiz,

36 Spedding 1862, pp. 40-45. Around that time Essex was criticised for his ambition and desire for popular renown: Edward Guilpin, in *Satire I of Skialetheia: Or A shadowe of truth, in certaine epigrams and satyres* (1598), sig. C3v, offered evidence that Essex courted popularity: «[...] Signior Machiavell | Taught him this mumming trick, with curtesie | T'entrench himself in popularitie | And for a writhen face and bodies moue | Be Barricadode in the peoples loue». Guilpin also attacks him as «Great *Fœlix*», see Gajda 2012, p. 204. The Cecils had also had nicknamed Essex «Felix», with pun on Devereux/'hereux', happy, used also in the *Prothalamion* (l. 153); George Chapman, who tried to become a client of Essex, dedicated to him his translation of the first seven books of the *Iliad* and addressed him as «most true Achilles» (1598, sig. A4r).

and was a point of no return for Essex. Cadiz had a strikingly divisive effect on English politics and the public campaign Essex orchestrated to gain full advantage from the venture, win popular support for his long-term military plans against Spain, and achieve political pre-eminence in the Privy Council polarised factionalism at court even further.³⁷ His ambition grew excessively and his demands for political supremacy at court and for leadership of the military became increasingly pressing. As dedications, both authorised and unauthorised, were showered on him, his commitment to literary patronage became erratic and undependable, as both Bacon and Watton suggest. Moreover, his proud cult of lineage and blood, the literalist pursuit of power through honourable conduct and dedication to military honour in the brittle world of the Elizabethan court and among civil servants whom he considered as less than *reptilia*, turned out to be a liability.³⁸ As a type of Rinaldo, he stood, and eventually died for, the exalted martial and aristocratic code of honour that was essential to knight errantry, and believed the law of nature and a knight's oath of honour to be above civil and common law.³⁹

6

Spenser's paradoxical representation of the political and military *cursus* of the brightest star of Elizabeth's firmament not as a successful drive through the sky but as the downward derailment of the *carrus* from the middle course appears to be the secret and prophetic subject of the *Prothalamion*.⁴⁰ Through the centuries the morally negative significance of the tragic destiny of Phaëthon as a tale on *hybris* dominated the reception of the myth. To Lucretius, Seneca, Martial and Lucian, and the exegetical tradition of the myth up to the Renaissance, Phaëthon was the negative hero of failed *magnanimitas* and emblem of sinful *temeritas*.⁴¹ It was with Svetonius that the

37 On the circulation of Essex's notorious «True relacion» and rival narratives of the victory in the propaganda battle over Cadiz and his attempts to find support outside the court for a new campaign against Spain, see Hammer 1997, and 1999, pp. 252 ff. On the public sale of prints of equestrian portraits of Essex and his associates after Cadiz see Montrose 2006, ch. 15.

38 On sycophancy at court see Hammer 1999, p. 335; Loades 2007.

39 With the younger generation of courtiers born in the 1560s, Essex challenged the demands of obedience and duty to the female monarch and flouted the Queen's authority. See Esler 1966, pp. 87-99. On the comparison of Essex to Tasso's Rinaldo see Helgerson 1991.

40 On the implications of the term 'career' see Laird 2010.

41 In *Tristia* 3.4.19-30, Phaëthon is used as an exemplum for the danger of ambition. The myth becomes the exemplum of pride to Arnulf of Orleans (c.1175), John of Garland, the anonymous author of the *Ovide Moralisé* and to Pierre Bersuire in *Ovidius Moralizatus*. On the reception of the myth in art and literature from antiquity to the Renaissance see Marongiu 2008.

Ovidian *fabula* acquired a political significance that humanists used in their mirror for princes. Erasmus in the *Institutio principis christiani* was the first to use the fable as a monitory exemplum for the future Charles V. After him, editors and illustrators of the *Metamorphoses*, the mythographers of the Renaissance, Andrea Alciati and the many authors of *emblemata* and visual eloquence represented the *ambustus* Phaethon as the allegory of the *stulti principes*.⁴² Arthur Golding followed this didactic tradition, and in the long dedicatory epistle to the Earl of Leicester wrote on the necessity of a sound education for the sake of the commonweal:⁴³

In Phaetons fable vntoo syght the Poet dooth expresse
 The natures of ambition blynd, and youthfull wilfulnesse.
 The end whereof is miserie, and bringeth at the last
 Repentance when it is to late that all redresse is past.
 And how the weaknesse and the want of wit in magistrate
 Confoundeth both his common weale and eeke his owne estate.

Golding's words echo Johannes Spreng's moralisation of Ovid's fables in which the fable of Phaethon is turned into a political allegory and given an extended interpretation and three illustrations.⁴⁴ This elegant octavo had immediate European circulation and one extant copy comes from the library of Gabriel Harvey with his signature and notes.⁴⁵

As in the *Ovide moralisé* tradition, Spenser's paradoxical representation of Essex as Hesperos-Lucifer-Phaëthon is meant, «vntoo syght» (Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, in Hamilton 1977, p. 583), as a meditation on the consequences of blind ambition. Similarly, his encrypted representation of the hero of Cadiz as *Orgoglio* marks a point of no return for his life-long project

42 On the allegory of Phaëthon see Natalis Comes (1520-1582) *Mythologiae Liber VI*, ll. 364-365. In the books of emblems of Raphael Regius (1450-1520), Giorgius Sabinus (1508-1560), Jacobus Pontanus (1542-1626) and notably in Alciati (*Emblematum Liber*, Venice 1553) the moral fable was used politically (see Marongiu 2008, pp. 12-13, 22). Horace (*Carmina* 4.11.25 ff.; Shorey, Laing eds. 1919) instead mentions the grave exemplum of *ambustus* (scorched) Phaëthon in connection with the dangers of unrealistic ambition.

43 Golding 1567, p. 3v. For the political readings of Ovid in England and related bibliography see Heather 2003.

44 *Metamorphoses Ouidii / argumentis quidem soluta oratione, enarrationibus autem & allegorijis elegiaco uersu accuratissimè expositae, summa[ue] diligentia ac studio illustratae, per M. Iohan. Sprengium Augustan; unà cum uiuis singularum transformationum iconibus, à Vergilio Solis, eximio pictore, delineatis. Impressum Francofurti: Apud Georgium Coruinum, Sigismundum Feyerabend, & haeredes VVygandi Galli, 1563*; Harvey's copy is preserved in Harvard Library (Houghton A1447.5.10); cf. Stern 1972, p. 41. The woodcuts are by Virgil Solis and are based on those by Bernard Solomon for the same text.

45 The allegory of the Phaëthon episode is heavily marked in red by Harvey; see for instance p. 24v.

of courtly didactics. It expresses Spenser's own final disillusionment with his exalted project: «to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline» (Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, in Hamilton 1977, p. 583). It has been argued that there is a paradox at the heart of Spenser's didactic project: his deeply set Protestant pessimism about human condition clashes against his desire to educate the virtuous person through poetry. To him, not even the best human beings can avoid without divine intervention, the mortal consequences of weakness and errors. Robert Devereux failed to become a new Arthur because he was unfashionable. His *hubris* and radical notions of magnanimous leadership and aristocratic honour excluded any middle path or *medietas*. As the motto «DUM FORMAS MINUIS», in fashioning you diminish, carved around the rough diamond on his *impresa* in Hilliard's portrait (1594 ca.) boldly intimated, he was unfashionable (Figure 3).⁴⁶

The paradoxical eulogy of Essex in the *Prothalamion* is perhaps Spenser's last concealed message to the understanding few and adds another piece to the puzzle of his life and works. Secrecy, as it has been claimed, lies at the heart of Spenser's life as a subject in itself and as I have demonstrated, the secret subject of Essex's exalted and dangerous *hubris* lies under the veil of the paradoxical catasterism. In *Letter to Raleigh* Spenser had paradoxically claimed that his allegorical method of «wrapping» would enlighten, but his allegories shed an opaque light for the common reader and mystify us. His overwrought allegorical devices at times work like literary paradox and go against common opinion – as he specifies in the Letter («commune sence») – other times they are internally contradictory like logical paradoxes and the medieval amphiboly. The syntactical ambiguity of Spenser's paradoxical catasterism of Essex, like the many «allegorical devices» disseminated throughout his writings, results in the simultaneous revelation and maintenance of secrets and endows the poet's utterance with the aura of hermetic knowledge and prophecy.⁴⁷ The encrypted reference to the fall from pride in Spenser's last poem, written at a critical time and probably after *An Hymn to Heavenly Love*, is monitory. The *Prothalamion* therefore does not express Spenser's desire to return

46 This *impresa*, or emblematic device, in the form of diamond was described by Camden 1870, pp. 384-385): «[...] the late Earl of Essex took Diamond only amidst his shield, with this about it, 'Dum formas minus' [that is] diamonds as we all know are impaired while they are fashioned and pointed». See Piper 1957; Strong 1969, p. 297.

47 *Prothalamion*, a word of Spenser's invention, literally means 'pre-wedding' song. However, knowing his penchant for word play and puns, it is possible that he is playing here with *talamos* (nuptial chamber) and *protéleion*, translated in Scapula's Greek-Latin lexicon as «tirocinium, & initiativum [...] et generaliter, omne primordium rei divina faciendæ». Listed among the 'composita' of *téle*, 'mysteria, sacra' *protéleion* carries into Spenser's neologism 'prothalamion', its mysteric, Orphic and hieratic connotations that reverberate on the poet as the divinely inspired vates or prophet.



Figure 3. Nicholas Hilliard,
Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex
 (c. 1594); NPG 6241

to service at court and to celebrate a national epic, as it has been claimed (Cheney 1993). On the contrary, under its epithalamic and celebratory veil, the *Prothalamion*, not unlike *Complaints* (1591), marks Spenser's turning away from courtly preferment and pursuit of laureateship and prospects the return to the pastoral spirituality of the *Calender* (1579) and to Colin who sings «rymes» that urge his fellow shepherds to set their hopes not in «earthly things» but on «heavens hight» (Knapp 2003; McCabe 1999; Bates 1992).⁴⁸

As T.S. Eliot clearly saw, the *Prothalamion* has the tinge of death. Its prophetic amphibologies, the elegiac *ubi sunt*, and the *pietas* are pronounced as if from the underworld, and the poet's voice is a *vox* from the dead. The nymphs, the brides, Essex and the lyric 'I' himself suddenly appear to be insubstantial, netherworld 'doubles' of original existences on earth.

48 Legend of Courtesy in book vi of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser meditates on the relations between a poet and his patron, and while celebrating the patronage system he subtly reviles it. See Bates 1992, p. 146.

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The Logic of Excess

Religious Paradox and Poetical Truth in Donne's Love Poetry

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Abstract This paper investigates John Donne's rhetorical strategies and lyrical outcomes in the light of the increasing scepticism, following the crisis of the century-old epistemological and religious framework undermined by the Reform and the *new science*. It focuses, in particular, on the recurring use of paradox in the profane context of *Songs and Sonnets*, which shows how Donne draws upon the religious discourse preserving its 'sacred' form but adapting it to secular contents and persuasive purposes, devoid of any orthodox transcendence. Moreover, the analysis of Donne's religious paradoxes reveals the poet's will to compete with the religious authority by mimicking its argumentative style and its limit-expressions (according to Ricoeur's definition), in order to build and defend his own 'poetical truth'. Finally, the paper underlines how Donne's poetry anticipates one of the main features of modern secularization: the role of the arts (poetry included) as the only possible fictional shelter able to compensate for the loss of religious faith.

As a part of his broader concern for the philosophy of language, Paul Ricoeur has devoted two essays to the specificity of religious language and its correlation with poetical language, providing a useful frame of reference to reread the rhetorical procedures which characterise John Donne's poetry and his paradoxical use of religious models and theological squabbles.

In the first essay (Ricoeur 1975), the French philosopher underlines the massive indebtedness of religious language to poetical language, founded upon a common rhetoric able to strike the readers and force them to reorganise through the imagination rather than the will thoughts and beliefs beyond received opinion. «[...] it is precisely on the basis of poetics that religious language reveals its specific character to the extent that the poetic function can appear, in an inverse sense, as the medium or the *organum* of religious language»: poetical language is the *organum* which gives voice to religious language «by various procedures such as intensification, transgression, and going to the limit, which make it [...] an 'odd' language» (Ricoeur 1975, p. 107) full of 'limit expressions' apt to describe «what we might correlatively call the 'limit-experiences' of man» (p. 108). A few years later, Ricoeur provides another insight into this 'specific character', claiming the difference between human logic, which is based upon equal-

ity and equivalence (as in the correspondence between crime and punishment which characterises human justice), and the logic of Jesus and Paul which is instead one of «excess, of superabundance», as Christ's parables collected in the Gospels exemplify (Ricoeur 1980, pp. 37-41). Reading the New Testament we can easily recognise the 'logic of excess' permeating religious language ('turning the other cheek' is a famous example), but it is also possible to recognise paradox as one of the figures of intensification, transgression and «going to the limit» mentioned by Ricoeur. His philosophical reading coincides indeed with the taxonomic description of the paradox as a figure of thought and as a 'metalogism', that is to say, as a figure which modifies the logic value of a sentence in order to deny reality (Groupe μ 1970, p. 125) and stimulate a mode of understanding which challenges our habits of thought. Both these philosophical and taxonomical references to the relationship between religious language and paradox offer an extraordinary starting point for approaching the complexities of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, a collection of poems whose success owes much to a paradoxical mixture of religious speculations with the conversational contexts of love affairs. Moreover, Ricoeur's logic of excess also allows to review the debate about metaphysical poetry, recognising wit as the rhetorical device capable of linking religious language, in its poetical expression, and the great variety of Donne's metalinguistic features which reveal the seventeenth-century increasing awareness of the arbitrariness of language and the unreliability of any discourse.

It is well known that Dryden introduced the word 'metaphysic' with the worst intentions in 1693 (Kinsley 1958, p. 604), and that Johnson followed him, criticising metaphysical poets for their metrical experiments and for having transgressed the Aristotelian principle of the mimetic nature of art. More than a century after their great success, in an age that had completely changed its taste, Johnson could mercilessly sentence: «They cannot be said to have imitated anything» (Napier [1779-1781] 1890, p. 23). Rather than poets, he adds, they are «wits» using a surprising but unnatural logic which combines «the most heterogeneous ideas» (pp. 24-25) in a way significantly different from that more orthodox wit which can be «rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike» (p. 24). Still, Donne's going beyond the limits of nature, and establishing unexpected relationships among things adhered to the idea of poetry suggested by his contemporary Francis Bacon, who wrote «poesy is a part of learning [...] which being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things» (Alexander 2004, p. 289).

Donne's poetical wit goes beyond the referential use of language cre-

ating «unlawful matches» and also beyond *decorum*¹ through the use of paradoxes which join and sever in puzzling ways things belonging to different cultural and linguistic worlds: medieval and Protestant theology, legal and political rhetoric, cartographic imagination, neo-Platonic philosophy, Petrarchan conventions, libertine tradition, among many others. This procedure pervades almost every single poem in *Songs and Sonnets*, but the excess, the ‘superabundance’ of Donne’s figurality is particularly evident in those texts in which the poetic voice mimics the rhetoric of religious and theological debates within erotic contexts in order to persuade his beloved’s imagination (if not her will) to abandon social and moral restrictions and accept his (physical) love. Here the use of a rhetoric of controversy with a profane teleology largely surpasses the model of Petrarch: Donne does not merely display the sacralisation of profane love but uses the intricate reasoning of theological debates for sexual aims. Patently, this corrosive use of wit goes beyond Bacon’s idea of poetry as the art always thought to have «some participation in divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind, where reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things» (Alexander 2004, p. 290) and discloses instead a sceptical vision of the world we already find in Donne’s *Satyres*, especially in *Satyre III* with its suggestion to «doubt wisely» in choosing one’s own religion among the many become available (l. 77). Also in the early *Paradoxes and Problems*, the third paradox *That by Discord things increase* paradoxically exalts the benefits of Discord from which we can expect new advantages, against the Concord of Nature which only points to the conservation of things. More interestingly, Donne also hints at the ‘formal’ disputation of religious controversies as example of dissembled Discord:

The number of *good* men, the onely charitable nourishers of *Concord*, wee see is thinne, and daily melts and waines; but of *bad* *discording* it is infinite, & growes hourelly. Wee are ascertained of all *Disputable* doubts onely by arguing and differing in *Opinion*, and if formall *disputation* (which is but a painted, counterfeit, and dissembled *discord*) can worke vs this benefit, what shall not a full and maine *discord* accomplish? (Peters 1980, p. 19)

The rhetorical strategies and lyrical outcomes (often paradoxical to the verge of blasphemy) displayed in *The Flea*, *The Funerall*, *The Relique*,

1 About wit and *decorum*, see Ong 1947, pp. 310-341. Ong’s article deals with medieval poets, but also develops an interesting comparison with metaphysical poets, suggesting the influence of the theological debates which affected both: «This fact [the use of wit in religious contexts] is intimately connected with the dominance of theological speculation in the milieu in which these men moved», p. 339.

Twicknam Garden, and *The Canonization*, reveal themselves to have been affected, in a more profound and less explicit way, by religious controversies but also by the increasing scepticism towards the century-old religious framework undermined by the issues of the Reform or *Reforms* (Haigh 1993), with their endless squabbles, as well as by the epistemological scientific and ‘anatomical’ patterns of the ‘new philosophy’ (Coffin 1937, Andreassen 1982). The unstable transition from Catholicism to Reformed Church in England as well as the influence of Classic thinkers on religious, political and philosophical controversies contributed to the «rising tide of doubt» (Bertram 2004, p. 18; Popkin 1979, pp. 1-17), whose most quoted examples are Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, on the one side, and these verses in Donne’s *Anatomy of the World* (1611), on the other:

And new Philosophy cals all in doubt,
 The Element of fire is quite put out;
 The Sunne is lost, and th’earth, and no mans wit
 Can well direct him where to looke for it.
 And freely men confesse, that this world’s spent,
 When in the Planets, and the Firmament
 They seeke so many new; they see that this
 Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.
 Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
 All just supply, and all Relation:
 Prince, Subiect, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
 For euery man alone thinkes he hath got
 To be a Phoenix, and that then can be
 None of that kinde, of which he is, but he.
 (ll. 205-218)²

This famous allusion to the epistemological crisis of his time is one of Donne’s arguments in support of the disappearance of divine harmony and the omnipresence of sin in the world. According to Bertram, here Donne «dramatizes or perhaps overdramatizes the confusion of his society by linking the collapse of cosmic harmony to the death of what he nostalgically believes was once social harmony» (Bertram 2004, p. 19). More generally, the *Anatomy* is also a striking example of the supposed and much criticised excess of Donne (see Drummond’s report of Jonson in Milgate 1978, p. 221), as he transfigures the untimely death of the young Elizabeth Drury and her funeral elegy into an mourning lamentation over the end of the divine correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, man and the world, both corrupted since the Fall (Martz 1954, pp. 221-235).

2 All quotations from Donne’s works are from Coffin 2001.

If *An Anatomy of the World* denounces the crisis of his time in an extraordinary hyperbole, in his collection of *Songs and Sonnets* Donne does not merely record the terrible changes occurring in those years, but elaborates, within erotic settings, an original and incredibly modern reaction to, or compensation for, the uncertainties surrounding his world. The recurring use of religious paradoxes in the profane context of *Songs and Sonnets* effectively reveals the weakening of the religious faith due to the multiplying of the theological authorities. Nonetheless, it also shows the poetical subject's increasing awareness of the verbal fallacy of the religious authority and his will to mimic its argumentative and paradoxical procedures in order to build and defend – as in a debate or trial – his own 'poetical truth'. The verbal strategy is to stimulate the imagination of the beloved, to oppose common sense and the *doxa* prevailing in the fields of love and morality. To this end, the poet puzzles his interlocutors (and readers) about the consistency of his reasoning in a way that recalls the language of Christ in the Gospels, even though his language ultimately appears devoid of an orthodox Christian religious sense, and even of any religious sense.

One of the religious paradoxes on which Donne often builds his audacious imagery and reasoning is that of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The mystery of the Gospel words «This is my body», whose interpretation had to be literal for Catholics and was only figural for Reformers who read them as 'this stands for, represents my body', played a key role in the controversial battles between Catholics and Reformers, but even earlier, in Christian medieval thought since the ninth-century (Davies 1975, pp. 103-104; Rubin 1991, pp. 12-49; Duffy 1992, pp. 91-130). This exegetical issue had soon led, in the Reformed England, to an unceasing religious war against the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, that is to say, against the idea, in Thomistic terms, of the transfiguration of the *substantia* of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, during which the bread and the wine still retain their outward form, *accidens*. At the same time, the very complex and fascinating matter of the Eucharist became a recurring theme in the literature of seventeenth-century England, as is now widely recognised (Ross 1954; DiPasquale 1999; Gallagher, Greenblatt 2000; Young 2000; Whalen 2002; Schwartz 2008), providing an underlying paradigm to some of Donne's most semantically multi-layered poems. It is the case of *The Flea*, one of Donne's most famous poems, which draws on the conventional erotic image of the flea (Gardner 1965, p. 174; Serpieri, Bigliuzzi 2009, pp. 108-109) and renovates it using a 'sacramental wit'. Against the sacred and witty subtext woven by the poet we hear a man trying to convince, casuistically, a woman to accept his erotic proposal of uniting their bodies. Since the very beginning of the poem, the mistress and the reader are invited to consider the flea, introduced in the title and pointed at by the deictic «this» (l. 1), occurring twice in the first line:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
 How little that which thou deny'st me is;
 Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
 And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
 Confesse it, this cannot be said
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
 Yet this enjoyes before it woove,
 And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.
 (ll. 1-9)

The starting point of the persuasive strategy is the idea that the poet and the woman are already «mingled» in the flea that has sucked both, and more precisely they are mingled in the blood of the flea which, according to Theresa DiPasquale, can be considered a «quasi Eucharistic sign, telling her that, in essence, "Hoc est corpus nostrum"» (DiPasquale 1999, p. 175). The body of the flea is a sacralised-reified metonym of the conjectural union of the lovers whose «real presence» is strengthened by the reiteration of the theologically allusive «this» throughout the poem (Hester 1990, p. 377). The use of sacramental allusions in a text belonging to the anti-Petrarchan libertine tradition of a woman wooed for explicitly sexual aims reveals Donne's sceptical resolution to use religious dogma and theological debates as a form of persuasion whose original content has completely lost its sacred power and allure of self-evident truth, but is still thought to have a gripping sophistic ability. The blasphemous subtext becomes even more evident in the second stanza:

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
 Where we almost, nay more than maryed are:
 This flea is you and I, and this
 Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;
 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
 And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.
 Though use make you apt to kill mee,
 Let not to this, selfe murder added bee,
 And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.
 (ll. 10-18)

The stanza opens dramatically with the poetic voice praying the woman to refrain from killing the flea that represents their marriage (one of the sacraments abolished by the Reform) and particularly their «mariage bed» and «mariage temple» (v. 13): two sacred spaces where, if performed, the sacrifice of the flea would represent a «sacrilege», that is, a double murder (the flea and the poet) plus a self-murder (of the woman contained in the

flea). In the final stanza, the sacrifice has already occurred outside the poem, and the poetic voice tries to interpret the decision of the woman to commit that supposedly impious crime:

Cruel and sodaine, hast thou since
 Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,
 Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?
 Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou
 Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now.
 'Tis true; then learne how false, feares be;
 Just so much honour, when thou yeeld'st to me,
 Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.
 (ll. 19-27)

The «blood of innocence» at l. 19 insinuates the identification of the flea with Christ, reinforced by the word «purpled» that suggests the colour of the Eucharistic blood as well as the traditional colour of kingly power. In fact the killing of the flea appears in this light as an iconoclastic attempt to cancel the outward sign of the paradoxical communion, both erotic and sacramental, of the blasphemous lovers. In the last verse the serpentine argumentation makes explicit the syllogism on which it was built: just as the death of the flea - which had undergone a divine conversion (or transubstantiation) in this poetical excursus - did no harm to the lovers, so the waste of honour - overrated by society and Christian morality (especially Protestant) - will not do any harm to the woman if she decides to yield to the poet's reshaped proposal that «cannot be said | A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead» (l. 6).

Donne's rhetorical strategy is here particularly manifest: to draw persuasive and puzzling forms from religious discourse and convert them to secular or erotic contents devoid of any orthodox transcendence. The poet does not show any vanishing point within the frame of persuasion and sophistic statements to which the poetical language is compelled. He exploits the convergence of divine logic and poetical wit only to ensure the sexual surrender of the woman, but nonetheless «his sacramental profanities are witness to the rhetorical power of a religious idea» (Whalen 2002, p. 59).

The same sceptical horizon relying on religious paradoxes can be discovered in poems like *The Relique*, which belongs with *The Funerall*, *The Damp* and *The Apparition* to a groups of texts where the after-life is represented or imagined as a mundane space for further speculations, revenges, sexual encounters or promises of eternal love. In *The Relique*, as the title suggests, the religious, and namely Catholic framework refers to the supposed miraculous quality of the objects and parts of the body belonging to

saints; a quality fiercely abolished by Reformers as ‘popish’ superstition.³ The setting of the poem is a grave, and immediately postulates a continuity between the worlds of the living and the dead: the poet imagines himself and his beloved lying buried, and disturbed by the ill-timed arrival of a ‘second guest’ (or ghost):

When my grave is broke up againe
 Some second ghest to entertaine,
 (For graves have learn’d that woman-head
 to be more then one a Bed)
 And he that digs it, spies
 A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
 Will he not let’us alone,
 And thinke that there a loving couple lies,
 Who thought that this device might be some way
 To make their soules, at the last busie day,
 Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?
 If this fall in a time, or land,
 Where mis-devotion doth command,
 Then, he that digges us up, will bring
 Us, to the Bishop, and the King,
 To make us Reliques; then
 Thou shalt be’a Mary Magdalen, and I
 A something else there by;
 All women shall adore us, and some men;
 And since at such times, miracles are sought,
 I would that age were by this paper taught
 What miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought.
 (ll. 1-22)

The bracelet – the ‘sign’ to which many scholars have paid attention since T.S. Eliot⁴ – is here a private device of recognition and a sign of the promise made by the lovers to wait for the Last Judgement Day and take advan-

3 The word ‘popish’ was widely employed in treatises and pamphlets of the time. In the *OED*, its use is recorded since 1528, with the meaning: «Of or pertaining to popery; of or belonging to the Church of Rome; papistical (In hostile use)».

4 T.S. Eliot highlighted that here «the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of associations of ‘bright hair’ and of ‘bone’»: Eliot [1921] 1932, p. 243; Serpieri too stressed the surprising semic collision of life (bright hair) and death (bone), of elegance (bracelet) and total spoliation (bone) (Serpieri 1975, p. 284). Similarly, according to Carey «the line startles us by its suggestion of death and life coiled together. The hair is dead, but its unnaturally prolonged brightness seems to vouch for some persistent, subterranean vitality»: Carey 1981, p. 126. Finally, Pagnini underlined the strength of its alliterative structure [br][br][b][b]: 1970, p. 100.

tage of the resurrection of the bodies to «make a little stay» (l. 11). In the second stanza, the poetic conjecture leads the speaker to further, and paradoxical, speculation about a possible future where «mis-devotion», perhaps the Catholic adoration of relics, «doth command» (l. 13) and the corpses-lovers, found by the second guest, will be taken to the religious and political authorities («the Bishop, and the King», l. 15) to be publicly declared relics.

This is the premise for the audacious and blasphemous identification that takes place in the centre of the poem: if the woman will be a Mary Magdalene (l. 17) – the Baroque profane-and-sacred female figure *par excellence* –, the poet will be «something else there by» (l. 18), that is Christ, as the thirty-three lines of the text seem to corroborate (Redpath 1967; for numerological implications, see Rufini 1992, p. 83). The poet evokes a land or time of mis-devotion where orthodox faith has been forgotten to the point that it allows the lovers to become the deities of this conjectural world where traditional religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, has been replaced with a religion of Love. The second stanza closes with two lines devoted to a meta-poetical reference to «this paper» (l. 21) intended to teach «what miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought» (l. 22). Following the poet's identification with Christ, «this paper» narrating miracles (the poem itself) appears as a sort of apocryphal Gospel, legitimately 'excessive' in its language and hyperboles, as we find out in the final stanza, where the miracle of lovers turns out to be ironically enough their chastity:⁵

First we loved well and faithfully,
 Yet knew not what we loved, nor why;
 Difference of sex we never knew,
 No more than guardian angels do;
 Coming and going we
 Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
 Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals,
 Which nature, injured by late law, sets free.
 These miracles we did; but now alas!
 All measure, and all language, I should pass,
 Should I tell what a miracle she was.
 (ll. 23-32)

In this poetical space, parallel to the ordinary word, chastity can paradoxically exist only as the most unnatural of events, a «miracle». This final line adds support to the interpretation of the religious subtext as a blasphemous parody, where the figure of Christ (and his Word) is substituted

5 As for the possible interpretations of the last two lines, see Serpieri 1975, pp. 286-287.

by the poet (and his poem) only to display an unconvincing 'address by counsel' about an asexual angelic relationship (except for kisses) similar to that between Christ and Mary Magdalene.

It is worth underlining how this poem, contextualised in the seventeenth-century age of anxiety in which religious persecutions were under way and Catholicism was even punished with death, appears remarkably puzzling in its representation of the Catholic devotion to relics and at the same time more generally reveals Donne's scepticism in exploiting and emptying orthodox Christian issues (first of all, the innocent relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene, one of the few saint recognised by the English Church) irrespective of their Catholic or Protestant source.

This is most evident in *The Canonization*, a poem in which a new love religion replaces the vacillating old religion thanks to a sacralisation celebrated by the poet-priest and performed in the text (about the poet-priest, see McNees 1992, p. 18). Thanks to the power of the poetical language that is the *medium* of a religious and also verbal transfiguration, here the lovers are shown in their alchemical sublimation from the sublunary world to (a parallel) Heaven. Like the flea, the lovers undergo a substantial transformation in the space of the poem, but the use of paradox and the competition between religious and poetical truth is far more articulated. The formal aspects of the text immediately inscribe it in the genre of the epithalamion, or as Rufini has suggested, of a crypto-epithalamion alluding to the distress caused by Donne's own marriage to Ann More (Rufini 1992, p. 89). The reiteration of the word *Love* at the end of the first and last line of each stanza, and the number 5 that recurs in the number of stanzas (5 being the numerological nuptial union of 2 and 3, respectively symbols of the female and male quintessence) point to the theme of love and (the sacrament) of marriage as the *fil rouge* of the text. In the first stanza, the reader of the poem finds himself *in medias res* of a quarrel between an off-stage interlocutor and the poet:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,
 Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
 My five gray hairees, or ruin'd fortune flout,
 With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,
 Take you a course, get you a place,
 Observe his honour, or his grace,
 Or the King's reall, or his stamped face
 Contemplate, what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love.
 Alas, alas, who is injur'd by my love?
 What merchants ships have my sighs drown'd?
 Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?

When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veins fill
 Adde one more to the plague Bill?
 Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,
 Though she and I do Love.
 (ll. 1-18)

The poet's voice seems to burst into the text against an interlocutor represented through a verbal metonymy, «your tongue» (l. 1), to defend his right to love and to reaffirm the importance of love against common people who prefer the favour of the King or money, «the King's reall, or his stamped face» (l. 7). In the second stanza, instead, the verbal structure completely relies on rhetorical questions, that is to say, on questions which do not expect any answer, and the aim of the poet is to sneer at all the hyperbolic conventions and stereotypes of the Petrarchan tradition in order to declare the innocence and 'harmless' nature of love.

In these first two stanzas, special attention must be paid to the pronominal aspect of the discourse of the poet, who adopts the first person singular (eight times in nine lines) and distinguishes between 'she' and 'I', located in a specular-opposite position in the final «Though she and I do love» (l. 18). Since the third stanza, a pronominal union discloses the 'union' of the lovers that will be shortly celebrated:

Call us what you will, wee are made such by love;
 Call her one, mee another flye,
 We're Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,
 And wee in us finde the Eagle and the Dove;
 The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
 By us, we two being one, are it,
 So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love.
 Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombes and hearse
 Our legend bee, it will bee fit for verse;
 And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
 As well a well wrought urne becomes
 The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,
 And by these hymnes, all shall approve
 Us *Canoniz'd* for Love.
 (ll. 19-35)

The third stanza, which is central in the whole stanzaic pattern, opens with plural forms of the first person, 'us'/'we', in which 'she' and 'I' are now «mingled». It is only the beginning of the alchemical climax culminating in the transformation of the lovers in the figure of the Phoenix that occupies the centre of the poem (see again Rufini 1992, p. 90). Interestingly, the intermediate figures of this process are «flies» and «tapers» (ll. 20, 21), both Renaissance symbols of lust, and the Eagle and the Dove, respectively Pagan symbols of Male and Female Virtues, but also, in the Christian tradition, of Christ (once again) and the Peace following the Flood. The three figures of the Eagle, the Dove and the Phoenix – considered by A.L. Clements as «advancing steps in the alchemical process (“flying eagle” and “Diana doves”) leading to the philosophers’ stone (“phoenix”)» (Clements 1990, p. 49) – contribute to suggesting the theme of the Resurrection as a pivotal question of the poem, even though once again it reveals itself to be a paradoxical mixture, a «riddle» (l. 23) of lustful and religious allusions. If the eagle was believed to periodically renew its plumage and was then adopted as symbol of the Resurrected Christ, and the dove is a symbol of the rebirth of the earth after the Flood, the image of the mythological bird able to rise from its own ashes also suggests the complete mystical sexual fusion of the sacralised lovers in the hermaphroditism usually associated with it. «By us, we two being one, are it, | So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit» (ll. 24-25): the syntactical and pronominal patterns of these verses strengthen this interpretation: us/we become one/it, a singular entity whose paradoxical nature or riddle lies in its celebrating a sort of communion of the singular and plural, sexual and neutral, mystical and physical, religious and profane. The physical aspect of this communion emerges from the striking ambiguity we find in the lines «Wee dye and rise the same, and prove | Mysterious by this love» (ll. 26-27). It is well known that the use of the verb 'die' had a strong sexual connotation in the use of the time, alluding to orgasm, but its association with the verb 'rise', though alluding to resurrection, sheds an erotic and even obscene light on that «mystery» hinted at in the end of the stanza (on the sacramental connotation of «mysterious» associated to *mysterion*, see also Schwartz 2008).

In the fourth stanza, the poem celebrates the mysterious sacralisation of the lovers after their death and resurrection enabled by the religious and erotic imagery displayed by the poet. The paradoxical answer of the poet to the interdiction of (physical) love we read in the first two stanzas is the legitimate canonization of love in the fictional and unorthodox space of the poem: «if unfit for tombes or hearse | Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse» (ll. 29-30). Poetry will preserve and transmit their 'legend' (their 'life of saints'): not history or chronicles, but the pretty rooms of the sonnets (like the one we are reading) will be the hymns accompanying this rite of love sanctification. According to Brooks: «The poem is an instance of the

doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realisation of the assertion. The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the 'pretty rooms' with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which hold the lovers' ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with prince's 'halfe-acre tomb» (Brooks 1947, p. 17). Later, in opposition to Brooks' new critical approach, Jonathan Culler has proposed a deconstructionist interpretation of the poem as a «chain of discourses and representations» very different from Brooks' self-enclosed poem-urn (Culler 1982, pp. 201-205). As for our discourse, it is important to underline that these rooms are also the place where the lovers can build an eternal poetical 'truth' whose form reminds the religious ones, having these provided the rhetoric possibilities and cultural patterns to imagine a parallel world (the after-life) where lovers can be free.

Finally, in the last stanza the poet goes even further in his challenge to traditional religion and mimicking of its divine rhetoric, dramatising the invocation of the brand new saints:

And thus invoke us; You whom reverend love
 Made one anothers hermitage;
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage,
 Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove
 Into the glasses of your eyes,
 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,
 That they did all to you epitomize)
 Countries, Townes, Courts: beg from above
 A patterne of your love!
 (ll. 37-45)

The poem ends with this absurd but still plausible conclusion - the canonization - made more likely thanks to the mise-en-scene of the invocation of the saints by a believer speaking in the poem. The shifting of the voice from the plural first person to an external voice paradoxically contributes to the objective 'poetical truth' of the situation and strengthens the blasphemous mimesis towards traditional religion: since the sacrifice of saints is an act of love, the deaths of the lovers are a copy of that sacrifice to be re-performed by the believers.

In the sceptical world of Donne, also saints' religious model has been discredited to the point of being erotically re-written. The traditional procedure of sanctification is emptied, and the orthodox figures are substituted by a 'representation' ('This stands for'), a fictional and puzzling copy of lost models. Even the world is reduced to a mere 'image' in the lovers' eyes at ll. 40-41.

This procedure is similar to the sacramental allusions in *The Flea*, and to the mimesis of Christ in *The Relique*: to use a religious form/model/pat-

tern and show its emptiness and abuse, and at the same time to express a nostalgia for that lost world of correspondences between words and things that the poet tries to restore through his own *organum*, poetry, and through a rhetorical figure, paradox, which is able to cancel reality and draw attention on that same cancelling. As Young well summarises, «what emerges is a view of poetry striving to capture in the spell of verbal form a sense of the mystery that was rapidly banished from the world» (Young 2000, p. 2).

By the end of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, Donne anticipates one of the main and enduring outcomes of the pervasive feeling of scepticism affecting the interpretation and representation of the world. As in *The Relique* and *The Canonization*, so increasingly in modern poetry, art becomes the only fictional shelter where the loss of religious faith can be provisionally compensated. This secularised shelter can only be built through an awareness of the coeval (and since then unsolved) epistemological crisis affecting the process of communication (Serpieri 1975). Following Kenneth Burke's suggestion that speaking about God (He being *Logos*) is always a metalinguistic reflection about language itself (Burke 1970), it is essential to consider the seventeenth-century religious crisis as namely a crisis of the Word, and of its power to tell and preserve truth. This accounts for the great emphasis on the witty unreliability and logic frailties of language in Donne's love poems, but also of the corrosive use of paradox in the literature of his time: the rising scepticism towards the old religion finds its best ally in this figure of thought and 'excess' which cancels the delusive religious content and reduces it to a mere persuasive form suitable to shift what Ricoeur called the 'limit-experiences' from the reign of God to the field of worldly experience.

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Sceptical Responses in Early Modern Plays

From Self-Knowledge to Self-Doubt in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*

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Abstract Defined for the first time by Sir Thomas Elyot as a «secte of Phylosophers, whiche affirmed nothyng» (1538), the term 'scepticism' appears in all its variants only too rarely in the drama of the period. Chadwyck Healey databases (Early English Books Online and Literature Online) record only four different occurrences (Tomkis 1607; Jonson 1640; Cartwright 1651; Massinger 1655), in a span of time which runs from 1550 to 1655, although scepticism as a way of participating in, and responding to, life is registered on the London stages as an increasingly popular critical attitude. Vindice's «I'm in doubt whether I'm myself or no» is evidence of that suspension of judgment which is envisaged by the sceptics as the only viable answer in a world governed by the relativism of human knowledge. Against a theoretical and philosophical background which investigates the relationship between self-knowledge and scepticism, the article looks at how this early modern revival of scepticism – so profoundly influenced by the translation of Montaigne's essays – can couple with, and go beyond, an emergent awareness of inwardness, as the one hinted at in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In particular, the essay examines the interplay between the revengers' responses to the adoption of different masks and the *dictum* of a philosophy which demands the deferment of any epistemological verdict. A discussion of the rhetorical strategies which better testify to the contradictions at the heart of this ontological impasse will then follow.

Summary 1. Identifying (sceptical) selves in early modern literature. — 2. Tragicomical Self-knowledge in John Marston's *The Malcontent*. — 3. Questioning the Self in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*: The Knowledge of Self-doubt.

The more I learnt the more I learn to doubt.
(John Marston, *What You Will*, 2.2.153)

We must know how to distinguish and separate ourselves from our public charges: every one of us plays two parts, two persons; the one strange and apparent, the other proper and essential [...] A man must serve and make use of the world such as he finds it; in the meantime, he must likewise consider it as a thing estranged from itself, know how to keep and carry himself apart, and to communicate himself to his own trustie good, howsoever things fall out with himself.
(Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*)

1 Identifying (sceptical) selves in early modern literature

Defined for the first time by Sir Thomas Elyot as a «secte of Phylosophers, whiche affirmed nothyng» (1538, n.p.), and thus antedating the *OED*'s

first record of the noun in 1587, 'sceptici' appears in all its variant spellings and forms only too rarely in the drama of the early modern period, despite being widely employed in prose and poetry. Chadwyck Healey databases (Early English Books Online and Literature Online) register only five different occurrences of the term in plays between 1550 and 1655: in two comedies, Thomas Tomkis's *Lingua* (1607) and Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1640); a masque, William Davenant's *Britannia Triumphans* (1638); a tragicomedy, William Cartwright's *The Lady Errant* (1651); and a comical history, Philip Massinger's *The Guardian* (1655). Although the term is rarely employed by playwrights, scepticism as a way of participating in, and of responding to, life is registered on the London stages as an increasingly popular critical attitude, which paradoxically finds its most intriguing ambassadors in the tragedies of the period where the term never appears.

This revival of scepticism, reinvigorated by the social, political, religious, and scientific turmoil of the age (see Spolsky 2001, pp. 62-63), as well as by the literary patrimony of Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (1603), and by the works of More, Sextus, and Erasmus, couples with an emergent awareness of inwardness, which is hinted at in Marston's *The Malcontent* (Kay 1998) and in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (MacDonald 2007), two plays which have received scant attention in discussions of sceptical selves, with the exception of Hamlin's treatment of the topic in *The Malcontent* and, more in general, in Middleton (Hamlin 2005).

As scepticism thus surfaces in the period, one may wonder how the revengers' response to the adoption of different disguises functions, if at all, according to the *dictum* of a philosophy that demands the deferment of any epistemological verdict and how the genre of the play may variously affect the playwrights' ways of dealing with this subject. From a dramatic perspective, we also need to know which rhetorical strategies testify to the contradictions at the heart of what becomes an ontological impasse ('who am I?') and how paradoxes inherent in the expression of the self may illuminate our understanding of early modern plays' engagement with scepticism.

Literary scholars, as well as cultural historians, have recently discerned new scenarios on the relation between the private and the public sphere in the everyday experience of the early modern world. Words such as 'subject', 'subjectual', 'individual', 'identity', and 'inwardness' have therefore emerged as a new vocabulary to define the concept of Renaissance selfhood. These terms, however useful, may on occasion clash with the developing terminology of an age whose responses to questions on the nature of being inevitably differ from ours.

It is probably for this reason that readings of early modern plays may tend to privilege Stephen Greenblatt's coinage: 'self-fashioning'. In his influential New Historicist *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the word has come to suggest a denial of any independent agency on the part of the individual

in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Greenblatt, selfhood is fashioned as «the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society» (2005, p. 256). This presumed relational subjectivity, strongly informed by Foucauldian overtones, has offered new ways of «specifying the Subject» in a period when, according to Condren, «human social and moral identity, as opposed to material identity, was presented and presumably conceived not in terms of selves or individuals but personae [...] the moral world was overwhelmingly articulated as comprised of offices» (Condren 2006, pp. 35-36; see also Barker 1984).

Despite the fact that our understanding of Renaissance identity and culture has greatly benefited from these studies, a large group of scholars have been increasingly inclined to suspect New Historicist approaches as, borrowing John Jeffries Martin's words, «hold[ing] them [Renaissance identities] up as mirrors to ourselves, [so that] what we see depends almost entirely upon where we stand». Greenblatt's theory has in fact been charged with anachronism because of his attempt to define the «glimmerings of the postmodern self» (Martin 2004, p. 7). Indeed, the same uneasiness with Greenblatt's assumptions has also informed the critically acclaimed *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, where Katharine Eisaman Maus accuses that «the new-historicist critique insists that the 'self' is not independent or prior to its social context. Yet that critique often seems to assume that once this dependence is pointed out, inwardness simply vaporizes» (1995, p. 28). Although she agrees with some of the arguments offered by these postmodern readings, Maus believes that a preoccupation with a rhetoric of inwardness and privacy is manifest in Renaissance theatre, which investigates this «sense of discrepancy between inward disposition and outward appearance» (p. 13). Early modern identity has therefore become the focus of attention on problems of representations of the self as well as «the relation of one's inner experience to one's experience in the world» (Martin 2004, p. 15), as Geoff Baldwin also argues:

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was a body of writers who developed ideas of the self which drew upon stoicism and ideas of office, but went beyond both of these. They pointed forward to more individualistic moral theories, as well as backwards to the conception of the individual as a performer of a variety of roles. (Baldwin 2001, p. 364)

Against this critical background, which tends to analyse early seventeenth-century English plays in relation to an emergent awareness of identity as a conflictual site between private and public selves in the drama of the period, this paper argues instead that early modern investigations of the self may also be informed by literary and cultural traditions of scepticism and that the resulting different degrees of self-knowledge achieved

by the revengers through their use of masks and disguise are variously expressed according to the generic requirements of the play considered. Even though it is too early to treat early modern characters as examples of the individualism one associates with Hobbes or with Milton's Satan, the revengers of this period can in fact be discerned as products of a discussion on self-examination. In an age where, as John Donne famously put it in his *An Anatomy of the World* (1611), «the new philosophy calls all in doubt» (Serpieri, Bigliuzzi 2009, l. 205), the disguises adopted by these characters become means through which the experience of 'knowing (one) self' is structured around negotiated inner and outer conflicts and, as in the case of the tragedies, may paradoxically produce doubt in a new, emergent reconfiguration of the coordinates in the other relation. The masks of the malcontent or the knave, for instance, perfectly exploit the gap between external representation and internal truth in a metatheatrical game where the self-proclaiming revenger, suspicious of the unreliability of appearances and assuming a certain degree of self-knowledge, has to mould a new social identity. Functional to the reacquisition of a former public role in the tragicomedy, this cognitive process, which is here investigated through the lens of early modern scepticism, favours in the tragic revenger a new perception of his own interiority, which undermines his assumed self-knowledge.

2 Tragicomical Self-knowledge in John Marson's *The Malcontent*

By offering an interesting perspective on the conflicts between inward observation and outward representation in early modern drama, Duke Altofronto epitomises the revenger's struggle with the adoption of a mask: «Oh God, how loathsome this toying is to me, that a duke should be forced to fool it! Well, *stultorum plena sunt omnia*; better play the fool lord, than to be the fool lord» (5.3.41-44). Performed between 1602 and 1604, *The Malcontent* is the only play of the period where the malcontent persona – self-consciously performed by the protagonist to achieve his own personal revenge and recognised as a codified cultural type by the other characters on stage – is given the status of a character in a play. In this tragicomedy, Malevole, Altofronto's alter-ego, is a sceptic who can «give his judgement free», as in Richard Brathwaite's definition of the type in his 1615 *Strapado for the Divell* (quoted in Hamlin 2005, p. 98). That in Brathwaite the «scepticke» comes to define something different from what we have encountered so far testifies to the polisemic nature of a term that may refer to either the doubters (in the Phyrroonian fashion) or someone who, with his opinions, «do [*sic*] small harme to mens integrity», as in Marston's play (quoted in Hamlin 2005, p. 98). Malevole is in fact presented as consistently satirical in his language and attitude (Peter 1956; Kernan 1959;

Axelrad 1955) and content to act the fool and to be taken to be one. His malcontent credentials are limited to the fact that he casts himself as an outsider and thinks badly of the world.

Criticism has long debated the relationship between Altofronto and Malevole, speculating on the different degrees of contamination between the two and, eventually, agreeing on taking the deposed duke as the real malcontent of the play's title who adopts his fake malcontent persona in order to regain the power and status he has lost. On this subject, T.F. Wharton claims that «disguise serves as more than a convenient trick. It involves a definite loss of the habits, values, and restraints of one's normal identity. It frees the disguiser to do things which would be otherwise inconceivable, as he in a sense becomes what he poses as» (1988, p. 24; on the notion of self-alienation and self-concealment, see Gomez 1991, p. 52; Lanier 1987; Clark 1983; and Kinney 2005, p. 416). Malevole's cynical persona is therefore absorbed into the duke's, as evidenced in the play's closing moments when the malcontent alarmingly remains on stage wearing Altofronto's clothes.

William Hamlin's reading of the play reinforces Wharton's position since he believes that «Altofronto enjoys his role as Malevole, and thus appears to *be* Malevole in some sense worth considering; it follows from this that if he is not precisely 'intrapped' in the role, the role nonetheless functions as a part of him – an extension or development, perhaps» (2005, p. 188). Hamlin, however, goes beyond conflating two characters in one to argue that Altofronto/Malevole is actually

practic[ing] in *utramque partem* argumentation but conclud[ing] that *both* sides are true. He thus follows a sceptical trajectory to the extent that he entertains 'cross'd opinions' and refuses to choose between them, but he abandons the trajectory in departing from the Pyrrhonian principle of non-assertion. Instead of 'A, but not-A, therefore neither', he presents us with 'A, but not-A, therefore both' (2005, p. 189).

That the disguise becomes part of the disguiser remains, of course, a critical speculation rather than an element of a plot where the donned mask, in order to be a successful tool for revenge, has to distinguish itself from its bearer, despite sharing with him several attitudes. After all, as Dzelzainis states, following Francis Bacon's *Of Simulation and Dissimulation*, «to be open and truthful (or *apertus et veraxor libera e vera*) is in fact the best way to render oneself and one's dissimulation 'almost invisible'» (2000, p. 238). Hence, although Malevole's denunciation of the dukedom is Altofronto's denunciation of the corrupted Genoa, the different social roles of the characters (a malcontent and a former Duke) help preserve the scope of the planned revenge: interestingly, as long as Altofronto is invisible, Malevole's invectives are not perceived as a real danger to the

constituted authority.

However, what is really at stake here is not so much the ways in which Altofronto's identity is perceived as the duke's awareness of a gap between his private self (variously adulterated by his public persona as former duke) and the new public mask that he now creates for himself. Altofronto is in fact aware of the importance of representation in order to manipulate the others - «inconstant people | Love many princes merely for their faces | And outward shows» (5.6.139-141) - and he seems constantly in control of the assumed role, as is evident in the stage direction «*Bilioso entering, Malevole shifteth his speech*» (1.4). Following the *esse est percipi dictum* (to be is to be perceived), the revenger forges a persona (here a malcontent) according to the characteristics that society would impose on that specific figure, thus demonstrating an ability to interpret the ways in which the others perceive the malcontent and forge him discursively as well as the ability to undergo a certain degree of self-examination. The mask of the malcontent becomes therefore the arena where the tension between socially constructed figures and self-conscious reflection takes place, where the 'being' *versus* 'seeming' topos, one of the «literary paradigms of early modern scepticism» listed by Hamlin, is made manifest (2005, p. 124; see also pp. 124-137). As Malevole states: «Oh, my disguise fools him most powerfully. | For that I **seem** a desperate malcontent» (3.3.33-34; my emphasis). Interestingly, it is the old panderess of the play, Maquerelle, who also relentlessly comments upon the same topos by catechising her interlocutors on the public exercise of honesty: «Have you the art to **seem** honest?» (2.4.24; my emphasis) and «Honesty is but an art to **seem** so» (5.3.12; my emphasis). And yet, Altofronto's responsiveness to the conflict between outward representation and intimate understanding is informed by a more philosophical tone, which he exhibits also in lecturing a shocked Pietro who has just discovered her wife's sexual affairs:

Pietro: All is damnation, wickedness extreme; there is no faith in man.

Malevole: In none but usurers and brokers, they deceive no man; men take 'em for blood-suckers, and so they are. Now, God deliver me from my friends [...] there's nothing perfect in it [the world] but extreme, extreme calamity, such as comes yonder. (4.4.16-31)

In this exchange, the two dukes perfectly fulfil another of Hamlin's literary paradigms of early modern scepticism, «that which develops from a collective sense of human weakness and mental frailty, [which] may be explicitly accounted for by reference to the Fall» (2005, p. 124). Human defectiveness and insufficiency become, therefore, the leitmotif of a play where knowledge is damnation, as Pietro's cue perfectly epitomises:

Oh, would I ne'er had known
 My own dishonour! Good God, that men should
 Desire to search out that which, being found, kills all
 Their joy of life! To taste the tree of knowledge
 And then be driven from out Paradise! (3.114-118)

The fact that the play's epistemological scepticism is voiced by a malcontent (the Duke in disguise), a usurper (Pietro), and an old panderess can be seen as a further signal of Marston's distinctive way of shaping the satirical tone of his tragicomedy.

If, as William Hamlin rightly asserts, «scepticism is less a school of thought than a temper of mind: a set of characteristic mental attitudes and practices» (2005, p. 5), then this play resonates with sceptical preoccupations in the very references to the unreliability of appearances (seeming *versus* being) and to the assertion of human weakness and insufficiency, as pungently articulated in the epilogue to the play: «He that knows most, knows most how much he wanteth» (l. 18). On the contrary, the Phyrroonian lesson (the «A, but not-A, therefore neither») does not inform Altofronto's response to the adoption of the mask: the Duke's performance of the malcontent is never translated in the disguiser's suspension of judgement determined by a new perception of his (double) self (as it is in *The Revenger's Tragedy*). The camouflage does not provide Altofronto with anything but his lost authority and the consequent recovery of a former public identity which, in this play, coherently merges with the idea that the Duke already possesses of himself. And it is perhaps for this reason that, once regained his power and despite wearing Malevole's clothes, the revenger never comments on his disguise.

3 Questioning the Self in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*: The Knowledge of Self-doubt

If in *The Malcontent* Altofronto's disguise is not really functional to the disguiser's reconsideration of 'who he is', the mask being merely a means to regain social power, in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the guises occasionally worn by Vindice (Piato and Hippolito's discontented brother) do offer the revenger a prismatic range of identities that urge him to question himself - by questioning his own self. I have elsewhere explored how this game of identities works in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Nigri 2011 and 2014), but here I want to investigate Vindice's sceptical responses to the masks and to a game which seems to escape containment and control on the part of the disguiser. Vindice's «O, I'm in doubt | Whether I'm myself or no!» (4.4.24-25) can therefore be read as one of the character's many capitulations to a world where revenge does no longer lead to the reconstruc-

tion of a renewed moral and political order and where the suspension of judgment envisaged by the sceptics offers the only viable response to a universe governed by the relativism of human knowledge.

If in Marston's play the audience is never involved in Altofronto's decision to wear a mask – as the play starts, we are introduced to Malevole, and it is through him that we come to know Altofronto, the disguiser –, Middleton's tragedy makes the audience participate in Vindice's escalating rethinking of himself through the different roles which he happens to perform. In the revenger's opening monologue (the only one in the whole tragedy), in fact, he says nothing about camouflage: Vindice only announces his intentions to revenge, its motive (the murder of his betrothed Gloriana), and the objects of his vengeance («four exc'llent characters», 1.1.5). It is only later in the scene that the occasion to put his thoughts into practice arrives: Lussurioso, the Duke's son, is looking for «some strange-digested fellow forth | Of ill-contented nature, either disgraced | In former times or by new grooms displaced | Since his stepmother's nuptial» (1.1.76-79). Vindice grabs an opportunity he cannot miss. Despite his pronouncement that he will «put on that knave for once» (1.1.93), the revenger's ability to conceive his disguise as 'other' from himself is only occasional. In this tragedy, the act of 'putting on' the mask soon transmutes into 'being' that new mask, as Vindice does not fail to note: «Brother I'll **be** that strange composed fellow» (1.1.96; my emphasis). In a play where the disguise can no longer be seen as a mere instrument for revenge, seeming turns into being. The 'seem' of the revenger in Marston's tragicomedy («For that I **seem** a desperate malcontent», 3.3.34; my emphasis) becomes the 'be' of the revenger in Middleton's tragedy.

The objectification of the mask as something distinctive from the disguiser's self («I'll quickly turn into another», 1.1.134) is hardly convincing in Middleton's work; in fact the revenger increasingly loses control over a performance which, to his fear, he cannot really master. Vindice's uneasiness and anxiety about role-playing are sharply voiced in his dialogue with Hippolito, where he asks: «What brother, am I far enough from myself?» (1.3.1). The same fear pugnaciously reappears in the second act when, during his performance as Piato, he addresses Lussurioso in his own voice: «Vindice: My lord. || Lussurioso: Who's that?» (2.2. 39). Conceivably providing a moment of comic relief in the tragedy, what we are dealing with here is a volatile self which, as it spirals out of Vindice's power, overshadows the role performed, thus blurring the distinction between the representation of another public persona and that «inward heart» (3.5.9) Vindice attempts to preserve. And in fact, despite the overall success of his performance, the tragedy makes it difficult to distinguish Vindice's «inward heart» from the masks which he assumes, as demonstrated by the character's increasing pleasure derived by his role and the punishments increasingly enjoying the role and the punishments which he inflicts on people: the attempts to prostitute Gloriana and Gratiana and the progres-

sively indiscriminate murders which he is now ready to commit («As fast as they peep up let's cut 'em down», 3.5.220).

The ephemerality of the self in a tragedy, where the revenger's own personality is thinned down into that of his mask, is indeed a concern shared by many characters in the play. Characters constantly interrogate themselves or the others about lost and forgotten selves, substituted selves, and selves that demand reconfirming. The topic of forgetting one(self) is not new to this period. The 1608 English translation of Charron's *De La Sagesse* (1601; translated into English as *Of Wisdome*) also registers the age's anxiety regarding self-knowledge: «Thou **forgettest** thy self, and **lovest** thy self about outward things; thou **betrayest** and **disrobest** thy self; thou lookest alwaies before thee; gather thy self unto thy self, and shut up thy self within thy self: examine, search, know thyself» (1608, p. 2; my emphasis). The same insistence on losing and forgetting oneself is one of the recurrent tropes of the play: Lussurioso consents to «forget [himself] in private» (1.3.38) – here with the meaning of temporarily disregarding his social rank; Hippolito fears to «lose ourselves» (4.2.199); and Vindice accuses his mother to «uncivilly forget [her]self» (4.4.19). In Lussurioso and Vindice's examples, the fear of forgetting or losing the self becomes a fear of invalidating the social identity of, both, the son of the Duke and the mother. In other words, the self is persistently mistaken here for the public role held by these characters, as when, spurred by Hippolito to remember their roles in the revenge («Oh brother, you forgot our business», 4.4.83), Vindice dreams of an ideal human condition where «man's happiest when he forgets himself» (4.4.85; see also 2.5.29). With this statement, one of the most powerful in the tragedy, Middleton seems to recuperate that sceptical trope of the inadequateness of men also explored by Marston in the same years.

If in the case of Gratiana her self is one with her role as mother when long as she protects daughter from prostitution, then Castiza's incredulity in the face of her mother's eventually pushing her towards it, stigmatises the woman as being not only lost («Pray, did you see my mother? Which way went she? | Pray God I have not lost her», 2.1.157-158) but also other than herself: «Why, are you she? | The world's so changed, one shape into another, | It is wise child now that knows her mother» (2.1.160-162). The daughter's reflection on her mother's transformation suggests that one 'lost being' (being a mother) is replaced with another, opposite 'being' (being a pimp), as evidenced in the following dialogue where Castiza voices her dismay at her mother's suggestion that she 'must' become Lussurioso's mistress:

Castiza: Mother, come from that poisonous woman there.

Mother: Where?

Castiza: Do you not see her? She's too inward, then. (2.1.232-234)

Gratiana, in other words, is seen by Castiza as ‘another’ Gratiana – «Are not you she» (4.4.127) – and the identity split she senses in her is significantly translated into a figure of pronominal equivocation similar to diaphora and contiguous to paradox (on the metalogic function of diaphora see Bigliuzzi 2011, p. 136]. The play acclaims, therefore, the definitive collapse of the unified self of humanist tradition, as further testified to by the mutability of selves (and identities) depending on role-playing. This emerges, for example, when the old Duke suspects his son of treason («This boy, that should be myself after me, | Would be myself before me», 2.3.19-20), or when Lussurioso perceives of his self through the office he will hold («If e’er I live to be myself, I’ll thank you», 3.2.4), or when Dondolo makes sharp remarks on his own striving «would strive a little to show [him]self in [his] place» (2.1. 20-21).

Demanding confirmation on ‘who I am’ is another specific concern of this tragedy. The characters’ destabilising sense of their selves (and their roles) is expressed in the rhetorical questions of Gratiana to his daughter («Am I not your mother?», 4.4.8) and of Lussurioso to vindice and the nobles, respectively («Am I a lord for nothing» and «Am not I duke?»; 5.1.62 and 5.3.19). By demanding confirmation of their roles, these characters demonstrate a concern with the way their authority is perceived by others. As Sylvia Adamson points out, «‘Who (or what) am I?’ and ‘Who (or what) are you?’ are asked repeatedly by protagonists for whom the unity or distinctness of the categories of personal self and social role has become a pressing issue, imposed by a sudden imperative demand either for self-knowledge or for knowledge of the other» (2010, p. 64).

Vindice, on the contrary, never asks ‘who am I?’ and, from the third act of the tragedy on, he assertively declares his identity as a revenger to those characters who, as the dying old Duke and his dying son, know him as either Piato or Hippolito’s «discontented brother» (4.2.35): «’Tis I, ’tis Vindice, ’tis I» (3.5.167) and «And I am he» (5.3.79). Arguably, these assertions must be read more as sadistic and instrumental to his own revenge than as an answer to his reflections upon the identity game. It is, instead, in Vindice’s joke – «O, I’m in doubt | Whether I’m myself or no» (4.4.24-25) – that, as pointed out by MacDonald P. Jackson in his edition of the play, Vindice «raises a deeper question about his true identity [provided that he has one] than [he] intends» (2007, p. 583). Failure to gain a definitive homogeneous sense of his own identity and an emergent alertness to a more sophisticated and complex self-knowledge is also evidenced in Vindice’s final statement when, seized by guards and ready to be executed for an excessively violent revenge and for constituting a danger to the new order, he affirms that «’Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes» (5.3.109; see also 4.1.61). Middleton’s revenger fails where Marston’s succeeds because, while Altofronto seems to some extent aware of the coherence of his own personality and always in control of his performance as a malcontent,

Vindice misses the opportunity to direct the action of his own revenge with some distance from his camouflage: his «inward heart» (3.5.9), in other words, indiscriminately flows into the public mask he has created, thus producing an identitary friction between what he thought he was and what he thinks he is now. As Geoff Baldwin pertinently points out:

In order to present a public *persona* [...], it was important not to put one's whole self into this *persona*, so that the individual could not be described by referring to the sum of duties or offices held. Something unique had to be retained that could not be crushed, [...], by the destruction of those other *persona*. Not only this, but the self which was reserved had to be capable of judgement, so that it could discern the deception of the world and direct the operation of one or more *persona*. This made it possible to **act** in flawed world, and remain true to oneself and therefore potentially free. (2001, pp. 363-364)

Vindice, on the contrary, cannot be 'free' simply because he cannot remain true to himself without discharging the masks which he progressively assumes and which, paradoxically, are now part of himself, as suggested by Vindice's reply to Hippolito's diaphoric «you're yourself» in the scene where the revenger 'disguises' as the discontented Vindice Lussurioso assumes to know:

Hippolito: So, so, all's as it should be; you're yourself.

Vindice: How that great villain puts me to my shifts! (4.2.1-2)

However, in this complex short-circuit of roles, the revenger does gain what we may define as a performative self-knowledge: through the adoptions of several roles, the disguiser achieves a certain degree of understanding of himself, which he now expresses in sceptical argument. The only accessible self-knowledge which Vindice can access is, in fact, self-doubt, in the fashion of Pyrrhonian investigation of a truth which is impossible to claim with certainty (as opposed to the Academic philosophers who, according to Sextus, negate human knowledge). Vindice's suspension of judgment between the «we» perceived as both «ourselves» and «our enemies» (5.3.109) substantiates the sarcastic 'doubt' expressed in his statement - «O, I'm in doubt | Whether I'm myself or no» (4.4.24-25) - where the revenger is not simply making fun of the performative multiple personae.

Middleton's construction of self-doubt in *The Revenger's Tragedy* could also be linked to the notion of selfhood propounded by Calvin, especially in view of his uncompromising separation of a hidden, spiritual self from an outer, social one (Stachniewski 1991; see also Cox 2007). The play, however, seems to draw more consistently upon the same philosophical context from which Montaigne's «Du Repentir» nourishes itself. According to Luiz Eva's

reading of the French essayist's introductory passage, Montaigne argues that «the way in which different changes overlap leaves us without benchmarks by which to determine what is true. [...] Insofar as we cannot tell if our changes are properly changes of what we are ourselves, or changes due to exterior causes, we cannot take these changes as representing knowledge of the self» (Eva 2012, pp. 78-79).

Likewise, at the end of the play, Vindice is forced to reconsider his own self, to borrow Fingarette's vocabulary on self-deception, as a «community of subselves» (quoted in Cox 2007, p. 11), all simultaneously dissenting and – somehow at the same time – all true, thus differing from Montaigne's impossibility to define truth. Vindice's ontological and epistemological understanding is prompted by this very coexistence of the masks within himself. On the other end of the spectrum is, instead, Gratiana's response to an identity game, which can only be possible in an asynchronous timeframe. Her resurrection as a loving mother is in fact possible only in the moment she rejects her other role (the pimp), as she does not fail to recognise: «'Tis unfruitful, held tedious, to repeat what's past. | I'm now your **present** mother» (4.4.132-113; my emphasis). There is no ontological gain deriving from the change of roles: she can be either one or the other.

The revenger thus appears as the only one able to achieve some renewed knowledge of his own presence in the world. His masks offer him the occasion to transform himself and, in the process of (re)presenting himself as 'other', to embrace, as a palimpsest, all his previous selves and, at the same time, to doubt them all. Self-doubt is in fact the price to pay in order to gain knowledge, and the tragedy ends with the character astray in the face of an unsolvable instability at the roots of his own being.

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Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief

The Case of *Othello*

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Abstract The visceral responses of theatrical audiences to *Othello* across time and place clash oddly with the scepticism often ascribed to this play, and famously discussed in Stanley Cavell's seminal work, *Disowning Knowledge* (2003). The debate aroused by Cavell's sharply philosophical, and partly psychoanalytical inquiry into Othello's reasons for "disowning knowledge" has brought fuel to the issue of Othello's scepticism. After taking initial stock of Cavell's reading and of the main objections raised against his subtle argument, this essay explores the textual and cultural reasons for the contradiction between the shapes of scepticism moulded in *Othello* and the extreme emotional responses of audiences recorded by Mason Vaughan (*Othello: A Contextual History*, 1994). What the essay aims to highlight are the ways scepticism was deflected into potential scandal. Section one addresses the socio-cultural aspects of the early modern sceptical gaze in topical passages of *Othello*, with an eye on issues that mark the epistemic shift underlying the early modern philosophy of scepticism. Reference is made mainly to the performative strategies of inwardness – as well as to the related issues of race/colour and of military/marital service. Section two shows how Desdemona's instability is a vehicle for deflecting extreme discursive and theatrical aspects of scepticism in *Hamlet* into potential scandal and radical improbability.

1

And a most instant tetter baked about | Most lazar - like with vile
and loathsome crust | All my smooth body. (*Hamlet* 1.5.71-73)

Do but encave yourself | And mark the fleers, the gibes, and
notable scorns | That dwell in every region of his face.
(*Othello* 4.1.77-79)

Like the defacing bark that imprisons Hamlet's ghost, the self-encaved posture that befalls Othello stands out as a poignant image of a *corpus clausus*: a secluded body. The two pictures mark the sequential steps of a narrative that, from *Hamlet* to *Othello*, sheds light on the transformations undergone by the body severed from communion with the outer world. In *Othello*, the encrusted body that encapsulates Hamlet's melancholic solipsism hollows out into the cave of the Moor's hiding and voyeuristic spying upon otherness. Obstruction of the natural flow of knowledge lies at the core of both tragedies where it acts as a tegument that impedes the

incorporation of God and otherness into oneself, an obstacle that separates scepticism from belief.¹ In order to access what is now felt as the interior of the body, a leap of faith is demanded: belief requires that the boundaries between inward and outward be transcended rather than inquired.² And since it takes those boundaries as essential, scepticism requires that they be established by force, and that all layers that impede the probing of knowledge should be penetrated, in order for the truth to be known (Hillman 2007, pp. 29-32).

Whether bounded within a nutshell, like Hamlet's, or confined within the cave of his own self, like Othello's, the bodies staged by these two sceptical Shakespearean tragedies are driven by the same urge: they aim to access an unreachable kernel of truth by breaking through material or visual barriers forcibly. In the deflected form of a prying gaze, the violence of masculine knowledge is summoned to bridge the gap that has opened up in the integrity of corporeal, linguistic, religious and political bodies: the split that has severed words from meanings, seeming from truth, King from subjects, God from creatures, men from women. And the obscurity of the Scriptures marks a sharp symbolic divide, setting the plenitude of God's word far up against its profane interpretations (Eisaman Maus 1995, p. 9). Given the postlapsarian biblical scenario in which *Hamlet* locates the opening of the epistemological gap that fissures knowledge, it could be argued that Hamlet's drive into inwardness closely recalls the one of contemporary Biblical exegetes.³ The post-lapsarian rift that Luther had vividly depicted (1955-1978, vol. 1, pp. 77-78)⁴ and that reformed exegesis

1 My reading of scepticism is here indebted to Hillman 2007, pp. 1-59. On the questionability of porose, permeable bodies in humorous theory and Galenic physiology see also Paster 1993. For a discussion of *Hamlet* from the same angle see Marzola 2014.

2 In his monumental study on scepticism Richard Popkin clarifies the terms of the Post Reformation religious dispute within which the revival of Pyrronian scepticism helped to redefine belief or dogmatism. Far from opposing belief the Protestant informed shape of English scepticism «is raising doubts about the rational of evidential merits of the justifications given for a belief» (2003, pp. xxi). For more insights into the ways scepticism came to affect Shakespeare's work in particular see Bradshaw 1987 and Hamlin 2005.

3 As often noted (Belsey 2001) the Ghost's narration recalls the scriptural setting of the primeval sin committed in the Garden of Eden, superimposed unto the scene of the fratricide, which was the outcome of that sin. The Fall theme - a highly popular one at the time - was also widely translated and stringently reinterpreted by Reformed Protestant theologians. In their readings - informed by daily engagement with the Holy Book - salvation and redemption were overshadowed by a new emphasis on the trauma of guilt. Hamlet's painstaking search into the folds of a language that his father's narrative has shown to be fractured beyond salvation can thus be taken as the dramatic enactment of reformed theological inquiries. For an expanded treatment of this issue see Herschfeld 2003: pp. 424-448 and Marzola 2014: pp. 205-206.

4 In his lectures Luther actually highlights passages in the Scriptures where sin is described as «a complete breakdown of the comprehensive process of communication» and as a turning away from God that is described as *incurvatio in se ipsum* (Bayer 2008, p. 182).

had been charting painstakingly in the records of Genesis, is actually the unhealed trauma which underpins the trajectory of scepticism from *Hamlet* to *Othello*.

While Hamlet's re-enactment of that trauma unveils the rank, material grossness that takes hold of a Lutheran world, Iago's 'post-traumatic stress disorders' casts the world's blackened contents onto the fabric of innocence. The legacy that victimises Prince Hamlet – the «cursed spite» (1.5.188) that dooms him to set a disjointed world right – has metamorphosed into Iago's victimising, retaliatory drive to curse otherness.

The offal of Elsinore's unweeded garden, confined inside Iago's sceptical body, eventually comes to monstrous seed in the groundless world of Othello's Venice. A disconcerting heir to the Danish Prince, the Venetian Ensign detects the fissures that undermine the whole structure of received knowledge only to open them up in order to hasten Othello's downfall into the dizzying vision of his own begrimed and begriming self. In *Othello*'s postscript to *Hamlet*'s lapsarian narrative the stake is no longer the questioning elicited by doubt, but, as Stanley Cavell has argued in his groundbreaking study (2003), the catastrophic effects which Pyrronian scepticism brings about once the idealizing construct of love communion succumbs to the threat of otherness which female separateness and openness embody. Within the Cartesian paradigm of knowledge this play prefigures, Othello's unremitting search for the ocular proof of the other's bedevilment is but a cover for his anguished loss of a fantasised integrity, a displaced drive to self-annihilation that the tragedy exposes and dooms to failure. The alabaster of dead Desdemona – the only ocular proof the play produces – is the monumental correlative of the consequences sceptical doubt has when engrafted into fantasies of absoluteness (Cavell 2003, p. 128).

And the fact that the play's shattering conclusion has been invariably resented by post-Cartesian recipients⁵ proves that Cavell's reading touches raw nerves: it exposes Othello's catastrophe as the possible outcome of our own ingrained scepticism. Even less tolerable than the doomed fatality of the end, is the unwilling complicity with the 'monstrous engendering' of scepticism which is forced upon us by Shakespeare's rhetorical orchestration of Iago's role.⁶ Not only do we become compellingly enmeshed in Othello's voyeuristic drive like actors on stage. We also feel quite baffled

5 I am using the term 'recipients' in order to refer to theatrical audiences as well as to professional and amateur readers across time. No matter how culturally determined, I believe such responses share the essential predicates that I have pointed to. For a comprehensive view of critical and theatrical reactions to *Othello* see Pechter 1999. Insightful reflections on the cultural determinants that have stirred such ripostes can be found in Mason Vaughan 1994.

6 An exhaustive survey of the critical contributions which highlight Iago's compelling ascendancy over on and off stage viewers is offered in Pechter 1999, pp. 26-29. For an emphasis on Iago as a «deceitful version of the 'nuntius'», see Neill 2006, p. 138.

and grow frustrated when, bolstered up by the knowledge Iago imparts on us in his asides, we suddenly find that our illusion is shattered since we are excluded from «the hidden realm of inwardness» (Eisaman Maus 1995, p. 126) that Iago's final vindication of flat roles ultimately reconfirms («Demand me nothing: what you know, you know», 5.2.301).⁷ What justifies the arousal of empathic identifications with the parts on stage, and of visceral rebuttals of the plotline, what even stimulates the urge to rewrite the script altogether, is the simultaneous inducing and thwarting of the suspension of disbelief on which this play so heavily relies. It is ultimately our resistance to take in the sceptical legacy we have unwittingly subscribed that sparks beliefs and that lures our off-stage bodies to cross over the boundary of the scenic platform.

In the sections that follow I will attempt to retrace the ways such emotionality is being sparked: it is the play's projective re-enactment of Lutheran curses – I submit – that forcibly dramatises the devastating effects of scepticism *Othello* puts forward. On the other hand I believe that it is the failure of mediations that marks the breach of knowledge which brings about the relentless enclosing and emptying of masculine bodies and gazes. My final emphasis however will be on the ultimate challenge Desdemona's inclining posture sets up against the destructive pervasiveness of Cartesian scepticism: unlike the men in *Othello*, she leaves the way open for the reactive beliefs this play arouses.

2

'Tis the curse of service: | Preferment goes by letter and affection,
| And not by old gradation, where each second | Stood heir to th' first. (1.1.34-37)

O curse of marriage, | That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
| And not their appetites!(3.3.265-267)

Like the curse of service that Iago laments at the outset, the curse of marriage that enslaved Othello bemoans in act 3 resonates with echoes of a Biblical consignment to inexorable doom. Service and marriage are cast as unbending conditions, fixing in equal measure the corresponding curses recorded in the Book of Genesis: the curse of subjection that dooms Canaan «to be a servant of servants» (9.27) and the curse of enmity that forever sets man apart from woman: «I shall put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed» (3.14-15). The whole parable of Othello's scepticism is in fact fostered by Biblical curses – threatening

⁷ All quotations from *Othello* refer to Neill 2006.

speech acts that in their proleptic force pin down the future of mankind, forever arresting it into irreversible postures. A stunning example of such doomed immutability confronts us in the depersonalised tableaux that seal the play's conclusion: the white alabaster of dead Desdemona, the Turbaned Turk – the hostile, circumcised dog – Othello stabs as he performs his suicide (5.2.341-355), the very wedding bed – with its impersonally tragic burden – are like objects that give substance to Iago's pervasive monstrosity, as he engenders annihilating effigies of otherness. No matter how estheticised into the alabaster within which Othello's rhetoric has encrusted it, Desdemona's dead body, the casual victim of a prying masculine gaze, is eventually merged into the indistinct female loading of the wedding bed. And no matter how soaked with exoticism and eroticism, the body Othello exposes in his self-framing performance, is irretrievably split into fetishised fragments of alienness.

The unredeemed freeze of such a finale comes as the play's historicised enactment of underlying biblical curses: while enmity between man and woman has been recast into the alienation and annihilation of feminine and masculine bodies, the curse of service that dooms Canaan in Genesis has degenerated into the curse of Ham that contemporary writers were popularising as the punishment of and justification for black skin, as well as for slavery (Whitford 2009; Mason Vaughan 1994, pp. 51-70): the blackness of Othello, the whiteness of Desdemona, hardened into prototypes of racialised and gendered otherness, become the chromatic markers of differences that the ensnaring web of scepticism has construed and fatally entwined. The light *Othello* sheds on the accomplishment of the curse illuminates the fixed ways these two culturally loaded colours presuppose. They implicate each other in a knot that ties violent masculinity to victimised femininity.

The after-effects of Cartesian scepticism become thus sclerotised in this fatal entanglement wherein all the curses the play adumbrates – of marriage, of service and of Ham – come to accomplishment in a devastating conflation. Such entanglement is vividly recorded in the so-called temptation scene where the «forked plague» of marriage Othello laments (3.3.273-275) consists in disowning feminine appetites through expulsion: «[...] O curse of marriage, | That we can call these delicate creatures ours, | And not their appetites! [...]» (271-273). The rift between the delicacy men are entitled to own, and the appetites they are cursed to disown signals a failure of recognition that Othello re-enacts in his conflated begriming of himself and bedevilling of Desdemona. As Othello surrenders to temptation, he yields unconditionally to a coalescence of biblical curses that he is doomed to enact and perpetrate through words and deeds, so much so that he curses himself to perennial enslavement and Desdemona to bawdy whoredom.

In its biblical overtones, the style of Othello's bewhoring of Desdemona, performed within the enclosed precincts of the so-called brothel scene (4.2), mimics the fatal fury of a Lutheran God cursing the primal woman to

the fate a whorish and scheming Eve.⁸ While the injunction Othello imparts to Emilia «Leave procreants alone and shut the door» (28) ushers us into a domestic and privy version of Hell, the abuses he hurls on her come as the stigmas of an unmentionable sin whose consequences deface and efface Desdemona at once. In fact, the demonised bedchamber sets up the stage where Othello, like a postlapsarian procreant, collides with the figure of Desdemona, as though she had already receded into the ‘whatness’ of a hellish and reified impersonality: «Why what art thou?» (4.2.33). Far from being ignored or silenced, Desdemona’s subsequent professions of identity will be instead received as disconcerting denials of the begrimed image of her that possesses Othello («Are you not a strumpet?», 83; «What, not a whore?», 86). And her protestations of innocence will be likewise sensed to belie the desecrating role she plays in the alienated version of their marriage overshadowing Othello’s mind: «I took you for that cunning whore of Venice | That married with Othello» (90-91). It is the unendurable coexistence of this bedevilled projection with the lasting image of «chaste Desdemona» that will drive Othello to «put out the light» twice («Put out the light, and then, put out the light -», 5.2.7) as if to extinguish, one after the other, the split parts of Desdemona: her delicacy and her appetites. These parts, eventually subsumed under Desdemona’s deadly alabaster, are forever doomed to a destiny of depersonalisation and fixity that is repeatedly evoked by the whole imagery of projections in this play. Projection – a psychic and visual externalisation of inward images onto the screen of outward otherness⁹ – is the word that most aptly describes the ways *Othello*’s sceptically deformed knowledge translates the fixity of curses into fixations – «the fixèd figure for the time of scorn» (4.2.53) –. As famously instanced in 3.3, Iago’s reticence is what unveils the inwardness which drives Othello to visualise Iago’s projections: the Moor’s enchafed demands for Iago’s thought to be shown and made known marks the onset of a prying pursuit of knowledge. And Iago’s resistance to yield away the sealed contents of his mind turns such pursuit into a voyeuristic inquiry.¹⁰ Announced as a set of instructions on how to «wear eyes» (3.3.201), the exhortations Iago keeps imparting throughout the whole scene come to shape

8 In his commentary on Genesis Luther repeatedly points to the ways God’s wrath, induced by the Fall, becomes manifest in his curses (Lehman, Pelikan eds., vol. 1, pp. 77-78, 310, 205. Cited in Stephenson, Power, Bratton 2010). For an insight into the ways Lutheran re-readings of Genesis depicted Eve as a scheming temptress see Crowther 2010. Biblical overtones in *Othello* are also mentioned in Hannibal Hamlin’s encompassing review of Biblical allusions and quotations in Shakespeare (Hamlin 2012).

9 Adelman (1997, pp. 125-145) offers a still valuable Kleinian insight into the plays’ projections and introjections.

10 For an in-depth exploration of the ways Iago engenders introspection and voyeurism in *Othello* in this scene see Neill 1998, pp. 151-159. See also Burke [1951] 1988, pp. 127-158.

both the 'I' and the 'eye' of Othello into the deformed gaze of a prurient beholder of secret obscenity: a post Cartesian researcher of ocular proofs. As Othello's broken certainty grows more and more fragmented, Iago successfully deflects his own recommendations to «observe» Desdemona (195) and to «look to» the matter (198) into the insinuations that the Moor might want to «grossly gape on» a prurient show: «Would you, the supervisor grossly gape on? | Behold her topped?» (393-394). To treat Othello's sceptical disease Iago prescribes a sort of homeopathic cure: Othello is urged to spy the hollowness of his own encaved self from within, onto the outward projection of incorporated abuses («Do but encave yourself, | And mark the fleers, the gibes, the notable scorns | That dwell in every region of his face.», 4.1.77-79). Yet Iago's prescription marks the final enhancement of Othello's sceptically deformed gaze. And it is this gaze that charges the projections of fixity and impersonality put forth in the play with the burden of a stinging curse that affects gender and race. A glaring example of this culturally loaded curse, the «black ram» and the «white ewe» conjured up in Iago's initial flash of Othello's coupling (1.1.87-90), set the tone of prediction, factuality, impersonality and defacement that haunts the visions of the mind in this play. Analepsis and prolepsis here converge into a psychic image of bestiality projected onto the screen of the Venetian imaginary. It is the first shot of a sequence that the play's conclusion will freeze into an irrevocable endorsement, and that each scene progressively deploys into a lustful phantasmagoria of erotic projections, all of which bear striking analogies with Iago's initial cursing. In all the moving images captured by Iago's fantasy and echoed in the hollow cave of Othello's newly discovered inwardness, emphasis on the masculine enactment of debased sex obfuscates the identity of the actors and consigns their adulterous deeds to impersonal invisibility. What stands out in Iago's phantasmal account of Cassio's lascivious dream (3.3.420-427) is neither Cassio nor Desdemona: rather, the kinetics of lecherous masculine bodies, and the clandestine secrecy of adultery: a whispering voice, warnings to hide, a wringing body that plucks kisses «by the roots» (424), a leg laid over a thigh. Superimposing Desdemona's, the body of Iago figures then as the casually misplaced object of lust, more than a homoerotic replacement. As they linger on voyeuristic details of private, unauthorised kisses and of nakedness in bed, Iago and Othello will actually freeze the dynamics of this phantasmal shot into the curttness of picture captions allusive to guilt-ridden morbidity: «Iago: What, To kiss in private? | Othello: An unauthorized kiss! | Iago. Or to be naked with her friend in bed | An hour or more, not meaning any harm? | Othello: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?» (4.1.2-5). What Iago has brought to light through his tempting is in fact an archetypal visual pattern, made of fixed clusters of images «for the time of scorn» (4.2.53), where horned men materialise bestial monstrosity: «A hornèd man's a monster and a beast» (4.1.58). That is the same type of pattern Othello will project

onto the show of Cassio's skirmish with Bianca, which Iago has set up for him. Observed from Othello's withdrawn, self-encaved posture, the bodies of the actors - Iago, Cassio and Bianca - become animations that mimic his own horned and enslaved condition.

And just as Cassio's derisive remarks on Bianca harden into the arrogant pose of a Roman conqueror triumphing over a vanquished slave («Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?» 4.1.115), the handkerchief in Bianca's hands becomes the ocular proof of the bawdiness that has bewhored Desdemona and made Othello horned. The charmed piece of cloth woven by the Sybils, degraded by a chain of improper offerings, glows as the iconic correlative of Othello's lost property and barbarised self: in this visual projection of the curse of enmity, Desdemona's guilty deed, her adultery, is unsurprisingly erased. Here and elsewhere the pale of the curse is not what Desdemona has done, but what Othello has lost: his property, her alienation from the garner of his heart (4.2.57). What emerges here is less Desdemona's bedevilled image than Othello's mournful leave from her delicacy, lavishly redeployed in a typified gallery of multifaceted feminine virtues. Lost whiteness, the pitied thing of the past Othello bemoans, stands out in stark opposition to the blackness of present whoredom, the «iniquity» (4.1.191) Iago unremittingly calls to mind. As they turn Othello's heart to stone, making it impervious to pity, the black and white Desdemonas conjured up in these contrasting set of attributions signal the reifying of her person into a double thing of clarity and darkness. Not only will the sceptical curse that befalls Othello doom him to suppress this divided object that eludes projection: in his last theatrical projection of himself Othello will also encircle the sense of his murderous deed within the chiasmic fixity of a kissing and killing («I kissed thee ere I killed thee - no way but this: I Killing myself, to die upon a kiss», 5. 2.356-357). The results of these two acts are self-annihilating, but at the same time they ultimately convey the fatal compulsion of the Moor's divisive thrust.

The two separate and yet identical absolute causes Othello invokes - «It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul» (5.2.1) - stand as abstract figurations of the killed and of the kissed Desdemona, the split parts of her that his mind has been impelled to construe, to project and to suppress, in order to ward off the threat posed by the difference of her sexual body, by her separateness and finitude.

The sight of Desdemona's otherness, the inward secrecy of femininity, pursued by the play's pruriently scopophilic gaze, remains occluded. We are left instead with a gallery of projected images whose archetypal fixity reminds us that the poison of scepticism is made with the stuff of curses.

But he - as loving his own pride and purposes - | Evades them with a bombast circumstance, | Horribly stuffed with epithets of war; | And in conclusion | Non suits my mediators [...]. (1.1.11-15)

Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her. | Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft. | Iago: Indeed! (3.3. 101-102)

By sanctioning a split, curses stigmatise divorce beyond mediation. The enmity between man and woman, between whiteness and blackness settled at the end of the play is in fact the outcome of the failed mediations unravelled from its outset, evidences of an original breach in the plentitude of language and of service, whose consequences Iago exposes as the inflicting of a narcissistic wound on his own self.¹¹ As he denounces Othello's 'non suiting' of his mediators Iago points to the rift that has required intercession: the interruption of the body of hierarchy, where «old gradation» granted the fluidity of succession: «Preferment goes by letter and affection, | And not by old gradation, where each second | Stood heir to th' first. [...]», 1.1.35-37). On the other hand, Iago's Othello utters his appointment of Cassio in the fashion of an elective verdict whose finality precludes interposition: «But he, sir, had, the election» (1.1.26), as if the infringement of the set rules of service were authorised by a Lutheran God. Instead of being replete with the awesome prerogatives of Protestant divinity, the language of this Othello, however, rings with empty and evasive magniloquence. A flash forward of the Moor's hyperbolic style, Iago's vivid prolepsis also yields the image of stuffed emptiness: «But he - as loving as his own pride and purposes - evades them with a bombast circumstance, horribly stuffed with epithets of war; | And in conclusion | Non suits my mediators» (1.1.11-13). Othello's denials of mediations then come across as hollow utterances filled with the rhetorical paraphernalia of military service, while his «bombast circumstance» combined with proud self-love and evasions betray the precariousness of his extroverted posture: Othello's spiteful non-suiting of mediations appears then to blindly deny and defy the split in the body of language that its own stuffing decries. This is a fissure that Iago has instead fully introjected within his tightly shut self: Othello's appointment of Cassio is to him the effect of lost plentitude and stability, the «curse of service» that befalls the fallen. As he professes his enforced subordination to the Moor («Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago: | In following him I follow but myself», 1.1.57-58) and as he proudly claims not to be what he is («I am not what I am», 1.1.65) in mocking defiance of

¹¹ The play's emphasis on the need for mediations and on mediators sheds light on the contentiousness of diplomacy, mediation and transmission in Early Modern England. For a discussion of these issues see Charry, Shahani 2009.

God's profession of identity in the Bible,¹² he announces a displacement of service and self that mirrors the cleavage inherent in language, the already accomplished discovery that «language is open to the repudiation of itself» (Cavell 2003, p. 16). Although not referred to *Othello*, Stanley Cavell's definition of the constitutive fissures of language is a glowing metaphor of what happens in this play. It is in fact the openness of male selves and languages to self-repudiation that Iago intercepts and grasps in order to expose and to revengefully revive the curses they have been unaware of.

Openness, an invariant attribution of the Moor until he falls prey to Iago's enclosing and encaving in 3.3, marks Othello's blind confidence in his own fluid communion with the world, witnessed by his compulsion to be found. In stark contrast with Iago's retentive style, the style of Othello lavishly releases unblemished narratives of self-fashioning, drenched in string of reminiscences that are both exotic and audacious. Paradoxically, Othello's openness takes the defensive shape of an armour of expostulating tropes (Altman 2010), intended to uphold and guard the General's reputation in Venice, the credibility of his service, the laborious redemption from his past enslavement, and the legitimacy of his marriage to Desdemona. In contrast to that, the cramped body of Othello, seized by epileptic contortions in 4.1, materialises the crushing effects of his self-disarming, the 'dispossession' that Iago has sparked by exploiting the aptness of his self-construing fortress to the point of self-repudiation. As his stentorian style deflates into broken language, Othello is stripped of the discursive carapace that supported him: he is no longer himself.

The phantasmal communion with the world Othello sheds as he is disrobed of self-fashioning tropes, is actually described early in the play as a fantasy of osmotic love, a replacement of the Holy Communion with God. The narrative of mutual enamouring Othello deploys builds up a story of entwined identifications and projections aptly phrased in the symmetry of his conclusive rhetorical remark: «She loved me for the dangers I had passed, | And I loved her that I did pity them», 1.3.167-168. This idealising construct, reinforced in Desdemona's parallel profession of idealising love («I saw Othello's visage in his mind», 250) adumbrates a Platonic marriage of true minds: bodies – including the colour of their skin – are transcended and erased by intoxicating tales that, as suggested by the Desdemona of Othello's report, might work as a screen for indiscriminating love fantasies: «[...] She thanked me, | And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, | I should but teach him how to tell my story | And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake» (164-166). Othello's idealising and incorporating vision of love is blind to the potential threat posed by Desdemona's hint to a third party. It is no chance that Othello should claim Desdemona's allusion as

12 «And God said unto Moses: I am that I am» (Exodus, 3.14).

a proof of his entitlement to love her. It is no chance either that a chink in Othello's verbal shield should open up for Iago's prying, just as Desdemona's undefined wooer materialises in the person of Cassio, a postulator of intercessions. Much like Iago's failed mediations at the outset, the ones Cassio demands of Desdemona unveil obstructions in the natural flow of allegiances and services and disclose a breach in the normal sequence of appointments.

Innocent Desdemona, however, ignores the threat announced by mediations, let alone the prospect they might fail. Unlike Othello's, her idealising thrust is disarming and disarmed, her free and fruitful nature (2.3.326-327) impervious to the thought of interrupted flows. Like Othello's narrative, Cassio's suit woes her into communion with his grief,¹³ arouses unconditional pity and drives her to unremitting pleas. Unaware of breaches, Desdemona behaves as if the split in the chain of service Cassio has disclosed were a trifling misconduct, a negligible private matter: «[...] 'tis not almost a fault | t'incur a private check» (3.2.67-68). Her resolve to «intermingle» Othello's life with perorations (3.3.25-26) presupposes her interblending with the Moor, a fusion that requires no mediations. In this couple Cassio would never figure like the unwanted third party. What Desdemona remembers of him is actually his exemplary male bond with Othello, his coming «a-wooing» (3.3.72) and siding with him against her occasional disparagements. It is precisely the questionability of this transparent male bond and of its intermingling with Desdemona, that Iago promptly exposes as he pries open the slits of Othello's discursive armour in the inception of his temptation: «Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her. | Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft. | Iago: Indeed? | Othello: Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in this? | Is he not honest?» (3.3.101-105). Iago's prying bar is, quite tellingly, «the going between» Othello mentions as the prerogative of Cassio's acquaintance with Desdemona and himself. With its split implications of communion and division this is in fact a phrase emblematically open to self-repudiation: it points both to the easy overriding of thresholds inside a communal body, and to the disruptive interposing of an unwanted self between two separate entities. Like a crack in the mirror of Othello's words Iago's «Indeed?» (104) brings the menace of intervention out of the safety of the «going between». At the same time it twists Desdemona's intercession into a mediation doomed to fail, just like the one of Iago's emissaries.

Henceforth, Iago's penetration and hollowing of Othello's discursive plenitude will be a smooth task. As they echo the vacuity of Othello's words, Iago's interpellations echo the emptiness of the Moor's self. And as he

13 «Othello: Went he hence now? || Desdemona: Yes, faith: so humbled | That he hath left part of his grief with me | To suffer with him» (3.3.52-55).

mourns the loss of the tropes that have shielded him, the Moor himself will put on a boastful display of the paraphernalia of military service Iago had scornfully exposed as the horrible stuff of his emptiness (3.3.349-359). The epitaph that seals Othello's impersonal narrative of self-destitution – «Othello's occupation gone» (359) – epitomises the full import of Othello's destituteness and foregrounds the demise of a self made of a 'stuff' that was both occupying and occupied. While pointing to the inflated pomp of military accoutrements («pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war», 356), «occupation» unveils the flat brutality of a colonising self, who is nonetheless utterly possessed by his own violent impetus. More dramatically, it ushers into the exposure of his blending with Desdemona in terms of a dispossessing possession, a discarding from the very fountain of his life (4.2.59-60). In the sceptical gaze Othello has introjected, an unbridgeable split, beyond mediations, has opened up between the 'garner' he has incorporated, the godlike fountain of his life, and the otherness of Desdemona's desire. What is left in the place of the garner «is a cistern for foul toads | To knot and gender in!» (4.2.61-62), the offal of infected scepticism.

4

For 'tis most easy | Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue | In any
honest suit. She's framed as fruitful | As the free elements.
(2.3.324-327)

The story of cursing projections and failed mediations I have retraced so far along the lines of Cavell's essay bears little mention of the women in the play. This should come as no surprise if we consider that in the world of *Othello* women seem alien to the parable of sceptical knowledge that victimises them. They are not the agents, but the pawns of a game, which is entirely played in the arena of a proprietary and grasping masculine gaze (Burke [1951] 1988, p. 247). Unsurprisingly, the devastating consequences of the patriarchal regime *Othello* visualises has heightened the emotionality of responses over time as if, faced with the inevitability of feminine collapse, the urge to resist the enforced Iago-like perspective had become compelling. But in the case of Desdemona, this impulse has become coercive, since the connivance we sense with the strategy that leads to her murder is both forbidding and constraining. Not only do we wish Othello were different: we also and especially want Desdemona to be more knowing and less innocent. Desdemona's part – so frequently rewritten in the late twentieth-century versions of *Othello's* (Hodgdon 1991, pp. 232-238) – has been invariably disturbing to scholars and amateurs alike: whether dismissed as aesthetically irrelevant and incongruous, censored as politically unbearable, or rehabilitated in its feminist sparks,

Desdemona has been an unnerving hindrance to the comprehension and apprehension of this play. Even more puzzling than her self-sacrificing disclaim of Othello's guilt is the range of her contradictory subjectivities. Defying coalescence into one subject, Desdemona's subjective personas come through as separate discursive tropes intended to uphold the contested constructs of early modern femininity, as the transition from filial obedience to marital choice was turning into an object of dispute. A meek and yet defiant daughter, a faithful spouse, and yet a querulous wife, a martial Amazon and a subdued virgin, Desdemona can be lewd and imperious, worldly and shy, plaintive and bold: the only unified essence she is endowed with is her humorous Galenic body where «the Minds inclination follows the Bodies Temperature» (Selden 1614, sig. b4, cit. in Paster 2004, p. 13). No matter how tempting, the effort to retrace a progress in the deployment of such exemplary Erasmian attributes of femininity is hopelessly thwarted by her inconsistent shifting from the one to the other. Even when the conjugal empowerment that has heated her depressive virginal coldness regresses to child-like meekness and «half asleep» (4.2.98) inertia, she is unexpectedly pervaded by an incongruous arousal of appetite for Ludovico's eloquence («This Ludovico is a proper man», 4.3.34; «He speaks well», 36), a timid resurgence of the 'devouring greed' which would make her incline towards Othello's exotic narratives.¹⁴ Nor does Othello's murderous jealousy or the proximity of her death in the least inhibit her most ill-timed outstretching towards Cassio: «Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone» (5.2. 78). Until the very end - when her inanimate body unexpectedly throbs in a last spasm of life and of words (5.2.118-125) - Desdemona commands attention to her unpredictable mutability. Her swinging however is never coterminous with the flickering volubility ascribed to bawdiness. No matter how begrimed by Othello's infamous bewhoring, or by Iago's pornographic shots, Desdemona retains to the end the resolute innocence of a pre-lapsarian Eve. So unknowing is she, that she balks in dismay at the prospect of embodying the role of a whore that has been ascribed to her, as if the words uttered to define her were, because of their remoteness from her experience, less insulting than stupefying: «Am I that name, Iago?» (4.2.118); «[...] I cannot say 'whore' | It does abhor me now I speak the word | To do the act that might th' addition earn | Nor the world's mass vanity could make me» (4.2.161-164). Unknowingness, the predicate that makes her disturbingly deaf to the fracas of Othello's jealousy and embarrassingly obtuse to his emotional trajectory, is also the distinctive feature of her pied virtues, which Iago promptly seizes. No matter how perceived as instrumental to his scheming, the attributes Iago pins down

14 For an articulate description of Desdemona's Galenic humoral body see Paster 2004, pp. 117-118.

as characteristic of Desdemona still yield a picture which is poignantly faithful to her composite parts: like the fertile matrix of unwilled and unchecked proclivities, Desdemona – Iago purposely proclaims – is «framed as fruitful | as the free elements» (2.3.326-327). It is the smooth naturalness of her virtues, untouched by the uncouthness of temptation that, set against Othello's enfeathered soul, empowers the freedom of her appetite: «His soul is so enfeathered to her love, | That she may make, unmake, do what she list, | Even as her appetite shall play the god, | With his weak function [...]» (2.3.335-338). Unlike the «the free and open nature» Iago pinpoints as the attribute of Othello's credulousness (1.3.388), Desdemona's freedom, reminiscent of the one of free elements, combines with pliant malleability and with over-zealous propensity towards the needy: «She is of so free, so kind, so apt a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested» (2.3.307-309). What I find compelling, however, is the way these attributions converge into «the inclining Desdemona», a phrase where Iago crystallizes Othello's description of her «inclination» to hear his own tale («[...] This to hear | Would Desdemona seriously incline», 1.3.145-146) into the permanent and ungovernable motion of an outstretched subject: «[...] For 'tis most easy | Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue | In any honest suit.» (2.3.324-325).¹⁵

Regardless of Iago's opportunistic uses of his «inclining Desdemona», the posture he conjures up to visualise her elusive open-handedness posits a radical challenge to the very sceptical knowledge his scheming is eliciting. The mobility of the multidirectional pose captured in the adjective «inclining» actually highlights the threat posed by the ethical connotations of 'inclinations', a graphic word that became charged with highly contested symbolism when it ceased to be synonymous with the aptness to preserve oneself which God had imprinted (see Sloan 1971, p. 11). Outlining the troubled path of this disputed concept, philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2013) has traced the history of inclinations from the time they became a threat against the righteousness of God set in the Bible: when associated with unseemly deviation from the mainstream of life, inclinations are shown to be related to feminine obliqueness, until they are fixed into the acceptable bent of the nurturing and subjected femininity sanctified by Marian iconology. Desdemona would rightly feature in this chart as a major challenge. For, while her inclinations towards the tales of the Moor foreshadow the threats of her empowered desire, her «inclining» casts her restlessness into the fixed unruliness of a subject that ultimately resists reduction to

15 The adjectival use of 'inclining' – a unique occurrence in Shakespeare's corpus and in the linguistic repertoire of the age – actually belies the relational sense of the verb 'incline' and of its popular forms with 'to' or 'towards' to mark the direction of propensity. There is in fact no entry for this adjectival occurrence in reference books on Shakespeare until 2002. See Crystal 2002.

the model of subdued femininity of stereotyped Marian iconology. Quite to the contrary, and in accordance with the post-reformation humanising and fracturing of Virgin Mary's maternity (Espinosa 2012, pp. 114-137), the motion suppressed in the inclined postures of those Marian paintings seems to resurface in the permanently inclining body of Desdemona, a body whose wifely and maternal capability is truncated by the curse of a Lutheran God and of a sceptical mind.

It is in the light of these postural and geometrical scenarios that Shakespeare's «inclining» Desdemona, a visual synecdoche of the diverse styles the play bestows on her, can be seen to counter the horizontal flatness of death that scepticism dooms her to, as well as the sceptical aloofness of her audience. In contrast with the «declined» age Othello puts forward as one of the reasons for his loss of Desdemona («[...] Haply for I am black | And have not those soft parts of conversation | That chamberers have, or for I am declined | Into the vale of years [...]», 3.3.266-268), Desdemona's inclining defies the laws of linear time and of Cartesian geometry even as it provocatively evokes them, on account of its oxymoronic coexistence of motion and stillness, mutability and permanence.¹⁶ Albeit evocative of her obedient bending to the service of fathers and husbands, Desdemona's steadily inclining posture also subsumes the whole threatening potential posed by feminine inclinations to the vertical paradigm of sceptical masculinity: her unconditional outstretching towards the needy merges with the driving energy of erotic appetite, with sanguine imperiousness and martial rebellion. A woman in becoming and a matrix of multiple feminine roles, Desdemona does more than thwart the expectations of knowingness that would allow her to sense and ward off the violence that befalls her. What she ultimately mystifies is the very Cartesian frame forced upon viewers, on and off stage: the frame whereby we are made to resent her annihilation, the very frame that arouses the audience's faith in the possibility of a different Desdemona. For the urge either to rewrite her part entirely or to adjust the elusiveness of her subjectivities into one coherent subject is in fact no different in kind from the masculine grasp of knowledge, whose fatal trajectory the play illuminates.

What Desdemona defies, however, is precisely the absoluteness of that grasp. Even when frozen in the monumental contour of ice-cold alabaster, her theatrical body preserves the glowing, fluid profile of a wavering silhouette. Provided it is left beyond the reaching grasp of male interpretation and appropriation, Desdemona's pliant versatility – which the play puts for-

16 The most telling instantiation of how threatening such attributes can become in the sceptical world of the play is offered by Othello himself as he frantically expounds on Desdemona's «well-painted passion» (4.1.249) in terms that evoke an endlessly repetitious spiralling motion, that defies linearity: «Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on | And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep» (4.1. 245-257).

ward as the anthropomorphic precipitate of stage language – ignites sparks of utopian belief in other worlds: worlds not yet trapped in the snares of a cursing knowledge, worlds where Desdemona's 'inclining' might not be fatal and Desdemona's unknowingness unpredictably knowing.

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«For thou must now know farther» Representation, Illusion, and Unstable Perspectives in *The Tempest*

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Abstract Scholars in the last few decades have pointed out the manifold relations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with the increasingly sceptical frame of mind of early modern English culture. As Robert Peirce argued in 1985, different forms of sceptical thought may be identified in the play. Along with the philosophical background which saw the revival of Pyrrhonism and of Sextus Empiricus' thought, the article examines *The Tempest* in the light of recent investigations of early modern visual culture, a period in which the reliability of human vision was deeply undermined by the new discoveries in the fields of medicine, science, technology and art theory, as well as by the controversial debates on the illusions of magic, demonic deceptions and witchcraft. Different forms of ethical and epistemological scepticism in *The Tempest* are explored, taking into account a variety of structural features which include the weaving of multiple 'narrative' voices in the opening act; the condition of the shipwrecked crew «in troops [...] dispersed [...] 'bout the isle» (I, 2, 220), in which each group is ignorant of the truth about the others; and the role of Ariel, who reflects all the characters' conflicting views as a moving mirror. Prospero's island, whose circular space introduces a sort of 'unstable perspective' allowing virtually infinite viewpoints all around it, is examined in the light of the far reaching ideological implications of early modern theories of linear perspective (Panofsky) and of the «unresolvable contradictions that structure the Western discourse on vision, representation and subjectivity» (Massey).

1

In the last few decades scholars have underlined the manifold relations between Shakespeare's plays and the increasingly sceptical frame of mind of early modern English culture. Deriving from a long academic tradition¹ (Robertson 1897; Taylor 1925; Harmon 1942; Ellrodt 1975), Stanley Cavell's prominent 1987 epistemological reading of the playwright's great tragedies as a «response to the crisis of knowledge inspired by the crisis of the unfolding of the New Science in the late 16th and early 17th centuries» (Cavell 2003, p. xiii) already offered ample testimony of the intrinsic

1 The first investigations on Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare date back to Edward Capell's *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare* (1781) where the scholar pointed out a parallel between *The Tempest* and Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay *On Cannibals*.

relationship between Shakespearean theatre and the crucial philosophical issues of his age. The scholar went so far as to argue that «the advent of scepticism as manifested in Descartes' *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare in the generation preceding that of Descartes» (Cavell 2003, p. 3). In those same years, Graham Bradshaw noticed how the playwright's 'radical scepticism' «turns on itself - weighing the human need to affirm values against the inherently problematic nature of all acts of valuing» (Bradshaw 1987, p. 7).

Read against the background of the social and political transformations of sixteenth-century England, insightful analyses of Shakespeare's plays have more recently investigated the ideological conditions that lie beneath the playwright's modes of thinking as «verging upon nihilism» and especially the great tragedies' attempts at destabilizing notions of a ruling cosmic order and political legitimacy, thus undermining «all ideal conceptions about [...] the ordained hierarchy of nature and society» (Bell 2002, p. 168). Attention has been paid to the intricate cultural context that not only saw the revival of Pyrrhonism and of Sextus Empiricus' doctrines, that called into question the trustworthiness of human perceptions (Hamlin 2005; Cox 2007), but also witnessed the development of print culture, where the individual interpretation of texts increasingly destabilised any notion of authority, to the point that even moral certainty could no longer be located dogmatically (Caldwell 2009).

A variety of events - ranging from theologically threatening revelations in astronomy to plagues or eclipses - have been likewise related to the pervasive sense of uncertainty that underpins Shakespeare's plays with their invitation «to question, from moment to moment, the inherited, standard truths of his time [...] and to view fearfully the results of abandoning the props of such beliefs» (Bell 2002, p. 5). Significant relationships with early modern scepticism have also been discerned in the legal uncertainties arising from the sixteenth-century conflict between common law and equity (Carpi 2003, Cormack, Nussbaum, Strier 2013) and in the economic effects of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society (Sebek, Deng 2008).

Set within such a multifaceted debate, this essay investigates *The Tempest's* scepticism in relation to the specific background of European visual culture which «suffered some major and unprecedented shocks to its self-confidence [...] between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries» (Clark 2007, p. 2). It was an exceptionally complex period in which the reliability of human vision was called into question by new discoveries in the fields of medicine, science, technology and art theory (Edgerton 2009; Massey 2007) as well as by controversial debates on the illusions of magic, demonic deceptions and witchcraft (Clark 1999). As Robert Peirce already argued in 1986:

The Tempest is surely a sceptical play. The characters are perplexed with ambiguities of seeing and judging, and we as audience are invited to share their perplexity [...] But the kinds of scepticism in the play need to be distinguished. There is a playful scepticism based on the incompleteness of human perception, like the scepticism of Montaigne about his cat. There is a hierarchy of misperception dependent on the moral and intellectual qualities of the perceivers. And there is a deep-seated lack of illusion in Prospero, which modulates into a philosophical resignation based on seeing the world as evanescent. (Peirce 1986, p. 173)

Different expressions of epistemological and ethical scepticism will be thus explored in *The Tempest* starting from the weaving of multiple 'narrative' voices in the opening act, where the centrality of Prospero's vision is undermined by alternative reconstructions of the past. The condition of the shipwrecked crew «dispersed [...] 'bout the isle» (1.2.220), so that each group is ignorant of the truth about the others, and the role of Ariel, who reflects all the characters' conflicting views like a moving mirror, will also be investigated along with the play's persistent references to the instability of human perceptions. Finally, Prospero's island, which appears differently to different characters, and whose circular space functions as a paradigm of the 'unstable perspective', allowing virtually infinite viewpoints and vanishing points, will be examined in the light of Shakespeare's ambiguous response to the courtly aesthetic of the Stuart Masque and in relation to the «unresolvable contradictions that structure the Western discourse on vision, representation and subjectivity» (Massey 2007, p. 5).

2

Prospero's long narration in the second scene of the opening act has gained prominence in critical readings of the play as a remarkable instance of Shakespeare's skillful dramatic use of narrative devices (Lindley 2002; Bigliuzzi 2014). Dealing with a time period which covers twenty-four years, from Caliban's birth on the island to the arrival of the shipwrecked crew, Prospero cleverly manipulates the chronological order of the events and constructs his 'plot' proceeding backwards. Arranging the events according to his own criteria of relevance, he starts by 'telling' Miranda the story of his brother's usurpation («'Tis time | I should inform thee farther. Lend thy hand | And pluck my magic garment | From me», 1.2.22-24); then he summons Ariel to shed light on the period before his arrival on the island, and he finally calls for Caliban, thus moving the narrative back to an earlier past, when Sycorax was queen of the isle «Then was this island - | Save for the son she did litter here, | A freckled whelp hag-born - not honoured with | A human shape» (1.2.281-283).

Interestingly, attention is increasingly shifted away from the events reported to the very process of recalling, reconstructing and interpreting them. As Holderness has argued, «the processes of storytelling, and the means by which representations of the past are constructed, are made so obtrusively explicit» at the beginning of *The Tempest* «that the relativities of memory and interpretation become insistently foreground» (Holderness 1990, p. 175). The focus on the potential and, above all, on the limits of memory, in the first part of the long scene deserves particular attention in the light of the theoretical background of early modern culture where «the art of memory becomes [...] an art of doubt» (Sherman 2007, p. ix) and, on the other hand, «it must be defended both against its own tendencies to slide into disorder and against the onslaughts of other minds and competing memories» (Tribble 2006, 153).

The long scene bears traces of a cultural context in which, under the influence of Aristotle's cognitive theory, memory was supposed to be inherently related to the process of vision (Clark 2007, p. 43), thus accordingly bearing all the marks of its unsteadiness and restrictions, as the references to Miranda's 'mental images' and uncertain 'visions' testify:

Prospero: Obey, and be attentive. Canst thou **remember**
 A time before we came unto this cell?
 I do not think thou canst, for then thou wast not
 Out three years old.
 [...]
 Of any thing the **image** tell me that
 Hath kept with thy **remembrance**.
 Miranda: 'Tis far off
 And rather like a **dream** than an **assurance**
 That my **remembrance** warrants.
 Prospero: [...] But how is it
 That this lives in **thy mind**? What **seest** thou else
 In the **dark backward and abyss of time**?
 If thou **remember'st** aught ere thou cam'st here,
 How thou cam'st here thou mayst.
 (1.2.38-41, 43-46, 48-52; my emphasis)

The sensible qualities of objects in the visual field were supposed to «produce *species* [...] which radiated out from these objects into the surrounding medium, usually the air» (Clark 2007, p. 15) before being stored in memory. As Aristotle stated in *De Memoria et Remiscentia*:

we must conceive that which is generated through sense perception in the sentient soul, and in the part of the body which is its seat - viz that affection the state whereof we call memory - to be such thing as

a picture. The process of movement (sensory stimulation) involved in the act of perception stamps in, as it were, a sort of impression of the percept, just as persons do who make an impression with a seal [...]. (3.449a-450a)

‘Mental impressions’ and the ‘objective things’ from which they derived appeared therefore as essentially related to each other, like wax being ‘impressed’ with an image, as the Zwinglian theologian Petrus Martyr Vermigli explained in his *Loci Communes*, a text translated and published in English in 1583:

[W]e must know that of those things, which by sense are conceived, there arise certaine images, and doo come unto the senses, afterward are received unto the common sense, then after that, unto the phantasia; last of all unto the memorie; an there are preserved: and that they be imprinted and graven in everie of these parts, as it were in waxe. Wherefore when these images are called backe from the memorie unto the phantasies, or unto the senses; they beare backe with them the very same seales, and doo so stronglie strike and move affection, that those things seem even now to be sensible perceived, and to be present. (cited in Clark 2007, p. 133)

The instability of memory gains a sharper focus when Prospero addresses Ariel: «Dost thou **forget** | From what a torment I did free thee?», 1.2.250-251; «Hast thou **forgot** | The foul witch Sycorax, [...] hast thou **forgot** her?» 1.2.257-258; «I must | Once in a month recount what thou hast been, | Which thou **forget’st**» (1.2.261-262; my emphasis). It is Caliban’s arrival that marks however a climax in the play’s attempt «to give space, if not necessarily clear endorsement, to alternative, unauthorised constructions of the past» (Thorne 2000, p. 214), thus shedding light on the partial and selective accounts that both memory and interpretation of reality may produce. Caliban’s views, that are «partial, occlusive or skewed by the beholder’s temperament or self-interest», definitely undermine the belief in a shared narrative of the past and they are «consistent with the play’s practice of foregrounding the relativity of perception» (Thorne 2000, p. 214). Although Caliban’s report of Prospero’s usurpation of the island and of his cruel conduct towards him is dismissed as the outrageous fabrication of a «most lying slave» (1.2.344), it is unquestionable that Prospero’s hegemonic vision is eventually destabilised by the interaction with his slave’s competing viewpoint:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first,
Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me

Water with berries in't, and teach me how
 To name the bigger light, and how the less,
 That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee,
 And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
 The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
 Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
 Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
 For I am all the subjects that you have,
 Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
 In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
 The rest o' the island.(1.2.332-346)

Significantly, true discrepancy between their different views never really occurs. Prospero does not deny having found Caliban on the island on his arrival («I have used thee, | Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee | In mine own cell», 1.2.347-349), neither does Caliban deny trying to violate Miranda («O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! | Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else | This isle with Calibans», 1.2.351-353). What they cannot share is the meaning they give to the two facts. While certainly testifying to Prospero's unwillingness or inability to assimilate cultural differences, thus situating the play in the context of early English colonialism, as influential readings have pointed out (Barker-Hulme 1985; Brown 1985; Vaughan 1991; Loomba-Orkin 1998; Zabus 2002), Prospero's and Caliban's different views of the past increasingly call attention to the elusive quality of historical truth. More specifically, they acquire further relevance in the light of intriguing forms of convergence that recent scholarship has identified between early modern ethnographic inquiry and the Renaissance revival of philosophical scepticism, two «seemingly disparate discourses» that curiously «intersect and interact with one another» (Hamlin 2000, p. 366).

Caliban's persistent references to a previous period, long before Prospero's arrival («When thou cam'st **first**»), when he lived alone on the island («which **first** was mine»; my emphasis), deserve indeed particular attention in the context of early modern ethnographic reportage, where the destabilising discovery of 'other worlds' was often associated to the equally disturbing discovery of an 'earlier past', which seriously undermined the reliability of European historical narratives. As William Hamlin has claimed, such discoveries introduced a threateningly relativistic perspective into the Europeans' hitherto unwavering frame of cultural, ethical and religious values and contributed to producing an increasingly sceptical frame of mind (Hamlin 2000, pp. 361-363). Significant evidence of such implications is provided by many influential documents of those years. Most notably, in his attack to atheists, in *Christs Tears Over Jerusalem* (1593), Thomas Nashe argued that contemporary accounts of the discoveries con-

cerning the 'Indians', testifying to an hitherto unknown 'earlier past' of the Indian subcontinent, were persistently employed by atheists as 'proof' in their attacks against the Biblical certainties (p. 362). The atheists, Nashe argued, «followe the Pironicks, whose position and opinion it is that there is no Hel or misery but opinion. Impudently they persist in it, that the late discovered Indians are able to shew antiquities thousands before Adam» (cited in Hamlin 2000, p. 361). Likewise, in his famous *Note* (1593) containing a list of accusations against Christopher Marlowe's heretical views, Richard Baine relates Marlowe's «damnable judgement of religion, and scorn of God's word» to the recent discovery of an 'earlier past', long before the Bible's account of creation: what proved particularly destabilizing was the fact that «the Indians and many authors of antiquity have assuredly written about 16 thousand years ago, whereas Adam is proved to have lived within 6 thousand years» (Cole 1995, p. 157).

To ascertain whether and to what extent *The Tempest* might actually bear traces of early modern ethnographic reports and of the «relativistic crisis» (Hamlin 2000, p. 363) they engendered, is beyond the scope of this essay. It is indisputable, however, that the undermining of Prospero's authoritative master narrative at the beginning of the play is part of an extremely intricate context in which representations of cultural differences were not only instruments to legitimise the colonialist project: they also led European readers towards «a process of questioning their own values and behaviours [and] played a part in the generation and sustenance of [...] skeptical habits of mind» (Hamlin 2000, p. 365). This process was significantly affected by the Ten Modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy that enjoyed a revival in the Renaissance, following the publication of the first modern edition of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1562) by the French publisher and scholar Henry Etienne. It was one of the most influential texts of the age that «shaped the course of philosophy for the next three hundred years» (Annas-Barnes 1985, p. 5). As the tenth mode of Pyrrhonian doubt argued, «customs, laws, beliefs, etc. appear differently and incompatibly to humans of different persuasion; i.e. they appear not only to differ but to be incompatible in terms of their value, intrinsic merit, ethical status, etc.» (Annas-Barnes 1985, p. 160). Analogous expressions of cultural relativism were largely exemplified by Montaigne's well-known conclusion that «chacun appelle barbaries ce qui n'est pas de son usage» [«men call that barbarisme which is not common to them»] in *Des Cannibales*, one of the prominent sources of *The Tempest* (Taylor 1925; Harmon 1942). Almost in the same years, he wrote meaningfully ironic observations upon his encounter with three Tupinamba natives at Rouen in 1562:

Once I saw men brought here from overseas. We could understand nothing of their language; their manners, features, and clothing were far different from ours. Who among us did not take them for brutes and savages? Who

did not attribute their silence to stupidity and bestial ignorance? They spoke no French, after all, and were unaware of our hand-kissing, our serpentine bows, our bearing, our behaviour. Don't these things serve as a pattern for the human race? (cited in Hamlin 2000, p. 373)

3

If Prospero's account of the past appears inconsistent and largely controversial, the opening scene of the storm introduces equally unreliable and conflicting perspectives of the present. As Robert Peirce has pointed out, «we watch a shipwreck which we recognize by all the conventions of Elizabethan drama, whatever the precise details of the staging [and] there is nothing in the text as we have to suggest any doubt about what we are seeing» (Peirce 1986, p. 168). We directly experience the unsettling doubtfulness of our perceptions and knowledge as soon as Miranda's opening words convey her own uncertainties about what she sees and hears: «**If** by your art, my dearest father, you have | Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them» (1.2.1-2; my emphasis). It is tempting to read her experience of the inconsistency of human perceptions as an example of 'visual paradox', the visual equivalent of the long Renaissance tradition of logical and rhetorical paradox (Colie 1966, p. 312) which implied, as Stuart Clark has illustrated, «an intrusion into ordinary visual experiences of features that cut completely across normal cognitive expectations and, potentially at least, subvert them», thus producing in the beholder «ambiguity (even duplicity) of image and meaning, indeterminacy of appearances, irresolution between certainty and uncertainty [...] both of which are asserted simultaneously» (p. 107).

Furthermore, as soon as Prospero's explanation of the illusory nature of the 'direful spectacle' of the storm expresses his «stable, privileged view as the artist of the shipwreck» (Peirce 1986, p. 169), other viewpoints are meaningfully introduced by the group of sailors on the king's ship and the rest of the fleet. The latter, as Ariel says:

Which I dispersed, they have met again
And are upon the Mediterranean float,
Bound sadly home for Naples,
Supposing that they saw the king's ship wrecked
And his great person perish. (1.2.233-237)

The former have been left asleep («The mariners all under hatches stow'd; | Who, with a charm join'd to their suffer'd labour, | I have left asleep», 1.2.230-232), as the Boatswain confirms in the last act:

[...] We were dead of sleep,
 And - how we know not - all clapped under hatches,
 Where but even now with strange and several noises
 Of roaring, shrieking, howling, jingling chains,
 And more diversity of sounds, all horrible,
 We were awaked; straightway, at liberty;
 Where we, in all our trim, freshly beheld
 Our royal, good and gallant ship; our master
 Cap'ring to eye her: on a trice, so please you,
 Even in a dream, were we divided from them
 And were brought moping hither. (5.1.230-239)

Being «in troops [...] dispersed [...] about the isle» (1.2.220) and thus prevented from knowing the truth about the others, the different groups of the crew who have reached the island offer a further manipulation of viewpoints, so that the play becomes a «virtuoso piece of different seeings, all of which we are asked imaginatively to share» (Peirce 1986, p. 169). Ferdinand is thus sure of his father's death («Sitting on a bank, | Weeping again the king my father's wreck», 1.2.392-393) and, alone on the shore, is himself believed dead; while Francisco thinks that he may have reached the island («Sir, he may live: I saw him beat the surges under him, | And ride upon their backs; he trod the water»; «I not doubt | He came alive to land»; 2.1.109-110, 117-118), Antonio is certain that «it is impossible that he's undrowned | As he that sleeps here swims» (2.1.231-233). Even Trinculo and Stephano contribute, in the form of parody, to the multiple viewpoints that the storm allows:

Trinculo: I took him to be killed with a thunder-stroke. But art thou not drowned, Stephano? I hope now thou art not drowned. Is the storm overblown? I hid me under the dead moon-calf's gaberdine for fear of the storm. And art thou living, Stephano? O Stephano, two Neapolitans' scaped! (2.2.109-114)

Powerful similarities are also discernible between the conflicting accounts of the tempest, as reported by the characters involved, and some of the Ten Modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy. The fifth Mode, in particular, stressed how different positions produce dissimilar perceptions of the same thing:

[...] based on positions, distances, and locations; for owing to each of these the same objects appear different. For example the same porch when viewed from one of its corners appears curtailed, but viewed from the middle symmetrical on all sides; and the same ship seems at a distance to be small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in

motion; and the same tower from a distance appears round but from a near point quadrangular. (Hetherington 2014, p. 405)

The eighth Mode more overtly emphasised the absolute relativity of all human perceptions depending on a variety of conditions:

We may conclude that, since all things are relative, we shall suspend judgment as to what things are absolutely and really existent [...] Indeed we have always argued that all things are relative – for example with respect to the thing which judges, it is in relation to some one particular animal or man or sense that each object appears, and in relation to such and such a circumstance: and with respect to the concomitant percepts, each object appears in relation to some one particular or mode or combination or quantity or position. (Hetherington 2014, p. 405)

It cannot go unnoticed, in this perspective, how Prospero's island itself appears different to different characters: it is the ideal location for establishing Gonzalo's utopia («Had I plantation of this isle, my lord [...] And were the king on't, what would I do? [...] I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries | Execute all things», 2.1.139-144) but, paradoxically, also the best place for murdering Alonso, in Antonio's and Sebastian's ambitious minds (2.1.275-284). It is the setting Prospero has chosen for his final forgiveness (5.1.130-132), but also the stage on which the never-ending struggle for power, which underlies the history of mankind, is performed over and over again, thus staging «an act | Whereof what's past is prologue» (2.1.247-248).

Not just the initial storm, but everything that occurs on the island thereafter, displays the utter instability and unsteadiness of human perceptions. Scholars have frequently underlined the auditory ambiguities of Prospero's isle, where the complete spectrum of sound, including noise, music, and silence is explored and related to the supernatural quality of the place. In this island «full of noises» (3.2.133), Ariel's song leads Ferdinand to Prospero's cell, his celestial music lulls Gonzalo and Alonso to sleep at the climax of dramatic tension in the third act, but remarkably has no power over Antonio's and Sebastian's murderous minds which are out of tune with the cosmic order. As Andrew Gurr has pointed out, the sonic environment of the indoor space of the Blackfriars theatre largely accounts for the play's «unique exploitation of instrumental music as well as song, and of the plethora of magic and stage effects dependent upon the music» (p. 93). More recently, drawing on seventeenth-century anatomical theory, the auditory imagery of the play has also been related to Renaissance cultural interest in «competing models of audition [...] as both a voluntary and involuntary process that can be restorative, destructive, and even ineffectual» (Deutermann 2010, p. 175).

The unreliability of visual perceptions in the play deserves however no minor attention in light of early modern discourses on cognition that considered «the senses as objects of inquiry and analysis» (Gallagher-Raman 2010, p. 7). That all the senses, and above all vision, are in themselves far from neutral and, accordingly, unable to provide access to the truth of things, was eloquently expressed by Montaigne's famous sceptical stance: «[...] I make a question, whether man be provided of all naturall senses, or no. I see divers creatures that live an entire and perfect life, some without sight, and some without hearing; who knoweth whether we also want either one, two, three or many senses more: For if we want any one, our discourse cannot discover the want or defect thereof» (Florio trans. [1603] 1906, vol. 4, p. 263). The equally sceptical conclusion that the nature of the world remains unavoidably obscure, owing to the differences in the sensory organs of different species, was also supported, on the other hand, by the biological studies of those years, as reported by Sir Walter Raleigh's posthumously published *The Sceptic*:

If then one and the very same thing to the eye seem red, to another pale and white to another [...] [then what] they are in their own nature I cannot tell. For why should I presume to proffer my conceit and imagination in affirming that a thing is thus and thus, before the conceit of other living creatures, who may well think it otherwise to them that it doth to me. (Raleigh 1651, pp. 11-12)

If Miranda is «pushed to the limits of her perceptions and held there» (Peirce 1986, p. 168) at the beginning of the play, all the characters experience in different ways the untrustworthiness of their visions and they often fail to interpret what they think they see. Ferdinand is, for instance, unable to understand Miranda's real nature («my prime request, | Which I do last pronounce, is, O you wonder! | If you be maid or no?», 1.2.427-429) and she too mistakes him for a spirit («What is't? a spirit? | Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir, | It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit», 1.2.412-414). Trinculo does not recognise his mate Stephano («What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? a fish: he smells like a fish», 2.2.25) and Caliban believes that they both are spectres («The spirit torments me: - O!», 2.2.62). The appearance and the sudden vanishing of a banquet served by 'strange shapes' in Act 3 is likewise entirely misunderstood and related to false beliefs about the New World by Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian, who fail to recognise that the apparitions are punishments meant to drive them mad:

Alonso: [...] What were these?
Sebastian: A living drollery. Now I believe
That there are unicorns; that in Arabia

There is one tree, the phoenix' throne, one phoenix
At this hour reigning there. (3.3.20-24)

Trinculo and Stephano equally fail to understand that the rich garments that attract their attention are but a bait in Prospero's trap:

Trinculo: [...] O worthy Stephano!
look what a wardrobe here is for thee! [...]
Stephano: Put off that gown, Trinculo: by this hand, I'll have that
gown
Trinculo: Thy grace shall have it
Caliban: The dropsy drown this fool! What do you mean
to dote thus on such luggage? (4.1.226-231)

Such visual deceits which abound on the island have many equivalents in the surveys of those years on the techniques of sight deception, as described in Reginald Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). Writings on visual magic in particular were filled, as Stuart Clark's enquiries have amply testified, «with human torsos without heads (or heads without torsos), flying men, men transformed into animals, bodies dismembered and reassembled, and disappearing banquets» (p. 82).

Also Ariel's invisibility and his appearance in a variety of shapes, ranging from nymphs («Go and make thyself like a nymph o' th' sea: I Be subject to no sight but thine and mine: invisible I To every eyeball else», 1.2.301-303) to harpies («Enter Ariel like a Harpy; claps his wings upon the table; and with a quaint device, the banquet vanishes», 3.3.52) bear traces of a cultural context that was fascinated by visual errors, illusions and other fallacies of sight (Nelson 2000; Hendrix, Carman 2012). They became the principal object of enquiry of the long and complex explorations of demonology, on which «European intellectuals embarked from the 1430s onwards» and which played an essential role in disrupting inherited confidence «in the relation between human being and what they observed» (Nelson 2000, p. 2). As Stuart Clark further illustrates:

They discussed the power of demons to intervene in the not just spiritual but physical world [...] Among these powers, mostly granted, although always challenged and eventually refuted, were some that radically undermined any attempt to maintain human cognition on a secure basis - the power, for example, to suddenly displace objects so that they seemed to become invisible, the power to adopt any bodily form or shape whatever, the power to create simulations of people and events.[...] In effect, the devil could control (and subvert) each of the stages of Aristotelian cognition - manipulating the world of perceived objects, tampering with the medium through which visual *species* trav-

elled, and altering the workings of both the external and the internal senses. (Clark 2007, p. 3)

Ariel's 'airy' nature («thou which art but **air**», 5.1.21; my emphasis), which allows his quick movements, thus enabling him to appear and disappear rapidly and perform his master's tasks up until the end of the play («I drink the **air** before me, and return | Or ere your pulse twice beat», 5.1. 103-104; my emphasis), particularly bears echoes of early modern investigations into prestiges and other demonic deceptions where 'air' was mentioned more frequently than the other three elements of Renaissance cosmology (Habicht 1990). As Clark explains: «A demonic prestige resulted either from the real presentation to correctly functioning eyes of nevertheless false 'similitudes' of things, made of air (and therefore having no real substance) or from an interference with the humours or other dispositions of the eyes themselves» (p. 126). Widely circulating theories on the devil's alteration of the physiological process of vision, such as those reported in Prieur's *Dialogue de la lycanthropie ou transformation d'homme en loups* (1596), argued that «new bodies are made by Satan from *air*» (Clark 2007, p. 139), and that demons were able to form the shapes of objects «by altering the ayre, which is the mean by which the object or species is carried to the eye» (Perkins 1610, p. 157). As illustrated by Martin Antonio Del Rio's *Disquisitionum magicarum* (1617) in the light of the widely shared Aristotelian notion of species, demons were presumed to

prevent the visible *species* from carrying to the eye by hiding the entire object or part of it from view, or by placing in the medium some quality by which the *species* that passed through it were so changed that they presented the object other than it was [...] Demons could alter the composition of the air immediately around the object or between the object and the eye by thickening it so that its appearance was correspondingly changed by refraction (just as a coin thrown into a basin of water looked bigger than it was, and when thrown to the bottom seemed to lie on the surface). They could move the intervening air, so that the species of objects also appeared to move. (cited in Clark 2007, p. 132)

It cannot go unnoticed, in this perspective, that if air is mentioned in many Shakespearean plays as an instrument «of sleights and tricks, not one of transparency and truth, the location for deceptive images of spirits and souls» (Clark 2007, p. 248), *The Tempest* explicitly relates its deceptive quality to the illusory nature of Prospero's art («this **airy** charm», 5.1.54; my emphasis), and accordingly, to the entire universe it conjures up, thus implying more extensive epistemological repercussions:

These our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and
 Are melted into **air**, into thin **air**:
 And, like the baseless fabric of this **vision**,
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. (4.1.148-157; my emphasis)

4

In such an imaginative interweaving of the multiple components of early modern visual culture, *The Tempest* evocatively sheds light on the far reaching ethical and political implications of visual uncertainties in a cultural context in which, as Stuart Clark has pointed out, «to problematize sight [...] was to problematize the positive things with which sight was symbolically and metaphorically associated, including many of the values of orthodox politics and political morality. [...] If vision was supposed to be the most certain and most noble sense, then to acknowledge its uncertainty in fundamental ways was to dislodge particular political, religious and moral values and question their certainty too» (pp. 256-257).

That the political problem of the legitimacy of authority is a central concern in *The Tempest*, starting from the symbolism of the title, as influential readings have pointed out (Greenblatt 1988), needs no further evidence. As Thomas Thomas' *Dictionarium linguae latinae* (1606) clearly testifies, the word 'tempest' connoted social and political behavior as well as natural phenomena:

Tempeſtas, atis [...] Time: a ſeaſonable time and faire weather: a faire weather: a faire or good ſeaſon: a tempeſt or ſtorme [...] a boiſterous or troublous weather, be it winde, haile, or raine: commonly it ſignifieth a tempeſt, or ſtorme of raine and haile together: alſo great trouble, buſineſſ, or ruffling in a common weale: a ſtorme or trouble of aduerſities (Thomas [1558] 1606)

Instances of the Renaissance tendency to employ meteorological metaphors with political connotations are furthermore provided by Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577-1587), one of Shakespeare's most influential historical sources, which explicitly praises Queen Elizabeth's ability to pacify the destructive winds and calm the swollen seas of Queen Mary's reign:

After all stormie, tempestuous, and blustering windie weather of queen Marie was overblowne, the darkesome clouds of discomfort dispersed, the palpable fogs and mists of most intollerable miserie consumed, and the dashing showers of persecution overpast: it pleased God to send England a calm and quiet season, a clear and lovely sunshine, a quitsett from former broiles of a turbulent estate, and a world of blessings by good queen Elizabeth. (4, p. 155)

Although Prospero's storm is eventually used as a means for re-establishing harmony, still it unquestionably displays a violent confrontation of nature with the social order (Kott 1964) and exemplifies the Renaissance use of tempests as symbols of political chaos,² embodying «bellicose and anticivilizing demonism» (Schmidgal 1981, p. 162). On the other hand, Miranda's clear allusions to the four Aristotelian elements («The **sky**, it seems, would pour down stinking **pitch**, | But that the **sea**, mounting to the welkin's cheek | Dashes the **fire** out», 1.2.3-5; my emphasis) overtly imply a threatening distortion of the natural order, much as Ulysses sets forth in *Troilus and Cressida* (1.3.101-124), thus stressing the figurative connotation of a tempest meant, in accordance with the Elizabethan world view, as a sign of «the cosmic anarchy before creation and the wholesale dissolution that would result if the pressure of Providence relaxed and allowed the law of nature to cease functioning» (Tillyard 1972, p. 24). At the same time, the boatswain's question «What cares these roarers for the name of King?» in the opening scene, indisputably sets the political overtones of the event, performing an elaborate proleptic function that «points to the plotting by figures who care not for the name of King: Antonio and Caliban» (Schmidgal 1981, p. 161).

More relevant to this discussion, however, is how the play overtly relates political chaos to the implications of visual ambiguities. The plot against King Alonso, clearly echoing the usurpation of Prospero's dukedom and providing a new iteration of the struggle for power as the underlying principle of human history (Kott 1964), is elaborately prepared in an atmosphere of strange heaviness and drowsiness of the senses, a torpor that involves all the courtiers except Antonio and Sebastian: «what a strange drowsiness possesses them [...] Why | Doth it not then our eyelids sink? I find not | Myself disposed to sleep» (2.1.197-199). It is in this dream-like condition of confusion between sleep and waking, where Antonio seems to be «asleep | With eyes wide open» (2.1.208-209), that the deceptive visions of his ambitious imagination are conjured up:

2 Significant examples include not only *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, where the symbolism of storms is widely explored, but also *Richard II*, where Sir Stephen Scroop reports that the immanent civil struggle will come «like an unseasonable stormy day» (3.2.106) or 2, *Henry IV*, where the meteorological eruption of Northumberland is even more remarkable; see Schmidgal 1981, p. 162.

What might,
 Worthy Sebastian, O what might? No more.
 And yet methinks I see it in thy face,
 What thou shouldst be. Th' occasion speaks thee; and
 My strong imagination **sees** a crown
 Dropping upon your head. (2.2.202-207; my emphasis)

He thus eventually clarifies his project to kill the king in a context in which appearance and reality may be easily confused one with the other:

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 for ever. (2.1.275-279; my emphasis)

Similarly, Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo to murder Prospero is described through recurring allusions to forms of idolatry that overtly parody religious rites («That's a brave god, and bears celestial liquor: I will kneel to him», 2.2.119; «I'll swear, upon that bottle», 2.2.126) whilst maintaining explicit references to the corruption of vision:

Caliban: Hast thou dropped from heaven?
 Stephano: Out o' the moon, I do assure thee: I was the man I' th' moon when time was.
 Caliban: I have seen thee in her, and I do adore thee. [...]
 Stephano: Come, swear to that; kiss the book, I will furnish it anon with new content. Swear.
Caliban drinks
 [...]
 Caliban: I'll show thee every fertile inch o' th' island and I will kiss thy foot. I prithee be my god.
 (2.2.130-142)

They intriguingly call to mind early modern debates on the demonic use of visual deceptions. As Stuart Clark reports, «idolatry occurred in its primary form when the devil convinced people that he was a god by blinding their understanding occupying the inner eyes of their mind» (p. 245). The moral and ethical implications of the deceitfulness of sight were extensively explored by George Hakewill's *The vanities of the eye* (1608) in which, arguing that sight was responsible for all the major sins, he went so far as to attribute «the Fall to the fairness of an apple apprehended by a woman's eye; the 'sense of seeing' thus provided the original motif for sin and the reason for its repetition down the ages» (Clark 2007, p. 26).

The play's programmatic attempt to problematise vision and explore its ideological implications is finally epitomised, in a wider perspective, by its ambiguous response to the courtly aesthetic of the Jacobean Masque and to its use of linear perspective. As influential studies have pointed out, Alberti's set of rules enabling a rigorously unified representation of space around a single vanishing point³ was extensively employed in this form of entertainment, among other rhetorical conventions, with a eulogistic function (Orgel; Strong 1973). Inigo Jones' scenic inventions, first introduced to the English stage with *The Masque of Blakness* (1605), most notably testify to the Masque's aesthetic principles where «the lines of *Prospective* were made to converge on the eye of the monarch, whose chair of state was always placed at the optimum viewpoint» (Thorne 2000, p. 51). Used exclusively at court, or when the monarch was present, the adoption of perspectival scenery functioned as a ritual homage to the monarch in a political setting that meaningfully witnessed the reappearance of the Divine Right of Kings, as Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong have pointed out:

Through the use of perspective, the monarch, always the ethical centre of court productions, became in a physical and emblematic way the centre as well. Jones's theatre transformed its audience into a living and visual emblem of the aristocratic hierarchy: the closer one sat to the King, the 'better' one's place was, and only the King's seat was perfect. It is no accident that perspective stages flourished at court, and that their appearance there coincided with the reappearance in England of the Divine Right of Kings as a serious political philosophy. (Orgel; Strong 1973, vol. 1, p. 7)

That *The Tempest* does not share «the ideological agenda behind these ostentatious celebrations of monarchical power», despite its extensive reference to the forms and conventions of the Masque, has been influentially argued by Alison Thorne (p. 204). It is also significant that the masque and antimasque forms displayed in *The Tempest* «are part not of a court entertainment but of a 'dramatic allusion to one'» (p. 205) within a theatrical context that was utterly alien to such conventions and ideology:

³ They had been largely diffused in English culture thanks to the Richard Haydocke's *A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge & Buildinge* (1598), the translation of the first five books of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* (1584). Haydocke's text, which contained a number of personal additions and emendations to the original, testifies to the ways in which «this particular mode of conceptualising space - or, to be precise, the rhetorically infected discourse associated with it - was transplanted into English culture». Thorne 2000, p. 58. For the equally relevant influence of Serlio's *The First Book of Architecture* (1569) see also Schmidgall 1981, pp. 140-145.

How could the masque be altered by being performed in a public theatre like the Globe with its apron stage, which, reflecting the socially eclectic composition of its audience, is not structurally designed to give precedence to any one perspective? How can it be accommodated within a dramatic form whose characteristic multimodality or heteroglossic nature makes it equally resistant to the imposition of a single controlling point of view? (Thorne 2000, p. 205)

Far from adopting perspective, its mode of conceptualising space and the «rhetorically inflected discourse associated to it» (Thorne 2000, p. 58), *The Tempest* overtly displays the paradoxical nature of this apparently mimetic form of representation which, as Panofsky pointed out, «subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual» (p. 67). As Alison Thorne further explains: perspective «shows things not as they are, according to their ‘exact and true’ dimensions, but as they appear from a given standpoint. Yet it is precisely this distortion of objective fact that makes perspectival images seem so truthful to the eye» (p. 75).

In this sense, Ariel’s rapid movements from one part of the island to another, which reflect the different characters’ points of view as a sort of moving mirror, challenge the single, authoritative position implied by the restrictively monocular focus of Alberti’s *costruzione legittima* and its inherent ideological implications. They create a «hall of mirrors in which reflection is added to reflection in a curiously claustrophobic dramatic world» (Lindley 2002, p. 3) and contribute to producing «a strange and fantastic anamorphosis of events» (Trüstedt 2005, p. 352), which mostly characterises Shakespeare’s late plays⁴ where «we find miraculous events, strange distortions and discontinuities – all the result, it might be said, of holding up to nature, not Hamlet’s ordinary mirror but what Elizabethans called ‘perspective glasses’ or ‘trick mirrors’ (Schmidgall 1981, p. 125).

It is tempting to find parallels between Ariel’s structural function and the illusoriness of anamorphic images, those perspectival puzzles that were so popular in Shakespeare’s lifetime: «Simply by adjusting one’s viewing position, distorted apparitions could be made to resolve themselves into intelligibility, or one image to metamorphose into another [...] the effect of such ambiguity is to throw the beholder’s normal ontological categories into disarray by compelling him/her to experience at first hand the difficulties of disentangling the fictive from the real, truth from falsehood» (Thorne 2000, p. 136). Interesting similarities may be found, in particular,

4 Alison Thorne also reads Troilus’ crisis over Cressida’s identity as an «anamorphic puzzle» that sheds light on the play’s obsession with the epistemological discrepancy between «things as they are and what the perceiver makes of them». Thorne 2000 p. 165.

with some popular anamorphic images of those years consisting of two different pictures combined on a pleated wooden panel, so that one image was visible from the left and another from the right. An intriguing variation of it curiously implied also the use of a mirror:

It resembles the plain wooden version, but the pleats are horizontal instead of vertical, and hence one subject appears when viewed obliquely from below, another from above. The mirror is carefully placed in a tilted position above the panel, which is hung high enough that the second subject cannot be directly seen without the glass, but becomes visible by reflection. The onlooker approaches the perspective and sees the image on the lower pleats. When he glances at the mirror hanging above, perhaps expecting to see his own countenance, he is astonished with the reflection of something else. (Shickman 1978, p. 226)

Regardless however of parallels which might provide further evidence for Shakespeare's first-hand acquaintance with such techniques,⁵ *The Tempest's* imaginative handling of linear perspective and its intentional divergence from Albertian norms shed further light on the play's wider sceptical approach to the unreliability of human perception, memory, knowledge and interpretation of reality (Spolsky 2001), within a cultural context of «visual paradoxes where distinguishing between the true and the false became impossible on visual grounds alone» (Clark 2007, p. 2). In this respect, the play sharpens and defines Shakespeare's «already deeply rooted preoccupations with questions of viewpoint» (Thorne 2000, p. 55) that unquestionably inform his whole production, but are here more extensively explored in their far-reaching epistemological, moral and political implications. As Alison Thorne has influentially argued: «Consistently in his writings, perspective is associated with, and can function as a metaphor for, the relativity of human perception and cultural value-system by which it is shaped, a relativity that is shown to be equally conducive to self-delusion and conflict» (pp. 55-56).

5 That Shakespeare was acquainted with of anamorphic perspective has long been recognised by scholars. As Alan Shickman has pointed out, he might have seen instances of it in the distorted portrait of Edward VI at the National Portrait Gallery and he makes explicit references to such techniques in his plays (Shickman 1978, pp. 218-225).

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Webster's Geometry; or, the Irreducible Duchess

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Abstract This study of geometry, gender, and skepticism in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* argues that the play leaves us in a hall of mirrors, a horror show of optical tricks, delusion, narcissism, and perspectivism from which there seems to be no escape, no masterpiece of God's creation upholding reality beyond sensory images. In the absence of a transcendental referent, the Duchess' willful and fearful journey «into the wilderness» – the life she leads as a result of her furtive marriage to her steward Antonio – becomes an alternative to both the public sphere mapped by divine patterns of order and – on the other extreme – the nihilistic, private court culture mapped by the 'mad' geometry of her brothers and their henchman Bosola.

A cage went in search of a bird.
(Franz Kafka)

With its supposed origin in the mind of God, the creator of measure, number, and weight, Renaissance mathematics connected heaven and earth, giving humans access to God's master plan. Numbers, John Dee wrote in his *Mathematicall Praeface* to Euclid, are «the principle example or pattern in the mind of the creator». Mathematics could thus enable man to «ascend, and mount up (with Speculative wings), in spirit to behold the Glass of creation, the Forme of Formes [...]» (1975, *j.). Dee's commitment to the contemplative life notwithstanding, his preface also praises the practical mathematics in navigation, surveying, warfare, and cartography. Whether the mind was 'ascending' to spiritual matters or 'descending' to applied mathematics, it was working with patterns in nature that were reflections of the divine. The belief in what Dee called «general Formes», an unchanging reality behind appearances, was also widespread in the mathematical thinking that contributed to trade debates and political theory. Metaphysical references to the circle, for example, were a commonplace in economic and political tracts of the early seventeenth century. Such references were a product of the belief in man as microcosm, a replication of a larger cosmic order designed by God.¹ Whereas modern philosophy and science would increasingly move towards a representational model of truth, Renaissance mathematicians, especially those inspired by Plato,

¹ See, for example, de Malynes 1623.

believed in what Charles Taylor calls an «ontic logos», a rational order laid out by God that was ready to be discovered by those with the right mental equipment (1989, p. 144).

The political importance of having access to Dee's «pattern in the mind of the creator» can be seen in the opening of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which the French King's success is attributed to his knowledge of «his master's masterpiece, the work of heaven». In this early discussion of a commonweal, the virtuous steward Antonio says he «admires» the French court because

In seeking to reduce both state and people
 To a fixed order, their judicious King
 Begins at home: quits first his royal palace
 Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute
 And infamous persons - which he sweetly terms
 His master's masterpiece, the work of heaven
 (1.1.5-10)

These disciplinary actions are earthly manifestations of an unseen, ideal order that mirrors patterns in the mind of God. The word «dissolute» in line 8, from the Latin *dissolutus*, means 'loose', or 'disconnected' («dissolute», *OED* A3, A1), pointing to the lack of restraint in his kingdom and the need for a simplification that binds everything together as a 'single thing' («reduce», 2a), eliminating excess (financial, sexual, etc.) in the process. Antonio's verb «reduce» primarily means «to restore» (a dislocated, fractured, or ruptured part) to the proper position» (reduce, 6a) and «to bring to a certain order and arrangement» (reduce, 14a). To perform such a reduction, one needs a pattern or abstract model of society, also called a 'reduction' in the Renaissance, such as the fountain metaphor in the lines that immediately follow that reveals the proper form of a commonweal:²

Considering duly that a prince's court
 Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
 Pure silver drops in general; but if't chance
 Some cursed example poison 't near the head,
 Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.
 (1.1.11-15)

2 Such reductions were common in political treatises of the period. In *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* (1606) Edward Forset calls his model of the body politic a reductive pattern or «well compacted epitome» (p. 2). Forset's *Comparative Discourse* is a map of the social order, a symbolic representation that works through analogy, especially the relationship of microcosm/macrocosm. And the *sine qua non* for this map is the mind of God, since the numbers that allow for proportion to exist in the first place derive from that source.

The fountain metaphor suggests that Antonio's model is geometrical: the King occupies a position in the centre, which means that when he «begins at home» the changes radiate outwards like concentric circles from the court to the rest of the kingdom. Flattery, like dissolute behavior, cries out for the proper form, a model such as a fountain, that will combat falsehood in general by setting in place a fixed order that comes from God, the *fons et origo* of Truth itself.

But such a connection between the divine and the human, taken as a given in the opening lines of *The Duchess of Malfi*, becomes increasingly problematic as the play progresses. The sceptical dismantling of the play's initial confidence in a «fixed order» is striking. Detaching vision from truth, Webster leaves us in a hall of mirrors, a horror show of optical tricks, delusion, narcissism, and perspectivism from which there seems to be no escape, no 'masterpiece' of God's creation upholding reality beyond sensory images. At times, Webster's scepticism resembles John Donne's spiritual darkness or Montaigne's embracement of flux, in which paradox lies on the path toward transcendence (Colie 1966). But his scepticism lacks such intimations of immortality. For example, his visual wit is not in the Pauline vein - there is no hope that we will move beyond seeing «through a glass darkly». Webster works with Christian *topoi* - the 'vanity of learning', the *contemptus mundi*, and the 'theatre of the world' - as well as Greek Pyrrhonism, and yet a future unveiling of truth or the tranquility of equipollence are not on the table. Thus, the French King's ascription to a divine origin, his «master's masterpiece», appears suspect in a play that treats mimesis in a highly sceptical fashion. In the larger context of what Bosola calls «a general mist of error» (4.2.181), the irredeemable falsehood that permeates the play, the French King's reduction seems more like a mystification than a restoration or simplification; indeed, throughout the rest of the play we find another kind of reduction taking centre stage - what Rick Bowers calls «cruel mathematics», that is, «the play's unremitting tendency toward a reduction unto zero» (1990, p. 370).³

There is a bright spot in this tragic darkness, though it can easily be seen as a false light, and that is the irreducibility of the eponymous character.

3 I am indebted to Bowers' reading of the play; however, my understanding of 'mathematics', and thus my reading of the play, are quite different. He sees one kind of mathematics operating throughout the play, a «deterministic» and «nullifying» calculation. But I see competing kinds of mathematics that clash. For example, Pythagorean mathematics had very different cultural and cosmological meanings than the nihilistic geometry that competes with it for prominence in the play. Webster incorporates Pythagorean cosmology: the music of the spheres and the idea of the heavenly spheres moving in harmony and the idea that humans can achieve a matching inner harmony through reason inspired by mathematics. The play also incorporates the Pythagorean/Platonic metaphysics of number as the bedrock of an unchanging 'reality' separate from the physical world. For an excellent account of connections between Pythagoras and Plato, and their impact on Renaissance literature, see Heninger (1974).

The Duchess is irreducible in a double sense: she will not be reformed, that is, made to fit into the mental maps designed by men, even that of the virtuous French King praised by her husband, nor can she be annihilated by the mad geometry that prevails at court in Italy. In the absence of a transcendental referent, the Duchess's willful and fearful journey «into the wilderness» – the life she leads as a result of her furtive marriage to Antonio – becomes an alternative to both the public sphere mapped by the French King's patterns of order and – on the other extreme – the nihilistic, private world created by her brothers and their particular brand of court culture. On one extreme, we have the idealism (both mathematical and political) of the «master's masterpiece» and, on the other, we have the nihilistic death by geometry in which her brother the Cardinal is reduced to a «point, a kind of nothing» (5.5.77).

1

Because the French King follows a divine map, a reduction derived from God, his actions are said to be grounded in truth.⁴ In Italy, on the other hand, actions are guided by 'intelligence', a negative term related to the Greek 'metis', or cunning (on the concept of 'metic intelligence' see Detienne, Vernant 1978). Lacking the transcendental referent that makes geometry a source of cosmic truth, reason becomes merely a form of cunning. The most mathematically inclined character is Bosola, an «intelligencer» who appears to be 'poisoned' by melancholy. Although this condition makes his grasp of reality questionable, it hardly disqualifies him from excelling in mathematics. As Carla Mazzio points out, «if mathematics is an idealized cure in this period, that which in Francis Bacon's words could 'fixe' the 'wandring' mind, it is also strangely complicit with the disease of melancholy, capable itself of "wandering" and "alienating" the imagination» (43). Albrecht Durer's figure of melancholy, as Mazzio notes, holds a compass pointing inwards, an action that calls attention to her introspective state. Bosola's imaginative mathematics, as we will

4 Recent criticism of *The Duchess* tends to either ignore, deny or downplay the importance of Antonio's opening speech on the French King's «reduction». Karin Coddon, for example, refers to the «vacuity of the organic paradigm», suggesting that Antonio merely «gives lip-service to the conventional ideal of the body politic» (2000, p. 29). Frank Whigham is more on target when he points out that «this play was written, as least in significant part, to dissect the workings of the normative ideology set before us at its beginning» (1996, p. 223), but he, like Coddon, seems to be responding to the outmoded criticism that reads the speech as the moral and political norm upon which we should base our judgment of the characters. Both readings take the speech as a simplistic, generic expression of order, but the words «reduction», and «masterpiece» point to a much more subtle epistemological, ontological, and political crisis shaped by the mathematical nature of Webster's tragic form.

see, is a symptom of his «inward rust» (1.1.86) and malcontentedness. It becomes a vehicle of social protest in a society in which the common good has disintegrated, alienating people from the public sphere and the rational thought associated with it.

The poison of melancholy is one of the impurities Antonio sees in the fountain of state. It is a political and epistemological problem, since it is a symptom of social alienation and fragmentation. The fountain is above all a metaphor of circulation: the water that flows from the head outward will, we imagine, return to the center. It is an analogy for the flow of communication that can and should involve the «provident Council» of those who act and speak out of «noble duty». They «inform» the king, rather than give him 'intelligence':

And what is't makes this blessed government,
But a most provident Council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of the times?
Though some o'th' court hold it presumption
It is a noble duty to inform them
What they ought to foresee.
(1.1.16-22)

The fountain is thus in the republican spirit that informed complaints against tyranny and corruption, which threaten to destroy the commons or the 'general'. Later in the play a less conventional metaphor makes the same point: instead of polluted water spreading disease from the «head», the court, out into the «whole land», we see fire spreading from the center outward (3.3.36-38).

The fountain is the ultimate symbol of integrity (Latin *integritas* = wholeness) because, unlike body politic metaphors, there are no parts to be integrated, just a pure flow from inside out and back again. This very perfection, emblematised in the circular patterns of most fountains, is, however, the problem. It does not take much to make the whole system impure. Thus the play's beginning and end both call for «integrity» of the most pure sort while the rest of the play shows how in practice division seems to run *ad infinitum* from the collectivity itself down into the divided psyche. In the court in Italy, unlike the one in France portrayed by Antonio, the chaos of desire rages, and, as a result, the unitary space of society is lost, along with, to a great extent, the unitary self of the rationally ordered soul. Delio's sententious wisdom at the play's end matches his friend Antonio's metaphor at the start: «integrity of life is fame's best friend» (5.5.18). The flatterers, the dissolute, and the infamous mentioned by Antonio are examples of a lack of integrity and by play's end there is little hope of recuperating the centre, the fountainhead, that cannot hold.

Integrity and purity are crucial concepts in a play that has the Duchess's

supposed defiling of her family's bloodline as its central conflict. Indeed, although Webster does not produce any puns on bloodlines, he creates geometric and arithmetic paradoxes that playfully engage the concept. The mathematical sense of the word integrity is implicit in the paradox of the three siblings unintentionally proffered by the Duchess's chief admirer Antonio: «But for their sister, the right noble Duchess, | You never fixed your eye on three fair medals, | Cast in one figure, of so different temper» (1.2.105-107). This is an arithmetic problem. Are each a whole number, an integer, or are they fractions of a whole number, «one figure»? There is also the geometric/perspectival problem: one cannot simultaneously fix the eye on «one figure» and «three fair medals». Finally, there is the problem of form – the mould they were originally «cast in». How can one mould create entities with different «tempers»? Although the line is intended to differentiate the Duchess, its ambiguities call such thinking into question.⁵ This indeterminate 'fixing' of the gaze raises questions about the moral and mathematical ability to «reduce» people to a «fixed order». If familial identities are easily blurred, we might suspect the same about other social orderings, especially the one that is so explosive in the play – social rank.

Antonio's *aporia* of the three «fair medals» is unexpected because it is wrapped in the character's cheerful optimism. We are less surprised when Bosola employs perspective as a cynical debunking of ontological and spiritual certainty.⁶ Shortly before the Duchess's death, she says, «I am the Duchess of Malfi still», to which Bosola responds, «Glories, like glow worms, afar off shine bright, | But looked to near, have neither heat nor light» (4.2.139-140). This ocular metaphor, drawn from proverbial wisdom, Renaissance perspective, and possibly Greek Pyrrhonism, suggests that we should, as sceptics say, «suspend judgment» when it comes to knowing what objects are like «in their nature».⁷ The Duchess's experience of being, which was not spatial, is now placed in what Ernest B. Gilman calls a «curious perspective», the «witty style» in the visual arts that departs from the experience of certainty that perspective had once inspired (1978, p. 29). Bosola's harsh response appears to be inspired by the telescope (also known as a «perspective glass»), a device that had recently allowed Galileo to distinguish between light and dark regions on the moon and thus to see craters and mountains there (on Galileo's telescopic discoveries, see

5 For more on the way visual tropes problematise consanguinity, see Paganelli (1995).

6 In his study of perspective, Samuel Edgerton points out that the early innovations in linear perspective had «unmodern spiritual assumptions». «The Latin word for mirror, *speculum*», he notes, «became almost a synonym for 'divine revelation'» (2009, p. 27). The geometry of perspective enabled God to conceive of «the universe itself in his divine mind's eye at Genesis» (Edgerton 2009, p. 29). Perspective had become much more secular in Webster's England.

7 The fifth argument in Sextus Empiricus is «the one depending on positions and intervals and places — for depending on each of these the same objects appear different» (1994, p. 31).

Peterson 2011). Given his role as the malcontent and resident misogynist at court, Bosola's challenge to the Duchess's «glory» is fitting. Nevertheless, his scepticism is representative of the play as a whole, which repeatedly incorporates spatial metaphors as a means of undermining confidence in epistemological, ontological, and spiritual truths.

Attempts to degrade or control the Duchess through spatial metaphors can, like Antonio's attempt to glorify her, backfire. Earlier in the play, when the brothers are still hoping to reduce the Duchess in the sense of leading her down the right path (rather than in the sense of diminishing her spiritually and physically), Ferdinand compares her to a crab: «Think't the best voyage | That e'er you made, like the irregular crab | Which, though't goes backward, thinks that it goes right | Because it goes its own way» (1.2.234-236). His point, of course, is that the Duchess is like the crab moving in an «irregular» direction as she «goes [her] own way». But the relativistic nature of Ferdinand's metaphor undermines the message it is intended to deliver; truth becomes a matter of perspective. Might the Duchess, like the crab, simply not share her brother's point of reference? From the crab's perspective, it is going the «right» way (whatever that might mean to a crab). Ferdinand has imposed a human notion of what is «right» onto a creature that moves according to its natural inclination, much like the birds the Duchess envisions carolling «their sweet pleasures to the spring» (3.5.20).

Ferdinand's crab metaphor prepares us for the Duchess's courageous journey «into a wilderness», that is, into an uncharted social space. At a critical moment, when the Duchess secretly discusses her future marriage plans with Cariola, her lady-in-waiting, she says, «Wish me good speed, | For I am going into a wilderness | Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew | To be my guide» (1.2.274-176). This language contrasts markedly with the confident 'plotting', the scheming and mapping of physical space, primarily by men (1.2.77; 3.3.6; 5.4.39). The absence of her own 'plot' in a «wilderness» may be frightening, but it is also heterotopian, a chance to mark off a space away from masculine control. The liberating potential is more evident when we juxtapose «into the wilderness» with the Duchess's later line, spoken after she has married and secretly had three children with Antonio: «The birds that live i'th'field | On the wild benefit of nature, live | Happier than we; for they may choose their mates | And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring» (3.5.17-20). The earlier uncertainty is thus later replaced by a confident assertion about the power of natural pleasure. Frank Whigham argues that the Duchess's image of singing birds alludes to Myrrha's story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which all «human law» is challenged by Nature (209). If that is the case, the Duchess's marriage appears especially transgressive. In Ovid the speech is comic in the absurd lengths to which Myrrha will go in her challenge to human institutions of any kind, a mere rationalization for her incestuous desires.

But it is also possible that Webster built the Duchess's confident assertion on the scepticism of Montaigne (on Montaigne's influence in England, see Hamlin 2010). «Beasts», Montaigne writes, «as well as wee, have choice in their loves, and are very nice in chusing of their mates» (Florio trans. [1603], pp. 271-272).

There is no doubt that the French philosopher's notion that man is a «miserable and wreched creature» who calls himself «Master Emperour of this Universe» informs Webster's scepticism in general.⁸ And the Duchess's decentering of human beings in particular may have been inspired by Montaigne's relativistic notion of 'custom' and his lengthy praise of animal intelligence. Unconstrained female desire, and *a fortiori* the natural desire in the Duchess's «wilderness», threatens to destabilise male-centered power structures, both the idealised, rational kind Antonio attributes to the French King's reduction, and the irrational kind that characterises life at the Malfi court. But it is the brothers' henchman Bosola who delivers the most aggressive, mathematical language for reigning in the Duchess's pleasures. As noted earlier, much of the play's mathematics is steeped in the melancholy imagination, especially Bosola's, as we see when he employs his own spatial language of reduction. Accused by the Duchess's midwife of «abusing women», he says:

Bosola Who I? No, only by the way now and then, mention your frailties. The orange tree bears ripe and green fruit, and blossoms all together, and some of you give entertainment for pure love, but more, for more precious reward. The lusty spring smells well; but drooping autumn tastes well. If we have the same golden showers that rained in the time of Jupiter the Thunderer, you have the same Danaes still, to hold up their laps to receive them. Dids't thou never study the mathematics?

Old Lady What's that, sir?

Bosola Why, to know the trick how to make a many lines meet in one centre.

(2.2.13-25)

A mockery of women in general, the passage begins with «some of you», pointing specifically to prostitution at court; nevertheless, the imagery of a fecund nature and the allusion to Danae are especially pertinent to

⁸ In *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England*, William Hamlin points out that «Webster does not replicate the Essays' fideistic Pyrrhonism, but he exhibits consistent engagement with doubt, showing interest in the tropes of epistemological scepticism, casting a wary eye on metaphysical suppositions, and demonstrating a distinct lack of confidence in any human ability to find moral coherence on earth through the exercise of reason or the testimony of experience» (2005, pp. 211-212).

the Duchess, whose pregnancy is foremost on Bosola's mind. The Duchess's later imprisonment in a dark cell makes her the Danae figure and her incestuous brother the Jupiter figure. The myth itself would suggest the Duchess is the victim, but Bosola, anticipating Rembrandt, puts her transgressive sexual desire in the forefront when he says that the Danaes of his own day «hold their laps up» to receive Jupiter's golden showers.⁹

The revenge on the Duchess increasingly looks like an attack on nature itself or at least on the pastoral simplicity of natural desire that she seeks: she is a bird whose wings will be clipped (3.2.84), ground that will be «blown up» by mines (she fears) (3.2.153-154), a forest that will be uprooted (2.5.19), and territory that will be «wasted» (2.5.20). A foreshadowing of what happens to the Duchess in prison, Bosola's metaphor reduces her to a point (the centre of the circle) as punishment for her challenge to male control over female appetite, procreation, and pleasure. The excessive layering of metaphor and imagery is characteristic of Bosola's melancholy mind. Yet while Bosola's mental gymnastics are mocked elsewhere - he is a «speculative man» who uses mathematics for silly problem solving like studying the «symmetry of Caesar's nose» (3.3.44) - in this case the link between geometry and rape is part of the unfolding plot against the Duchess.

Although the circle was a symbol of perfection and held an important place in Renaissance Platonism, such perfection might be satirised, as we see in a curious epigram by John Davies of Hereford that appropriates Euclid:

Marc in the compasse of his Lusts designes,
is like a Circle in Geometry:
Hee; goes from point, to point, until he joynes;
Then puts a Period to his Lechery:
A Period call it, or full point, or (.)
All's one to him, so he therein doth stick.
(Epigram 268, Davies 1617)

Bosola's bawdy reference to the Duchess's «centre» is in the same satirical vein. But Webster also makes this «centre» a substitute for God as the creator and *fons et origo* of the social order that we saw in the play's opening. Bosola's term «the mathematics» gives us good reason to think the «many lines» that «meet in one centre» is a reference to Euclid's definition of a circle, though Bosola only flirts with it: «a circle is a plaine figure, conteyned vnder one line, which is called a circumference [...] vnto

9 Although Bosola likely has Ferdinand in mind as the Jupiter figure (see the earlier allusion in 1.2.165), the immediate context is Antonio's impregnation of the Duchess.

which all lynes drawn from one poynt within the figure and falling vpon the circumference therof are equall the one to the other» (Euclid 15a). Bosola has made a significant inversion of Euclid's definition: his interest is in many lines moving **towards** the centre while Euclid defines the circle as lines of equal length moving **out** of the center. Euclidean geometry was imbued with deep theological significance in the Renaissance, and Webster wittily layers that rational and metaphysical discourse with the mad, physical desires of men at court. The readers' minds, like those of Webster's male characters, veers from the God of Renaissance mathematics towards Ovidian sexual perversion. The reversal of the lines' direction turns mathematics into a representation of sex.

Rather than controlling lust, Davies and Bosola's geometry seems to encourage it, at least among men. Their geometry provides an alternative to – if not a satire of – the common ethical trope of «keeping within compass» in which the compass itself is an imposing emblem for ethical guidance. In John Trundle's advice manual, entitled «keepe within compasse», a man is standing literally inside the legs of a compass as an ordinary, God-fearing, «virtuous» gentleman (Title Page). The instrument itself, rather than the symbolic circle we are familiar with from Leonardo's «Man in Circle and Square», renders the human figure a passive, chastened sinner (rather than the active, energetic figure of Leonardo's humanism).

The irony, of course, is that the mathematics of the compass that is supposed to discipline women winds up revealing the hypocrisy of men, whose sexual desires are quite «out of compass».¹⁰ Ferdinand, who eventually goes mad from his incestuous desire, says of Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, «I would then have a mathematical instrument made for her face, that she might not laugh out of compass» (1.2.54-55). Like Trundle's compass, Ferdinand's seems too literal, as though the compass itself has a physical and talismanic power, only in Ferdinand's case the literalism is extreme and hence comic: it is as if the compass will literally serve as a vise to lock the muscles of Julia's face in place. As we will see in the next section, this male concern over the pleasure and desire of women, expressed through the language of geometry, undergoes a reversal as the play progresses. The real political crisis is created by the private desires of tyrannical men, and it is they, rather than the Duchess, who will ultimately be reduced to a «point».

10 Throughout the play, the word 'compass' is used to refer to the instrument (often called 'pair of compasses' in the period) that draws circles or measures distances (the compass was also called a 'divider'). It is also used as a noun or verb to refer to an enclosed space, the encompassing of space, and spatial limits, as in 'keeping in compass'.

The Duchess's initial nervousness about her marriage to Antonio – it seems like a journey into unexplored territory – also contrasts with her more defiant posture later, long after she has married, when she says, «Why might not I marry? | I have not gone about, in this, to create | Any new world, or custom» (3.2.108-110). She is right that a widow's remarriage is hardly a «new world» or new «custom»; nevertheless, as she herself recognises, the clandestine marriage to her steward «per verba presenti» (1.2.386) was fraught with danger.¹¹ When the Duchess and Antonio actually do make marriage vows, they avoid metaphors like «wilderness» and «new world» that signal transgression and instead adopt symbols from Pythagorean geometry that can counter the bawdy «circle» that troubles Antonio. Initially, Antonio sees himself as part of the established authority that upholds hierarchy and denies women autonomy and pleasure. In fact, when the Duchess hands him the ring, he sees a «saucy and ambitious devil | Is dancing in this circle» (1.2.323-324). The ring had long been a vaginal symbol in the theater – the *Merchant of Venice* provides a well-known example – but this instance is more explosive than others. The couple's world has been reduced to the private sphere of love and sexual appetite at the expense of their public commitments, their position in the kind of reduction or «fixed order» Antonio mentions at the start of the play. Antonio connects their union to a cosmic order by invoking the concentric circles of a Pythagorean universe: «And may our sweet affections, like the spheres, | Be still in motion – » (1.1.471-472). 'Affection' is thus controlled, the 'noise' and 'madness' of their marriage turned into something peaceful, quiet, and harmonious. Once they are about to be married, the couple seems to be 'in compass' in a new, daring way – finding balance and harmony in private life – while enjoying the silence of perpetual movement, the music of the spheres. But the Duchess disrupts Antonio's paradoxical «still in motion», his description of their eternal, spiritual love, by inserting the word «quick'ning», thus taking pleasure in the sensuality of the moment: the motion will be «Quick'ning, and make | The like soft music» (1.2.390). Despite this representation of balance and harmony in the household, the couple ultimately remains «out of compass» since they have abandoned the original purpose of attending to proper household finances that have already given way to excess. A few lines later, they are heading to bed without the public sanctification of the church. Antonio, the one who opens the play with the metaphors of social order, is himself contributing to the collapse of a symbolic order that defines the public. For a moment, at least, the lovers find a cosmic map for moral action that reconciles pleasure and virtue. But the orderly rotation of

11 On the historical context for the Duchess's marriage, see Rose 2000 and Callaghan 1989.

the spheres, which is part of the ritual of a clandestine marriage, does not carry the symbolic, ideological weight it would have had the couple been integrated into public life sanctified by church and state.

Webster's geometry generally serves darker ends than what we find in the marriage scene. The Duchess herself hints at this darkness when she attempts to redefine their social space by announcing to Antonio that everything outside «this circumference» (their embrace) is «discord» (1.2.378) (the embrace is reminiscent of Antony's «the nobleness of life is to do thus» in *Antony and Cleopatra*). Yet this private space will close in on them, the circumference diminishing in size as the play progresses. In fact, the orderly rotation of the spheres – symbols of social and political stability – is at odds with the more sceptical and gloomy sense of randomness in Webster's Democritean universe.¹² The times require metaphors of diffusion, like Bosola's comparison of people «struck and banded» by the stars to tennis balls (5.4.53-54) or Antonio's comparison of the «quest of greatness» to boys following after «bubbles blown in th' air» (5.4.65). Webster repeatedly returns to the idea that there is no rational order 'out there', and he challenges not only Platonism, but also a good deal of orthodox Christian thought about a providential order. When we do come across metaphors drawn from mathematics and scientific instrumentation, they fail to offer a sense of solace in a divine cosmos. In act three, for example, Antonio, contemplating the unfolding tragedy of his separation from his family, offers the suggestion that resonates with his praise for the French King's reductive order at the start of the play:

Heaven hath a hand in't, but no otherwise
Than as some curious artist takes in sunder
A clock or watch, when it is out of frame,
To bring't in better order.
(3.5.61-64)

Of course, the French King does not have to completely dismantle his Kingdom in order to set it right again. Nevertheless, the metaphor of God as an 'artist' (what we might call an artisan) resembles the metaphor of the divine masterpiece invoked in act one. If this theodicy is not laughable when it is spoken in act three, it surely is late in act five, at which point the best religion can offer is a *deus absconditus*. There may even be a grotesque joke here, since the only «hand» that does later appear is the detached one from a dead man that Ferdinand offers his sister in the darkness of her prison in the very next scene.

¹² Norma Kroll goes so far as to argue that «the philosophy of Democritus serves as Webster's unifying principle» (1973, p. 3).

In making scientific instruments – clocks, compasses, telescopes, plummet – serve his dramatic ends, Webster consistently reverses their potential for supplying truth; they instead are invoked to look inwards, as we find when Ferdinand returns to the compass metaphor in talking about his own psychological depth. Representing the inward turn at court, the narcissistic Ferdinand says, «He that can compass me, and know my drifts, | May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world | And sounded all her quicksands» (3.1.84-86). The immediate sense is of his expansiveness – Falstaff's 'world' comes to mind – but Bosola immediately deflates this possibility when he tells Ferdinand, « you are your own chronicle too much, and grossly flatter yourself» (3.1.88-89). We have seen as much in act one when Ferdinand says he prefers flattery, a mirroring of himself (1.2.42-44). Thus we are likely to agree with Bosola: Ferdinand brags about his immeasurable vastness – or at least the depth of his schemes (impossible to 'sound' or measure with a plummet) but such depth is indicative of political corruption and the narcissism or privacy of a tyrant. Quicksand is one of many images of horrifying traps Ferdinand has plotted in his incestuous and murderous imagination; it is also one of many representations of the court as a suffocating place of flattery, falsehood, and deception. Voyaging (as in the common expression 'to put a girdle around the world'; «girdle» *OED* n.1, 3a) and objective measurement establish the metaphor's vehicle, yet its tenor, paradoxically, is the unfathomable depths of a mad duke who falls into the quicksand of his own subjectivity.

At a time of great excitement over new inventions and discoveries, Webster has his characters shut the new 'book of nature'. The play was written two to three years after the publication of Galileo's *Siderius Nuncius* (1611), and four to five years after Galileo had developed a new telescope. Thus in encountering a reference to Galileo modern readers might hope for a connection to his science on a deeper level than what they find in its immediate context, a cliché about unchaste women that is spiced with an *au courant* reference to a recent 'invention'. In a line that reverberates with Donne's «Go catch a falling star» the cardinal tells Julia, «We had need go borrow that fantastic glass | Invented by Galileo the Florentine, | To view another spacious world i'th' moon, | And look to find a constant woman there» (2.4.16-19). The Galileo reference contributes not only to the Cardinal's misogyny, but also to his insight into the psychology of projection: «You fear my constancy because you have approved | Those giddy and wild turnings in yourself» (2.4.11-12). Serving as a psychological tool for the Cardinal, the telescope facilitates yet another turn inwards into the human psyche rather than outwards to the stars. Mathematics and instrumentation have no relation to new knowledge. Instead, they are bound up with psychological torture and narcissism.¹³

13 During the performance of the madmen we are reminded that Galileo's 'invention', the

Although we have no reason to expect a dramatic reference to Galileo's telescope to include more information than Webster provides, the overall lack of knowledge about the cosmos is itself a significant theme in the play. Webster repeatedly presents 'glasses' and compasses that fail to produce genuine knowledge about the external world, other minds, or even the self. These two objects are combined in Bosola and Ferdinand's attempt to reduce the Duchess. The compass becomes a clear counterpoint to her cry for the freedom and pleasure experienced by birds: «Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison» (4.2.126-129). Although the imagery that follows is drawn from the *contemptus mundi* tradition, Bosola drains that tradition of hope in the afterlife. The hitman echoes his boss's desire to reduce the Duchess to matter, indeed to mere nothing: «I would have their bodies | Burnt in a coal-pit», Ferdinand says, «with the ventage stopped, | That their cursed smoke might not ascend to heaven» (2.5.66-68). Bosola's focus on matter is just as bleak: he tells the Duchess she is «a box of worm seed», «a salvatory of green mummy», «a little curded milk», and «fantastical puff paste» (4.2.120-122).

Perhaps the true horror for the audience, however, is that it can easily feel like it too is trapped in this nihilistic space. With the pronouns «us» and «our», Bosola addresses the audience as prisoners, making the wooden O of the globe a confining space. Shut off from the cosmos by a «looking glass», the English audience is placed in the position of the narcissistic and vain people that populate the play. The traditional *theatrum mundi* topos, which posits an ultimate truth beyond the stage, is not compatible in this case with the *contemptus mundi* (as it generally was). In many of its manifestations, the *theatrum mundi* trope demonstrated that the world was imperfect, a degraded place of falsehood, a fallen place of representation much like the stage. Yet it offered hope because it included a position above from which human folly could be morally judged and laughed at. In Bosola's metaphor we find it hard to locate any position above or outside the theater from which one might distinguish reality and appearance; the «looking glass» makes us think of the human mind, not just the fleshly body, as a kind of prison.

Bosola employs spatial metaphors as a means of inflicting psychological torture, but he also turns them against his own oppressors. In yet another witty lesson in mathematics, he says of his service in the wars, «There are rewards for hawks and dogs when they have done us service, but for a

telescope he used to discover the moons around Jupiter, was derived from the «perspective glasses» he and others designed for the battlefield. One of the madmen is a «mad astrologer» who says, «Doomsday not come yet? I'll draw it nearer by a perspective, or make a glass that shall set all the world on fire upon an instant» (4.2.74-76).

soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation» (1.1.58-62). When asked by his befuddled companion if he really means «geometry», he replies:

Ay, to hang in a fair pair of slings, take his latter swing in the world upon an honourable pair of crutches, from hospital to hospital – fare ye well, sir. And yet do not you scorn us, for places in court are but like beds in the hospital, where this man’s head lies at that man’s foot, and so lower and lower. (1.1.64-69)

Bosola’s fanciful juxtaposition of crutches and the legs of a compass is a reminder of the literal meaning of ‘geo-metry’ as the measuring of land, pertinent examples being the surveying of a battlefield, the arrangement of troops, or the construction of a ‘plot’ for fortification (like that mentioned by Count Malateste in 3.3.6-7). But Bosola blurs cause and effect: the geometry used in war and the geometry of a broken body arriving home from the war. The *OED* defines the phrase «hang by geometry», which appears to be what he has in mind, as to «hang in a stiff, angular fashion». The expression describes someone on crutches hanging on a «fair pair of slings». It is as if Bosola’s body bears the traces of the mathematical ordering of troop formations, and yet it is his imaginative, melancholic mind that resists the emptiness of that rational ordering with a bizarre image of protest.

What makes Bosola’s metaphor especially perspicuous is that it comments on a full blown ideological crisis, not just on a particular ethical lapse by his patrons who refuse to give him payment for his service in the wars. Bosola’s broken body represents a broken world in which his patrons are «like plum trees that grow **crooked** over standing pools» (1.1.49-50; my emphasis). The ecological imbalance he describes is an indication that «service», a regulative idea of a social order modelled on the relation of mutual obligation, is inoperative. In a play filled with metaphors drawn from the compass, Bosola’s image of himself «hanging by geometry» is jarring: instead of cosmic order symbolised by circles, we have a symbol of social disorder rooted primarily in the abuse of tyrants. The Cardinal and Ferdinand transform a human being into a tool for destruction, and yet there is no ideological order that would give Bosola’s sacrifice meaning, such as the public commitment championed by Antonio and emblematised in his fountain or the «ring» he captures in a tournament at court.

The play’s incorporation of mathematical figures and references, I have thus far tried to show, reveals a failed attempt to maintain a public-spirited socio-political order (the French King is in fact captured and put in prison, as we learn at the end of act three) as well as attempts to control or ‘reduce’ women. Bosola’s mathematical figures are employed as tools for oppressing women and as tools for protest. The latter is also found in a

cryptic reference to geometry by the Duchess that serves as resistance to the sadistic staging of her death, which she counters with an alternative space: «I know death hath ten thousand several doors | For men to take their exits; and 'tis found | They go on such strange geometrical hinges, | You may open them both ways. Any way, for heaven sake» (4.2.211-214). The mathematics convey the central point quite clearly – that death is merely a kind of *theatrum mundi* with its many «exits and entrances».¹⁴ She remains calm in the face of death. What matters is the world beyond – heaven – and she appears confident she will get there. This is an expression of defiance towards the sadism of her tormentors, yet it also has an air of resignation, as if she merely wants to take the nearest exit from the theatre of the world. The passage remains enigmatic, however, since it is hard to know how the numbers add up when 10,000 exits become entrances and the hinges can open «any way». Moreover, Webster teases us with yet another allusion to the compass. The Duchess is talking explicitly about door hinges; nevertheless, she also seems to be thinking about the hinges on a compass, in this case specifically a divider, which has legs that pivot and hinges that open «both ways» or «any way». Overall, the passage is paradoxical not only in its odd blend of defiance and passivity, but also in its contradictory nature as a confident assertion of knowledge about death that is, upon careful inspection, a figurative and mathematical enigma.

Although the Duchess is strangled to death in this scene, she remains irreducible. Webster clearly wants us to juxtapose the staging of her death to that of her brother the Cardinal, whose death is dramatised in geometrical terms. After stabbing him, Bosola says, «I do glory | That thou, which stood'st like a huge pyramid | Begun upon a large and ample base, shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing» (5.5.74-78). Unable to secure a monumental death worthy of such a public figure, the Cardinal realises Bosola is correct: «And now, I Pray, Let me | Be laid by and never thought of» (5.5.87-88). Webster may well be thinking of two different kinds of pyramids, which combine to great effect – the kind of monumental building seen in Jacobean masques, but also the pyramid of linear perspective, which would mean that the Cardinal's death is like a figure receding to the vanishing point where it is no longer visible.¹⁵ This geometrical death contrasts with that of the Duchess, who rather than be «reduced» seems to retain her greatness when she utters the most famous line of the play, «I am the Duchess of Malfi still». Webster's play is itself the kind of monument to her greatness that the Cardinal mournfully concedes he will not receive.

14 I am borrowing from Jacques's famous speech in *As You Like It*, in which he says, «All the world's a stage, | And all the men and women merely players. | They have their exits and their entrances, | And one man in his time plays many parts» (2.7.139-142).

15 On masques, court politics, and space, see West 2002. On the masques and monuments, including the pyramid, see Lindley 1984.

In its immediate context, this line is a response to Bosola's attempt to annihilate her. First she reminds him «Am I not thy Duchess?». At this point she seems to be merely positioning herself in the kind of «fixed order» advocated by Antonio and the French King. But the line is much more than an attempt to defend herself by reminding the lowly and resentful Bosola of his social rank. Stated without equivocation following the cacophony of the madmen's performance, «I am the Duchess of Malfi still» is not simply an affirmation of her aristocratic identity in the face of death, like Hamlet's declaration in the graveyard, «This is I, Hamlet the Dane». It is specifically an affirmation of the **new** identity, political and personal, she established when she decided to marry Antonio. She is reaffirming the female reproductive and sexual freedom that she had earlier expressed as an ecology of desire with an image of birds and open spaces of wilderness. Her «I am» implies that her identity has remained the same when she has in fact willfully sought its transformation through her marriage to someone far beneath her royal position. As part of the Montaignean flux of the play, her identity is a work in progress.¹⁶

The «I am» also appears paradoxical in light of Webster's treatment of «integrity», wholeness, and permanence of any kind. The play ends with a sententious couplet by Delio, who, like his good friend Antonio, is relatively ethical but perhaps a little naïve. The lines seem to affirm the virtue and greatness of the play's eponymous character: «Integrity of life is fame's best friend, | Which nobly beyond death shall crown the end» (5.5.118-119). The couplet is trite and perhaps even absurdly smug in a play that is so steeped in scepticism and cynicism, yet it is hard to deny the power of the preceding image that lifts the Duchess high above her brothers, the «wretched, eminent things» that

Leave no more fame behind 'em than should one
 Fall in a frost and leave his print in snow -
 As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts
 Both form and matter.
 (5.5.112-115)

16 The Duchess's marriage to Antonio has an ideological dimension that also calls into question her confident assertion of a fixed aristocratic identity. On several occasions she explicitly champions a proto-bourgeois ethos. An example is her rhetoric of authenticity in the wooing of Antonio: «I do here put off all vain ceremony | And only do appear to you a young widow | That claims you for her husband» (1.2.366-378). Critics have also called attention to the Duchess's approval of value determined by merit and the marketplace (see especially 3.5.121-142). Her proto-bourgeois praise of the man Ferdinand denounces as «base» for practicing the commercial mathematics of «ink and counters» (3.4.70-72) suggests that her brothers may be right that she is in fact a threat to her social class. For more on the play as «the perfect fable of emergent liberalism», see Belsey 1985.

This temporal form, a mere print in the snow, contrasts with geometrical forms that constitute a permanent, underlying mathematical reality. But Webster's spatial play has made it a challenge to believe in that underlying reality and his mathematics calls into question the wholeness that «integrity» implies. Delio's final bit of wisdom circles back to Antonio's opening speech about the French King's reduction and it appears just as idealistic as the latter's celebration of a transcendent, «fixed order». Instead of a timeless «masterpiece» handed down by God, the play leaves us with the sense that any affirmation of being, permanence, and truth must be paradoxical since in the social and political order as it exists, it is inevitable that, to adopt a line from Marx that Webster would have enjoyed, «all that is solid melts into air» (Marx [1848] 1978, p. 476).

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«Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den» Animals, Plants and Paradoxes in Abraham Cowley's Writings

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Abstract Moving from his peculiar way of mingling poetry and natural philosophy, his composing lyrics with the condensation of good prose and his writing essays in a poetical language, these pages investigate the ambiguous attitude towards the natural world and, in particular, towards the animal dimension that marks Abraham Cowley's writings. Close to Andrew Marvell, Richard Lovelace, John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, for instance, Cowley seems to be torn between Descartes's mechanistic approach and Gassendi's 'animistic' theories, Republican ideals and monarchic values, classic culture and modern science: the poet celebrates and worships the natural world in its wholeness, identifies humanity (and wit) with animals and plants, obliquely associates a mouse with Charles II and, by displaying a paradoxical treatment of animals that do not belong to the poetical tradition, sheds light on the 'split' spirit of his age.

A lover of paradox, oxymoron and antithesis, Abraham Cowley himself seems to embody a series of paradoxes. If in his own day he is exaggeratedly popular, even hailed as the English Anacreon, Pindar or Horace, Cowley's reputation dissolves at his death: in his *Epistle to Augustus* Alexander Pope highlights the poet's «pointed wit» and asks the renowned question «Who now reads Cowley?», thus expressing his admiration for the poet and, at the same time, testifying to his early and swift oblivion.¹ Pope declares his appreciation for the poet also in *Windsor Forest*. Lamenting his 'early loss', he keenly refers to Cowley's premature death and, at the same time, to his rapid obscurity:

There the last numbers flow'd from Cowley's tongue.
O early lost! what tears the river shed,
When the sad pomp along his banks was led!
(ll. 272-274, in Butt 1961, vol. 1)

Cowley's peculiar way of mingling poetry and natural philosophy, his writing essays in a poetical language and, vice versa, his composing poetry

¹ «Who now reads Cowley? if he pleases yet, | His moral pleases, not his pointed wit; | Forgot his epic, nay, Pindaric art, | But still I love the language of his heart». Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Augustus*, ll. 75-78 (Butt 1961, vol. 4).

with the condensation, clearness and economy of good prose both clarify his descending parable and evidence his paradoxical substance: Samuel Johnson wittily defines him as a «philosophic rhymers» and, believing that one of the great sources of poetical delight is «presenting pictures to the mind», concludes that he «gives inferences instead of images» (Hind [1925] 1961, pp. 28, 34). As much as numerous commentators argue that Cowley has surrendered his poetic spirit to science and that his imagination «corroded and shrank in the prosaic atmosphere of seventeenth-century rationalism and materialism» (Hinman 1960, p. v.), Johnson comments on his 'scientific poetry' by claiming that he turns botany into poetry: «considering botany as necessary to a physician, he retired into Kent to gather plants; and, as the predominance of a favourite study affects all subordinate operations of the intellect, botany in the mind of Cowley turned into poetry» (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 7). Johnson even declares that *The Mistress*, a collection of love poems published in 1647, «has no power of seduction» and that Cowley's «poetical account of the virtue of plants, and colours of flowers, is not perused with more sluggish frigidity» (Hind [1925] 1961, pp. 27-28).

In the same train of thought, Thomas Sprat, a founding member of the Royal Society and Cowley's literary executor and biographer, remarks the interrelation between the poet's works and his life, personality and scientific concerns. Deeply interested in the new experimental science and a distinguished natural philosopher, Cowley, it goes without saying, involves himself with the Royal Society: «in 1657 Cowley was made a doctor of physic» and «in the commencement of the Royal Society [...] he appears busy among the experimental philosophers with the title of Dr. Cowley», as Johnson reports (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 7). Prompted by the very Sprat and John Evelyn,² Cowley celebrates in verse the Royal Society and the glories and merits of Francis Bacon, its inspirer and moral founder, the «mighty Man» who «at last [...] arose [...] and boldly undertook the injur'd Pupil's cause»,³ i.e. the cause of philosophy. Embracing Bacon's empirical scientific approach, Cowley believes that the authentic source of knowledge is «Nature's endless Treasure», not the «painted Scenes, and Pageants of the Brain», i.e. art and culture: «Those smallest things of Nature let me know | Rather than all their greatest Actions Doe» (ll. 27, 30, 157-158). Cowley opens his *Proposition for the Advancement of*

2 Evelyn records in his Diary a letter written to him by Cowley on May 13, 1667: «my laziness in finishing y^e copy of verse vpon y^e Royal Society, for w^{ch} I was engag'd before by Mr Sprat's desire, & encourag'd since by yow, was the cause of this delay». Quoted by Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1, p. lxxvii.

3 Abraham Cowley, *To the Royal Society (The History of the Royal Society*, 2nd ed.), ll. 37-38. The lyric is included in *Occasional Verses*, a collection of poems written between 1663 and 1668. Now in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1.

Learning (1661), whose title overtly pays a homage to Bacon's celebrated work,⁴ with a reference to the book of God and the book of nature and with a firm declaration of the superiority of nature over culture: «it were madness to imagine that the Cisterns of men should afford us as much, and as wholesome Waters, as the Fountains of Nature» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 285). In his heartfelt poetical praise, Cowley associates Bacon to Moses, traditionally regarded as the father of alchemy, thus evidencing the natural philosopher's paradoxical approach to learning, that is to say his embracing both hermetic knowledge and modern science:⁵ «Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last» (*To the Royal Society*, l. 93). With this definition of Bacon, Cowley seems to describe himself, since, like the founder of modern science, he functions as a middle ring between two cultural modes and moments, between the Metaphysical taste and neoclassical culture: as argued by Trotter, Cowley reveals «the decadence of a Metaphysical mode and the seeds of Augustanism» and his *Miscellanies*, published in 1656, are to be regarded «as a 'limit text': as one place where one discursive practice finds its historical limit and another begins to establish itself» (Trotter 1979, pp. 1, 5).

The cunning definition «mixt Wit» that Joseph Addison attributes to Cowley's art stresses the poet's paradoxical essence and his being in between two ages and two tastes: Addison believes that «there is [a] kind of Wit which consists partly in the Resemblance of Ideas, and partly in the Resemblance of Words; which for Distinction Sake I shall call mixt Wit. This Kind of Wit is that which abounds in Cowley, more than in any author that ever wrote» (Bond 1965, p. 265). Somehow anticipating Addison's considerations, in a poem published in *Miscellanies* Cowley conceives of wit in paradoxical terms:

What is then, which like the power Divine
We onely can by Negatives define?
In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
Yet all things there agree.
(*Of Wit*, ll. 55-58, in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1)

Cowley presents wit by means of a 'negative theology' and closely connects it to the classical concept of *discors concordia*, thus obliquely, and cunningly, equating wit to paradox, the witty exercise most used in the Renaissance and in the seventeenth century, along with contradiction and

4 Bacon devises *The Great Instauration* (1620), his uncompleted general work, in six parts but publishes only portions of the project: *The Advancement of Learning* as Part I and *Novum Organum* as Part II.

5 In his 'scientific utopia' *New Atlantis* Bacon overtly expounds his double approach to natural philosophy. Cf. Case [1906] 1951, Rossi [1957] 1974, and Farrington 1952.

antithesis:⁶ defined by Rosalie Colie as *serio ludere*, as an «exercise of wit designed to amuse an audience sufficiently sophisticated», paradox is a logical figure structured on assumptions contrary to logical expectations that insists on the intimate unity of all things and represents «the reconciliation of opposites», the fusion of form and content, subject and object (Colie 1966, pp. 5, xiv). In a most interesting way, Cowley clarifies his definition of wit as the unity of all things by means of an animal simile:

In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
 Yet all things there agree.
 As in the Ark, joyn'd without force or strife,
 All Creatures dwelt: all Creatures that had Life.
 (*Of Wit*, ll. 57-60)

Besides shedding light on the curious choice of equating wit to animals, Thomas Browne's peculiar concept of 'amphibiousness' functions as a figure of paradox and as an apt metaphor for Cowley: believing that humanity consists both of a material and of a spiritual dimension, in *Religio Medici* Browne declares that «thus is man that great and true *Amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live [...] in divided and distinguished worlds [...] betweene a corporall and spirituall essence» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 44). Man, suspended between heaven and earth as a sort of intermediate ring in the great chain of being, or «Staire of creatures»,⁷ is epitomised by Cowley's grasshopper, the «Happy *Insect* [...] fed with nourishment divine»⁸ that connects two dimensions and functions as a metaphor for the poet: «Thee *Phæbus* loves, and does inspire; | *Phæbus* is himself thy *Sire*» (*The Grassehopper*, ll. 23-24). Also Richard Lovelace represents the «happy insect» as a creature in between two worlds and explicitly links it to earth and air: «The Joyes of Earth and Ayre are thine intire, | That with thy feet and wings dost hop and flye» (*The Grasse-hopper To my Noble Friend*, Mr. Charles Cotton, ll. 5-6; quotations are from Wilkinson 1930). Cowley's and Lovelace's grasshoppers, presented as the link between air and earth, between the divine and earthly dimensions, function as an oblique metaphor for the poet, like Plato's cicada (Reale [1993] 1996) – it is worth noticing that most frequently the English term 'grasshopper' actually means 'cicada', the celebrated τέτιξ of ancient Greece. Besides Cowley and Lovelace, also Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, James Thom-

6 Christopher Ricks (1987) observes that the figures that characterise seventeenth-century literature are, chronologically, contradiction, paradox and antithesis.

7 Browne claims that «there is in this Universe a Staire, or manifeste Scale of creatures» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 42). For the idea of the 'great chain of being', see Lovejoy 1936.

8 Abraham Cowley, *The Grassehopper*, ll. 1, 3 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2).

son and Leigh Hunt, among others, praise in verse the pleasure provoked by the insect's musical chirping, thus using the term 'grasshopper' to celebrate the cicada. In *The Shepheardes Calender* Spenser writes that «such pleasaunce makes the Grasshopper so poore» (*October. Ægloga decima*, l. 11, in McLean, Prescottt [1968] 1993) and in the long poem *Upon Appleton House* Marvell presents a curious exchange between men and grasshoppers and mentions the insect's «squeaking Laugh»:

[...] Men like Grashoppers appear,
But Grashoppers are Gyants there:
They, in there squeaking Laugh, contemn
Us as we walk more low than them.

(*Upon Appleton House to my Lord Fairfax*, ll. 371-374; all references are from Lord [1984] 1993)

In *Summer* James Thomson dwells on the insect's song - «And scarce a chirping grasshopper is heard | Through the dumb mead» (ll. 446-447; all quotations are from Robertson 1951) - and in the sonnet *The Grasshopper and the Cricket* Leigh Hunt addresses the grasshopper as «sole voice that's heard amidst the lazy noon» and exhorts it to «sing in thoughtful ears this natural song», this «tricksome tune» (ll. 3, 13, 7; in Hunt 1960), thus insisting on the insect's musical competence. Paraphrasing Plato's *Phaedrus*, one of the classical sources of the city/country conflict, also Robert Burton associates poets with grasshoppers, i.e. cicadas: «poets, rhetoricians, historians, philosophers, mathematicians, sophisters, etc., they are like grasshoppers, sing they must in summer, and pine in the winter» (Jackson [1621, 1651, 1923] 1948, p. 307).

Cowley and Lovelace, highlighting the happy insect's double substance, fuse Anacreon's vision of the cicada as «daughter of the earth, lover of song» (fr. 34, l. 16, in West [1984] 1993) with an airy image of it - the cicada would later be depicted by Gabriele D'Annunzio precisely as *aerea* and *figlia dell'aria* (*La pioggia nel pineto*, ll. 68, 89, in Gibellini, Caliero 1995). Bachofen further stresses the 'amphibious' substance of cicadas arguing that they represent the union of light and darkness: since, like the first men, they are autochthons, cicadas do not generate among them but rise from the earth, from darkness, and aspire to the sun, to light, to heaven (Bachofen 1988, p. 779). The idea of the poet as a grasshopper, or of man as consisting of an animal, human and divine essence, is expounded by Browne, who further develops his speculations on the amphibious essence of humanity by declaring that man is a «composition of man and beast»: as if connecting men with the so-called *grottesche*, bizarre pictorial decorations that represent fantastic composite bodies in imitation of the frescoes discovered in Domus aurea, Browne claims that «we are all monsters, that is, a composition of man and beast» and that «We are onely that am-

phibious piece between a corporall and spirituall essence, that middle frame that linkes those two together» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 66). The wide diffusion of *grottesche* in the seventeenth century evidences Browne's theories, i.e. the mysterious amphibious origins of humanity and the double essence of everything: the *grottesca*, *capriccio*, *raffaelesca*, or, according to Giorgio Vasari, «pittura licenziosa e ridicola molto»,⁹ frequently depicts men formed by animals, plants, columns, winged fish, medusas and other fantastic creatures, thus representing a visual paradox, the union of the human, animal and vegetal dimensions, the amalgamation of art, architecture and botany and, since it recreates a garden within the house, also the union of within and without (see Griseri 1988, Ossola 1971, Praz [1968] 1975).

Andrew Marvell, the 'garden poet' that can be associated to Cowley for numerous reasons (stylistic, thematic and biographic), overtly embraces Browne's idea of 'amphibiousness', both in a metaphorical and in a literal way. In the concluding stanza of *Upon Appleton House* he associates men, defined as «rational *Amphibii*», to tortoises: «How Tortoise like, but not so slow, | These rational *Amphibii* go?» (ll. 773-774). In the lyric *The unfortunate Lover* Marvell depicts Charles I as «Th' *Amphibium* of Life and Death» (l. 49) and in two beautiful and complex ekphrastic poems represents the halcyon, one of his favourite 'amphibious' figures, as the conjunction of night and day, water and sky, heaven and earth, spirit and matter: whereas in the lyric *The Gallery* «The *Halcyons*, calming all that's nigh, | Betwixt the Air and Water fly» (ll. 35-36), in *Upon Appleton House* «The modest *Halcyon* comes in sight, | Flying betwixt the Day and Night» (ll. 669-670).

In his celebration of Thomas Fairfax's sober and harmonious estate at Nunappleton, Marvell criticises the vogue of building exaggerated and extravagant mansions and compares the Lord General's country house to the modest and proportionate dwellings of animals, in particular 'amphibious' ones such as tortoises and birds:

Why should of all things Man unrul'd
Such unproportion'd dwellings build?
The Beasts are by their Denms exprest:
And Birds contrive an equal Nest;
The low roof'd Tortoises do dwell
In cases of Tortoise-shell.
(*Upon Appleton House*, ll. 9-14)

9 Vasari defines the *grottesche* as «sconciature di mostri per strattezza della natura e per gricciolo e ghiribizzo degli artefici, i quali fanno in quelle cose senza alcuna regola, apiccando a un sottilissimo filo un peso che non si può reggere, a un cavallo le gambe di foglie, a un uomo le gambe di gru et infiniti sciarpelloni e passerotti; e chi più stranamente se gli immaginava, quello era tenuto più valente» (Bellosi, Rossi 1991, p. 73).

John Donne anticipates the same idea in one of his two verse letters to Henry Wotton, the learned ambassador especially appreciated for his competences in architecture, experimental science and optics.¹⁰ By exhorting him to be «thine own home, and in thy selfe dwell» (John Donne, *To Sir Henry Wotton*, l. 47, in Serpieri, Bigliuzzi 2009), the poet invites the ambassador to find inspiration in the animals' lodgings and to imitate the snail:

And seeing the snaile, which every where doth rome,
 Carrying his owne house still, still is at home.
 Follow (for he is easie pac'd) this snaile,
 Bee thine owne Palace, or the world's thy gaole.
 (*To Sir Henry Wotton*, ll. 49-52)

Richard Lovelace represents the snail as a paradigm of wisdom and good sense and, close to Thomas Browne's lucubration, regards his «marble cell» (Richard Lovelace, *The Snail*, l. 60) as a metaphor for womb and grave, birth and death: «And as thy house was thine own womb, | So thine own womb, concludes thy tomb» (*The Snail*, ll. 35-36). Both Cowley and Browne are convinced that there is a deep link between womb and grave, life and death, beginning and end. If in the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches* Cowley declares that there exists «so narrow a streight betwixt the Womb and the Grave» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 336),¹¹ in *Hydriotaphia* Browne even individuates a physical resemblance between the funeral urn and the maternal womb, between «our last bed» and «our first»:

many [Urnes] have handles, ears, and long necks, but most imitate a circular figure, in a sphericall and round composure [...]. But the common form with necks was a proper figure, making our last bed like our first. (Keynes [1658; 1928] 1963a, p. 148)

Close to Donne and Marvell, in *A Paraphrase upon the 10^o Epistle of the first Book of Horace. Horace to Fuscus Aristius*, one of the six poems included in the essay *Of Agriculture*, Cowley opposes natural and animal houses to urban mansions. Horace, «the lover of the Country», is presented in the poem as «loosely fly[ing] from bough to bough» (ll. 1, 6, in Grosart 1967, vol. 2) and is thus indirectly associated to birds, animals that, as cicadas-grasshoppers, have always functioned as a traditional

10 Cowley composes an elegy *On the Death of Sir Henry Wootton*, included in *Miscellanies*.

11 All the essays by Cowley are collected in *Several Discourses by Way of Essays in Verse and Prose*, published in 1668, in Grosart 1967, vol. 2.

metaphor for poetry: in the lyric *The Garden*¹² Cowley depicts birds, «the Freeborn Nations of the Air»,¹³ precisely as «danc[ing] from Bough to Bough» (l. 55) and compares their melodies to the poet's song, wishing fowl did not become object of cruel games and hunting¹⁴ - «'Tis well if they become not Prey» (*The Garden*, l. 65). In his paraphrase of the Horatian *Beatus ille* (*Epodes*, Ode 2), another poem that accompanies the essay *Of Agriculture*, Cowley reiterates his defence of birds by attacking the lord of the villa and his vogue of organizing «innocent wars», i.e. hunting parties, in his country estates:

He runs the Mazes of the nimble Hare,
His well-mouth'd Dog's glad Concert rends the Air;
[...] And all his malice, all his craft is shown
In innocent wars, on beasts and birds alone.
(*Horat. Epodon. Beatus ille qui procul, &c.*, ll. 35-36, 41-42)

In Cowley's Horatian Epistle the poet-bird rejects the extravagant products of art and chooses nature as the proper architect for his house:

Would I a house for happiness erect,
Nature alone should be the Architect.
She'd build it more convenient, than great,
And doubtless in the Country choose her seat.
(*A Paraphrase upon the 10^o Epistle of the first Book of Horace*, ll. 13-16)

With this wish Cowley evokes a couplet from the only poem included in his essay *Of Solitude* - «Here Nature does a House for me erect: | Nature, the fairest Architect» (ll. 9-10) - , the poem *The Wish*,¹⁵ the lyric that illustrates the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches* («Pity great Men, great thing despise», l. 48), and the central thesis of the essay *On Greatness*, where he confesses his love for «Littleness in almost all things», for «a little convenient Estate, a little chearful House, a little Company, and a very little Feast» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 329). In the poem *To the Royal*

12 *The Garden* is the last poem included in the essay *Of Agriculture*.

13 Abraham Cowley, *Ode. Upon Liberty*, l. 48 (in *Several Discourses*, in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2. Reformulating the same image, James Thomson will define birds as «plumy race, | The tenants of the sky» (*Winter*, ll. 137-138).

14 For the new sympathy for birds, see Margaret Cavendish, *Dialogue betwixt Birds* (1653) and Thomas Tryon, *Country-Man's Companion* and *The Complaints of the Birds and Fowls of Heaven to their Creator for the Oppressions and Violences Most Nations on the Earth do Offer Them*, both published in 1683.

15 The speaker of *The Wish* flees from «The Croud, and Buz, and Murmurings | Of this great City» so that he may «a small House, and large Garden have» (ll. 7-8, 10).

Society Cowley indirectly praises Bacon precisely by invoking modesty and proportion:

The things which these proud men despise, and call
 Impertinent, and vain, and small,
 Those smallest things of Nature let me know
 Rather than all their greatest Actions Doe.
 (*To the Royal Society*, ll. 155-158)

Bacon, who has always and notoriously criticised grandiosity, in the essay *Of Great Place* equates greatness to lack of freedom by means of a witty paradox:

Men in great places are thrice servants [...]. They have no freedom, neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times. It is a strange desire, to seek power over others and to lose power over a man's self. (Smeaton [1906] 2008, p. 31)

Like Cowley, Bacon celebrates smallness and proportion and invokes more sobriety and adherence to nature when dealing with houses: in the essay *Of Building* he argues that «houses are built to live in, and not to look on; therefore let use be preferred before uniformity, except where both may be had» (Smeaton [1906] 2008, p. 133). The opening lines of Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* formulate a stern disapproval of exaggerate, disproportionate and 'unnatural' estates that can be aligned with Bacon's and Cowley's reflections:

Within this sober Frame expect
 Work of no Forrain Architect.
 [...] But all things are composed here
 Like Nature, orderly and near.
 (ll. 1-2, 25-26)

These lines follow the above-quoted identification of Lord Fairfax's house with the modest and proportionate dwellings of animals,¹⁶ a concept expressed by Cowley in the lyric that illustrates the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches*: in this poem Cowley resumes both the idea that the dens of animals are paragons of modesty and perfection and the identification poet-bird. After a consideration on ants and grasshoppers, the speaker (overtly identified with Cowley) projects himself onto

16 «The Beasts are by their Dens exprest: | And Birds contrive an equal Nest; | The low roof'd Tortoises do dwell | In cases of Tortoise-shell» (ll. 11-14).

the «Heav'nly Lark», his «Fellow-Poet», wishing he could proudly soar above and humbly dwell below, like the bird:

The wise Example of the Heav'nly Lark,
Thy Fellow-Poet, *Cowley*, mark!
Above the Clouds thy proud Musick sound,
Thy humble Nest built on the Ground.
(ll. 49-52)

Thanks to its ability to ascend in a most rapid and vertical way, the lark is traditionally seen as the link between heaven and earth, night and day (like the grasshopper-cicada and like Marvell's halcyon), and its morning song is interpreted as a song of joy. Since it starts singing at dawn, in the threshold between night and day, the lark is considered the messenger of the morning, «the herald of the morn»,¹⁷ as highlighted by Lovelace when he defines it as «the jolly bird of light | Who sounds his third retreat to Night» (*Aramantha. A Pastorall*, ll. 1-2). The joy and quasi-divinity of the lark, that starts singing in the first days of spring, have always fascinated poets and have led them to regard the bird as a figure of Christ and saints in general (Cattabiani 2000). With a celebrated simile that has contributed to its mythology, Dante compares the eagle that illustrates the excellent spirits of Paradise to the lark that soars in the air with its heavenly song:

Quale allodetta che 'n aere si spazia
prima cantando, e poi tace contenta
dell'ultima dolcezza che la sazia.
(*Paradiso*, XX.73-75; Bosco, Reggio eds. 1982-1984)

In the same train of thought, Shakespeare regards the lark as a metaphor for the poet's skill to arise from mediocrity and reach spiritual peaks:

Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth sings hymns at Heaven's gate.
(Sonnet xxix, ll. 11-12)

Albeit Cowley criticises the vogue of hunting fowl, as already said, and poets frequently celebrate the divine essence of birds, and larks in particular, the seventeenth century is marked by a contradictory attitude. Close to John Evelyn and James I, defenders of animals and forests that have an authentic and paradoxical passion for lark hunting, Samuel Pepys

17 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.6; all quotations from Shakespeare's works are from Wells, Taylor 1987.

strenuously condemns hunting and cruelty on animals but, nonetheless, records with satisfaction a «very fine dinner» that includes the «Heav'nly Lark», a culinary delicacy:

a very fine dinner: viz. a dish of marrow-bones. A leg of mutton. A loin of veal. A dish of fowl, three pullets, and two dozens of larks, all in a dish. A great tart. A neat's tongue. A dish of anchoves. A dish of prawns; and cheese. (January 26, 1660; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 1, p. 29)

Whereas the vegetarian Evelyn¹⁸ reports, often proudly, the numerous occasions in which he devotes himself to hunting and falconry,¹⁹ Pepys is disgusted with hunting, hunters and those «great many silly stories they tell of their sport, which pleases them mightily and me not at all, such is the different pleasure in mankind» (November 9, 1665; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 6, p. 295).

Close to Evelyn's respect for animals and, at the same time, enthusiasm for falconry, Lovelace sings the nobility and grace of his brave falcon, the «Fair Princess of the spacious air» killed during a strenuous hunting party. Presenting his hawk in paradoxical terms, the poet stresses the seventeenth-century ambiguous and oscillating attitude towards birds: he claims that the «brave cousin-german to the Sun» is «safe in [her] velvet helm» and uses the oxymoron «free beauteous slave» (*The Falcon*, ll. 1, 10, 29, 21) to define the bird's condition. Evelyn reveals a similar contradictory approach to birds when he embraces the traditional association birds-freedom and, at the same time, declares that any garden of value ought to include the «winged choristers», even if they should be imprisoned in aviaries and deprived of their liberty: «our Elysium cannot be without their company though it be at the price of their liberty» (Ingram 2001, p. 254). The *volaries* advocated by Evelyn, however, are so wide that can contain even five hundred birds: «An Aviary of 60 foote long, 15 broad & 30 high will be sufficient to hold 500 smale Birds together» (Ingram 2001, p. 254).

With *The Swallow*, an *Anacreontique* poem included in *Miscellanies*, Cowley displays a mock cruel attitude when he expresses the wish that the bird of spring, as Philomel, had its tongue mutilated by Tereus:²⁰

18 Evelyn writes a treatise, *Acetaria*, in order to demonstrate that a diet based exclusively on salads and vegetables guarantees a long and happy life. In *Elysium Britannicum* he links vegetarianism to antiquity: «*Sine arte Mensam. a Sallet and to Bed [...]. So frugally did our Fore-fathers live, till the Horti urbani instituted by Epicurus*» (Ingram 2001, p. 30).

19 «In the morning we went hunting and hawking [...]; I went sometimes abroad on horseback with the ladies to take the air, and now and then to hunting. [...] We hunted in the Park and killed a very fat buck. [...] I went a hawking» (October 16, 1671; August 29, 1677; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, pp. 67, 115).

20 Translated into English by Arthur Golding in 1580, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* soon become

Well't had been had Tereus made
 Thee as dumb as Philomel;
 There his Knife had done but well.
 (ll. 4-6)

In the first lines of the poem the speaker blames the swallow with the epithet «Foolish Prater» and remonstrates because the bird has awakened him with its song:

Foolish Prater, why do'st thou
 So early at my window do
 With thy tuneless serenade?
 (ll. 1-3)

If the source of inspiration is undoubtedly Anacreon's love poem *The Swallow*, with the above-quoted first three lines Cowley is explicitly evoking John Donne's love sonnet *The Sunne Rising*, an *aubade* lyric that attacks, almost blasphemously, the sun that has awaked and disturbed the speaker and his beloved, paradoxically represented as the real centre of the universe («This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphaere», l. 30):

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
 (ll. 1-3)

Albeit Cowley pretends that he wishes the bird's death, by evoking Donne's sonnet he is indirectly associating the swallow with the sun, as Lovelace does with his falcon, thus endowing the animal with a quasi-divine substance. Cowley's hyperbolic representation of birds and insects as demigods and as metaphors for the poet is to be connected with his love of classical poetry, with his scientific interests, with his involvement in the Royal Society and with the general growing respect and compassion on the 'brute creation'. Pepys and Evelyn, for instance, express in numerous occasions their horror of the popular fights among animals, «this wicked and barbarous sport» (August 17, 1667; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, p. 30): if Pepys considers the battle of cocks as «a sport [...] of Barbarity» in which poor creatures «fight till they drop down» (December 21, 1663; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 4, pp. 427-428), Evelyn defines «cock-fighting, dog fighting, bear and bull-baiting» as «butcherly sports, or rather bar-

an enormous source of inspiration for literary works in England: Shakespeare, for instance, reinterprets the myth of Philomel and Tereus in *Titus Andronicus*.

barous cruelties» (June 16, 1670; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, p. 49). The growing respect, or pity, for animals fosters a fervent dispute in England that will lead the parliament to approve, in the second half of the seventeenth century, a series of Acts for the protection of wild birds. In 1833, moreover, the areas for the «barbarous cruelties» denounced by Pepys and Evelyn will become illegal in London and in 1849 cock fighting will be forbidden, even though these «butcherly sports» will survive clandestinely (Thomas 1983 and [1983] 1984; De Levie 1947; Regan 1983; Singer 1990; Sorabji [1993] 2001; Franklin 2005). Thanks to his theory of monads, Leibniz is the first thinker who breaks the barriers between the animal and the human world, thus opening the path for a passionate and long-lasting debate on the dignity of animals and on the relationship between human and animal psychology. Whereas for Descartes even the most evolved animals function as machines and are devoid of intellectual and rational faculties, and of anything in common with men,²¹ for Montaigne they are endowed with intellect and reason and for Gassendi they have a soul: embracing the latter thesis, Milton will comfort Adam declaring that animals «also know, | And reason not contemptibly» (*Paradise Lost*, 8.373-374; Bush [1966] 1988). Pepys expresses his sincere interest in animals also when he comments on the ferocious cruelty inflicted on a dog:

vexed in going in to see a son of Sir Heneage Finche's beating of a poor little dog to death, letting it lie in so much pain that made me mad to see it; till by and by, the servants of the house hiding of their young maister, one of them came with a thong and killed the dog outright presently. (May 18, 1668; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 9, p. 203)

The new approach to the natural world, however, is not prompted only by compassion and a democratic and sensitive spirit but also, and above all, by the new scientific interest and empirical approach. Whereas Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Levellers, suggests that every parish should deliver a weekly lecture on natural sciences instead of the Sunday sermon, Cowley formulates and idealises an educative system that includes agriculture, gardening and zoology: juxtaposing the «genuine taste» of the countryside to the sophistications of the city and arguing that «the three first Men in the World, were a Gardner, a Ploughman and a Grazier», in the essay *Of Agriculture* he maintains that any father should «provide a Tutor for his Son to instruct him betimes in the nature and Improvements of that Land which he intended to leave him» and wishes that «one College in each University were erected, and appropriated to this Study, as

21 In a letter to the marquis of Newcastle (November 23, 1646) Descartes expounds his renowned theory of animals as clocks and expresses his intention to complete an essay on animals he has been working on for fifteen years (Belgioioso 2009, p. 2,353).

well as there are to Medicine, and the Civil Law». The College should have «four Professors constituted [...] to teach [...] First, *Aration*, and all things related to it. Secondly, *Pasturage*. Thirdly, *Gardens, Orchards, Vineyards* and *Woods*. Fourthly, All parts of *Rural Oeconomy*, which would contain the Government of *Bees, Swine, Poultry, Decoys, Ponds, &c.*» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 321). Cowley knows much about animals, both real and mythical: he is familiar not only with Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Ulisse Aldrovandi's zoological studies, Edward Topsell's *History of Four-Footed Beasts* and Thomas Moffet's *Theatre of Insects*, but also with the more scientifically treated information in Francis Willughby's *Ornithology* and Johannes Goedaert's *Metamorphoses Naturelles, ou, Histoire des insectes* (Hinman 1960, p. 298). For this reason, in his Baconian essay *A Proposition for the Advancement of Learning* he stresses the importance of zoology in a university course: he explains how a proper *Colledge* should be organised and suggests that «of the twenty Professors four be always travelling beyond Seas» in order to send «Books, Simples, Animals, Stones, Metals, Minerals, &c, [...] to the Colledge» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 288).

The six poems that illustrate the essay *On Agriculture* are, placed according to the following disposition, a translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (*O fortunati nimium*, Lib. II); a translation of Horace's *Beatus ille*; *The Country Mouse* (a paraphrase upon Horace's Book 2, Satire 6); the already mentioned Horatian Epistle (*A Paraphrase upon the 10^o Epistle of the first Book of Horace. Horace to Fuscus Aristius*); *The Country Life*, and *The Garden*, a lyric dedicated to John Evelyn. The poem *The Country Mouse* is significantly placed after the English version of *Beatus ille* and before the above-quoted Horatian Epistle, a debate between the pleasures of the city and those of the country. Just after the Horatian Epistle is placed *The Country Life*, Cowley's own translation into English of the opening verses of *Florum*, the fourth Book of his *Plantarum* (a poetical work in six Books, entirely in Latin, devoted to the vegetal world):²² with these verses Cowley elaborates a story written by Valerius Maximus about Gyges, a «rich King, wicked and great», and Aglaüs, a countryman that «lived obscurely then without a Name» (ll. 27, 25), thus presenting again the classical *querelle* between city and country.

The Country Mouse, the animal adaptation of the classical city/country dispute, can be aligned with the well-established seventeenth-century tradition of poetical debates, such as Marvell's *A Dialogue, between The Resolved Soul, and Created Pleasure* and *A Dialogue between the Soul and Body*, Crashaw's *Musics Duel*, Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, besides

22 The whole title of the work, published in 1668, is *Poemata Latina. In quibus Continentur Sex Libri Plantarum, Viz. Duo Herbarum. Florum. Sylvarum. Et Unus Miscellaneorum*. The author's name is Latinized in *Abrahami Couleij Angli*.

his first sonnet in English, *O, Nightingale*, and Cowley's and Crashaw's *On Hope*,²³ for instance. By means of two mice, a «good substantial, frugal and grave» country mouse and a «well-coated, sleek, and gay» city mouse (ll. 4, 5, 7), in the lyric *The Country Mouse* Cowley praises the authentic and modest habits of rural life by opposing them to the luxurious pleasures of the city, a theme he expounds in numerous poems and essays. Besides the already quoted lyrics, it is worth mentioning *The Wish* and the essay *Of My Self*: if in *The Wish*, a poem included in *The Mistress* that evokes, and most probably anticipates, Marvell's *The Garden*, Cowley introduces retirement into an amatory context, in the essay *Of My Self* he seems to parallel king Charles II and himself to Maecenas and Horace. As Maecenas presented Horace with the Sabine farm, the poet's lifelong refuge and comfort, so Cowley wishes the king could grant him a country estate, a theme that sheds light on *The Country Mouse*: «And I never then propos'd to my self any other *Advancement* from his Majesty's happy Restoration, but the getting into some moderately convenient Retreat in the Country» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 340).

Albeit, among Cowley's paraphrases, *The Country Mouse* is a rare example of faithfulness to the original text, it introduces a substantial difference that can be obliquely linked to the poet's longing for a country retreat granted him by the king:²⁴ whereas in Horace's, Aesop's and Phaedrus's stories the two mice are old friends, in the English version they get to know each other by chance since the «Mouse of high degree [...] lost his way, | Wantonly walking forth to take the Air» (ll. 8-9). This stress on the mice's absence of friendship and ties seems to provide an answer to one of the most debated questions regarding the central decades of the seventeenth century in England: does the countryside represent a refuge for royalists or for republicans? The topic is still clouded by ambiguities: according to Maren-Sofie Røstvig, the writings that praise a peaceful rural retreat are a confession of loyalty to the crown. The scholar opposes contemplation to action, *otium* to *negotium*, and the classical figure of the 'happy man' in his «gentle cool retreat»²⁵ to the Puritan concept of the Christian pilgrim as a soldier, as a *miles Christi*:²⁶ she claims that the peace-

23 The subtitle of the debate is *By way of Question and Answer; betweene A. Cowley, and R. Crashaw*. Cowley's part appears separately, with minor differences, the following year in *The Mistress* (1647).

24 As reported by Johnson, Cowley «soon obtained, by the interest of the Earl of St. Alban's and the Duke of Buckingham, such a lease of the Queen's lands as afforded him an ample income» (Hind 1961, p. 9).

25 Cowley's lyric *The Garden* opens with the exclamation «Happy art Thou» and then invokes rustic life - «O blessed shades! O gentle cool retreat» -, almost paraphrasing Horace's *beatus ille* and Virgil's «O fortunatus nimium | [...] agricolas» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2).

26 «Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the

ful pleasures of gardens, fields and woods are unfit for the perfect Puritan, always poised between earthly life and the afterlife in his actively serving God and in his perpetual fight against Satan. The royalists, conversely, retired and often exiled in their country estates after the political defeat, have to make a virtue of necessity (Røstvig 1962, pp. 48, 121). Whereas, corroborating Røstvig's thesis, John Dixon Hunt argues that the lively interest in gardening in Jacobean and Caroline England is unequivocally linked to the crown and that this is the reason why the supporters of Parliament destroy the most notable examples of gardens,²⁷ Margarita Stocker claims that the *fuga in villa* is prompted by the Puritan spirit of rural simplicity and genuineness as opposed to the wicked city, 'England's Babylon'. It is worth noticing that the monarchists tend to exaggerate the depredations and plunders in the royal estates made in the Fifties, during Cromwell's Protectorate, and that, after the Restoration, deforestation is frequently equated to republican politics.

The debate on the symbolical and political meaning of country retirement is paralleled by a paradox inherent in the rural world, a contradiction between an idealised vision of bucolic life and its actual substance. In the essay *The Dangers of an Honest Man in much Company* Cowley analyses his own experience at Chertsey, Surrey, and confesses his disappointment before the prosaic reality he found instead of the classical Arcadia he expected:

I thought, when I went first to dwell in the Country, that without doubt I should have met there with the Simplicity of the Old Poetical Golden Age: I thought to have found no Inhabitants there, but such as the Shepherds of Sir *Phil. Sidney* in *Arcadia*. [...]. But to confess the Truth, I perceiv'd quickly, by infallible Demonstrations, that I was still in old *England*, and not in *Arcadia*. (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 336)

Samuel Johnson testifies to the poet's discontent and to the paradoxical substance of the country when he reports that the retreat at Chertsey is in the beginning utterly disastrous for Cowley: his fields are devastated by the neighbours' cattle, he suffers from rheumatism and is vexed by the villagers to such an extent that even plans to hang himself (Hind 1961, p. 9).

Within this maze of ambiguities and paradoxes one wonders whether the country mouse that dwells «at the large foot of a fair hollow tree» (l. 1) should be read as a royalist or as a republican. The final lines of the poem express the mouse's homesickness after his tasting the «generous Lux'ury

devil». Ephesians 6:11 (Carroll, Prickett 1997).

27 «So much gardening in Jacobean and Caroline England was royalist or bore unmistakably royalist implications that it cannot be a matter of surprise that the Parliamentarians destroyed some particularly fine example of it» (Hunt 1986, p. 143).

of the Court» and his desire to be «cover'd again» with the protective «Rocks and Mountains» and to enjoy the caves and woods of his beloved and peaceful countryside:

Our trembling Peasant wishes now in vain,
 That Rocks and Mountains cover'd him again. [...] [said he] Give me again, ye Gods, my Cave, and wood;
 With peace, let Tares and Acorns be my Food.
 (*The Country Mouse*, ll. 90-91, 94-95)

The mention of cave and wood highlights the gloomy, shady, protective essence that rural places convey according to Cowley. In *The Country Life*, the poem that follows and transforms in human terms *The Country Mouse*, the peasant Aglaüs is forced to leave his «happier Kingdom» (l. 22) in order to reach the court of king Gyges: «Unwillingly, and slow, and discontent, | From his lov'd Cottage, to a Throne he went» (ll. 17-18). The «happier Kingdom» abandoned by the «rev'rend Gard'ner» is depicted as «an obscure Arcadian vale» since, as the speaker explains, «Th' Arcadian Life has always shady been» (ll. 16, 44-45): most similarly, in the long poem *Sylva*, i.e. the last Book of *Plantarum*, the poet exhorts his Muse to leave the «Flow'ry Gardens in their fragrant Spring» in order to «trace the rougher Paths of obscure Woods, | All gloom aloft, beneath o'rgrown with Shrubs» (ll. 2, 3-4). Close to the country mouse, who longs for his dark caves and shady woods, the speaker of *Sylva* is in search of «the inmost Grottos of the Shades» and «lone Recesses» (ll. 8, 9). Whereas *Sylva*, the sixth Book of *Plantarum*, is partially translated into English by Aphra Behn, *The Country Life*, as already said, is Cowley's own translation of the opening verses of *Florum*, the fourth Book of his poetical study of plants – a Book partially translated into English by Nahum Tate.

Considering that in *Sylva* Cowley connects the dark recesses of the Arcadian world with king Charles II, the country mouse and his nostalgia for shady caves and woods and for his «fair hollow tree» can be read as an oblique confession of royalism: the city mouse that despises the frugal peasant and claims scornfully «Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den» (l. 36) can be interpreted, conversely, as a metaphor for the republicans. Few lines below his praise of shady groves and dark recesses, in *Sylva* Cowley overtly alludes to the battle of Worcester, won by Cromwell's troops in 1651, and, more specifically, to king Charles's concealment in the «sheltering Branches» of an oak at Boscobel, Shropshire, in order to escape the Roundheads:

Here Deities, of old, have made Abode,
 And once secur'd great CHARLES, our earthly God.
 The Royal Youth, born to out-brave his Fate,
 Within a neighbouring Oak maintan'd his State:

The faithful Boughs in kind Allegiance spread
 Their sheltering Branches round his awful Head,
 Twin'd their rough Arms, and thicken'd all the Shade.
 (ll. 20-26)

In the final part of *Sylva*, a section entirely devoted to oaks, Cowley narates in detail the king's adventurous escape, insisting precisely on the dark and shady quality of the 'sacred wood' of Boscobel:²⁸

A Grove appears, which *Boscobel* they name,
 Not known to Maps; a Grove of scanty Fame,
 Scarce any human thing does there intrude,
 But it enjoys itself in its own Solitude.
 And henceforth no celebrated Shade,
 Of all the *British* Groves shall be more glorious made.
 Near this obscure and destin'd happy Wood,
 A sacred House of lucky omen stood.
 (ll. 1333-1340)

Cowley hopes in the person and quasi-divine function of the king, as his suppressed poem *The Civil War*, started in summer 1643 and abandoned after October of the same year, testifies to. In a peculiarly witty couplet, Cowley presents Charles II as an oxymoron, as a paradox, as «the locus of reconciliation, the place where contraries are resolved in a higher unity» (Trotter 1979, p. 12): «In his great looks what cheerfull anger shone! | Sad warre and joyfull Triumph mixt in One!» (I, 255-256). With these lines Cowley anticipates the daring paradoxes of Richard Crashaw and, in particular, his representation of the Magdalen in the lyric *The Weeper*, first published in 1646 and later revised:

O wit of love that thus could place,
 Fountaine and Garden in one face!
 O sweet contest of woes
 With loves, of tears with smiles disputing.
 (*The Weeper*, ll. 89-92)

28 Samuel Pepys records in his diary a colloquy with king Charles II and the latter's bitter remembrance of his refuge in «th' eternal OAK» (*Sylva*, l. 33), a vegetal shelter that let him sail from Brighton to France: «he fell into discourse of his escape from Worcester, where it made me ready to weep to hear the stories that he told of his difficulties that he passed through» (May 23, 1660; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol 5, p. 45).

By mentioning Charles's «eternal OAK»,²⁹ Cowley implicitly praises also the king's sincere interest in woods, and in nature more in general, to the extent that in the end of *Sylva* he expresses his hope in the king and in the forests he will replant as symbols able to guarantee the *pax Britannica* and the future of England. In the last two books of *Plantarum* the poet contrasts man's sterility and destructiveness with the possibilities of the vegetal world:

Thus long-neglected Gardens entertain
 Their banish'd Master, when return'd again.
 All over-run with Weeds he finds, but soon
 Luxuriant Branches carefully will prune.
 The weaken'd Arms of the sick Vine he'll raise,
 And with kind Bands sustain the loosen's Sprays.
 (*Sylva*, ll. 1553-1558)

Cowley argues that with Charles II «the Golden Age seems now again restor'd» (l. 1515)³⁰ and believes that vegetation is able to guarantee posterity and, implicitly, immortality:

Nor are the Woods, nor Rural Groves disdain'd;
 [...] As Colonies of Trees thou dost replace
 I' th' empty Realms of our arboreal Race;
 Nay, dost our Reign extend to future Days;
 And blest Posterity, supinely laid,
 Shall feast and revel underneath thy Shade.
 (*Sylva*, ll. 1566, 1569-1573)

Close to Cowley, Thomas Browne hopes that humanity can procreate and become eternal as trees do, in a pure and uncontaminated way, «without conjunction»: «I would be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this triviall and vulgar way of coition» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 83). Moses Cook, a gardener praised by Evelyn, compares marriage and sexual reproduction to the sowing of the earth, connects arboriculture with the birth of children and associates the conservation of the dynasty, the «posterity of the gentleman», with the growth and multiplication of the trees in his estate:

29 «Th' eternal OAK, now consecrate to thee, | No more thy Refuge, but thy Throne shall be»: *Sylva*, ll. 33-34.

30 Aphra Behn, the translator of *Sylva*, as already said, is the author of a poem entitled *The Golden Age*.

For Nature, if once set in Motion, will rather cease to be, than alter its course; for Nature hates violence, neither can the seed receive this precious sperm without these two, Father and Mother; and these two must have a suitable Agreement between them.³¹

Further highlighting the links among trees, procreation, posterity, immortality and resurrection, Browne declares that «Generations passe while some trees stand, and old Families last not three Oaks» and that even a tree that seems to be dead «will restore it self from the root, and its dry and exuccous leaves resume their verdure again» (Keynes [1658; 1928] 1963a, pp. 166, 159). Cowley's «eternal oak» alludes to Charles's worship of nature, to the immortalising power and sacredness of trees and, at the same time, hints at the theme of monarchy from a natural perspective. The vegetal world, hierarchically organized according to arboreal nobility, or to a rigorous green 'great chain of being', is dominated by the «Royal Oak», as evidenced by Evelyn - «the large spreading of oak above all that species» (Evelyn [1664] 1972, p. 114) - , and Lovelace:

This is the palace of the wood
 And court o' th' Royal Oak, where stood
 The whole nobility, the Pine,
 Straight Ash, tall Fir, and wanton Vine;
 The proper Cedar, and the rest;
 [...] Floored with green-velvet Camomile.
 (*Aramantha. A Pastoral*, ll. 149-153, 156)

Cowley devotes the final and longest section of *Sylva* to the *Quercus* and explicitly associates it to majesty and nobility - as already said, in this last part of *Plantarum* the poet also narrates Charles's adventurous refuge in the oak of Boscobel. In the lyric that illustrates the essay *Of Greatness* the poet embraces the idea of a vegetal ladder, albeit momentarily nullified by the devastating power of the thunder: «The humblest Bush and proudest Oak, | Are but of equal Proof against the Thunder-stroke» (ll. 13-14). The reference to thunder is not a chance since the oak, the tree most frequently struck by lightning, is traditionally considered as the original store of the fire extracted in order to nourish the sun and, for this reason, worshipped in pagan cultures and religions (Frazer 1991 and Schama 1995). Most wittily, Cowley connects the oak with the sun and sacred fire, thus highlighting its royal and divine essence, as he does in *Sylva*:

31 Moses Cook, *The Manner of Raising, Ordering, and Improving Forests and Fruit Trees*, London, 1679, 2nd ed. p. 35. Quoted by Markley 1999, p. 93.

Disdain not in this leafie Court to dwell,
 Who its lov'd Monarch did secure so well.
 Th' eternal OAK, now consecrate to thee,
 No more thy Refuge, but thy Throne shall be.
 (*Sylva*, ll. 31-34)

The poet expresses reverence, almost adoration, for trees, often perceived in human terms. In the essay *Of My Self* he meditates upon his «oft turning others' leaves», as Sidney would say (Philip Sidney, sonnet 1, l. 7; all quotations are from Duncan-Jones [1989] 2002), i.e. his lifelong and «immoderate Love» of the classic poets, and, with a witty vegetal simile, identifies himself with a tree on whose bark are «stamp'd first, or rather engrav'd» the names of his beloved masters: «The Poets [...] were like Letters cut in the Bark of a young Tree, which with the Tree still grow proportionably» (Grosart [1881] 1967, 2, p. 340). In his elegy for the death of Cowley, John Denham dwells precisely on the poet's ability to know and emulate the ancients without being «Pindar's Ape»,³² thus alluding both to Cowley's classical culture and to the lively debate on creation/imitation:

To him no Author was unknown,
 Yet what he wrote was all his own.
 [...] He did not Steal, but Emulate,
 And when he would like them appear
 Their Garb, but not their Cloaths, did wear.
 (*On Mr. ABRAHAM COWLEY. His Death and Burial amongst the Ancient Poets*», ll. 28-29, 35-37; qtd. by Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1, p. cxxi)

Cowley frequently associates himself with plants. In the essay *Of My Self* he declares that «the natural Affections of my Soul gave me a secret Bent of Aversion for them [Glories, Business], as some Plants are said to turn away from others» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 339) and even identifies himself with a modest hyssop rooted up by the civil war, «that violent publick Storm»:

With these Affections of Mind, and my Heart wholly set upon Letters,
 I went to the University; but was soon torn from thence by that violent
 publick Storm which would suffer nothing to Stand where it did, but
 rooted up every Plant, even from the Princely Cedars to me the Hyssop.
 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 340)

32 «Let dainty wits cry on the sisters nine, | That bravely masked, their fancies may be told: | Or Pindar's Apes, flaunt they in phrases fine, | Enamm'ling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold». Philip Sidney, sonnet 3, ll. 1-4.

By depicting himself as a tree 'wounded', but not injured, by the names of his adored ancient poets, Cowley reinterprets the habit of carving the bark of trees with the name of the beloved, a classical literary *topos*. Ariosto's Angelica, for instance, engraves the name of Medoro in all the trees she can find:

Fra piacer tanti, ovunque un arbor dritto
 Vedesse ombrare o fonte o rivo puro,
 V'avea spillo o coltel subito fitto;
 [...] Angelica e Medoro, in varî modi
 Legati insieme di diversi nodi.
 (*Orlando furioso*, 19.36.1-3, 7-8; in Caretti 2005)

Erminia, in love with Tancredi, does the same:

Sovente, allor che sugli estivi ardori
 giacean le pecorelle a l'ombra assise,
 ne la scorza de' faggi e degli allori
 segnò l'amato nome in mille guise.
 (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 7.19.1-4; in Chiappelli 1982)

In his enraptured and devoted celebration of nature, Marvell wishes he could be dissolved in the vegetal world, rejects erotic love and, overcoming tradition, goes so far as to sternly criticise the cruel habit of carving trees with the beloved's name, a profanation of the «Genius of Trees»:

Fond Lovers, cruel as their Flame,
 Cut in these Trees their Mistress name.
 Little, Alas, they know, or heed,
 How far these Beauties Hers exceed!
 Fair Trees! Where s'ere your barks I wound,
 No Name shall but your own be found.
 (*The Garden*, ll. 19-24)

With *The Tree*, included in the early collection *The Mistress*, Cowley anticipates Marvell's *Garden*. By presenting anthropomorphic and almost prophetic trees, the speaker of the lyric, on a first reading identifiable with Marvell's «fond Lovers», expresses his grief, and remorse, at seeing that the tree he carved with his beloved's name has withered and, shortly, died:

I Chose the flouri'shing'st Tree in all the Parke,
 With freshest Boughs, and Fairest head;
 I cut my Love into his gentle Barke,
 And in three days, behold, 'tis dead;

My very written flames so vi'olent be
 They've burnt and wither'd up the Tree.
 [...] Pardon, yee Birds and Nymphes who lov'd this Shade;
 And pardon mee, thou gentle Tree;
 I thought her name would thee have happy made,
 And blessed Omens hop'd from Thee;
 Notes of my Love, thrive there (said I) and grow;
 And with yee let my Love doe so.
 (*The Tree*, stanzas i, iv)

Trees are to be respected and revered when alive since they suffer as human beings do. If in the lyric included in the essay *Of Solitude* Cowley disapproves of those artists that «can the fair and living Trees neglect» and «Yet the dead Timber prize» (ll. 11, 12), in *Pomona*, Book 5 of *Plantarum*, he observes the similarities between plants and the human body in order to stress the relationships between man, the vegetal world and God. Most possibly inspired by Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), the poet individuates common signs in trees and the human body as, for instance, in the walnut and the human head:

[...] haud equidem reor absque Deorum
 Consilio hæc Capitis nux est sortita figuram.
 (*Juglans*, in *Plantarum*, Liber Quintus. Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 205)³³

In *Of Greatness*, one of his last essays, the poet interprets and presents trees as a witty, and paradoxical, metaphor for humanity. Claiming that their branches aspire to heaven whereas their roots tend to hell, Cowley highlights the 'amphibious' essence of trees:

As far as up tow'rds Heav'n the Branches grow,
 So far the Root sinks down to Hell below.³⁴
 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 331)

Trees, as much as larks, grasshoppers and men, have their body fed by earthly nutrition, whereas their spiritual dimension is nourished by heaven above, close to Browne's «great and true *Amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live [...] in divided and distinguished worlds [...] betweene a corporall and spirituall essence» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 44).

³³ These lines are not available in English since Nahum Tate translates only a small part of *Pomona*, the fifth Book of *Plantarum*.

³⁴ Cowley quotes also the original version of the two verses, a slight deformation of Virgil's *Aeneid*: «Sed quantum vertice ad auras | Ætherias, tantum radice ad Tartara tendit» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 331).

Not only animals, but also plants, thus, function as metaphors for the poet, and for humanity. In the same way, Cowley associates wit, his most peculiar feature, to animals, as already noticed,³⁵ and to plants as well: in *The Preface of the Author* to the folio volume published in 1656, the poet declares that he «should take the boldness to prune and lop away», to «replant» and «cut off» some books and asks «if *Wit* be such a *Plant*, that it scarce receives heat enough to preserve it alive even in the *Summer* of our cold *Clymate*, how can it choose but wither in a long and sharp *Winter*?» (Waller 1905, pp. 5, 7).

Curiously, or, better, paradoxically enough, the lover of paradox that embodies paradox, the natural philosopher that in *Sylva* describes himself as *Plantarum vates* (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 219),³⁶ the poet that defends, celebrates and worships the natural world in its wholeness, to such an extent that even identifies humanity, and wit, with animals and plants, will be defined by Samuel Johnson precisely as «unnatural»: «we sometimes esteem [Cowley] as learned, and sometimes despise as trifling, always admire as ingenious, and always condemn as unnatural» (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 28).

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35 Cfr. Cowley's already quoted lines: «In a true piece of Wit all things must be, | Yet all things there agree. | As in the Ark, joynd without force or strife, | All Creatures dwelt: all Creatures that had Life». *Of Wit*, ll. 57-60.

36 In her English version of the sixth Book of *Plantarum*, Aphra Behn translates *Plantarum vates* as «Priest of Plants»: l. 59 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol 2).

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