The Fine Art of Lying in Early Modern English Drama

Selected Papers
from the IASEMS Graduate Conference
"The Fine Art of Lying: Disguise, Dissimulation, and Counterfeiting
in Early Modern Culture"

The British Institute of Florence
Florence, 7 April 2017

Edited by
Angelica Vedelago and Kent Cartwright

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Introduction

Kent Cartwright

On April 7, 2017, the Graduate Student Conference of the Italian Association of Shakespearean and Early Modern Studies (IASEMS) convened at the British Institute in Florence, Italy on the topic of "The Fine Art of Lying: Disguise, Dissimulation, and Counterfeiting in Early Modern Culture". The three essays published here arise from that conference and the call for papers for the proceedings.

What topic could be more timely? While the conference applied the problems of lying, disguise, dissimulation, and counterfeiting to the early modern era, those terms might have been brought to bear as easily on our own. In my own country, the United States, the highest public official in the land has taken to lying brazenly, and his lies have been recycled by his supporters. On the continent, it has been argued that the winning case for the Brexit campaign in England of 2016 was built on a fabric of lies. Charges of lying to the public haunt recent political contests in Italy as well as political controversies in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere. Certain leaders of great nations seem to have lied about their involvement in acts of subversion and violence in their own countries and elsewhere. Some governments even deny parts of their country's history. Although lying politicians are hardly new, we are perhaps witnessing public lying at a level higher than anything in recent memory. If lying and dishonesty become normalized in the public sphere, we can only think with alarm about the effects on local communities and on the more intimate spheres of friends and family. Or could the influence be working in the opposite direction? Has casualness about honesty in the commercial or social world lent tacit approval to lying in the public realm?

What we need right now is rigorous attention to the cultural problem of lying, to the various forms that dishonesty takes, to the difficulty of discerning the truth, and to the ethical and cultural issues surrounding dissimulation and honesty. In such a task, it helps to look for historical and theoretical insight. As the IASEMS conference call for papers points out, the questions "of what a lie is and whether it is wrong to lie" have a lively and provocative cultural history. The conference description identifies an "absolutist position," held by Saint Augustine and Emmanuel Kant, that treats lying as always morally wrong, in contrast to a "utilitarian perspective" shared by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and John Langshaw Austin, that sees lying as sometimes acceptable. It adds that mendacity brings with it a further set of issues, including ones of faith, trust, and belief.

The emergence of a sustained theoretical conversation about lying and dissimulation happened in Europe during the Renaissance. As Jon R. Snyder states, "[t]he sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been called 'the age of dissimulation' in Europe" (Snyder 2009: 5), wherein dissimulation was practiced, analysed, and represented. Accordingly, the period saw defences of political lying by Niccolò Machiavelli and Francis Bacon, along with defences of an aesthetic dissimulation by Baldassarre Castiglione and a prudent version by Torquato Accetto, while Michel de Montaigne, though disdaining social deception, explored in his *Essays* the intractable difficulty of being honest with oneself.

It is striking how much of the English literature of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can be described in terms of an overarching fascination with lying, dissimulating, counterfeiting, and disguising. The great inaugural poet of the Tudor period, Sir Thomas Wyatt, was obsessed with dishonesty and betrayal in love, and his importing of the Petrarchan sonnet form to England provided him a vehicle for giving vent to the frustrations and emotions he felt from a duplicitous court world. Indeed, in exploring duplicity, Wyatt used the sonnet to develop a tone that was itself ironic and illusively enigmatical, so that feelings in his poetry seem both raw and disguised. At the opposite end of the century, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), the seminal Elizabethan epic, is awash with protagonists deceived by liars, by impostors, by automatons, by occult forces, and, worst, by themselves. The problem of deception here has a metaphysical and ontological dimension beyond that of, for example, sir Thomas Malory's medieval *Morte d'Arthur*. Similarly, Elizabethan urban popular prose, which arose during the sixteenth century, typically turns on the theme of deception, often in new permutations aimed at addressing London's emerging city culture. A major figure, of course, is Robert Greene, who, writing in the 1580s, launched the vogue of "cony-catching pamphlets", those prose works that presumed to detail the cons and sharp practices of street rogues bent on separating dupes from their money. (Other such pamphlets, related to games, are mentioned in the essay by Louise Fang.) Perhaps the era's most memorable urban prose work is Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveler* (1594), the bildungsroman and "road novel" that follows Jack Wilton's peregrinations across the major cities of Europe, cities saturated with hypocrisy and cruel betrayal.

The drama of the period, too, traces a long trajectory through the precincts of dissimulation (as the essays here by Florence Krésine and Angelica Vedelago suggest). Of course, the morality play genre, a medieval form refashioned variously through the sixteenth-century, typically contains Vice characters who are the deceptive counterfeits and exact opposites of the Virtue characters. In the sixteenth century, the form was adapted from religious to political purposes, as the rise of the state brought attendant problems of intrigue and duplicity. In a related form, one of the first memorable "debate" plays of the early sixteenth century was Thomas Heywood's *The Four PP* (c. 1520s), which staged a lying contest whose winner may have been meaning actually to tell the truth. Later, at the later turn of the century, Ben Jonson's Italianate comedies typically involve hypocrites and tricksters, as in *Volpone* (1605) and *The Alchemist* (1610). Jonson was influenced by the model of classical comedy in its highly developed Italian form. Italian comedy usually featured an elaborate ruse, or *beffa*, often with the goal of a young man's bringing about an illicit love affair at the expense of the older generation. To some degree, Shakespeare's comedies were also influenced by the Italian model, as in the deceptions played by Lucentio and Tranio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (a play taken up by Louise Fang), but with less of the cynicism that accompanied either the continental examples or the works of Jonson. Perhaps the amazing flowering of comedy in Italy in the sixteenth century and its emergence in England earlier than tragedy had something to do with the fitness of the genre for the "age of dissimulation".

Renaissance writers and thinkers contributed a new understanding of the range and complexity of dissimulation, disguise, and counterfeiting – and also of honesty. Snyder identifies a number of "discursive fields" in which the problem of dissimulation played out, including: "(i) civility or good manners, (ii) the court, (iii) the prince and reason-of-state politics, (iv) moral philosophy, and (v) religious dissent" (Snyder 2009: 19). Although Snyder does not pursue that last discursive field, religion was an especially fraught area in sixteenth-century England, which suffered three major confessional changes in less than a century and which settled on a Protestantism that put intense scrutiny on the authenticity of one's relationship with God. Thus, one could potentially be a dissimulator not only as a religious dissenter but also as an "assenter" who fails to recognize his or her own venality.[1] Likewise, numerous areas of human psychology and activity became open to questions about deception, such as conscience (as in Claudius's divided conscience in *Hamlet*); urban street encounters (as in Greene's pamphlets); financial currency (counterfeit coins are often mentioned in Shakespeare); clothing (about which laws attempted to regulate dress so as to avoid false presumptions of class); even theatre itself (which was accused by Puritans such as Stephen Gosson of constituting a form of lying). While the dangers of lying seem to multiply, the problem of knowing the truth also becomes exacerbated, reflecting the shifts in the foundations of knowledge that accompany a time of religious change. Like Montaigne and Hamlet, not only do we have much ado to know ourselves but also, as John Donne phrased it, the "new philosophy [i.e. science] calls everything in doubt" (Donne 1978: 27, l. 205), and the age's fondness for irony, as well as for an expanding number of other tropes and figures, makes sorting out the bare and literal truth a sometimes intractable problem (a topic addressed by Angelica Vedelago). It is difficult always to know, for example, what Erasmus's quintessentially ironic Folly exactly means, to distinguish for sure her true values from her satirical ones.

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[1] On the problem of interiority, readers might consult Maus 1995.

Besides the seeming impossibility of avoiding deception, including self-deception, the problem of knowledge entails a further puzzle, and that is the human propensity to embrace falsehoods. Humans seem to be hard-wired to be credulous. That characteristic is explained by some psychologists as, at least in part, an aspect of group behaviour, which plays an important role in human evolution: after all, trusting the expertise of individuals advances the collective goals of the social unit. But why, in the Renaissance and now, do people believe highly improbable assertions, even ones that can be easily disproven? The Renaissance scholar Katherine Eggert has recently explored a phenomenon called "disknowledge", which arises when someone knows that an assertion is false but chooses nonetheless to believe that it is true (Eggert 2015).[2] Eggert argues that the long after-life of alchemy from the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century exemplifies willful disknowledge. Thus, the Renaissance problems of truth and knowledge point towards a very modern danger of individuals feeling licensed to believe whatever they want.

But are lying and deception always unethical? As we have seen above, the IASEMS program description distinguishes between an "absolutist position", held by Saint Augustine and Kant, that always condemns lying as immoral, and a "utilitarian perspective", represented by authors such as Bentham, Mill, and Austin, that admits lying on some occasions. For the Renaissance, one thinks of the sensational problem represented by Elizabethan Catholic martyr Father Henry Garnet (discussed by Florence Krésine), who wrote a pamphlet defending "equivocation", as in swearing allegiance outwardly to a Protestant queen but maintaining inwardly a mental reservation that preserves one's loyalty to the Pope;[3] the problem of "equivocation", of course, haunts *Macbeth*. Thus questions about dissimulation and disguise in the Renaissance came to entail vast additional questions about trust, belief, perception, ethics, and knowledge itself.

Drama offers a superb site for investigating "lying, disguise, dissimulation, and counterfeiting" in the early modern period, since theatre involves inherent forms of doubleness, advances by means of its juxtaposing of competing perspectives, stages plays and games within itself, and, as it develops during the sixteenth century, gives voice to dominant political points of view while yet making room for their undermining. The three essays here (presented alphabetically by author) show the variety of interests inspired by the theme of the IASEMS graduate student conference. In "Bluffing on the Early Modern Stage: 'Counterfeiting' and the Ludic Context in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*", Louise Fang points to lying as the activating condition of *Shrew*'s play-within-the-play, draws our attention to the disguised Tranio's use of a term for bluffing in the card game primero, and proceeds to argue that "the increasingly common practice of bluffing in card games […] echoed the debates on the legitimacy of theatre and the nature of dramatic illusion itself". In primero, players turn into actors staging their bluffs. Fang elucidates the central role of bluffing in primero and demonstrates the game's importance to *Shrew* (as in the recurrence of the word "vie"). *Shrew*'s Tranio justifies his gamester-like deception as assistance to his master; likewise, Petruchio bluffs and "vies" to win Katherina, and later wagers on her, too. The game metaphor that pervades the play (and the Induction) confers an aura of approval on its practitioners. Further, Tranio's initial bluff as the pretend suitor entails successively more and more deceptions, such that the world of play displaces the world of quotidian ethics. Fang thus argues that Shakespeare uses the metaphor of game and play to reshape the spectator's sense of the dramatic action and, further, to blunt Puritan attacks on theatre as a form of deception and dishonesty. The argument is fresh and credible, and this essay has the further value of illuminating how much Tranio's behaviour establishes a perspective for the audience to accept Petruchio's actions. Thus, readers who condemn Petruchio's treatment of Katherina will also recognize from this essay how easily a shift in the frame of reference can alter our ethical evaluation of deception.

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[2] Consider the opening lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138: "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her, though I know she lies" (Shakespeare 2010).

[3] See *The Treatise on Equivocation* (London, 1598).

In "The Age of Dissimulation: Degrees of Dissimulation and Dissemblers' Perspective in John Webster's Early Modern Tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*", Florence Krésine builds on the interest of Renaissance theorists (and, for Krésine, especially Bacon) in the difference between what they see as dissimulation, a form of secrecy and withholding, and simulation, the active projection of a false appearance with the intention of misrepresenting. According to Krésine, "John Webster's tragic vision relies heavily on a moral perspective that pertains to 'degrees of evil' and degrees of hiding". In *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Krésine finds differences in kinds of dissimulation, some more positive or neutral, others more pernicious. She also tracks how passive dissimulation can drift into active simulation. Krésine also sees Webster as practicing a kind of perspectival art wherein the moral standing of a character or meaning of an action depend on how they are seen, and she draws analogies to Holbein's famous anamorphic painting, *The Ambassadors*. She shows us that for Webster there were "degrees of untruth" (as distinguished from Father Garnet's more black and white scheme), degrees that imply different moral standing, yet that these gradations can be difficult to distinguish from each other, and, further, that the truth itself can depend uneasily on the angle from which it is viewed. Characters in these plays are left "still looking for a hidden truth in a disenchanted world".

Finally, Angelica Vedelago, in "A Matter of Speculation: Cleopatra's 'Infinite Variety' in Her Performance of Suicide", offers a fine close reading of Shakespeare's Cleopatra's subtle and complex tactics of dissimulation and simulation. Cleopatra stands as a character who is so consummately enigmatical that her true state of mind may be impossible fully to discern. She is the realization, in both the private and public spheres, of the challenge posed by 'the age of dissimulation'. Vedelago focuses "three aspects of Cleopatra's 'infinite variety' which best testify to her ambiguity: her rhetorical skills, her simulative and dissimulative techniques, and finally her preparations for suicide". Rather than undertaking yet one more interpretation of Cleopatra's state of mind, Vedelago instead analyses "how Shakespeare lures the audience into speculating" about it. The essay thus offers a deft parsing of Cleopatra's use of "irony, flattery, simulation and dissimulation – which all enhance the uncertainty surrounding her character". Vedelago gives us fresh insights, as in her discussion of Cleopatra's exchanges with Proculeius, and the essay culminates in a look at the multiple implications of the image of the serpent. Vedelago shows us how enthralling, for an audience, Cleopatra's self-theatricalizing can be, so that dissimulation and simulation become themselves an object of fascination. Likewise, she helps us implicitly to understand – in a way that reflects upon all the essays collected here – how useful the techniques of close reading are for probing a literature consumed with the epistemological and moral complexities of lying and truth.

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Bluffing on the Early Modern Stage: “Counterfeiting” and the Ludic Context in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*

Louise Fang

In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the embedded play involving Petruchio, Bianca, Katherine and Lucentio entirely stems from the Lord’s lie in the Induction scenes in which he tricks Christopher Sly, the local drunken tinker, into believing he is a nobleman about to see his first ever play. Therefore, although lying features prominently in many of Shakespeare’s plays, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, lying is not only a central theme, as is the case in most of the comedies, but it also plays a structural part from the very outset of the plot. In the course of this paper, we shall see how *The Taming of the Shrew* specifically addresses the problematic relation between lying and theatre itself. More specifically, I shall study the justifications for lying voiced by Tranio in Act II, scene 1. In that scene, the brazen servant seems to have no qualms about impersonating his master Lucentio and betting an unrealistic amount of money against the old Gremio in order to win Bianca’s hand in marriage for Lucentio. Left alone on stage after this betting scene, he declares:

> TRANIO. A vengeance on your crafty withered hide!
> Yet I have faced it with a card of ten.
> ’Tis in my head to do my master good.
> I see no reason but supposed Lucentio
> Must get a father, called supposed Vincentio. (*The Taming of the Shrew*, II, 1, 400-405)[4]

The phrase “to face it with a card of ten” comes from a very popular card game, primero, in which the card of ten was of low value: “facing” one’s rivals with a card of ten therefore amounted to bluffing. Although this phrase was lexicalised by the second half of the sixteenth century, the preceding extended metaphor of the card game in the exchange between the two rivals clearly brings to the fore its ludic sense. I would like to analyse how this representation of bluffing reflects the rest of the play as well as the debates on playing and acting that were taking place at the time. My argument is that the increasingly common practice of bluffing in card games – which predicated a precedent for the context-dependent acceptability of lying – echoed the debates on the legitimacy of theatre and the nature of dramatic illusion itself. Firstly, I shall study the metaphor of the card game and how it paves the way for the notion of bluffing. As we shall see, this scene between Gremio and Tranio is firmly anchored in the early modern debates on card games and the different forms of lying they entailed. I will then analyse to what extent Tranio’s first justification for lying – “to do [his] master good” – expresses an ethical justification and valorisation of lying or bluffing which we find in other passages of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Finally, I will see how the second justification for lying expressed by Tranio in his cue – “I see no reason but supposed Lucentio / Must get a father, called supposed Vincentio" – draws a contextual justification for lying that supersedes, or trumps, the ethical dilemma outlined in the first place.

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[4] All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare* edition (Shakespeare 2005)

Card games in The Taming of the Shrew *and early modern ludic debates*

The Taming of the Shrew contains several references to card games which hint at the ludic practices of the time as well as the debates sparked by such practices. These references testify to the increasing popularity of card games in early modern England. Games historians such as Jean-Michel Mehl, Olivier Calon, and Elisabeth Belmas for instance show that in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, card games replaced dice as the most popular European form of leisure (Calon 1996: 12; Belmas 2006: 108-109). They also explain how such games gradually acquired complex rules that were likely to involve more and more bluffing (Mehl 2010: 336). Although bluffing could be encountered in many different games and sports, it was more specifically linked to cards, which turned this form of lying into a widespread ludic practice in early modern Europe. In fact, the extended metaphor we find in the exchange between Gremio and Tranio in Act II, scene 1 clearly evokes primero. This was one of the most fashionable card games in sixteenth-century Europe according to an epigram by John Harington (Kilroy 2009: 247) and to Gilbert Walker, who referred to it as being a "new game" in 1555 (Walker 1555: sig. A7v). It seems that the game itself was sometimes deemed inappropriate, as one of the characters in this latter text voices his distrust of this new ludic fashion in the following way: "Primero now as it hath most vse in court, so is there most disceyt in it" (Walker 1555: sig. C8r). Shakespeare also mentions the game in *Henry VIII*, or *All is True*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.[5] The exact rules of the game are not known, but we can gather from different primary sources (Cotton 1725: 28-29; Kilroy 2009: 189; Florio 1591: 65-70) that primero was usually played by four to six players and is one of the ancestors of poker.

Players had to form certain sequences of cards on which they betted successively or "vied" and tried to entice other players to fold or to show their cards at an opportune moment. The two appearances of the term "vied" in Act II, scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew* might therefore also suggest an implicit comparison to a game of primero: Petruchio says Katherina: "vied so fast, protesting oath on oath, / That in a twink she won me to her love." (II, 1, 305-6); and in our passage Tranio asserts his victory in the following terms: "Gremio is out-vied" (II, 1, 381). In this scene, Tranio gains the upper hand thanks to bluffing, a practice that was considered acceptable in a game of primero. In John Florio's *Second Frutes*, for instance, a game of primero is described in which one of the players makes an understated bluff as he claims to have 40 points when he in fact reveals 54 points as the players show their hands (Florio 1591: 69). Although his opponent is particularly wary of cheating and repeatedly accuses him of swindling on other occasions, he does not see this particular form of lie as being contrary to the rules of their game. In the specific case of primero, lying about one's hand is perceived as a natural development of the game itself. Similarly, when Samuel Rid sets out to list the different methods of cheating that are typically to be seen during a game of primero, in *The Art of Iugling or Legerdemaine*, he mentions all those that involve shuffling the cards or sleights of hands but he does not allude to lying because it was considered to be part of the rules of the game (Rid 1612: sigs. D2r and D2v). The rules of primero were therefore known to facilitate and even encourage bluffing as a ludic strategy during the players' betting. The novelty of the game lies in the fact that winning depends on the ability of the players to lie about the cards they have and the way they relate to other players much more than on an actual strategy when playing the cards themselves. This evolution was noticed in other games of the same period and belonged to what games historian Jean-Michel Mehl hypothesised as being "[un] apprivoisement de la tricherie" or a gradual inclusion of deception in the rules of certain card games (Mehl 1981: 4). As such, it may also have paved the way for the games of the great "gambling era" of the eighteenth century.[6]

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[5] GARDINER I did, Sir Thomas, and left him at primero
With the Duke of Suffolk. (*Henry VIII* or *All is True*, V, 1, 7-8)
FALSTAFF I never prospered since I forswore myself at primero. Well, if my wind were but long enough, I would repent. (*The Merry Wives of Windsor,* IV, 5, 95-96)

However, bluffing did not go unnoticed by those who might be described as anti-ludic authors such as Thomas Wilcox, who expresses his outrage about the common lies associated with card games in *A Glasse for Gamesters* written in 1581:

> What neede I to speake of the common hypocrisie and deceipt used in these Games, whilest many makyng choise with whom thei plaie, to beleeve they have a good Game, thei dissemble and counterfeite, as though thei had an ill Game, thereby alluring the other to greater losses (Wilcox 1581: sig. C5v).

The preterition used to open this statement foregrounds what Thomas Wilcox considers to be the blatantly objectionable quality of this practice. In fact, such criticism is also perceptible in *All's Well That Ends Well* when Helen vouches for her good faith as she proposes to heal the king's illness: "I am not an impostor, that proclaim/Myself against the level of mine aim" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, II, 1, 155-6). The "imposture" she describes in these terms, which are borrowed from the field of archery, is none other than what we would identify as bluffing. This hostility to bluffing was strongly linked to the defiance towards the skill for counterfeiting – or, acting – that it involved, and which was often associated with games, as we can see from this other quote by the French Calvinist Lambert Daneau, whose text was translated into English in 1586:

> All such Playes, Games and Sportes therefore, wherein there is any maner representation, counterfayting, imitation, or pronunciation of filthinesse and vnchastitie, are, as lewd and lasciuious, to be vtterly condemned, and worthily to be banished. For they bee the flaming fierbrandes of all beastly lustes, and the shamelesse occasions of many outragious disorders (Daneau 1586: sigs. F2v and F3r).

Because players could hide their cards from their opponents, card games were more closely linked to the theme of dissimulation and theatricality than other types of pastimes such as dice. The dissimulative potential of card games had by then been stressed by Girolamo Cardano, who underlined the new ludic possibilities brought by the dissimulation inherent in any card game (DiFuria 2016: 34-35). We may note the same connection drawn between card games, lying, and theatricality in a painting by Pietro Paolini (*The Cardsharps*, c. 1625), in which the mask at the bottom right corner of the painting symbolises the different lies that were bound to occur during a game.[7] In fact, from a linguistic point of view, we may also note that the very term of "gamester" according to the *OED* could both refer to a gambler and to an "actor" or "a person who takes part in a theatrical performance" as is shown by two occurrences dating from the end of the sixteenth century.

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[6] Thomas Kavanagh tells the anecdote of the Marquis Victor Riqueti de Mirabeau who considered *Brelan* – a game that often required players to bluff – to be far more dangerous than *Pharaon* because it taught men how to lie and deceive (Kavanagh 2000: 505-521). Brelan became increasingly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries according to David Parlett (Parlett 1991: 95).

[7] The painting can be viewed in the catalogue of the exhibition "Les Bas-fonds du baroque: La Rome du vice et de la misère" (Cappelletti and Lemoine 2014: 177).

Thus, bluffing was the very epitome of what authors like Wilcox feared about card games and gambling in general. The debate sparked by card games and the different forms of lying they entailed permeates *The Taming of the Shrew* and especially the exchange between Gremio and Tranio in Act II, scene 1. Indeed, one might even argue that Gremio, Tranio's old rival in this scene, echoes the authorities that opposed such practices. Indeed, we may note the bitter contempt with which he addresses Tranio as he calls his bluff at the end of the scene:

> GREMIO. Sirrah, young gamester, your father were a fool
> To give thee all, and in his waning age
> Set foot under thy table. Tut, a toy!
> An old Italian fox is not so kind, my boy. *Exit.* (II, 1, 396-399)

The aggressiveness of Gremio's disapproval of his rival's deceptive tactics is highlighted by the phrase "young gamester" which is obviously an addition to the offence already expressed by the disparaging address "Sirrah". This scornful insult highlights the polemical dimension of games in the early modern period. Furthermore, enemies of play were commonly associated with old age just as play and games were linked to youth.[8] In *A Treatise against Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes or Enterluds with Other Idle Pastimes* for instance, John Northbrooke takes up this dichotomy by naming the naïve interlocutor who asks about pastimes "Youth" and his wiser counterpart who warns him about the dangers of dice and cards "Age" (Northbrooke 1577). Here again we can see that the rivalry between the old Gremio and the younger Tranio resonates with the early modern debate on card games and cheating.

Ethical justifications for lying in The Taming of the Shrew

The polemical impact of such instances of lying is also qualified in the play by the ethical grounds invoked by the characters themselves as well as the innocuousness of their consequences. After Gremio's accusation, Tranio, now left alone on stage, voices a first justification for his lies and his bluffs during the betting match for Bianca's hand: "'Tis in my head to do my master good" (II, 1, 402). This explanation, which is solely expressed for the audience's benefit, is consistent with Tranio's role throughout the play. He acts as Lucentio's *dolosus servus* (he is his "tricky slave" or *zanni*) and mentions his dedication to his master's well-being and his master's love for Bianca on several occasions. Later in Act III, scene 2, for instance, he plans future plots to achieve his goal and declares:

> We'll overreach the greybeard Gremio,
> The narrow-prying father Minola,
> The quaint musician, amorous Licio,
> All for my master's sake, Lucentio. (III, 3, 18-21)

Lying is therefore portrayed as morally acceptable – or justified – in order to attain a greater good, that of serving young Lucentio and his love for Bianca. Indeed, it is thanks to lying and bluffing that Bianca's hand is won for Lucentio, for Gremio is too cautious to offer what he does not possess, unlike the young gamester, as his cue suggests: "Nay, I have offered all. I have no more, / And she can have no more than all I have" (II, 1, 377-378). Hortensio will also withdraw from the game and declare his inability and unwillingness to lie any further in Act IV, scene 2:

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[8] Elisabeth Belmas notices the same dichotomy in early modern France (Belmas 2006: 52) and Alessandro Arcangeli also argues that the Renaissance saw the development of a specific leisure culture in which children were more closely associated to clearly identified games (Arcangeli 2003: 105-107).

> Mistake no more, I am not Licio,
> Nor a musician as I seem to be,
> But one that scorn to live in this disguise
> For such a one as leaves a gentleman
> And makes a god of such a cullion.
> Know, sir, that I am called Hortensio. (IV, 2, 16-21)

Similarly, Petruchio seems to win Katherina's hand through his daring bluffs. At the beginning of the embedded play, he pretends his marriage to Katherina has been already agreed upon when such is not yet the case. In II, 1, he calls Baptista "father" even though the wedding has not yet taken place: "Why, that is nothing, for I tell you, father" (II, 1, 130). His display of assurance is also designed to provoke the other characters of the play that seek to marry, as in the same scene when he calls them "novices" (II, 1, 307) starting a match between Hortensio, Lucentio, Gremio, and himself that will only end with the final wager of the play. It might therefore be argued that bluffing (or double bluffing) is a key element in the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* as it allows the play to reach its comedic resolution. Lying becomes a means to an end: since Tranio's justification for his lie to Gremio seems ethically adequate, his bluffs are easily forgiven by the audience.[9] Moreover, all the lies that occur in the play are described as innocuous. For instance, Tranio stops lying as soon as the threat of real harm surfaces when Vincentio believes his son to be dead and Tranio threatens to have him imprisoned in V, 1. Similarly, at the very beginning of the play, in the Induction, the Lord stresses the importance of controlling his "jest" or his lies to Christopher Sly by "modesty". His cautiousness is reflected by the conditional clause he uses as he gives directions to his servants just like a stage director giving instructions to actors: "It will be pastime passing excellent, / If it be husbanded with modesty" (Induction 1, ll. 65-66). Here, the term "modesty" expresses a requirement of moderation and restraint, which most early modern authors who wrote on games and playing agreed on as well. The repeated allusions to this quality highlight the innocuousness of what takes place within the "sport" at hand and the lies it entails.

Not only is bluffing portrayed as morally justified in *The Taming of the Shrew*; it is also valorised as a ludic practice and put on an equal footing with other more accepted sports and games. In fact, we may note that Shakespeare runs counter to the common hierarchy of games that was drawn by many authors of his time. He implicitly equates the accomplishments of gamesters like Petruchio or Tranio who bluff to the merits displayed in more aristocratic sports like hunting, which is presented in the Induction scenes as one of the lord's favourite pastimes. Conversely, many authors[10] sought to draw a clear line between "lawful" and "unlawful" games and sports and card games were very clearly part of the latter category. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, however, the references to card games and bluffing put to the fore the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Tranio. The deftness of both Tranio and Petruchio at card games which is suggested throughout the play through allusions to primero or one-and-thirty (another popular betting card game) is reminiscent of what Huarte said about such talents in *The Examination of Mens Wits*, a text translated into English in 1594:

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[9] We find a similar justification in *All's Well That Ends Well* when Diana, who is about to trick Bertram, declares: "Only, in this disguise I think't no sin/To cozen him that would unjustly win" (IV, 2, 76-77).

[10] Such categorisations can be found in the works of Thomas Wilcox or other anti-ludic authors. However, they are also present in many humanist texts on education (in Thomas Hoby's *The Book of the Courtier* for instance), and by no means restricted to a Puritan point of view.

> To play well at Primero, and to face and vie, and to hold and giue ouer when time serueth, and by coniectures to know his aduersaries game, and the skill of discarding, are all workes of the imagination (Huarte 1594: 112).

Betting and “vying” for Katherina or Bianca is therefore shown in the play as a comic yet almost heroic action[11] that also displays the character’s boldness and his willingness to risk all for a higher purpose. Betting in such cases acquires a symbolic value which has been underlined by Clifford Geertz’ conclusions in his work on betting in cock-fighting; betting is closely linked to the character’s honour and status (Geertz 1972: 16). In fact, we may note that the betting match between Gremio and Tranio opens with a challenge to both contestants as Baptista declares: “’Tis deeds must win the prize, and he of both/That can assure my daughter greatest dower/Shall have my Bianca’s love” (II, 1, 338-340). In this cue Baptista applies the chivalric ideal of worthy “deeds” to a betting match that is in fact much closer to card games than tournaments in which knights did compete for a “prize”. Similarly, Petruchio proves both his strength or cunning and the value of his newly tamed wife in the final wager scene, which is likened to a victory at an archery match in his final couplet: “’Twas I won the wager, though (*to Lucentio*) you hit the white, / And being a winner, God give you good night” (V, 2, 191-192). We may note that the chosen form of the heroic couplet further contributes to glorifying Petruchio’s victory at this betting match.

The Contextual Justification for Lying: Bluffing, the Ludic Space, and the Stage

This first justification offers a relative perspective on the moral acceptability of lying. However, it is strengthened by Tranio’s second justification for lying, which is somewhat different in nature. Indeed, when Tranio declares, “I see no reason but supposed Lucentio / Must get a father, called supposed Vincentio” (II, 1, 403-4), he implies quite a different legitimisation of lying. The repetition of the word “supposed” in this cue creates a circularity within which lying has in fact somehow become the norm. It is Tranio’s first lie that logically entails the whole succession of lies that are about to unfold. Moreover, Tranio applies the same reasoning when he starts betting against Gremio. It is exactly the logic at work in bluffing and vying games such as primero. His first lie about the wealth Lucentio possesses leads him into a series of never-ending of accumulations and exaggerations. He first promises three or four houses in Pisa, then two thousand ducats a year, and counters Gremio’s argosy with “three argosies”, “two galleasses” and “twelve tight gallies”. His enumeration ends with the impossible claim that he will offer twice whatever Gremio is ready to stake: “These I will assure her, / And twice as much whate’er thou offer’st next” (II, 1, 375-376). The circularity suggested by this cue evokes in fact the logic at work in any game according to the work of Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*: “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count” (Huizinga 1980: 12). Huizinga’s assertion about the form of the game has been taken up by many other critics[12] since and is buttressed by Jacques Henriot’s analysis of the subject’s attitude when playing a game: he also talks about a “ludic circle” (“un cercle ludique”) within which the player must be to fully appreciate his own activity (Henriot 1969: 87-88). Creative potential is unleashed by the separateness of this ludic space that has been withdrawn from commonly accepted ethical rules. Tranio’s second argument is therefore self-justificatory and trumps his first ethical claim. His first lie has created a ludic space governed by its own rules. Consequently, there is “no reason” why he should not lie in the circle of lies he has created.

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[11] In the same way that betting on the caskets for Portia’s hand in *The Merchant of Venice* is likened to Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece for example.

[12] More recently, Stephen Nachmanovitch for instance argues that playing creates “parallel universes and alternate time-streams that work according to their own laws and patterns different from the everyday” (Nachmanovitch 2009: 15).

There is a strong parallel to be drawn between Tranio’s second justification, his creation of a form of ludic circle structured by lying and bluffing, and the play itself. The lie that is the embedded play involving Petruchio and his friends only derives from another lie: the farce played by the lord on the tinker Christopher Sly in the Induction scenes. Furthermore, just as the betting match between Gremio and Tranio is likened to a game of primero, the play itself seems to be likened to a betting or gambling game and could be called a “wager play” in this regard.[13] Indeed, bluffing and betting form the frame of the plot of the Induction scenes and that of the embedded play. The play opens with Sly’s failed bluffs to the hostess. He first claims to be a descendant of William the Conqueror, whom he incorrectly names “Richard Conqueror” (Induction 1, 3-4) unveiling his own lie. Sly’s challenge to the hostess to check this information in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* is equally unrealistic and therefore comical. This lie about his lineage is deliberately intended to impress and frighten the hostess to whom he owes money. His bluff comes to a belated and unwitting realisation when the lord tricks him into believing he is a gentleman. Sly displays the same boastful attitude later in the same scene when the hostess threatens to call the headborough: “Third, or fourth, or fifth borough, I’ll answer him by law. I’ll not budge an inch, boy. Let him come, and kindly” (Induction 1, 11-13). The play therefore evolves from the belated realisation of a failed bluff by Sly to Petruchio’s successful double bluff in the final wager on his wife’s obedience. We might therefore even see the play as a demonstration in the sophisticated art of lying. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the plot is repeatedly equated with a form of wager: the wager on the lord’s dogs in the Induction for instance, is directly echoed by the wager the husbands make on their wives at the end of the play. The existence of a separate context or sphere within which lying was the rule was exactly what enemies of the theatre contested as we can clearly see from this historical anecdote we find in William Prynne’s later text *Histriomastix*:

> This Solon knew full well, who when he beheld Thespis acting a Tragedy, wherein there were many lies and cheates: he demanded of him after the Tragedy ended; whether he were not ashamed to lie and cheate so egregiously before so great a multitude? To which Thespis replyed; that there was no hurt in it, for all he had uttered or acted was but a Play, it was all in sport, nothing in earnest: which answer Solon hearing, stroke his staffe upon the ground with indignation, making this reply: If we commend or approve this Play of yours, we shall shortly finde it in our bargaines: intimating that this his lying and cozenage which hee acted in jest, would quickly turne to earnest: so prone, so docible are men to learne any evill that Players act (Prynne 1633: 516).

In this anecdote Prynne clearly asserts the indivisibility of the stage and the real world, which are, according to him, ruled by the same ethical code. Philip Stubbes had already voiced a similar criticism in his *Anatomie of Abuses* published in 1595 where he asks how a man playing the part of a cheater on stage can be anything else than a cheater himself: “who can call him a straight dealing man who playeth a Cosoners part?” (Stubbes 1595: 205). As an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare’s answer to such fears and accusations was to stress the ludic context of his own play in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the play Christopher Sly is made to watch, as well as the prank the lord plays on him are both forms of “sport” much like the wagers and card games that are evoked throughout the embedded play.

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[13] The phrase “wager play” was used by Allyna E. Ward to describe *Mucedorus* and *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*. In both these plays the wager takes place in the framing play rather than in the embedded one, unlike what we witness in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Ward 2012: 448-460). Of course, although wagers feature prominently in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the play itself cannot be entirely reduced to a betting match.

To conclude, although Tranio's first justification establishes the relativity of lying, his second justification establishes the true grounds for his otherwise condemnable actions: lying was a context-dependent matter, and as far as the protagonists of the *Taming of the Shrew* are concerned, the game they are playing clearly includes bluffing in its rules. The play is highly structured by a ludic dynamic of bluffing and counterfeiting that are brought to the fore through extensive gaming and gambling metaphors. I therefore hope to have shown that by asserting the ludic dimension of his play, Shakespeare has chiefly provided a contextual justification for lying in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The increasingly common ludic practice of bluffing in early modern England shored up a relative outlook on the ethical acceptability of lying and it is this viewpoint on lying Shakespeare chose to portray in his play. Representing bluffing on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage created an enlightening parallel to the debates on theatre that were taking place at the time. The stage as such was also a unique space wherein lying was more than just an accepted and expected practice. It had become the rule of the game.

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The Age of Dissimulation:
Degrees of Dissimulation and Dissemblers' Perspective
in John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*

Florence Krésine

Introduction

Renaissance Italianate plays like *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* reflect a keen interest in Italian politics and Machiavellian intrigue. Those plays opened up new spaces to be explored by English playwrights. Indeed, early modern dramatists tapped into resources provided by Italian stereotypes and clichés in order to deal not only with dissembling villains in intricate plots but also with the troubled period of Jacobean England (Jump 1966: 2-5; Redmond 2009: 11, 81). Moreover, many early modern theorists of dissimulation were Italian.[14] It is then highly significant that in two of the most illuminating plays written on dissimulation, blood, and revenge during the early seventeenth century, the scene should have been set in Italy.

One cannot but be sensitive to the mounting tension between a dramatic mode that resorts to sensationalism and a dynamic mode of concealment, owing to the combination of sexual fantasy and murder. As a matter of fact, the dramatist's art consists in showing the invisibility of dissimulation: "The true scandal of dissimulation was not that it produced a false representation of 'that which is not' but rather that it was a blank page, representing nothing" (Snyder 1954: 54). Yet, if dissimulation might first be perceived as a form of protection of the self, in John Webster's two tragedies, it is bound to give way to simulation.

The different degrees of invisibility and visibility serve as the premise of this study of "degrees of this hiding or veiling of a man's self", as it is based on Francis Bacon's essay "Of Simulation and Dissimulation" (Bacon 2008: 350). The sour reply of the "poor secretary", when confronted with Bracciano's contemptuous attitude, is the foundation of this analysis of degrees of hiding in the two plays:[15]

> O, my lord, methodically
> As in this world there are degrees of evil,
> So in this world there are degrees of devils.
> You're a great duke, I your poor secretary. (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 56-59)[16]

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[14] "[M]any of the *maîtres penseurs* of dissimulation – such as Baldassarre Castiglione, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Torquato Accetto (to name only three) were Italians and wrote in the vernacular of the peninsula" (Snyder 2012: xix).

[15] Torquato Tasso's *Il Secretario* was published in 1587. Douglas Biow argues that "[i]n late Renaissance treatises, the secretary, who was expected to be fully trained in the *studia humanitatis*, was often viewed as the keeper of secrets, though his silence, which makes the secretary seem a cipher, actually functions to suggest a secret interior existing within him and thus, ironically confers on him an identity, a private self, he would otherwise seem to lack" (Biow 2002: 160).

[16] All references to the *The White Devil* and to *The Duchess of Malfi* are taken from Webster 2009.

In the first play, *The White Devil* (1612), the scene is set in Rome and Padua; in the second in Malfi, Rome, Loreto in the Ancona province, and in Milan. The two plays introduce the figure of a kind benevolent duchess.[17] In *The White Devil*, the storyline is based on the history of the Medici family, which dates back to a period of thirty years prior to the composition of the play. The Duke of Florence, Francisco de Medici, seeks to wreak his vengeance on the lovers, the Duke of Bracciano, Giovanni Giordano Orsini, living most of the time in Rome, and his mistress Vittoria Corombona. Bracciano is married to Duchess Isabella, Francisco's sister, and Vittoria to Camillo, Cardinal Monticelso's nephew.[18] Bracciano hires Doctor Julio in order to assassinate his own wife, Duchess Isabella. As for Vittoria's brother, Flamineo, who seeks to act as the Duke's adviser, and whose personality exerts a powerful influence on him, he is to find a cunning device to kill Camillo.

The Duchess of Malfi (1614) was published in 1623, and is loosely based on events that occurred in the early years of the sixteenth century. The Duchess woos and weds Antonio Bologna, the master of the household, in spite of their social differences and unequal degrees. The Duchess conceals her marriage and her confinement from her twin brother Duke Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, as well as from her other brother, the Cardinal of Aragon. This radical act of dissimulation stirs up feelings of hatred toward the dissembling couple and their offspring. Wife, husband, and children born to the married couple are bullied, victimized, and eventually perish by the hand of Bosola, Ferdinand's spy, except for their elder son. Bosola is seen as one of the "black malcontents" thought so poorly of by Antonio (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I, 1, 76). He is presently entrusted with the awful mission of orchestrating the murders and assumes the role of master of ceremonies. Interestingly enough, unlike Iago who acts on his own initiative, Bosola has to comply with the Duke's commands. And yet, Bosola's grievances and Iago's bitter discourse on "preferment" and "gradation" have a close affinity:

> I have done you
> Better service than to be slighted thus.
> Miserable age, where only the reward
> Of doing well is the reward of it. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I, 1, 29-32)[19]

John Webster's tragic vision relies heavily on a moral perspective that pertains to "degrees of evil" and degrees of hiding. Thus, one of the most salient aspects of this article is first its indebtedness to Francis Bacon's distinction between the "three degrees of this hiding and veiling of a man's self": secrecy, dissimulation, and simulation (Bacon 1988: 350). Next, analysis of the use of imaginative mathematics and geometry to show the characters' inner thoughts and true motives allows a better understanding of dissimulation and simulation in the plays. Finally, as the Renaissance has been considered to be "the age of dissimulation" (Snyder 2009: 5), this research will investigate the politics of dissimulation and its opacity within a frame of reference that is suggestive of Galileo Galilei's perspective tube (or optical telescope) mentioned in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the second of those two ostentatiously anti-Catholic plays.

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[17] It is worth mentioning that the word "kind" in Flamineo's remark "your kind wife" (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 49) referring to Vittoria probably does not mean likeable but sexually yielding or malleable (male-able): "A man might strive to make them [women] malleable / Ere he should make them fixed" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, II, 4, 13-14).

[18] Let's bear in mind that a cardinal-nephew is a cardinal who was given the title by a pope who is either his uncle or his relative. The creation of cardinal-nephews has its origin in the Middle Ages, and continued during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

[19] Compare Bosola's statement with Iago's: "'Tis the curse of service, / Preferment goes by the letter and affection, / And not by old *gradation*, where each second / Stood heir to the first" (*Othello*, I, 1, 34-37); [my emphasis]. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Norton Shakespeare edition (Shakespeare 2008).

Degrees of evil and degrees of dissimulation

As in an allegory, the moral perspective of *The White Devil* points to the three personified evils turned into devils, i.e., prostitution, adultery, and murder:

> You know what whore is: next the devil, Adult'ry,
> Enters the devil, Murder. (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 108-109)

In what follows, I use this very pattern based on "degrees of evil" to shed light on degrees of dissimulation.

According to Francis Bacon, then, "there be three degrees of this hiding and veiling of a man's self". The second degree is dissimulation ("that he is not that he is"), as opposed to the third and last one, which is simulation ("that he is that he is not"). Yet, "he that will be secret", which refers to the first degree, must be "a dissembler by some degree" (Bacon 2008: 350). In *Novum Organum*, Bacon's scientific method is founded upon induction, and one element of his empiric observation is a table of degrees. Bacon makes heat fit into various degrees of intensity in his *Table of Degrees*, comparing fire and boiling water, for example, as true instances of heat, excluding light:

> We will first speak of those bodies which exhibit no degree of heat sensible to the touch, but appear rather to possess a potential heat, or disposition and preparation for it. We will then go on to others, which are actually warm to the touch, and observe the strength and degree of it (Bacon 2000: 119).

On the one hand, Vittoria's husband, Camillo, is associated with degrees of cold and with northern climate as a device to suggest sexual frustration when he declares:

> I assure you, my brother, no. My voyage lies
> More northerly, in a far colder clime. (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 51-52)

On the other hand, in the arraignment scene, heat is used as sexual innuendo by the Cardinal in order to expose the sin of adultery committed by Bracciano and Vittoria in their hiding place. As a result, the image of the meeting of extremes of cold and heat in one and the same proposition in Vittoria's retort raises the problem of her degree of implication in her husband's murder:

> Grant I was tempted
> Temptation to lust proves not the act
> *Casta est quam nemo rogavit*
> You read his hot love to me, but you want
> My frosty answer. (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 198-202)

A similar use of *discordia concors* (the merging of discordant elements) reverberates in the Cardinal's contemptuous words: "Frost i'th'dog-days! Strange!" (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 203). The white colour and the black colour are another key to this allusion to secret horrid deeds of darkness, which lead to extreme emotion in the lovers. Bacon's essay *Of the Colours of Good and Evil* testifies to the marked perception of degrees relating to the apparent colours of good and evil.[20] The title of Webster's play, *The White Devil*, gives some evidence that white is adulterated and rendered impure, since it implies white innocence and purity on the outside – and black within.[21]

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[20] "In deliberatives, the point is what is good and what is evil and of good what is greater, and of evil what is the less. So that the persuaders' labour is to make things appear good or evil, and that in higher or lower degree" (Bacon 2008: 97).

If we take a closer look at degrees of dissimulation in the play, can we draw a line between prudence and the driving forces of deception? Or are the limits between the two becoming unclear? First of all, in Webster's plays, dissimulation depends on a process of polarisation that opposes honest dissimulation, which is an act of prudence and patience, to falseness and deception.[22] Through silence, self-expression is apt to turn into a zero degree of outward expression, as in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Duchess's confinement can be seen as a retreat and a withdrawal into the hospitable inner self, from which all discord is banished, cutting her off from the hostile realities of the outside world. Yet, even with Antonio, the Duchess has to act prudently, be patient, and equivocate, first concealing her true meaning in order to reach her purpose. She cannot reveal her secret but by degrees as her social position makes it particularly difficult to remove obstacles between Antonio and herself:

> The misery of us that are born great
> We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us;
> And as a tyrant doubles with his words
> And fearfully equivocates,
> So we are forced to express our violent passions
> In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path
> Of simple virtue, which was never made
> To seem the thing it is not. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I, 1, 431-438)

As mentioned earlier, Bacon's essay shows that he was aware that there is inevitably a degree of dissembling in secrecy. The French critic Jean-Pierre Cavaillé highlights the similarities between dissimulation and simulation through the use of the term "dis/simulation", but he still acknowledges the Baconian early modern distinction between the two notions. Jon R. Snyder, who quotes Cavaillé, insists that dissimulation should be dissociated from its "evil twin" simulation (Snyder 1954: xvi-xviii). He emphasizes the fact that most early modern writings were in keeping with Bacon's formula, bestowing the second of the three degrees upon "dissimulation", and thus, distinguishing the second from the third.

When the Duchess's secret marriage is revealed to her brother, she does not confess her guilt. Instead, she simulates, feigns indignation, and makes up a story ("that which is not"). She instantly finds an artifice whereby Antonio appears different and is strangely twinned with another figure reminiscent of Shakespeare's Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*:

> My brother stood engaged with me for money
> Tak'en up of certain Neopolitan Jews,
> And Antonio let the bond be forfeit. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 169-171)

While making desperate attempts to mislead Bosola into thinking she sets little store by her steward, the Duchess mentions Antonio's genealogy and confirms his low descent: "But he was basely descended" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 260). Conversely, the Duke's informer praises Antonio, flattering the Duchess into placing her trust in himself rather than in any other courtier:

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[21] The chapter entitled "Dark is light – From Italy to England: Challenging Tradition through Colours" in *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance*, formulates the hypothesis that the treatment of light and darkness by "abolishing the boundaries between light and darkness" served to promote "a novel conception of reality" (Caporicci 2014: 214).

[22] *Della dissimulazione onesta* ("On Honest Dissimulation") is the title of Torquato Accetto's celebrated essay, published in 1641, almost twenty years after the publication of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It deals with the relationship between prudence and dissimulation. In the conclusion of his essay, Accetto insists on the need to dissimulate dissimulation: "offenderei le tue leggi non dissimulando quanto per ragione ho dissimulato" (Accetto 1997: 75); "I should offend your laws if I did not dissemble what I have rightly dissembled" (Accetto 1995: 385)

> This trophy of a man,
> Raised by that curious engine, your white hand. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 294-295)

This corresponds to the first stage of the Duchess's slow descent into hell. The falsehood adopted by the Duchess, meant to protect Antonio against her brother's wrath, shortly before her pretended pilgrimage to Loreto, may help us draw a sharper distinction between dissimulation and simulation:

> O misery. Methinks unjust actions
> Should wear these masks and curtains and not we. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 160-161)

Urged by the need to flee before danger and to deceive Bosola, she however entertains fond hopes of saving Antonio and herself from her brother, who is engaged in a power game and will brook no dissent from the Duchess. Making a careful assessment of the situation, she is now ready to resort to a "noble lie", quoting the poet Torquato Tasso in order to justify herself:[23]

> I must now accuse you
> Of such feignèd crime as Tasso calls
> *Magnanima menzogna*: a noble lie,
> Cause it must shield our honours. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 178-182)

The metaphor of the world as theatre then becomes of paramount importance in the play, especially after Antonio and she have parted. The lamentable sight of the figures of Antonio and of her children appearing as if they were dead has left the Duchess sinking into the Slough of Despond: "I account this world a tedious theatre / For I do play a role in't 'gainst my will (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV, 1, 84-5). As she is about to be executed, she turns to the metaphor of the world as theatre one last time, and thus, acting, pretending, or simulating prove to be a more general statement on life and death and a tendency inherent in human life.

> 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. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV, 2, 211-214)

Consequently, the analysis of both plays gives credence to the idea that, in Webster's tragic world, dissent (dissension), descent (lineage or degradation), and degree (temperature, gradation, and social position) are inextricably linked to the theme of dissimulation. "This ambitious age" is primarily concerned with degree, and is held responsible for the moral degradation of the characters of humble birth (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 278). For example, in *The White Devil*, Bosola's counterpart, Flamineo, ironically insists on his own demerits as he castigates the kind of education he received at university:

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[23] In *Jerusalem Delivered*, in the episode "Olindo and Sophronia", the Moslem king, unable to discover the thief, threatens to massacre all his Christian subjects. Sophronia, a young Christian lady of great beauty and virtue, willing to sacrifice herself for her people, accuses herself of being the thief, and is to be burnt alive: "Così al publico fato il capo altero / offerse, e 'volse in sé sola raccòrre. / Magnanima menzogna, or quand'è il vero / sì bello che si possa a te preporre?" (Tasso 2009: 128-129); "She gave her proud head for her people's sake, / gathering in herself the fate of all. / Greathearted lie! What truth could ever make / a finer claim to be so beautiful! (Tasso 2000: 40). Another link with the tragic fate of the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* can be traced in the seven years Tasso spent in the madhouse of St. Anna. There might also be a connection between them on account of the pilgrimage to Loreto in Tasso's last years (Boulting 1968: 271).

> Conspiring with a beard
> Made me a graduate. (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 315-316)

This merely taught him a lesson in deception and plotting and generated an acute sense of frustration. The pedestrian manner in which, during the trial scene, the lawyer reports Vittoria's lack of grammatical proficiency is comical, and so is the final remark in his formal address to Francisco, one of the "most literated judges" (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 26): "I most graduatically thank your lordship" (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 49). In spite of his knowledge of Latin and his expertise in legal matters, which serve to disguise his deficiencies, the lawyer is not far from being associated with "the uncapable multitude" scorned by the playwright (*The White Devil*, "To the Reader", l, 21). Does Francisco's contempt implicitly echo Webster's indictment of spectators and among them law students who frequently attended the theatre and demanded new plays?

In the same scene, Vittoria's bold stance allows Cardinal Monticelso to portray her as the white devil in disguise, who hides her vices under the guise of virtue in order to escape the chastisement: "If the devil / Did ever take good shape, behold his picture" (*The White Devil*, III, 2, 216-217). In fact, in *The White Devil*, a different meaning the idea of degree often takes on is a sexual one, as for instance, through the use of punning, in Flamineo's aside: "That's better, she must wear his jewel lower" (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 217).[24] On the other hand, critics have argued that, however ambitious and aggressive, Vittoria achieves a measure of dignity during the trial.[25] Vittoria incarnates the transgression of sexual prohibitions and the world's double-dealing toward highly sexed women, considered inferior. That's why she fulminates against those men, whom she sees as violating the cause of justice while purporting to serve it.

The geometrical lines of dissimulation

Baroque art is full of energy, fuelled by motion and emotions. Thus, exploring some of the most dissembling characters' consciousness (and conscience) affords us with a metaphorical representation of the geometrical lines of dissimulation in the two plays.

Bosola's face, according to Duke Ferdinand, has an "oblique character" the Cardinal finds suspicious:

> Maybe some oblique character in your face
> Made him suspect you? (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I, 1, 225-226)

The spy employs a personal language of secrecy and dissimulation drawing on mathematics and geometry to account for sexual intercourse and breeding, which is clearly a reminder of the pregnant Duchess's confinement, leading to childbirth. Indeed, the secret of the hidden object of desire, woman's female genitals, is hinted at through Bosola's crude joke:

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[24] The sense of interiority, of a space dedicated to concealed inner thoughts furnished by soliloquy or aside, is a common feature of those among the characters who stand for the "ambitious age" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 278).

[25] Stephen Purcell draws a parallel between Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and Vittoria, praising their strength and dignity (Purcell 2012: 33-34).

> Dids't thou never study mathematics?
> What's that, sir?
> Why, to know the trick how to make a many line meet in one centre. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, II, 2, 19-21)

The desire for power of Duke Ferdinand is most certainly an impediment to the other characters' self-fulfilment. The way the Duke's spy parodies scientific language is therefore instrumental in his action on behalf of repressive social forces that intimidate other characters into conforming:

> Bosola's imaginative mathematics, as we will see, is a symptom of his "inward rust" (I, 1, 86) and malcontentedness. Mathematics and instrumentation have no relation to new knowledge. Instead, they are bound up with psychological torture and narcissism (Bertram 2014: 177-178).

The shifting relative viewpoints that transform dissimulation into simulation are emphasized when the two brothers find the Duchess out. Indeed, the Cardinal's speech addressed to his brother Duke Ferdinand, after an interview with his mistress, consists of an allegedly lucid exposé of woman's nature, that gives force to a geometry of cold-hearted dissimulation.

> […] Cursed creature!
> Unequal nature, to place women's hearts
> So far upon the left side! (*The Duchess of Malfi*, II, 5, 31-33)

In *The White Devil*, Flamineo, being a spy and a would-be murderer, compares his own secret course of action to rivers with snake-like turnings.[26] This geometry of meandering rivers is highly symbolic of the natural bent of a villain's secretive mind.

In this dynamic geometry, the convergence of two lines of force like dissembling and disassembling may be of interest too. Indeed, in Middle English, the word "assemble" was a euphemism to signify "couple sexually". The Duke of Bracciano is addressing his wife and berates her for trying to pit the Duke of Tuscany and his followers against himself. He even unfairly accuses her of committing adultery in Rome:[27]

> BRACCIANO. O dissemblance!
> Do you bandy factions 'gainst me? Have you learnt
> The trick of impudent baseness to complain
> Unto your kindred?
> ISABELLA. Never, my dear lord.
> Must I be haunted out, or was't your trick
> To meet some amorous gallant here in Rome
> That must supply our discontinuance. (*The White Devil*, II, 1, 171-177)

Ironically enough, the thing backfires on Bracciano as, after Isabella's death, he is enraged and refers to Vittoria's dissimulation:

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[26] The lines "Flows with crook bendings beneath forcèd banks [...] / The way ascends not straight [...] / Shall find her ways winding and indirect" (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 341-346) call to mind the verse "What is crooked cannot be made straight" (*Eccl.* 1:15).

[27] In his seminal book on Webster, Charles R. Forker discusses Isabella's adulterous relationship with Bracciano's cousin Troilo (Forker 1986: 107).

> Procure but ten of thy dissembling trade,[28]
> Ye'ld furnish all of your Irish funerals
> With howling, past wild Irish. (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 92-94)

Vittoria protests vehemently and then charges all men with dissembling: "O ye dissembling men!" (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 179).

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, after Bosola has brought her "by degrees to mortification" (IV, 2, 168) and after the Duchess has been strangled to death, the two quasi-incestuous halves of the androgynous pair, brother and sister, have come apart, because of the revelation of the Duchess's act of dissembling. The ongoing process of disassembling relating to the two similarly shaped figures of the twins was inevitable: "She and I were twins" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV, 2, 259). Because of this dramatic act of dis/simulation, the Duchess's twin brother is to sever ties with his sister. Antonio described her as having such strong ties with her two brothers that they seemed to be cast in the same mould in spite of their different temperaments. Likewise, in *Shakespeare's Language* (2001), Frank Kermode gives the example of Viola and Sebastian's "twinship" and broaches the subject of "natural perspective":

> One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons,
> A natural perspective, that is and that is not (*Twelfth Night*, V, 1, 216-217)

The critic's comment reminds one of Bacon's definition: "A good painting is a good image of the state in which *that that is is not,* since it presents two different pictures depending on whether you view it from the front or from the side" (Kermode 2001: 68; my emphasis).

The Age of dissimulation and Galilean perspective art

The cruel drama of blood and murder in *The White Devil* provides contemporary spectators with a vision inspired by the same kaleidoscopic picture as light reflected on glass submitted to fire. The name Flamineo would evidently suggest fire or even hellfire. The villain's vision, perceived as through a magnifying glass**,** is rather disquieting for a character as unsophisticated as Camillo, Vittoria's husband:

> It seems you would be a fine capricious mathematically jealous coxcomb, take the height of your own horns with a Jacob's staff afore they are up. These political enclosures for paltry mutton makes more rebellion in the flesh than all the provocative electuaries doctors have uttered since last Jubilee.
>
> [...]
>
> It seems you are jealous. I'll show you the error of it by a familiar example. I have seen a pair of spectacles fashioned with such *perspective art*, that lay down but twelve pence a'th'board, 'twill appear as if there were twenty; now should you wear a pair of these spectacles and see your wife tying her shoe, you would imagine twenty hands were taking up your wife's clothes, and this would put you in horrible causeless fury (*The White Devil*, I, 2, 94-100; my emphasis).

Flamineo's art seems to be inspired by the Freudian scene of repressed visions, uncanny images, and unconscious nightmarish fantasies.

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[28] In *Théâtre élisabéthain*, the words "ten of thy dissembling trade" have been translated into French by Marie-Anne de Kirch and François Laroque as "dix simulatrices", which sounds like "dis/simulatrices" (Cottegnies, Laroque, and Maguin 2009: 689).

Vittoria is "the white devil", a splendid creature praised for her beauty, but as in a sixteenth century *vanitas*, her charm is like a screen that conceals her mortal condition through a "dissembling of nature", a phrase coined by Torquato Accetto, the seventeenth century Italian philosopher: "a certain dissembling of nature is useful" (Accetto 1995: 375).[29] In the poem entitled "Whispers of Immortality" (1918), Thomas Stearns Eliot highlights the idea that Webster "was much possessed by death / And saw the skull beneath the skin" (Eliot 2010: 57).

Webster's perspective art is dependent on a technique tantamount to anamorphosis, owing to its distorted perspective. One is oblique anamorphosis, the same technique used for the skull in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*.[30] The eerie spectacle of Bracciano's strangely familiar spectre holding a skull and a pot of lily flowers or the sudden appearance of Isabella's ghost confirms the playwright's use of anamorphosis: "*Enter Bracciano's ghost in his leather cassock and breeches, boots [and] a cowl [in his hand] a pot of lilyflowers with a skull in't*" (*The White Devil*, V, 4, 119). When the work of imagination is brought to the fore instead of being relegated to the background, in the unconscious, it can "frame / Things which are not" (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 100-101). The link between Webster's tragedies and Holbein's representation of the liberal arts incongruously juxtaposed with the essential symbol of death, the elongated skull, has long been established.[31] An example of this device is Bosola's "oblique character" in his face, which obviously refers to the hidden thoughts of the spy and to his crooked personality, as stated above (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I, 1, 225-226).

The other is the mirror anamorphosis, consisting of the projection of a distorted image that can only recapture the undeformed original image in the mirror from a specific vantage point. Another instance of anamorphosis can be found in *The Duchess of Malfi*, with the discovery scene showing the Duchess looking at herself, and her brother Ferdinand intruding on her privacy before she eventually catches sight of him in the mirror (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 2, 10). It most skilfully foreshadows the odd scene with a mad astrologer and a mad lawyer evoking a "perspective" or a "glasshouse" where women's souls are persecuted in hell (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV, 2, 78-80). Finally, scepticism and sarcasm about the New Science are conveyed through the Cardinal's sexual fantasy, significantly directly linked to Galileo's "fantastic glass":

> We had need go borrow that *fantastic glass*
> *Invented by Galileo the Florentine*,
> To view another spacious world i'th'moon,

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[29] After quoting Tasso, Accetto asserts that "even though a mortal beauty is usually said to seem scarcely terrestrial, it is really, to tell the truth, nothing other than a corpse dissembled by the blessings of the youthfulness whose effects still prevail over those shapes and colours that the forces of time and death will divide and conquer. A certain dissembling of nature is useful [...]" (Accetto 1995: 375).

[30] The painting is now conserved at the National Gallery in London; see an image in North (2002: 140).

[31] Referring to Bushy's speech in *Richard II* (II, 2, 14-27), Kermode specifies that "Bushy thinks of 'perspectives', meaning those anamorphic pictures (of which the most famous is probably Holbein's *The Ambassadors*) which offer a different image when viewed from the side (awry) rather than directly in front. [...] The Arden editor, Peter Ure, remarks that there were actually two kinds of perspective, only one of which could be thought to give an effect like that attributed to the Queen's tears. This is the device sometimes called 'a multiplying glass,' as Webster illustrates in Flamineo's speech about jealousy in *The White Devil* (I.ii). [...] But if Bushy is thinking of multiplying-glasses, he seems to be also thinking of anamorphoses, and argues that the Queen has been eying the substance 'awry,' whereas his main contention is that she has wrongly viewed it 'rightly'" (Kermode 2001: 41-42). Another valuable contribution is provided by Forker: "Inga-Stina Ewbank has convincingly related Webster's puzzling vision of life to the 'perspective' art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to paintings such as Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and the anonymous trick portraits of Edward VI" (Forker 1986: 346).

> And look to find a constant woman there. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, II, 4, 16-19; my emphasis)[32]

It therefore appears that, though Galileo is often associated with a resistance to the baroque, yet in the Cardinal's vision, Galileo's scientific breakthrough, the new spyglass, seems to be demoted as mere optical trick, not unlike the trompe l'oeil illusionism typical of Baroque painting, rich in grotesque exaggerated visual manifestations.[33] This hypothesis is all the more valid as the spy is reported to have been a "fantastical scholar" in Padua, which ironically reminds us that Galileo moved to the University of Padua, where he taught geometry, mechanics, and astronomy until 1610.

> What's that Bosola?
> I knew him in Padua: a *fantastical scholar* like such who study how many knots was in Hercules' club [...]. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 3, 40-42; my emphasis)

However, Rivka Feldhay's article, which deals with Nature's invisible secrets revealed by Galileo, puts his book *The Starry Messenger* and its unseen "theatre of light", with its innumerable stars observed as through a magnifying glass, at the heart of Baroque culture (Feldhay 2013: 291). The article also shows that Galileo had recourse to prudence and to honest dissimulation, and thus connects the theory of prudence expounded by Accetto with the predicament of Galileo, destined to be the visionary "Baroque hero of a mourning play" (Feldhay 2013: 302). This theory shows that dissimulation exists

> as a special space outside the self in which the self is capable of 'accomodating' his beliefs to the needs of the moment. With this he [Accetto] recognizes that dissimulation is a kind of splitting of the self in order to be able to live simultaneously in two seemingly incompatible levels of meaning [...] (Feldhay 2013: 300).

Webster's drama offers an anti-papist approach through Baroque art almost a century after the events leading to the Reformation in England. A moral perspective of these issues in the play will find fault with equivocation as being one aspect of dissimulation:

> [She reads the] letter
> 'Send Antonio to me; I want his head in a business:'
> A politic equivocation!
> He doth not want your counsel, but your head;
> [...]
> The devil is not cunning enough
> To circumvent us in riddles. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III, 5, 28-41)

We know that equivocation (mocked in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the ludicrous scene in which the porter equivocates) gained ground in the context of the trials of English Catholic recusants, as it was a matter of life and death to find new ways to tell the truth and disguise it in order to avoid confessing. Thus, in the work of the Catholic hard-liner, the English priest Henry Garnet's *Treatise of Equivocation* (or *The Treatise Against Lying and Fraudulent*

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[32] In his discussion on the tradition that links the immaculate moon to the Virgin Mary, Lawrence Lipking adds: "The telescope dismantled that image forever, except as a relic of holy purity superimposed on nature" (Lipking 2014: 33).

[33] "And in that respect Galileo's science, inasmuch as it was a product of Humanism, was also Baroque, which is why it is not altogether accurate to claim that the Italian scientist was representative of a resistance to the Baroque" (Perez 2011: 23). Comparing Galileo to Johannes Kepler, Rolando Perez then argues that "Kepler's ellipse [...] would merely push the early Baroque style further in the direction of the anamorphic image" (Perez 2011: 23). For a contrasting point of view, see Greco (2018: 64).

Dissimulation), equivocation is justified but, of course, is exposed as devilish by staunch Protestants. Henry Garnet does not seem to support the idea that there are degrees of untruths but justifies equivocation because there is "a variety of propositions in which verity may be found" (Garnet 1851: 8).[34] Thus, he refers to the mental position whereby truth is only in the mind or to the vocal position that says untruth is only in the mouth.

In that particular respect too, Webster's "Italianness" should not be contrasted with "Englishness" because "the Italian Catholicism is in part an uncanny doubling of the English Catholicism of previous generations" (Coleman 2016: 127). In *The White Devil*, the murderers, disguised as Capuchins or Franciscans, include Duke Francisco, who, in accordance with the motif of the disguised ruler, equivocates and acts a part.[35] The assassins jeer at their victims and mock cult objects and religious devotion (*The White Devil*, V, 3, 63). The scene, which insists on the proximity between priests and actors — both more often than not charged with hypocrisy — is evocative of the stereotyped indictment of priesthood and of the theatre in one single unified vision, even for a moment.[36] One example of such disapproval is the image of priest robes ridiculed by Protestant Thomas Becon as mere "game-players garments" (Williamson 2016: 138).

Oddly enough, Webster's play, first performed in 1612 between January and March, has a strong affinity with Thomas Adams's sermon delivered at St Paul's Cross, March 7, 1612. It appears that the sermon enlarges and comments upon Martin Luther's predicate of the "white devil", who is described as "black within" but "white without": "A devil he was, black within & full of rancour, but white without, and skinned over with hypocrisie; therefore to use Luthers word, we will call him the white Devil" (Adams 1861: 221).[37] Adams's sermon also uses the same imaginative mathematics as Flamineo when it denounces the action of the hypocrite: "Consider this Covetousness, fraud, malice, hypocrisie: and you will say his sin was monstrous; sine mode, like a mathematical line (*divisibilis in semper divisibilia*) infinitely divisible". (Adams 1861: 223). The strange ubiquitous character of Bosola or Flamineo's "varying of shapes" can also be traced in the sermon. Furthermore, the name of Henry Garnet, who incarnates hypocrisy, is associated with "the white Devil": "It [Hypocrisie] has many names as *Garnet* had, and more *Protean* shapes than the Seminaries: The white Devil is in this a true Devil" (Adams 1861: 236). Finally, one of the chapters of the book is entitled *Lycanthropy or the Wolves Worrying the Lambes* (Adams 1861: 109). This title calls to mind *The Duchess of Malfi* and Duke Ferdinand (*The Duchess of Malfi*, V, 2, 6). As a matter of fact, the Doctor asserts that Ferdinand told him

> […] he was a wolf, only the difference
> Was a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside,
> His on the inside. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, V, 2, 16-18)

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[34] Garnet's authorship of *A Treatise of Equivocation* has been confirmed by A.F. Allison in 1951, exactly one hundred years after the publication of Jardine's edition of the treatise in 1851 (Allison 1951; Malloch 1980).

[35] Forker sees Francisco as "inhumanly Machiavellian and bloodily disengaged, a sort of death's-head who presides quietly, aloofly, efficiently, and invulnerably over the lives of virtually everyone in the play" (Forker 1986: 264). Indeed, the "Machiavellian" Duke is described as "that old dog-fox, that politician Florence" by Bracciano (*The White Devil*, V, 3, 91). The "death's head" conjures up the vision of the skull in Holbein's painting.

[36] The word *hypocrisy* comes from the Greek ὑπόκρισις (*hypokrisis*), which may mean jealous, play-acting, coward, or dissembling.

[37] "Note the resourcefulness of the devil. Heretics do not advertise their errors. Murderers, adulterers, thieves disguise themselves. So the devil *masquerades* all his devices and activities. He puts on white to make himself look *like an angel of light* [...]. Knowing Satan's guile, Paul sardonically calls the doctrine of the false apostles 'another gospel', as if he would say 'You Galatians have another gospel, while my Gospel is no longer esteemed by you'" (Luther 2006: 14; my emphasis).

It is also worth mentioning Luther's *Commentary on the Psalms, Called Psalms of Degrees* which is an indictment of cardinal sins like despair, idolatry, and hypocrisy. Those sins belong to *the first table* that, unlike *the second* designating safety of goods and bodies, is concerned with the spirit: "and whereas thou were a sinner before in the second table and *in the inferior degree* of the commandments of God, now thou settest thyself in the first table also, and *in the highest degree*, adding to thy other sins, despair and incredulity, &c." (Luther 1819: 352). As he is addressing Bracciano, Flamineo's anger and resentment are reminiscent of Luther's commentary on *The Psalm of Degrees*:

> O, my lord, methodically
> As in this world there are degrees of evil,
> So in this world there are degrees of devils.
> You're a great duke, I your poor secretary. (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 56-59)

If Vittoria has been described as "masquerading" as "the angel of light", the portrait of Cardinal Monticelso (later Paul IV) as "the white Devil", in the guise of an underhand scheming prelate aiming at papal election, is rather convincing: "And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Indeed, declaring the newly-married couple excommunicate after plotting Bracciano's death with Duke Francisco, while castigating Lodovico for pledging himself to avenge Duchess Isabella, a "damnable" act, is a remarkable instance of Monticelso's propensity to dissemble and to deceive (*The White Devil*, IV, 3, 129).

Conclusion

In modern physics, the degree of freedom of a system is based on the number of parameters that may vary independently, in which, to quote Flamineo, those varying shapes exist separately.[38] Degrees of evil, degrees of dissimulation, and degrees of freedom are inextricably linked in the two plays. However, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, as worth and freedom are becoming reconciled, even through the stoic Duchess's death, the fragmented self may be fused into a harmonious whole. This is not in contradiction to a Montaignean conception of the flux of identity in progress.[39]

Dissemblers in Webster's two tragedies have to grapple with the haunting fear of losing their souls upon meeting death. The ultimate enigma resides in the horror of encountering the untold agony, that of being submerged into darkness and chaos, and into the unknown, without artifice or disguise, and without art for them to hide their crimes. "Webster's God, concludes Baker-Smith, unlike his devil, is a hidden one. This does not mean that He is not there, but we are offered 'nor path nor friendly clew' to find him" (Gunby 2011: 47). Flamineo and Vittoria's wandering minds are still in quest of a perspective, the perception of a new depth. They are still looking for a hidden truth in a disenchanted world somehow likened to the paroxystic vision of hell furnished by a madman's spyglass. Indeed, Bosola, who saw "a perspective / That shows us hell" now dies "in a mist" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV,

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[38] As for the ambiguity specific to Bosola's psychology and the relation with Flamineo's "varying of shapes" (*The White Devil*, IV, 2, 239), Karen Zyck Galbraith states that "Webster's rendering [...] in a muddled and incoherent way, through performativity, thus ties him closely to several literary ancestors: [William] Painter's Daniel de Bozola and the unnamed first assassin, Shakespeare's Iago, and Cynthio's enseign" (Galbraith 2014: 119).

[39] "I describe not th'essence but the passage, not a passage from age to age, or as the people reckon, from seaven yeares to seaven, but from day to day, from minute to minute" (Montaigne 1999: 767). For Webster's borrowings of Montaigne, see Dent (1960: 41).

2, 350-351; V, 5, 94). Even as the characters are on the point of dying, there's no lifting of the veil:

> My soul, like to a ship in a black storm
> Is driven I know not whither. (*The White Devil,* V, 6, 247-248)

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A Matter of Speculation: Cleopatra’s “Infinite Variety” in Her Performance of Suicide

Angelica Vedelago

Introduction

The Shakespearean character of Cleopatra has always invited critics to speculate upon the inner motives behind her actions. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare seems to “frustrate our reasonable desire for certainty” in a more marked way than in other plays (Adelman 1973: 15): he gives Cleopatra no soliloquies or asides. Given this lack of psychological insight, questions about Cleopatra’s supposedly real motives become even more irrelevant than those concerning any other fictional character: as Janet Adelman bluntly observes, “we cannot judge what we do not know” (Adelman 1973: 14). Likewise, Michael Neill points out that the level of “psychological exteriority” makes “the whole question of ‘sincerity’, of what Cleopatra (or Anthony) ‘really’ feels a matter of constantly teasing conjecture” (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 79). However, it is exactly the play’s enigmatic quality that invites critics to account for the characters’ inner intentions: any attempt at “conventional explicatory criticism” (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 79) might be impaired, but the whole play manifestly calls for speculations, with characters trying “to understand and judge each other and themselves” (Adelman 1973: 20). With her “infinite variety” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II, 2, 243),[40] Shakespeare’s Cleopatra inevitably elicits questions about her actions from both the other characters and the audience.

In line with the theme of this conference – disguise, dissimulation and counterfeiting in early modern culture – this paper focuses on the last scene of the play looking at three aspects of Cleopatra’s “infinite variety” which best testify to her ambiguity: her rhetorical skills, her simulative and dissimulative techniques, and finally her preparations for suicide. My aim is not to formulate another interpretation of her inner motives, which is bound to remain a matter of speculation; it is rather to analyse how Shakespeare lures the audience into speculating. And he achieves this by having Cleopatra use various strategies – irony, flattery, simulation and dissimulation – which all enhance the uncertainty surrounding her character. Furthermore, in the scene of Cleopatra’s suicide the distance between the queen and the audience is conflated by means of now veiled, now overt metatheatre, a device that reminds the audience of the play’s fictional nature but contextually invites them to generate further comments and judgements on the character of Cleopatra.

The essay will be accordingly divided into three parts: I will first concentrate on Cleopatra’s rhetorical skills of irony and flattery; second, on her use of (possibly) simulative and dissimulative strategies; and finally on the rituals she performs to commit suicide. The scope will be initially limited to the boundaries of the “dramatic or written text” but will gradually expand to encompass also the level of the “theatrical or performance text” (Elam 2012: 2). Finally, I will suggest that the serpent – featuring both as recurring image and as stage object in the play – ideally encapsulates Cleopatra's "infinite variety" as analysed in both levels of the text.

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[40] All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* are taken from Shakespeare 1994 and the title of the play will henceforth be omitted in the following quotations.

Cleopatra's irony and flattery

Theorists of eloquence since Classical antiquity often expressed the fear that rhetoric may become a tool at the service of falsehood (Hadfield 2017: 158-159). Early modern English authors also shared this concern: Leonard Cox in *The Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1530), William Baldwin in his best-selling *A Treatise of Moral Philosophie* (1547), and George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) all reflect upon the risk of falsehood which rhetoric entails (Hadfield 2017: *passim*). What is more, other European works on the topic were circulating in translation, for instance Matthieu Coignet's *Politique Discourses upon Trueth and Lying*, translated from French by Edward Hoby in 1586, and Montaigne's *Essays*, translated by John Florio in 1603 (Hadfield 2017: 160, 179).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare proves to be receptive to contemporary reflections on the ethics of rhetoric and its violations: Cleopatra in particular offers a sample of how a rhetorician of her calibre can manipulate her interlocutors. In this section, we shall focus on Cleopatra's use of flattery, one of the main faults imputed to the Egyptian queen in Shakespeare's major source for the composition of this play, Plutarch's *Life of Antony*:

> Plato writeth that there are four kinds of flattery; but Cleopatra divided it into many kinds. For she, were it in sport or in matters of earnest, still devised sundry new delights to have Antonius at commandment, never leaving him night or day, nor once letting him go out of her sight (Plutarch 1964: 205).

In Plutarch as well as in Shakespeare, the main targets of Cleopatra's flattery are Antony and her enemy Octavius Caesar, directly or by means of his supporters. On one occasion, Cleopatra addresses flattering messages to Caesar through his messenger Thidias so effectively that Enobarbus comes to doubt her allegiance to Antony:

> CLEOPATRA. He is a god and knows
> What is most right. Mine honour was not yielded,
> But conquered merely.
> ENOBARBUS. [Aside] To be sure of that,
> I will ask Antony. Sir, sir, thou art so leaky
> That we must leave thee to thy sinking, for
> Thy dearest quit thee. (III, 13, 60-66)

Here Cleopatra is confirming Thidias' insinuation that she did not attack Caesar willingly but under Antony's influence. Also, the queen asserts her submission to Caesar by performing all the gestures of a servant to a master, from kissing his hand to kneeling at his feet:

> Most kind messenger,
> Say to great Caesar this in deputation:
> I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him I am prompt
> To lay my crown at's feet, and there to kneel
> Till from his all-obeying breath I hear
> The doom of Egypt. (III, 13, 73-78)

Is Cleopatra's flattery – that is her magnifying of his standing and the minimizing of her own

– aimed at ingratiating herself to Caesar, or is it combined with another of her rhetorical strategies, i.e. irony? Here we enter the realm of the motives of a fictional character and cannot reach a definitive answer. David Bevington seems persuaded that Cleopatra "is merely playing up to Thidias, restating Caesar's position with a kind of deflating mockery" but he immediately hesitates and undercuts his former statement: "But one cannot be certain; Enobarbus is not" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 188, note to lines III, 13, 62-63). In his aside quoted above, Enobarbus doubts whether she is actually abandoning Antony as a sinking ship. Enobarbus' reaction best reflects the audience's bafflement at Cleopatra's indecipherable behaviour and exemplifies his role of commentator; in other passages, Enobarbus even voices Plutarch's own comments and transposes them into the play (Wilders in Shakespeare 1995: 59).

Although in Act III, scene 13 we are left without any clue as to whether Cleopatra is using flattery conventionally, as a way to win Caesar's favour, or if she is being ironical, in the last scene the irony behind her flattery towards Caesar is more clearly identifiable: what appears an ingratiating gesture also reads as subtle mockery. Cleopatra deploys an effective combination of flattery and irony against Caesar, either indirectly by means of his servant Proculeius, or directly in her final meeting with him. In her dialogue with Proculeius in Act V, scene 2, Cleopatra feigns acknowledgement of Caesar's superiority when she claims to be "his fortune's vassal":

> Pray you, tell him
> I am his fortune's vassal, and I send him
> The greatness he has got. I hourly learn
> A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly
> Look him i'th'face. (V, 2, 28-32)

Shakespeare has left some clues to unmask the irony behind Cleopatra's fawning words. As Bevington notes, the formal beneficiary of Cleopatra's promise is Caesar's fortune, not Caesar himself (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 239, note to line V, 2, 29). That Cleopatra should make herself the vassal of Caesar's fortune is hardly believable in light of her outpouring of contempt for Caesar at the outset of the scene, which further invalidates her promise of submission:

> 'Tis paltry to be Caesar –
> Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
> A minister of her will. (V, 2, 2-4)

Moreover, Cleopatra's ironical attitude is evident since her confrontation with Proculeius:

> PROCULEIUS. Caesar sends greeting to the Queen of Egypt,
> And bids thee study on what fair demands
> Thou mean'st to have him grant thee.
> CLEOPATRA. What's thy name?
> PROCULEIUS. My name is Proculeius.
> CLEOPATRA. Anthony
> Did tell me of you, bade me trust you, but
> I do not greatly care to be deceived
> That have no use for trusting. If your master
> Would have a queen his beggar, you must tell him
> That majesty, to keep decorum, must
> No less beg than a kingdom. If he please
> To give me conquered Egypt for my son,

> He gives me so much of mine own as I
> Will kneel to him with thanks. (V, 2, 9-21)

Proculeius tries to deceive Cleopatra into believing not only that she can demand anything she wants – with Caesar paradoxically "bid[ding]" her to think "what fair demands" she has – but also that such power sets her in a position of superiority. However, Cleopatra appears to be perfectly aware of her inferiority: she is the one who has been defeated at the battle of Actium, a fact which the offer made by Caesar only foregrounds. Therefore, she perceives that Proculeius is trying to depict a distorted version of offer-demand relations in which the roles of the winner and loser are inverted.

Cleopatra's counterattack displays such awareness. Her second speech contains various figures of speech – a litotes, a paradox and a meiosis – all creating a "verbal irony", i.e., "the simplest form involving a discrepancy between statement and intent" (Buchanan 2010: 255). The litotes is to be found in the expression "I do not greatly care to be deceived": with an ironic move, Cleopatra conveys the message that she carefully looks after her own interests.[41] Therefore, Proculeius should realize that he cannot make a fool of her by getting her to believe that she has the upper hand. This explains why Cleopatra's irony in her answer is not tainted with flattery as usual: she questions his truthfulness with irony.

The litotes in line 14 links up with line 15 to form a paradox, a device which early modern critics such as Puttenham regarded as a figure of speech (Puttenham 1589: 189).[42] However, lines 14-15 – "I do not greatly care to be deceived / That have no use for trusting" – do not represent a paradox in the sense given by Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie,* in which he defines it as something "marvellous", which poets do not describe "simply but with some signe of admiration".[43] Rather, I intend here "paradox" more in its meaning as "apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition" (*OED*: "paradox" A.2.a).[44]

Applying this conception, the paradox in lines 14-15 lies in the parallelism between deceit and trust. Cleopatra establishes this unexpected association after she comes to know Proculeius' name. She realizes that this man is the one Antony recommended to her as the only trustful person among their enemies ("None about Caesar trust but Proculeius", IV, 16, 50). Despite Antony's advice, however, she makes it clear that she does not want to establish any relation of trust, affirming that she is one "that ha[s] no use for trusting" (V, 2, 15). Bevington interprets this line as "I who know how dangerous trusting can be" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 238, note to lines 14-15). However, a more literal interpretation of the relative clause is even more telling. If we consider the *OED* definition of "have no use for", lines 14-15 could be paraphrased as follows: "I have no great fondness for the idea of being deceived, I who do not need trusting" (*OED*: "use" P14: "to have no use for": a. "to be without need of something”; this meaning of the phrase was already in use in Shakespeare’s time). Being thus paraphrased, Cleopatra’s statement would then suggest a relation of similarity, if not identity, between “trusting” and “deceiving”: they are not presented as opposed concepts, as Bevington’s interpretation posits, but they are paralleled as if any concession of trust necessarily entailed a share of deceit. This may be seen as an example of what Michael Neill defines as the “Egyptian” use of paradox in the play, in which “opposites flourish in mysterious complementarity” (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 102). However, in a Roman perspective, from which paradox is “only self-devouring contradiction” (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 102), Cleopatra’s disillusion with the idea of trust exposes the intrinsic hypocrisy of the Roman world: Rome’s much renowned and celebrated virtues are not substantiated by coherently virtuous actions.

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[41] Both Bevington and Neill appear uncertain as how to interpret this line, either literally or ironically (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 238, note to line V, 2, 14). However, Neill favours the latter option. He suggests two alternative paraphrases for this line – either "it is a matter of indifference to me whether I am deceived or not" or "I have no wish to…" – but to him the second "better fits the context" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 14).

[42] Since the twentieth century, critics have considered paradox more as "a mode of understanding by which poetry challenges our habits of thought" (Baldick 2001: 183) rather than a figure of speech.

[43] This definition coincides with one of the meaning attributed also today to the word, i.e., "a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, *esp.* one that is difficult to believe" (*OED*: "paradox" A.1.a).

[44] In his first book, Puttenham also proves to use the term 'paradox' to indicate a contradiction: "There be wise men, and of them the great learned man *Plutarch* that tooke upon them to perswade the benefite that men receive by their enemies, which though it may be true in manner of *Paradoxe*, yet I find mans frailties to be naturally such" (Puttenham 1589: 46). However, in this passage the implied meaning is that the thought of someone receiving benefits from their enemies is contrary to any expectation: again the focus is not so much the self-contradiction in a statement but the wonder caused by something that goes beyond the received opinion, in line with the etymology παρὰ δόξαν "contrary to expectation" (*OED*).

Cleopatra’s answer to Proculeius ends with another figure of speech – the meiosis or, in Puttenham’s terms, the ‘meiosis or the Disabler’ or “extenuation or diminution” (Puttenham 1589: 183) – consisting in an “understatement or ‘belittling’” (Baldick 2001: 149). By comparing herself to a beggar, Cleopatra belittles herself but not “for modesties sake, and to avoid the opinion of arrogancie”, which is the function Puttenham attributed to meiosis (Puttenham 1589: 183). As Neill has supposed, Cleopatra’s self-diminution may here have an “ironic inflection” (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 16).[45] If we look at the context, Cleopatra is clearly being ironic. Proculeius has just tried to flatter her by saying that she can ask whatever she wants but, at the same time, has implicitly reminded her that she is the one who should “study on what fair demands” (V, 2, 10) she has and Caesar is the one who can “grant” (V, 2, 11) her what she asks. As a reaction, Cleopatra takes the idea of asking to the extreme of begging, but the fact that she is begging “no less [...] than a kingdom” (V, 2, 18) demonstrates that she is not being modest at all. The paradox of begging a kingdom exposes the irony implicit in the meiosis, thus confirming the “ironic inflection” hypothesized by Neill. Furthermore, the ironic nuance is emphasized in another paradox intervening in the immediately following lines:

> If he please
> To give me conquered Egypt for my son,
> He gives me so much of mine own as I
> Will kneel to him with thanks. (V, 2, 18-21)

Cleopatra declares she will kneel at Caesar’s feet provided he gives her what she requires of him. At first glance, this seems an ingratiating remark, echoing her words to Caesar’s messenger Thidias quoted above (III, 13, 73-78). However, if we consider the formulation of the sentence, she is equating “conquered Egypt” with “so much of mine own”; therefore, she is pointing out that if Caesar fulfils her request, he will be merely giving her what has been hers all along.

Suicide: simulation (?) and dissimulation

In the second half of her dialogue with Proculeius – after their mutual exchange of false, flattering remarks and promises – Cleopatra’s suspicion of any form of trust seems to be justified: the guards abruptly seize her, apparently by Proculeius’ order. Once Cleopatra sees that her freedom is being threatened, she tries to stab herself. And it is at this point that Proculeius unintentionally suggests how important her life is to Caesar:

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[45] The association between queen and beggars is a recurring trope in Shakespeare and is based on a ballad on the same theme (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 16).

PROCULEIUS. Do not abuse my master's bounty by
Th'undoing of yourself. Let the world see
His nobleness well acted, which your death
Will never let come forth. (V, 2, 43-46)

The reason why Cleopatra's life is so important to Caesar will be clarified later, in Cleopatra's dialogue with another servant of the emperor, Dolabella: Caesar wants to lead her in triumph as her trophy. However, here we are already given a hint at Caesar's intention to display his power – or "bounty" in Proculeius' perspective – by means of Cleopatra: the word "acted" inevitably underscores Caesar's aim to set up a show of his "nobleness", in which Cleopatra is apparently meant to play a fundamental role. This is not the first reference to Caesar's triumph: in an outburst of anger against Cleopatra, Antony had wished that Caesar would take her, "hoist[ing]" her "up to the shouting plebeians" (IV, 13, 34). Cleopatra herself imagines the "imperious show" that "full-fortuned Caesar" might want to set up (IV, 16, 25-26). The prospect of Caesar's triumph does not constitute a real possibility to the audience when it is envisaged by Antony, whose words are just a curse coming from an enraged lover ("Let him take thee…", IV, 13, 33 ff.); nor does it have any more substance in Cleopatra's mouth, since she is only imagining and rejecting the worst scenario that she can think of. However, these inconsistent references coupled with Proculeius' hint at an acting of Caesar's "bounty" (V, 2, 43) and "nobleness" (V, 2, 45) do give the idea of Caesar's triumph more reality, as it now sounds like a decision that Caesar has already taken and that Proculeius, as his servant, has been informed about.

What effect does the awareness of Caesar's plans produce on Cleopatra? When Proculeius gives her clues about the future Caesar holds in store for her should she remain alive (V, 2, 44-46), Cleopatra summons death:

Where are thou, Death?
Come hither, come! Come, come, and take a queen
Worth many babes and beggars! (V, 2, 46-48)

Then, she delivers a self-assertive and characteristically hyperbolic speech,[46] which seems a genuinely outraged reaction to the prospect of being carried to Rome in triumph:

Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink, sir;
If idle talk will once be necessary,
I'll not sleep, neither! This mortal house I'll ruin,
Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I
Will not wait pinioned at your master's court,
Nor once be chastised with the sober eye
Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark nak'd and let the water-flies
Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
My country's high pyramides my gibbet
And hang me up in chains! (V, 2, 49-62)

An echo of Antony's curse ("Let him take thee / And Hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians!”, IV, 13, 33-34), this speech may tell a lot about the reasons behind her suicide. It would appear clear that she decides to die not so much out of despair for Antony’s death – or at least not solely for this reason – but mostly because she cannot bear the idea of being imprisoned and led to Rome as an “Egyptian puppet” (V, 2, 208).

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[46] About the role of hyperbole in the play see Adelman (1973: 111 ff) and Neill (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 68 ff).

Now, we cannot establish how “genuinely” Cleopatra means to kill herself; however, what we can do in relation to her suicide is to look at how her outward stance towards it changes in the play. Before getting to know about Caesar’s intentions from Proculeius, Cleopatra’s utterances about suicide are quite contradictory. At first, she toys with the idea of killing herself, and on one occasion, even with irremediable consequences. Following Charmian’s advice, Cleopatra makes Antony believe that she killed herself, while she hides in her funerary monument.[47] However, in so doing, she unwittingly gives him one more reason for suicide, i.e., the shame of “lack[ing] / the courage of a woman” (IV, 15, 59-60).

In the following scene, when Antony, close to death, is brought to her and laid at the bottom entry of her monument, she does not go to him there, but instead has him lifted up to an upper entry, because she fears to “be taken”:

> I dare not, dear –
> Dear my lord, pardon – I dare not,
> Lest I be taken. Not th’imperious show
> Of the full-fortuned Caesar ever shall
> Be brooched with me, if knife, drugs, serpents have
> Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe. (IV, 16, 23-25)

Her feigned suicide in Act IV, scene 14 becomes here partially substantiated by this declaration of intention to die by any means at her disposal, be it a “knife”, “drugs” or “serpents”. Now Cleopatra sees herself “safe” only in her monument but not in the way it was before, as a hiding place from Antony’s rage (IV, 14): now, for her, safety is only in death. The monument, in which all the action of the last scene will take place (Neill 1994: 128), prematurely fulfils the function for which it was built, a tomb, a physical counterpart for “house of death” (IV, 16, 82) into which Cleopatra wants to rush, as she metaphorically refers to her suicide:

> Then is it sin
> To rush into the secret house of death
> Ere death dare come to us? (IV, 16, 81-83)

After her lover’s last gasp, Cleopatra’s gives way to despair and contempt for the world (“there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon”, IV, 16, 69-70). She now seems mostly concerned to do “what’s brave, what’s noble” (IV, 16, 87) “after the high Roman fashion” (IV, 16, 88). Nevertheless, far from fulfilling her stoic project, she indulges in talks about suicide, leading Laurens J. Mills to exclude “any interpretation of her tragedy as a love tragedy” (Mills 1960: 155). Indecisiveness prevails over firmness of intentions.

As mentioned above, Cleopatra abandons her temporizing when she attempts to stab herself in front of Proculeius and invokes death once she realizes that Caesar wants to lead her in triumph (V, 2, 46-48). Only then does she pronounce her firm protestation of freedom. However, after the dialogue with Proculeius, the queen prompts Dolabella, someone she appears to trust despite his being among Caesar’s supporters, to give her explicit confirmation of what she knows already:

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[47] We know that it was a funeral monument from Plutarch (Plutarch 1964: 272, 279; Neill 1994: 353-354).

> CLEOPATRA. Know you what Caesar means to do with me?
> DOLABELLA. I am loath to tell what I would you knew.
> CLEOPATRA. Nay, pray you, sir.
> DOLABELLA. Though he be honourable –
> CLEOPATRA. He'll lead me then in triumph?
> DOLABELLA. Madam, he will: I know't. (V, 2, 106-110)

By insisting on Cleopatra's hesitation, Shakespeare here seems to invite us to reflect once again upon her motives: why is she asking for confirmation about Caesar's plans if she had declared her intention to die on many occasions? How reliable is her promise to kill herself? What impact do Proculeius' and Dolabella's revelations of Caesar's plans have on her? Critics have variously assessed the relation between Cleopatra's decision to commit suicide and her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella; some of them have even questioned whether Cleopatra's decision is in any way related to these dialogues.[48] Just as Cleopatra manipulates her interlocutors on stage, so does Shakespeare with his audience, casting doubts as to the reasons behind her suicide. Inscrutability stands as one distinctive feature of Cleopatra's character, no matter how masterfully persuasive might sound her protestation of freedom through death. We can only accept that there is more than one viable interpretation and that this is exactly the point with Shakespeare's Cleopatra. What is more, everyone in the audience would know that Cleopatra eventually kills herself; what is relevant here is how she gets to accomplish her suicidal plans, i.e., which strategies she employs.

Along with her rhetorical skills analysed in section 1, Cleopatra adopts two other strategies: at first, simulation and, later, dissimulation, depending on the different purposes she has. The definition of these terms provided by Francis Bacon in his *Essays* coincide with my interpretation of Cleopatra's twofold tactics in this context:

> There be three degrees, of this Hiding and Vailing of a Mans Selfe. The first *Closeness*, *Reservation*, and *Secrecy* […]. The second *Dissimulation*, in the *Negative*; when a man lets fall Signes, and Arguments, that he is not, that he is. And the third, *Simulation*, in the Affirmative; when a Man industriously, and expressely, faigns, and pretends to be, that he is not (Bacon 1625: 27).

What I suggest is that Shakespeare has Cleopatra shift her strategy from simulation to dissimulation after her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella, when it becomes clear that Caesar wants to lead her in triumph. This bears out the hypothesis that she kills herself mainly out of fear of becoming one of Caesar's captives and sees self-imposed death as the only way to preserve her freedom. In light of this assumption, her dialogue with Proculeius could easily be interpreted as mere impulsiveness, standing out as a rare insight into her inner thoughts: once she realizes that she is going to be treated like a captive, she immediately tries to stab herself and, being prevented from doing so, she bursts out claiming her freedom and declaring her intention to kill herself. From this perspective, there is no simulation. However, two aspects may lead us to interpret her attempt at suicide in Act V, scene 2 rather differently: the precedent of her feigned suicide in Act IV, scene 14 to Antony's detriment and her temporizing up to that point suggest that she might well have simulated to stab herself. True, she had no certainty that someone would stop her at this point,[49] but the guards had just received the order to seize her and there was a high probability that they would try and prevent her from killing herself. Also, since it is thanks to her sensational gesture that Cleopatra gets the information she was looking for, i.e., what were Caesar's intentions with her alive. One might even conjecture that the reason why she feigned to stab herself is to see Caesar's reaction through Proculeius if she were to die.

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[48] In particular, there appears to be a strong emphasis on Dolabella's revelation. According to John Wilders, this meeting is decisive: "it is only when she discovers from Dolabella that the latter option [i.e., to come to terms with Caesar] is not open that she resolves finally on suicide" (Wilders in Shakespeare 1995: 46-47). By contrast, Richard C. Harrier affirms that the queen has planned to kill herself "only if her terms are not met" in the negotiations with Caesar (Harrier quoted in Stirling 1964: 305-306). Similarly, Brents Stirling believes that although "from IV, 15 [IV, 16 in Shakespeare 1994] onward Shakespeare implies from time to time that Cleopatra is hedging", he never leads us to think that Cleopatra regards suicide as the last resort; in Stirling's view, "the effect" conveyed is "one of growing assurance that Cleopatra will not temporize" (Stirling 1964: 306).

It could therefore be argued that in the last scene Cleopatra initially adopts a strategy in which she "industriously, and expressly feigns and pretends to be" what she is not (Bacon 1625: 27): this means that she feigns to be willing to die, whereas the events show that she is only temporizing. In line with this interpretation, in her dialogue with Proculeius Cleopatra is only feigning an attempt of suicide, vainly threatening to let herself die out of hunger and thirst, and indulging in a seemingly uncontrolled reaction at his hinting at Caesar's plans for her. She also wants Proculeius to report that she longs for death ("Say I would die", V, 2, 70). It must be added, however, that her making sure that her intention to die is reported to Caesar could back up both hypotheses: on the one hand, i.e., if she is just being impulsive, this would be a clear warning to his enemy; on the other, i.e., if she is simulating, she would be using her life as a leverage to attract him so as to manipulate him directly as she will do in the Seleucus scene.

Whatever her inner motives for suicide – love for Antony or avoidance of captivity or both – it is clear that, when she finally meets Caesar, Cleopatra abandons her impulsiveness or her simulation and turns to a strategy of dissimulation instead. In Bacon's terms, she "lets fall Signes, and Arguments" that she is not what she is (Bacon 1625: 27). While in front of Proculeius she threatens to starve herself to death, in front of Caesar she makes it very clear that she is not meditating suicide at all. And actually, unlike Plutarch, Shakespeare does not mention Cleopatra's request to be buried with Antony (Plutarch 1964: 290), which would lead Caesar to believe she was contemplating suicide. It takes a long time before she actually does the deed she has so often anticipated. However, far from witnessing to hesitation, her stalling here seems strategic: if we assume that defending her freedom is the motive behind her suicide, her new strategy, i.e., dissimulation, may equally serve this purpose.

In her direct confrontation with Caesar, Cleopatra makes the most of her dissimulative skills in order to dispel any doubt about her intention to live on. Cleopatra kneels before Caesar, and at his request to rise, she seals her act with words of submission:

> Sir, the gods
> Will have it thus: my master and my lord
> I must obey. (V, 2, 115-117)

And when Caesar minimizes the attack she and Antony have made on Rome as "things but done by chance" (V, 2, 120), Cleopatra plays the victim pleading her womanly "frailties" (V, 2, 123) as excuse:

> Sole sir o'th'world,
> I cannot project mine own cause so well
> To make it clear, but do confess I have
> Been laden with like frailties which before
> Have often shamed our sex. (V, 2, 120-124)

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[49] I thank one of the reviewers for this observation.

Interestingly, Cleopatra opens her rhetorically refined plea by questioning her very dialectic ability. However, she is only indulging in false modesty in order to produce a harmless and vulnerable image of herself; hence, here we have a proper case of meiosis or belittling in Puttenham's sense as mentioned above (Puttenham 1589: 183). Cleopatra's own words disprove her: her obsequious address to Caesar already exposes her mastery of rhetoric. Also, the audience had the chance to appreciate her rhetorical skills on many occasions earlier in the play: not only in her deployment of flattery and irony, as we have seen in section 1, but also in the hyperbolic narration of her dreams about Antony to Dolabella (V, 2, 82-92).

Cleopatra's dissimulative strategy goes even further: after she has aroused pity playing on her femininity and presumed lack of eloquence, she apparently sets up a scene with her treasurer Seleucus as part of her strategy to lead Caesar to think that she has no intention to commit suicide. Cleopatra hands him over a list of her possessions and summons her treasurer to confirm the amount. However, the latter refutes his queen's statement as he points out that she has made no mention of half of her treasure. Cleopatra's outraged response to the disloyalty of her servant, however, dissimulates her intention to make Caesar believe that she wants to keep her jewels for herself for future occasions, which would then mean she is not even considering suicide as an option (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 246, note to line V, 2, 139; Stirling 1964: 300).

The Seleucus scene perfectly exemplifies Cleopatra's dissimulative art. Her feigning is so effective that it still leaves a question open: it is not exactly clear to what extent this dissimulation involves Seleucus himself, i.e. whether he is serving as Cleopatra's unwitting instrument or he is consciously participating in her schemes. In this regard, it is worth comparing Shakespeare's scene with his source. In Plutarch Seleucus is there "by chance" (Plutarch 1964: 287), and it is by his own initiative that he disclaims Cleopatra's list of her possessions, whereas in Shakespeare he is prompted by Cleopatra to verify and confirm her declaration. This change is significant: as Bevington and other critics have pointed out,[50] Cleopatra and Seleucus might have orchestrated "a prearranged scene of deception" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 246, note to line V, 2, 139), whilst in Plutarch, as Stirling explains, "Cleopatra's ruse is all alone and is an impulse of the moment" (Stirling 1964: 300).

Moreover, in the Seleucus scene, dissimulation intersects with flattery. The queen skilfully interjects her outburst of indignation at her treasurer's (possibly feigned) treachery and disloyalty with an ingratiating reference to Caesar's sister:

> O Caesar, what a wounding shame is this,
> That – thou vouchsafing here to visit me,
> Doing the honour of thy lordliness
> To one so meek – that mine own servant should
> Parcel the sum of my disgraces by
> Addition of his envy! Say, good Caesar,
> That some lady trifles have reserved
> Immoment toys, things of such dignity
> As we greet modern friends withal; and say
> Some nobler token I have kept apart
> For Livia and Octavia, to induce
> Their mediation – must I be unfolded
> With one that I have bred? (V, 2, 159-171)

Only when Caesar has gone, does Cleopatra throws off her flattering mask. It is now apparent that she has been only pretending to accept his conditions:

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[50] Stirling quotes many critics who agree on the same interpretation of the scene with Seleucus (Stirling 1964: 300).

He words me girls, he words me, that I should not
Be noble to myself. (V, 2, 191-192)

Up to this point, Cleopatra has proven to be an excellent manipulator by means of her rhetorical skills and her mastery of both simulative and dissimulative art: the first victims of this manipulation are the spectators, who are unable to identify what aim Cleopatra is pursuing up to her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella. However, her new awareness of Caesar's intentions makes her increasingly "marble-constant" (V, 2, 240), as she defines herself towards the accomplishment of her suicidal plans. Her "resolution's placed" (V, 2, 238); now, it is only a matter of "acting it out".

Suicide and metatheatre

From Caesar's exit on, the focus shifts onto Cleopatra's orchestration of her suicide: Cleopatra here finally enacts what she has only been talking about heretofore. However, the audience was familiar with the story: everyone would expect her to commit suicide from the outset of the play. How can Shakespeare revive this event beyond a mere reproduction of historical facts? His signature in the story's end is identifiable in the metatheatrical pattern of the suicide scene: Cleopatra's self-annihilation is presented as a most macabre play to be performed. Although metatheatre is a recurring feature in Shakespeare's later production (Holland 2004), Cleopatra's is "the most self-consciously *performed*, the most elaborately gestural dying in all Shakespearean tragedy" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 78). As she prepares for suicide, the queen has her clothes changed on stage, thus literally "disguising" herself, i.e., putting herself out of her usual guise:[51]

Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch
My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,
To meet Mark Anthony. (V, 2, 227-229)

The theme of disguise is crucial in terms of metatheatrical references: it is linked to the early modern theatrical practice of casting male actors, especially young ones for female roles (Shapiro 1969: 46).[52] Gender cross-dressing in theatre is referred to more openly in the second half of the last scene of the play (V, 2), before Cleopatra begins to direct the staging of her own death. When Cleopatra hears the information Dolabella has been able to gather about Caesar's plans, which includes taking her and her children to Rome, she bursts out in anger and pictures the welcome she would receive if she came as Caesar's trophy:

Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers

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[51] The "primary" sense of "disguise" is "to put out of one's usual guise, manner, or mode (of dress, etc.)" (*OED*).

[52] With reference to *Antony and Cleopatra* and the possible use of a boy for the demanding role of the queen, Joy Leslie Gibson writes: "the part of Cleopatra is often quoted as being impossible for a boy to play, and indeed, there is no record of it having been performed in Shakespeare's time. Perhaps he decided that he would rather not have some 'squeaking Cleopatra' play the part. Nevertheless, the role was written with a boy in mind" (Gibson 2000: 104). As Jason Scott-Warren admits, "the near-total absence of female actors from the professional stage before the Restoration" remains still inexplicable, also because England is the only exception in Europe in that regard: on the continent women were not prevented from acting (Scott-Warren 2005: 115). For further reference to this early modern practice in the play see Cleopatra's outburst of sorrow at Antony's death: "Young boys and girls / Are level now with men" (V, 2, 67-68). Cleopatra's disclaiming of her own womanhood in V, 2, 237-238 ("I have nothing / of a woman in me") could equally contain a reference to this early modern practice.

Ballad us out o'tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels – Anthony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th'posture of a whore. (V, 2, 214-221)

Cleopatra's anticipatory outline would strike contemporary audiences as ironic on account of its references to the early modern practice of transvestism amongst male actors. As Bevington has noticed, Cleopatra is here breaking "theatrical illusion" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 29).[53] As a result, the boundaries between stage and reality become blurred. The use of the noun "boy" as a verb – an example of anthimeria,[54] which had puzzled Shakespeare's nineteenth-century editors (Rackin 1972: 201) – performs in language the substitution of a woman with a boy. Just as the noun substitutes for the verb, so a boy takes the place of a woman. Shakespeare thus turns the boy's sex, which was "a visible 'defect'" into an "aesthetic advantage" (Gruber 1985: 40). When Cleopatra asks her women for her "best attires" (V, 2, 228), she is therefore adding another layer of disguise to her transvestising.

Cleopatra also demands to wear her royal attributes ("Bring our crown and all", V, 2, 232; "Give my robe. Put on my crown", V, 2, 279), which all stand out as "presentational" images but also as objects on stage symbolizing Cleopatra's "majesty and queenliness in death" (Charney 1963: 122-123). Her servant Charmian, who is about to commit suicide in turn, makes sure that the effect of Cleopatra's ultimate disguise will last even after her death: as her last tribute to her queen, she performs the final adjustments of Cleopatra's royal attire, by straightening the queen's crown on her now lifeless body:

Your crown's awry;
I'll mend it, and then play. (V, 2, 316-317)

The verb "play", which Charmian uses to adumbrate her impending suicide, gestures towards the metatheatrical quality of her death and Cleopatra's. Furthermore, as Rackin suggests, here "the word 'play' emphasizes both the hedonistic and the theatrical aspect of the very Egyptian death these women are contriving" (Rackin 1972: 209).[55] This multiple rehearsal of the coronation act has led Michael Neill to identify an "anachronistic borrowing from the language of contemporary political pageantry" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 126).

Cleopatra's staging of her own suicide comes as the culmination of other metatheatrical passages distributed throughout the play; these moments all involve the queen, either as a skilled actress "whom everything becomes, to chide, to laugh, / to weep" (I.1.51-52) in her histrionic "infinite variety", or as a director. In one of her outbursts of jealousy in Act 1, she instructs – and in a way directs – Antony on how he "should perform his grief" (Bates 2012: 435) for the death of his first wife Fulvia:

I prithee turn aside, and weep for her;
Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears

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[53] As Phyllis Rackin argues, the "squeaking boy speech" opens another major issue, namely "the issue of the nature of the plays" (Rackin 1972: 207). Rackin discusses the implications of the metatheatricality of the play for the contemporary debate about theatrical conventions and tastes: "The play seems perfectly calculated to offend the rising tide of neoclassical taste and to disappoint rational expectation"; Shakespeare thus "defies the expectations of reason and the possibilities of realistic representation […] [by reminding us] that he cannot truly represent" Cleopatra's greatness by means of a "squeaking" boy (Rackin 1972: 207).

[54] "The substitution of one part of the speech for another" (Rackin 1972: 201).

[55] The hedonistic aspect of death is enhanced by the images of the figs and the snakes, both symbols of sexuality; (Adelman 1973: 63).

Belong to Egypt. Good now, play one scene
Of excellent dissembling, and let it look
Like perfect honour. (I, 3, 77-81)

Something similar happens early in Act IV, scene 16, the scene that ends with Antony's death. As if foreboding the impending death of her lover, Cleopatra depicts her sorrow in ways which suggest that she is preparing to rehearse the part of a lady in grief and in love, more than actually to grieve:

All strange and terrible events are welcome,
But comforts we despise. Our size of sorrow,
Proportioned to our cause, must be as great
As that which makes it. (IV, 16, 3-6)

The use of the word "must" turns what should be a verbalization of her inner feelings into a self-imposed attitude.

What effect does metatheatre produce in the suicide scene? In general terms, metatheatrical references enlarge the scope of the "dramatic or written text" to include also the "theatrical or performance text" (Elam 2012: 2). Metatheatre works as "estranging device building up to an increased awareness of [the audience's] role as receivers in the theatrical event" (Soncini 1999: 18). By pointing to the inherently fictional nature of the play, Shakespeare reminds us of our condition as spectators: in so doing, he establishes a complicity with the audience, winking at them about their suspension of disbelief. However, the audience is not treated as passive onlookers: the audience is asked to fill in the gaps, is engaged "in the creation of meaning" (Soncini 1999: 12). In this play, in which "not even scepticism is a secure position", spectators are "forced to participate in the act of judgement" (Adelman 1973: 24). This applies to both of the dimensions of the play we have identified, the dramatic and the performative text. At the dramatic level, the reliability of any judgement about Cleopatra's inner states has been questioned throughout the play, and it is exactly this feature that engages both the other characters and the audience in speculations about her. Adelman sees this uncertainty as a crucial feature of the play as a whole: it is "the very indirectness of *Antony and Cleopatra* that insures the direct participation of the audience in it" (Adelman 1973: 31). In the play, Cleopatra herself acknowledges the impossibility of producing any final judgment on people's motives by comparing Antony to a piece of anamorphic art, with images changing depending on the perspective (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 136, note to line II, 5, 118-119):

Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,
The other way's a Mars. (II, 5, 117-118)

A similar anamorphic effect is achieved at the performative level with metatheatre (Soncini 1999: 19): Shakespeare occasionally unveils the theatrical illusion lurking beneath the main representational level. In so doing, he adds a further layer of complexity for the audience, in case it should not be puzzling enough with Cleopatra's baffling actions and words. However, as Adelman puts it, "Shakespeare is not dallying with us only to confuse us". Metatheatre is an instrument to enhance the audience's self-consciousness not only as spectators but also as commentators and judges of the events just like the other characters or as "silent extensions of them" (Adelman 1973: 39).

In the last scene, however, metatheatre acquires a further significance. Cleopatra's performance of suicide is not just another hint at theatrical self-reflexiveness, it is a play within a play in its own right. And Cleopatra undertakes the role of director of this embedded play, in which she also happens to perform the main action. For the first time, we know that her words will correspond to her deeds: there is no more space for irony or flattery, simulation or dissimulation, as she finally accomplishes what she has postponed, after much temporizing and scheming. However, the characterization of her suicide as a performance directed by herself does not drive away the doubts regarding her inner motives: far from compensating for Cleopatra's ambiguity, this metatheatrical performance heightens Cleopatra's "infinite variety" by way of attaching a new role to her character, namely the role director of her own death.

Cleopatra's ability to manipulate either with her rhetorical skills or her deceitful strategies alongside the metatheatrical performance of her suicide are all aspects that seem to be reunited and conflated in the image of the serpent,[56] the instrument of Cleopatra's self-imposed death. As is well known, some of the details in the mechanics of Cleopatra's death come from *The Life of Antony*; one of them is the countryman bringing a basket of figs containing the instrument for the suicide: several asps in Shakespeare,[57] one asp only in Plutarch. And yet, what in Plutarch figures as a mere detail – an asp as Cleopatra's weapon of self-destruction – achieves in Shakespeare a major significance since the appearance of the serpent is where the dramatic and the performative text intersect: the snake is not just a word, or, in Maurice Charney's terms, a mere "verbal image" (Charney 1963: 8). Since a true reptile is thought to enter the stage, the serpent gains the status of "non verbal or 'presentational' image", i.e., an image "that is not part of the spoken word of the text, but directly presented in the theatre" (Charney 1963: 7-8), thus exploiting the characteristically theatrical mode of ostension, namely the action of pointing out an object.[58] What is more, far from being just put on display, the serpent is made to perform no less than the killing of Cleopatra, one of the key-actions in the play. The customary "distinction between the active subject, embodied by the actor, and the objects to which he relates and which participate in the action through his agency" is thus undermined (Elam 2002: 13).

It must be added, however, that even on the purely dramatic level, the serpent as a "verbal image" stands as the ideal metaphor for the various declinations of Cleopatra's baffling changeability: she can deceive and change her "skin" at will just like a serpent. And this metaphorical connection between the image of the serpent and Cleopatra explicitly surfaces in the play-text in various associations, each referring to a different aspect of Cleopatra's "infinite variety".[59] Antony calls her his "serpent of old Nile" (I, 5, 25) or defines the time spent in Egypt under the spell of Cleopatra's seductive and serpentine enchantment as "poisoned hours" (II, 2, 95); "the flattering thought that Antony is thinking of her" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 107, note to line I, 5, 28) is to Cleopatra a "most delicious poison", which she consciously administers to herself (I, 5, 27).

And once we look at the play from the performative perspective, the asps also feature as actors, who, directed by Cleopatra, are made to play a crucially instrumental role in the gruesome show of the queen's suicide. As Cleopatra remarks while she applies the first asp to her arm, poor instruments may bring liberty and do noble deeds:

What poor an instrument
May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty. (V, 2, 236-237)

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[56] Here I will be discussing only parts of the various declinations of the symbolism attached to the serpent. For more details on this topic, see Adelman (1973: 62-64) and Madelaine (Madelaine in Shakespeare 1998: 22).

[57] We infer that in Shakespeare there is more than one asp from the stage directions: "She applies an asp" (V, 2, 297 SD) and "She applies another asp" (V, 2, 306 SD).

[58] Keir Elam defines ostension as "the most 'primitive' form of signification" upon which theatre draws and explains its functioning as follows: "in order to refer to, indicate or define a given object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question" (Elam 2002: 26).

[59] Another symbol for Cleopatra's changeability is water, notably the river Nile (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 85).

Moreover, the serpent/actor is to Cleopatra here not just an instrument of death, but also a "baby":

> Peace, peace!
> Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
> That sucks the nurse asleep? (V, 2, 307-309)

In a mutual exchange of life and death – a morbid maternal relationship, Cleopatra feeds a dreadful serpent / "baby", which in return gives death to her. Mary Olive Thomas interprets Cleopatra's maternal attitude towards the serpent as a way to assert her vitality even when she is about to die (Thomas 1963: 181). In the immediately following lines, "Cleopatra's imagination transforms the asp to a surrogate for Antony himself" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 124), thereby turning the maternal care for the serpent into sexual pleasure:

> As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle –
> O Anthony! Nay, I will take thee too. (V, 2, 310-311)

The serpent on Cleopatra's breast evokes not only maternity or erotic pleasure: as Neill has pointed out, this image also recalls "the *macabre* tradition" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 124), especially the *gisant* sculptures of rotting cadavers with worms in *transi* tombs, with which Shakespeare must have been familiar.[60] This macabre association is prepared by the ambiguous references to the serpent as a worm when the Clown brings the basket of figs with the asps inside Cleopatra's monument. Cleopatra welcomes him, asking if he has brought "the pretty worm / of Nilus" (V, 2, 242-243), and the Clown himself repeatedly refers to it as a "worm". Although the Clown's remarks are full of sexual overtones ("she [a woman] makes a very good report o'th'worm", V, 2, 254; "I wish you joy of the worm", V, 2, 259), some of them also sound ominous: "His biting is immortal" (V, 2, 246), where by immortal he means "mortal" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 318, note to line V, 2, 246); "there is no goodness in the worm", V, 2, 265-266). From this perspective, Cleopatra's maternal relationship towards the asps is turned into a process of decomposition of the queen's body. Moreover, this macabre effect is all the more enhanced by the backdrop, Cleopatra's funerary monument.

Cleopatra's relationship with the serpent can be seen as yet another, multiple paradox in this play. Not only does Cleopatra use a life – that of the asp – to end life (Bates 2012: 440); she nourishes this very life with her body, thus prefiguring its putrefaction by worms, and in exchange she receives death. Yet, the Clown had warned her: "Give it nothing I pray you, for it is not / worth the feeding" (V, 2, 268-269). On the other hand, when she is about to annihilate herself, Cleopatra transfers her life to a serpent, her symbolical counterpart in the play. And it is only apt that she should choose a real snake to kill her own snaky self, again in a perfect coincidence of verbal and nonverbal meanings.

The manifold nature of the serpent – its role as a verbal sign, as a presentational object and, to a certain extent, as an active subject – mirrors the multiple facets of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, namely her skills as a refined manipulator through flattery and irony, as a shrewd strategist deploying (possibly) simulation and dissimulation and finally as a director of her own, highly macabre death. At the dramatic level of the text, Shakespeare problematizes the unreliability of Cleopatra’s utterances and actions; at the performative level, he makes her the catalyst of metatheatrical reflections, which further adds to Cleopatra’s cryptic nature rather than offering a solution to the audience’s doubts: in her performance of suicide she figures both as leading lady and director. However, by conflating the distance between spectators and stage, Shakespeare at least grants the audience the awareness that they have fallen prey to the invincible powers of manipulation of Cleopatra and, ultimately, of theatre itself.

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[60] That these tombs have impressed Shakespeare is even more evident in a play such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Green 2016: 259; Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 123-125). The term *gisant* indicates "a recumbent effigy, frequently idealized" (Green 2016: 252). The *transi* or cadaver tomb is a medieval tradition of burial, which "instead of burying the corpse beneath the ground thrusts it menacingly before the eyes of the living, presaging their own inescapable fate"; these tombs sometimes were "double" in the sense that they "combined a life-sized *gisant* figure […] depicting the deceased as he or she was in life, housed with a life-sized emaciated corpse or putrefying skeleton" (Green 2016: 252).

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In a time such as ours in which the manipulation of truth is becoming alarmingly normalized even in the public sphere, a reflection on lying seems particularly fitting. Lying has a century-old cultural history but the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries deservedly stand out as “the age of dissimulation”. The present volume explores lying and some of its related manifestations – disguise, dissimulation, and counterfeiting – in early modern English drama, by considering the responses to these topics in some plays by William Shakespeare and John Webster.

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