

Poison, Contagion, and Toxicity in Early Modern Literature



**Selected Papers from the
“Infection and Toxicity in Early Modern
English Literature and Culture”
Graduate Conference**

Virtual Conference, 23 April 2021

Edited by
Laura Tosi and Laura Pinnavaia

THE BRITISH INSTITUTE OF FLORENCE



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Introduction: Poison, Contagion and Revenge in Early Modern Literature

Laura Tosi

Virus, plague, contagion

The topic of the 2020 IASEMS Graduate conference, the proceedings of which are presented here, was “Infection and Toxicity in Early Modern English Literature and Culture”. The conference should have taken place in Florence in April 2020, precisely at the time when Italy was being hit by the Coronavirus and experiencing the first major lockdown in Europe as a measure to try and protect people from the tragic effects of the infection. While we were all incredulously working on our papers, expressions such as “infiltration” and “contagion”, “sealing off towns”, “rising numbers of cases”, all of a sudden became current in the news and in everyone’s experience. In a way that no one could imagine was possible, life reflected on the one hand the theme of the conference and, on the other hand, what contributors were researching and thinking about discourses of toxicity, infection and, as it happened, poisoning. Theatres worldwide were closed for fear of COVID-19, and it was impossible not to think back to past times when theatres were closed because of the plague. The conference was moved to April 2021, and it went online. We were then hermetically sealed away from each other, at a time in which a massive vaccination campaign had started in Italy but was still far from reaching most of the population, and “in person” conferences were considered dangerous to organize and attend for fear of the infection. By then the virus had become part of our imaginative landscape: the way it is caught, how to best defend ourselves, and the way we imagine it can access our bodies, was (and is still) a matter of discussion, between experts and the general public, with possibly the same serious concern that the early moderns expressed, in their cultural and literary production, about the circulation of toxic and poisonous substances. Like our early modern ancestors periodically visited by the plague¹, we have now to a certain extent adapted to periodic manifestations of a pandemic that still affects some aspects of our daily life due to virus mutations and the possibility of reinfection (unlike them, we have at least some notion of the mechanics of transmission). It is not surprising then that most of the papers that were discussed and are collected in this edition of the IASEMS proceedings are about contagion and especially poison (in its physical as well as metaphorical sense).

Poison and invasion

Poison, like the virus, comes from the outside but works, in slow and mysterious ways, inside us: it is a substance as well as an act that evokes ideas of danger and vulnerability, which are easily projected on an imaginary cultural landscape. It would be impossible in this introduction

¹ Plague discourse in England registered in a large body of writing which included literary representation as well as religious belief (such as, among other things, plague as divine utterance to be read in the body of the sick). See Wilson 1963, Healy 2001, Gilman 2009 and Totaro and Gilman 2010.

to explore all the associations with poisons that affected many cultural discourses of the period, from religion to medicine, from proto-journalism to politics, to law, and the way they “contaminated” the literary sphere. Many essays in this collection deal with the fact that poison has to do with the permeability of borders, both physical and metaphorical, and the way poison can be a site of overdetermination of meaning, with specifically political overtones. For example, the connection between poison and politics, especially poison and tyranny, that we find in revenge tragedies (the tyrant as metaphorically poisonous, who uses real poison to eliminate political enemies) is part of a long-standing tradition. In Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Allegory of Bad Government*, a scene from a famous cycle of frescoes located in the Hall of the Nine in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, the tyrant is portrayed as a devil holding a cup of poison. It was painted in 1338-1339. Much later (1614) John Webster would open his *Duchess of Malfi* (1614) with Antonio, the honest steward, describing a prince’s court as being “like a common fountain”, which, if by chance it is poisoned near the head, “death, and diseases through the whole land spread” (I, 1, 12, 15).

The metaphor of invasion, at a macroscopic level, describing an agent crossing geographical boundaries, is often employed in connection with poison. References to poison intervene in a larger conversation about contagion (see Carlin 2005 and Chalk and Floyd-Wilson 2019) and the pharmaceutical analogy (the infiltration of disease) in early modern England. It has been argued that the metaphorical analogy between social/political life and the human body does not only concern the “harmonious concord of the diverse members”, but often focusses on “the vigilant surveillance of the body’s limits in the face of potential infiltration” (Harris 1998: 25). The new medical paradigms seemed to reinforce this perception: disease was increasingly perceived no longer as an internal imbalance of humours or fluids according to Galenic medicine, but as an attack from an external agency, in which the porous body acts as a site of infiltration: “regular outbreaks of epidemic illnesses such as plague, the sweating sickness, and, in particular, syphilis revealed the inadequacy of the conventional, Galenic understanding of disease as an endogenous state” (Harris 2004: 15). It is not by chance that poison metaphors increasingly turn up in conjunction with ideas of syphilis and the plague (especially after the severe epidemic of 1603 in England), which carry metaphorical, as well as physical, connotations. Harris notices that, for example, the variety of names given to syphilis at the beginning of the sixteenth century “demonstrates how virtually every nation afflicted by the epidemic assumed it to have its origins in another body politic” (1998: 26). So, the Italians and the English called it the French sickness, the French the Neapolitan disease, the Russians the Polish sickness, the Poles the German sickness, and so on (Harris 2004: 43). Syphilis, like Coronavirus, is always imported from somewhere else. The political implications of such a model are immediately evident: the body politic requires policing of its borders.

Poison and power

Poison narratives in Europe in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, discussed by the French historian Franck Collard (2007), describe a crime that is typically located in places of power, involving people of power: popes, cardinals, royal counsellors and favourites, dukes, kings. When Richard II sits and tells stories of the deaths of Kings, he mentions “some poisoned by their wives” (III, 2, 159). Richard has a point there, as this “murder most foul [...], strange and unnatural” (*Hamlet* I, 5, 26-27) does not require exceptional strength – it is a crime that can be performed by the weak and the marginalized (Bellany 2016: 559), such as women, or servants, against the noble and the strong (as Hallissy has argued, poison is “an insidious equalizer of strength in the battle of the sexes” (1987: 6)). It is not surprising that this (imaginary) accessibility to the low-born or the powerless would have triggered fears for the disruption of

hierarchies of power. The association between women and poison, as Maddalena Repetto's essay in this collection "*Nero Veneficus*: Poison as an Emblem of Feminisation in Matthew Gwinne's *Nero*" argues, was a long-established notion in early modern England. Her contribution investigates the way the Roman archetype of the female poisoner, the *venefica*, is exploited by Gwinne to expose Nero's weakness and emasculation: the Roman emperor's choice to appropriate the feminine role of poisoner and actively become a *veneficus* foregrounds his renunciation of masculinity, in favour of feminine traits (possibly, as Repetto suggests, the opposite of what Elizabeth had been doing in her self-representation as a prince).

Catherine de' Medici, another powerful woman, was considered by many as the ambassador of Italian poison into France (Stelzer 2020: 216). Most famously, for Thomas Nashe in *Pierce Penniless* (1592), Italy is the "Apothecary-shop of poison for all nations" (Nashe 1985: 83), and Thomas Adams in 1614 encapsulated contemporary prejudice when he wrote in one of his sermons that there are nation-specific sins, and "if we should gather Sinnes to their particular Centers, we would appoint [...] Poysoning to *Italie*" (quoted in Wilson 2014: xxxi) (incidentally, Adams identifies as England's typical sin that of *gluttony*). After all, Italy had produced writings specifically devoted to poisons much earlier than England and, on stage, poison and poisoners are rarely English. However, it is not just the dramatists that attribute to Italy this particular inclination: ever since the Middle Ages, other European countries have drawn a geography of poison that has placed Italy at its centre. Collard mentions Florence and Venice as "pôles de toxicité" (Collard 2003: 51), and since 1509, for example, the Council of Ten, the intelligence apparatus of the Republic of Venice, regularly authorized the use of poison against the enemies of the Republic (see De Mas Latrie 1895).

But Italy was believed to poison English culture in other, devious, ways. The danger of real and metaphorical poisoning of Italian translations in early modern English culture features extensively in Beatrice Fuga's contribution in this collection "'I have bound thee to't by death': Italian Intoxication of English Reading Practices". The essay focuses on the controversy concerning the ambivalent fascination for Italian literature in translation for the English: an inspirational source of early modern drama (such as the *Novelle* by Matteo Bandello) but also a vehicle of moral and cultural infection. Material and symbolic poisoning conflate, once again, in Webster's Italianate revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, after Bandello and its French and English translations, in which the murder weapon used by the Cardinal to kill his mistress is a poisoned Bible – a dramatic way to represent Catholic depravity and satirize the toxic power of the Counter Reformation, but also, as Roger Ascham believed, a powerful symbol of the penetration of the poisonous influence of Italian literature in England.

Concern about the venomous potential of Italian imports aside, the crime of poisoning provided endless fascination for the English and was so present in their imagination, that for a while it even deserved a special punishment. In 1531 Henry VIII passed an *Acte for Poisoning* – not to get rid of a wife, but to punish a Richard Roose, cook to the Bishop of Rochester, who had put poison in the Bishop's food (again, we have a case of a social inferior trying to kill someone who is far above him in the social hierarchy). The Bishop did not die, but many people in the household were sick, and so were a number of poor people who fed on the Bishop's leftovers. The statute turned this type of murder into an act of high treason and determined that all future poisonings would be considered as such, regardless of circumstances and victims: poisoning became punishable with death *by boiling* (Kesselring 2001: 894-5). At least one other person, a woman, was boiled to death, in the 1540s, for this crime. The act was then repealed by Edward VI's first parliament. Of course, on reading about the boiling, one can't help noticing how this "kind of wild justice", as Francis Bacon would put it in his essay "Of Revenge" (1597), resembled the symmetry much favoured by revengers (Stacy 1986: 5), the perfect way to reenact the original crime: a cook trying to poison food, who is boiled alive – punishment, like the best revenge, could not be closer to the original crime.

Poisoning in the early modern period is unanimously considered as the most abhorrent crime, “of all murders [...] the most detestable and fearfull to the nature of man”, as the legal scholar Edward Coke put it in 1644 (quoted in Wilson 2013: 100), a deed of darkness, like witchcraft. Witches were long associated with poisons as well as love potions. In his *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), Reginald Scot conflates poisoning with witchcraft (“a cozening art”, like poison), *veneficium* with *maleficium*: “sometimes a murtherer with poison is called a witch [...] trulie this poisoning art called Veneficium, of all others is most abhominable; [...] the most odious kind of murther” (quoted in Hallissy 1987: 66).

Let us pause for a moment and think about the reason for this abomination. What distinguishes poisoning from any other way of killing? What makes it more odious? First of all, poisoning is a premeditated murder, an act performed in cold blood when the victim is not aware – it is the opposite of a duel, which is commonly associated with honour and chivalry (chivalric violence was perceived as a more honest, “civilized”, transparent way of dealing with opponents). Unsurprisingly, in revenge tragedy it is often the undeserving, the abject, the guilty, who use poison. *Hamlet* is a case in point. While Old Hamlet defeats Old Fortinbras in single combat, as rival generals of armies sharing the same military code of warlike masculinity, Claudius poisons his brother while he is asleep, defenceless, vulnerable. And he avoids challenging young Hamlet, when he chooses Laertes as a champion (Alexander 1971: 179). The chivalric nature of the final duel is perverted and corrupted by the double addition of poison (to the tip of the sword and to the cup: “if he by chance escape your venomd stuck / Our purpose may hold there” (IV, 7, 159)). Claudius, who just cannot bring himself to compete face to face in this world of open action and masculinity, in the end, quite appropriately, has to drink his own poison (a metaphor for revenge if ever there was one).

Poison as prop

While the sword is a conspicuous prop with a clear purpose on stage, poison, like any toxic substance, is an *invisible* prop. A prop has been defined as a property which gives the owner “a right of action” (Sofer 1998: 69). It is “an inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance [...] a stage object [that] must be “triggered” (Sofer 2003: 11). In the case of poison, even if it is not there, it does trigger action on stage (it has, *and it has not*, been smeared off stage onto Laertes’ sword, or onto the Cardinal’s Bible in *The Duchess of Malfi*, for example). On stage, it can “hide” in a container (Claudius’s pearl), but the content is just *not there* (poison’s ability to work by secret means resembles the early modern model of contagion as an agency of invisible operations and movements between bodies). If all props need to be willed into action, brought from the real world with all their cultural baggage onto the stage, poison, which has no material life on stage, requires the audience to evoke it, as in a séance, and believe in its existence. Its movement, alteration, effect is entirely in the spectators’ minds. It is theatrical and antitheatrical at the same time: it is anti-theatrical because the audience can’t see it onstage, but it is theatrical precisely because it creates the illusion of its existence, in the same way as Prospero has everyone believe that there was a tempest at the beginning of the play. It is a form of magic on stage, which lends agency and action to the objects it touches. As Vindice in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606) admits, after having smeared the skull of his lover Gloriana with poison in order to take revenge on the Duke who killed her (with poison), “I have not fashioned this only for show / and useless property, no – it shall bear a part / E’en in its own revenge (III, 5, 99-101). Poisoning requires having access to a body, dominating that body and being willing to access the vulnerable, private orifices of the body natural. Claudius intrudes upon the privacy of a king: from the ghost’s tale we learn that there is no guard checking the entrance of the orchard. It is an open world, based on honour and personal

trust: a court with no policy of access (Perry 2006: 121-122). But in the Tudor and Stuart courts things were not that different. Favourites could enjoy intimate relationships with the spaces and even the bodies of sovereigns, at the expense of other courtiers: “the inner sanctum was to be governed by a politics of intimacy, a face-to-face, interpersonal politics in which the monarch called all the shots” (Scott-Warren 2005: 48). Which takes us back to the link between poison and court intrigue. The persistence of the corrupt favourite in the political imagination of the period was encouraged by a variety of pamphlets and court cases. *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, a libel that circulated in the 1580s and was reprinted under James and Charles, portrayed Elizabeth’s favourite as a villain, whose insatiable ambition drove him to poison everyone who stood in his way to power (Perry 2006: 22-54). Later, in 1615-1616 James’s favourite Robert Carr, the Earl of Somerset, was found guilty, with his wife, of poisoning another powerful courtier, Sir Thomas Overbury, in the Tower of London. Another favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, who was at James’s deathbed, was accused of poisoning the King as he interfered in some way with his medical treatment. In 1626 a pamphlet entitled *The Forerunner of Revenge Upon the Duke of Buckingham*, by the Scottish doctor George Eglisam, enjoying a wide circulation, still targeted the Duke as poisoner. The secret story of James’s alleged poisoning captured the imagination of many English subjects (see Bellany and Cogswell 2015). As Perry explains,

the alacrity with which such stories took hold and circulated must have partly to do with the vivid, pre-existing figure of the favourite as poisoner [...] such stories confirmed deep popular intuitions about the nature of corrupt favour (2006: 97).

All this imaginative world left a theatrical legacy or was possibly fuelled by theatre: in many Jacobean and Caroline revenge tragedies the narrative of courtly favouritism is refashioned as the rise of the malcontent, the corrupt upwardly mobile servant, or simply the courtier who craves admittance to and friendship with a duke or a sovereign, but often ends up playing the role of the tool-villain: Lodovico in *The White Devil* (1612), Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), and Francisco in *The Duke of Milan* (1623) fight to be able to enjoy the privilege of being with the powerful, and in their various capacities use poison to speed up their careers.

Poisonous cosmetics

The idea of poison infiltrating the body is also represented through the image of its entering the skin, as cosmetics are supposed to do (especially if they are expensive). There was widespread concern about the dangerous ingredients that were part of cosmetics, like mercury sublimate (also used to treat syphilis), which would be absorbed through the skin and have toxic effects (as women’s bodies were considered intrinsically permeable, see Mullaney 1994: 159). Of course anti-cosmetic pamphlets did not just warn against the physical danger posed by early modern cosmetics; they insisted that cosmetics were morally corrupting, and led to spiritual contamination (prostitutes were notorious for heavy use of face painting, possibly to hide the marks of venereal disease): “The notion of a painted lady as a snare is tied closely to this neurotic fear of poison in early modern England and is at the root of the anti-cosmetic sentiment” (Karim-Cooper 2006: 48).

John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) and Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter* (1607) allude to the anti-cosmetic tradition in reference to poison to construct radically different female identities. Let us compare two scenes of ladies at the dressing table as they look at their faces in the mirror. Act III, scene 2 of *The Duchess of Malfi* is a domestic scene: the Duchess has asked her servant to bring her a mirror, so that she can remove her jewels and brush her hair

before going to bed. While the Duchess is performing these operations, she is checking for grey hairs and thinking of old age:

Doth not the colour of my hair 'gin to change?
When I wax grey, I shall have all the court
Powder their hair with arras, to be like me: (III, 2, 58-61)

What is interesting here is that she does not intend to change the colour of *her* hair with cosmetics, but affirms that, when she grows older, she will keep her hair naturally white – it will be her court that will have to use “arras” (or “orris”: the white powder of orris root) to make *their* hair white, so that everyone will look old like her. In the mirror the Duchess sees the reflection of a woman who is no longer young but is nevertheless not interested in altering her appearance with cosmetics. Earlier, the Duchess had been described as a drug that revives: “She throws upon a man so sweet a look / that it were able to raise one to a galliard / that lay in a dead palsy” (I, 2, 117). Far from being a corrupt and corrupting influence, the Duchess is represented as rejecting the artificiality of painting and bringing health to her court, in contrast to what her corrupt brothers think of her.

A radically different female character at her dressing table can be found in Barnes’s bloody Jacobean revenge tragedy, acted by the King’s Men at the court of King James in 1607. The play is about Pope Alexander Borgia’s pact with the devil and the general corruption of his family, which includes Cesare Borgia, and of course, Lucretia, the poisoning of whom is orchestrated by her own father. In Act IV, Scene 3, the scene direction describes Lucretia who enters “richly attired, with a Phyal in her hand” and sits at her dressing table to get ready. A few lines later “enter two pages with a table, two looking glasses, a box with combs and instruments, and a rich bowle”. Like the Duchess, Lucretia looks at herself in the mirror, noticing “a little riueling [a wrinkle] above my for-head” (IV, 3, 31). She reassures herself by recalling all the compliments that her forehead has received over the years by her several lovers. Then, in order to prepare her skin to receive “these collours” (cosmetics), she calls for “blanching water” (60) before she applies the tincture that was originally in the vial, intending to “smooth the brows” (71). The result is not quite the one she had imagined:

I feele a foule stincke in my nostrells,
Some stincke is vehement and hurts my braine.
My cheekes both burne and sting: give me my glasse. [...]
My braines intoxicate my face is scalded.
Hence with the glasse: coole, coole my face, rancke poyson,
Is ministered to me to my death,
I feel the venime boyling in my veins (IV, 3, 75-77, 82-85)

Immediately Lucretia interprets the poison as burning, corroding her face and travelling to her brain as a sign of her corrupt soul (Drew-Bear 1994: 52): “who painted my faire face with these foule spots / You see them in my soule deformed blots” (IV, 3, 105-106). Unlike the Duchess, Lucretia uses cosmetics to beautify her appearance, while corruption keeps working from within. Cosmetics here operate as a litmus test that reveals her “foul spots” – poison metaphorically opens a window into her soul, while the toxic substance corrodes her skin. Incidentally, the author, Barnabe Barnes had been arrested in 1598 for having tried to poison a man with mercury sublimate (Sisson 1936: 175-238), so one wonders whether he may have used his own experience to write this scene of the play.

Revenge as contagion

Revenge tragedy, as we have seen, is, unsurprisingly, replete with poisoners and poisoning scenes. Poison is not only often part of a revenge plot but also shares some of the structural characteristics of a revenge plot: like a cell that holds the same DNA as a bigger organism in its nucleus, poison operates along similar structural lines as revenge. As we know, revenge is highly symmetrical, and memory is essential for a revenger that has to keep the wound green and their anger unabated: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. “The point envenomed too? Then venom do thy work” (V, 2, 306) says Hamlet when he stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword that killed Laertes. It is like using poison to cure a disease, and indeed this is precisely the point. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1595) Sidney writes that “the high and excellent tragedy openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue” (1986: 45), in line with the Aristotelian therapeutic model of tragedy bringing about catharsis. By repeating the initial crimes, like the poisons believed to cure through similitude in popular medicine, in the end revengers want to purge the community of evil. Unfortunately revenge, exactly like an infection or a contagious disease, has a tendency to spread – from one act of violence to another, from the part of the body (natural as well as politic) that has been poisoned or infected to the rest of the body, “the leperous distilment whose effect / Holds such an enmity with blood of man / That swift as quicksilver it courses through / The natural gates and alleys of the body” (*Hamlet* I, 5, 64-67). The Ghost’s description of the way poison spread in his body is an almost “forensic moment of revelation” (Wilson 2014: 77). We could even go as far as saying that revenge is like an act of contagion and that the revenger is patient zero, the one who starts a series of deaths because he refuses to forgive, or let the authorities deal with the murder. Purg- ing turns easily into contamination.

Another characteristic that revenge and the act of poisoning share is the necessity of secrecy. Poison is invisible, and needs to be administered in advance and with no one knowing. So, in order to appreciate the poisoning, we need a back story, someone needs to tell us what/who will be poisoned and how. Similarly, the revenger must operate in secret: both poisoner and the revenger need soliloquies in order to communicate their intentions to the audience. And yet, despite advance planning, poisoning casualties are not uncommon – often poison destined to someone is taken by the wrong person (Gertrude in *Hamlet*, the Duke in *Women Beware Women*). Timing is also essential, for both effective revenge and successful poisoning (see Wilson 2013). Sometimes the poisoner realizes that more time is necessary for the substance to work: it is the case of Brachiano wearing a poisoned helmet in *The White Devil*, whose dying takes so long that the villains, tired of waiting, stab him. Similarly, in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (1621?), after poisoning the Cardinal’s drink, Bianca wonders in a frustrated aside “No yet no change? When falls he to the earth?” (V, 1, 213).

The symmetry that we find in revenge (retaliation ideally should resemble the crime) is heightened in the convention of the poisoner poisoned: one only needs to think of the female corpses on which poison is smeared so that, suitably made up in order to look alive, they can poison the men who poisoned them in the first place. Notable examples are Gloriana, in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607), the Lady in *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (1611), and Marcellia, in *The Duke of Milan* (1623). Painted corpses to be revenged take on a double corrupting significance: they are dangerous as unburied corpses – corrupting the air or causing infections, and they are corrupting as “bony ladies” who make heavy use of cosmetics. Vindice stages the perfectly symmetric revenge when he has the Duke kiss the poisoned skull of Gloriana: “Duke: My teeth are eaten out. [...] Vindice: Then those that did eat are eaten” (III, 5, 157, 159). Painted corpses are paradoxical poisoned props and grotesque bodies *ipso facto* in the Bakhtinian sense, as they are not sealed (Stallybrass 1986 and 1987): they are animated, manipulated and inter- fered with by men who take revenge by proxy.

Poisoning words

But poison is not just an invisible prop: it has an amazing metaphorical range that cannot be equalled by the idea of duelling, or wounding with a sword or poniard. In many Shakespeare plays words anticipate the deed – figurative poison becomes real. For example, in *King Lear* Goneril is often associated with serpents (Albany calls her “a gilded serpent V, 3, 97; Lear describes her as “most serpent-like” II, 2, 350). It is not surprising that she poisons her sister at the end of the play. Cleopatra fantasizes about the absent Antony in act I, scene 5 (“Where’s my serpent of old Nile?/ For so he calls me. Now I feed myself / With most delicious poison” 25-27) – an anticipation of the way she will die. But it is in *Hamlet* that the semantic area of disease, poison and contagion is particularly overwhelming and widespread, from the “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” (II, 2, 268-269) of the court, to Laertes who uses the word “contagion” as a synonym for poison: (“I’ll touch my point [of the sword] with this contagion”, IV, 7, 133). Shakespeare used metaphors of toxicity and poison extensively. Laura Pinnavaia, in her essay in this collection “Toxicity and Infection in Shakespeare’s England: An Insight from Tilley’s *Dictionary of Proverbs*” examines one hundred proverbs regarding toxicity and infection that were circulating in early modern English texts and that are collected in Tilley’s *Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* (1950). Her contribution uncovers the denotative and connotative meanings of these proverbs, and briefly discusses Shakespeare’s use (and manipulation) of a restricted number in his plays.

As we know from old Hamlet, ears are dangerously permeable. The eustachian tube, a passage for matter and air, for example, was identified in 1564 by the anatomist Bartolomeo Eustachi and was well-known in England by the time of Shakespeare (Pollard 2005: 129). Ears in Hamlet are not only physically vulnerable, as in Old Hamlet’s literal poisoning, but also metaphorically so. Ophelia’s “too credent ear” (I, 3, 30) allows Hamlet’s sweet words to enter her heart; the prince’s harsh words “like daggers” pierce Gertrude’s “ears” in III, 4, 93; Leartes, as Claudius puts it, “wants not buzzers to infect his ear / With pestilent speeches of his father’s death” (IV, 5, 90-91). Poisoned speeches are affecting the nation: “the whole ear of Denmak / is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused” (I, 5, 38-39), says the ghost. But there’s a sense in which Hamlet has also been poisoned by the ghost’s words, and entrusted with the destructive mission “to set the time right”.

Iago is the character who can be associated more closely with another form of metaphorical poisoning – slander. He is aware of the effect that his words will produce in Othello and he expresses his purpose in terms of poisoning:

The Moor already changes with my poison:
Dangerous conceits are in their nature poisons,
Which at the first scarce found to distaste,
But with the little act upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulphur (III, 3, 328-332).

Leonard Mustazza argues very convincingly that the reason why only Hamlet and Othello, of all Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists, ask, in their respective dying speeches, to have their story told accurately is because they need a corrective “to poisonous language and the deeds to which such language leads” (1985: 12). Othello implores: “Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate / Nor set down aught in malice” (V, 2, 345); Hamlet addresses Horatio: “What a wounded name [...] shall I leave behind me! [...] in this harsh world draw my breath in pain to tell my story” (V, 2, 228-229, 332-333). They need reports that would clarify and dis-infect the corruption of words previously spoken against them. Othello’s dying words show acute consciousness that poisonous language can contaminate the mind as well as the body.

Ilaria Pernici's essay "'Shall Rather at My Hands Haue a Figge to Choake him' or How a Very Ancient Fruit Became a Venomous Antidote to Cure Ignorance and Prejudice According to Thomas Lodge" and Aoife Beville's "Toxic Tricks: Lying as Malady and Remedy in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*", in this collection examine, from different perspectives and in different texts, the way language in early modern literature can have both infectious and healing properties. Pernici focuses on the fig as a powerful and contradictory symbol in early modern culture, connecting it with poison and anti-Spanish feeling. In her contribution she examines Thomas Lodge's collection *A Fig for Momus* (1595), which used sayings and expressions featuring poisoning figs to discuss the way words can be both the poison and the antidote to cure ignorance and prejudice. In her contribution Aoife Beville applies a Neo-Gricean model to verbal deception and trickery in Shakespeare's problem comedies: by identifying different types of deceptive linguistic strategies in the plays from the perspective of current linguistic theories on lying, she unravels the dual function of mendacity as both toxic and curative.

I argued earlier that poison can be both theatrical and antitheatrical – apparently less spectacular than a duel or an ambush, it can nevertheless produce highly effective metatheatrical effects. A skull dressed and made up and given movement is not just a prop – it is a metaphor for the actor, and poison is at the centre of several *en-abyme* situations, like that of the Mouse-trap. Hamlet hopes to infiltrate the ears of his uncle, and have him reveal some feeling, but the actors' words do not produce the intended effect. Were plays really able to penetrate the ears and souls of their spectators and through spectacles of contamination and poison in the state purge them in the way that Hamlet hoped to purge Denmark of its pestilential vapours? Early modern theatregoers, according to the Puritan William Prynne, were "contagious in quality, more apt to poison, to infect all those who dare approach them, than one who is full of plague sores" (quoted in Chalk and Floyd-Wilson 2019: 2). Contemporary theatregoers, at least in Italy, are still recommended to wear masks to avoid Covid contagion. It seems that drama penetrates the vulnerable ears of its listeners in a far less powerful way than this modern intangible but dangerous virus. In early modern culture as well as in our own pandemic-ridden societies, the elusive nature and the unpredictable timing of contagion give us a powerful metaphor of men and women's loss of control, as invisible yet toxic entities keep crossing boundaries of bodies and nations.

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Toxic Tricks: Lying as Malady and Remedy in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

Aoife Beville

Introduction

This contribution aims to examine the strategies of deception employed in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* from the perspective of current linguistic theories on lying. Recent years have seen several publications on the linguistics of lying, the most pertinent being from a neo-Gricean¹ perspective. Notable publications include *Lying Misleading and What is Said* (Saul 2012) and the *Oxford Handbook of Lying* (2019), edited by Jörg Meibauer, who boasts several other recent publications on the topic in the past decade (2011; 2014; 2018). There have been several attempts within the philosophy of language to define lying (Carson 2006; Mahon 2016) and some stimulating debates between authors from a pragmatic perspective (Dynel 2015; Meibauer 2016). However, to date, there has been little research which aims to apply recent developments in the linguistics of lying to the language of Shakespearean plays (Rudanko 2007; Del Villano 2016; Scott 2019). Nevertheless, the linguistic turn has undoubtedly produced excellent studies on Shakespearean texts in recent years: in areas such as historical pragmatics (Busse and Busse 2010; Culpeper and Kytö 2010; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013), characterisation (Mullini 1985; Culpeper 2001) and (im)politeness (Rudanko 2006; Del Villano 2018). Linguistic deception will be understood in relation to the key concepts of pragmatics, namely Speech Act Theory² (SAT) (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; 1975) and Grice's Cooperative Principle³ (CP) (Grice 1989). Starting from these bibliographical coordinates, this essay will examine the curative and noxious properties of mendacity within the two problem comedies.

Problem plays as drammi dialettici

Measure for Measure (MM) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (AW) are “dialectical dramas”

¹ The term ‘neo-Gricean’ refers to the school of thought emerging from recent refinement and expansion of H.P. Grice’s “seminal but patchy proposal” (Huang 2017: 50). This paper will refer primarily to neo-Gricean notions (Dynel 2011; Fallis 2012; Meibauer 2018) as they represent the most relevant research on lying and deception. For a comprehensive overview of neo-Gricean pragmatics see Huang 2017: 48-78.

² Austin’s theory (1962) presents the concept of acts performed by the speaker: locutionary (act of uttering a locution), illocutionary (act of performing the function of the utterance – asking a question, describing, commanding, etc) and perlocutionary acts (effects produced through the utterance – persuasion, annoyance, etc). Searle (1969, 1975) expanded on the classification of speech acts, codifying the felicity conditions that Austin had referenced and classifying the major speech acts (representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives).

³ Grice’s Cooperative Principle is as follows: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”; the maxims of conversation, which emerge from the CP are those of quantity (be as informative as required), quality (be truthful), relation (be pertinent) and manner (be clear, brief and orderly) (Grice 1989: 26–27).

(Melchiori 2010), or more commonly “problem plays”⁴ which share some notable commonalities both structurally and compositionally. *MM* is dated 1603–4 and it is generally agreed that the version present in the 1623 First Folio (FF) includes significant modifications made by Middleton.⁵ *AW* is commonly dated to circa 1605 and similarly contains evidence of Middleton’s contribution (Taylor & Egan 2017: 278–384; Taylor & Loughnane 2017: 557–559).

AW centres around Helen, an orphaned physician’s daughter living in the household of Roussillon, who is secretly in love with Bertram, the young Count Roussillon. Bertram is sent to court, as a ward of the ailing King of France, and leaves in the company of his “equivocal companion” Paroles. At court, Bertram hears news of a war in Italy, but he is forbidden from enlisting due to his young age. Helen follows Bertram, hoping to win the sickly King’s favour through her knowledge of medicine. She convinces the King to allow her to treat his ailment, securing his promise that she may choose a husband from his courtiers if she is successful. Her ploy works; she chooses Bertram as her reward. With great disapproval at having to marry a socially inferior woman, Bertram reluctantly yields, but flees to Italy, shunning the bride and the consummation of the marriage. Helen’s perseverance and cunning trick will however lead her eventually to wearing Bertram’s ring and bearing his child.

MM opens with the Duke of Vienna leaving the city and entrusting the viceregency to Angelo, a puritanical hyper-moralist, who is eager to purge the city of its licentiousness. However, the Duke returns to the city in the guise of a friar in order to observe the events that are happening in his absence. Angelo’s violent zeal leads him to sentence to death Claudio and his expectant betrothed Juliet for engaging in pre-marital relations. Claudio’s sister Isabella is called away from the convent where she was about to take her vows in order to intercede on her brother’s behalf. However, her pleas unwittingly ignite Angelo’s passions. Angelo promises to release her brother if Isabella gives in to him. Isabella plots with the Duke-as-Friar to find a solution. They convince Mariana, Angelo’s jilted ex-betrothed, to take the place of Isabella, in order to preserve Isabella’s chastity and consummate the marriage of Mariana and Angelo. Even though the bed-trick succeeds, Angelo orders that Claudio be executed nonetheless. The Duke arranges a head-trick substitution and stages his “return” to Vienna in order to hold a final trial scene in which the tricks are unravelled and justice and mercy are meted out.

MM and *AW* have long been considered ambiguous “problem plays”. For the purposes of this essay it is useful to refer to Melchiori’s recategorization of the plays as “*drammi dialettici*”, which sheds the vague and intuitive classification of the plays as problematic and endeavours to investigate the dialectical nature of the problem asserting that:

Their vitality is all in the internal debate in the drama, independent of the outcome, it lies in a continuous dialectical debate which acquires the absolute value of a quest for the truth, a truth which, in order to be true, cannot be unique and univocal. It is this very awareness of the dialectical values, this privileging of debate which likens [these plays] (2010: 406).⁶

In this perspective, the discursive nature of the comedies becomes a central aspect in their analysis. The “dialectical conflict between characters” and their strategic use of language must inform our reading of the plays. This paper explores the hypothesis that such conflict is a key element in interpersonal deception which has both infectious and curative properties in the

⁴ The classification by Melchiori expands on the critical category of “problem plays” which first emerged with Boas in the late 1890s and has seen a remarkable longevity see Boas 1910; Tillyard 1950; Cunneen 1963; Lawrence 1969; Toole 1996; Rhodes 2000; Barker 2005.

⁵ On date and authorship see Braunmuller & Watson 2020 and Taylor & Egan 2017.

⁶ “La loro vitalità è invece tutta nel dibattito interno al dramma, indipendentemente dagli esiti, sta in un continuo confronto dialettico che acquista valore assoluto di ricerca di una verità che, proprio per essere vera, non può essere unica e univoca. È questa consapevolezza dei valori dialettici, questo privilegiare il dibattito rispetto alle conclusioni che accomuna [le opere]”, my translation.

plays. Both plays are centred around deception and trickery; linguistic deceit is functional to the comical structure of the plays as it is both toxic and tonic in nature.

To have what we would have we speak not what we mean (MM, II, 4, 59-60)

In pragmatic terms lying can be understood as a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), particularly of the Maxim of Quality, which states "do not say what you believe to be false" (Dynel 2016: 26–27; Grice 1989 [1967]; Fallis 2012). It is important to note that in order to deceive this must be, in Gricean terms, a "quiet and unostentatious" violation, as opting out or "blatantly" flouting the maxim would result in irony, metaphor or other forms of conversational implicature which are not intended to mislead. Dynel neatly distinguishes these two options as overt untruthfulness and covert untruthfulness (2016). Another pragmatic perspective on lying is provided by Speech Act Theory (SAT) in which lying is generally considered as an assertion that does not respect the Sincerity Condition⁷ (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; 1975; Reboul 1994). However, both notions raise considerable theoretical issues. Essentially, the phenomenon of verbal deception lies on the semantics-pragmatics interface: it is a question of "what is said" and "what is meant". As Rudanko notes, communicative intentions can be either overt or covert: the speaker (S) wants the hearer (H) to recognise an overt intention, but S does not want H to recognise the covert intention (2007: 113-114). Before delving into more technical definitions of lying, I wish to note the aptness of the description offered by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, "to have what we would have we speak not what we mean" (II, 4, 119). Her description is stunningly pragmatic in nature, focussing firstly on the illocutionary force of the speech act and secondly on the violation of the Cooperative Principle.

Most linguistic definitions of lying run the risk of being either too narrow or too broad. In the first case, (L1), "To lie [is] to make a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that the other person believe that statement to be true" (Mahon 2016: 2). In the second:

- (L2) "A lied at t, iff⁸
 a) [S]⁹ asserted at [H] that *p*,
 b) [S] actively believed at [H] that not *p*" (Meibauer 2005: 1376; 2014: 103).

Meibauer's definition is then expanded with the following:

- (L3) [S] lied at [H] by uttering the declarative sentence [X] iff
 a) if the definition of the lie in (L2) holds,
 b) or if [S] thereby conversationally implicated that *q*, but actively believed that not *q* (Meibauer 2005: 1382; 2014: 125).

According to these definitions, all forms of misleading implicatures and insincere speech acts should be classed as lying, or else no particular distinction for the half-truths, false implicatures,

⁷ "An assertion is a type of illocutionary act that conforms to certain quite specific semantic and pragmatic rules. These are: 1. The essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition. 2. The preparatory rules: the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition. 3. The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance. 4. The sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle 1975: 62).

⁸ An abbreviation of "if and only if" as commonly found in logical, mathematical, and philosophical publications.

⁹ The abbreviations (A and B, S and S1, etc) used for speaker and hearer in the literature are designated as S and H uniformly throughout, square brackets denote where these diverge from the abbreviations used in the original citation. Various placeholder such as "p" or "q" refer to the proposition or the content of the proposition.

pre-supposition faking, and countless other strategies employed constantly in communicative contexts exist. I contend that a robust linguistic definition of lying must allow for these borderline cases, while taking into account the specific strategic choices of the Speaker in retaining a level of deniability.

The deniability afforded through what is commonly considered “technically-not-lying” should not be expunged through an over-reaching definition of lying but rather incorporated into a broader model of verbal deception which distinguishes between prototypical lying and other forms of mendacity. Therefore, the proposed definition adopts and adapts the notion of “off-record” used by Brown and Levinson in their foundational theories of politeness (1987). This concept moves beyond the notion of overt and covert untruthfulness, outlined by Dynel (2016). It distinguishes, instead, between two forms of covert untruthfulness. Firstly, lying that entails “going on record about the truth of p ”, or committing oneself to the truth of the proposition similar to the notions of “warranting the truth” or “adding to the common ground” found in some definitions of lying (Carson 2006; Saul 2012; Stokke 2013). Secondly, Off-Record Verbal Deception (ORVD) that allows the speaker to deny once they have “asserted that p ”. Therefore, my proposed definition is as follows:

(L4) S lied at H, iff

- a) S went on record to say p (committed himself to the truth of p)
- b) S actively believed at H that *not* p

(L5) S committed Off-Record Verbal Deception to H by uttering the sentence x if S thereby conversationally implicated that q , but actively believed that *not* q (Beville 2022: 48).

Brown and Levinson’s terminology was, of course, developed to tackle the notion of interactional politeness. However, I believe it may also offer a fruitful framework for distinguishing between mendacious strategies. Specifically, it offers a lens through which to view the Speaker’s choice to retain deniability. Brown and Levinson’s definition specifies that “if an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent” (1987: 69). This is further explained by Culpeper, who states that “in a suitable context the hearer may be able to infer that the speaker [is saying X] but, if challenged, *the speaker could always deny this*” (2001: 244-45, emphasis added).

This distinction between lying-proper and ORVD is useful in categorising two principal strategies of deception employed by characters within the plays: whether the deception is flagrant or retains a level of deniability.

Quantitative Data

The analysis¹⁰ reported here consisted in identifying and categorising instances of verbal deception according to the theoretical framework briefly outlined in the previous section. This was conducted by the close reading and manual annotation of the text in order to collate salient instances of possible verbal deception. Such segments were then analysed in order to determine the deceptive strategies employed. The instances of deception were tabulated according to the

¹⁰ Evidently such an analysis presents a certain level of subjectivity as the analyst must decide whether to categorise the exchange as deceptive or not. Such categorisations were undertaken according to textual clues available (asides, soliloquies, dramatic irony, etc). For further explanation of the processes of data collection see Beville 2022: 62-66.

participants and the strategies involved. Non-verbal deception was included in the quantitative analysis as a means of accounting for strategies such as disguise (employed in both plays). “Embedded” verbal description designates those instances where verbal deception is not represented directly in the text but recounted (either by the liar himself or by a third party). Where the same lie is both directly and indirectly represented in the text the direct representation was counted only once. The category of “instructing others to deceive” was included in order to account for directives which, in achieving the desired perlocutionary effect, would result in mendacity. These parameters allowed for a simple tabulation of the preliminary quantitative data that led to the qualitative analysis of the more salient examples taken from the text. The aim of the quantitative analysis was to identify patterns of language behaviour in the plays; the aim of the qualitative analysis was to account for the effects that such linguistic strategies produce in the text.

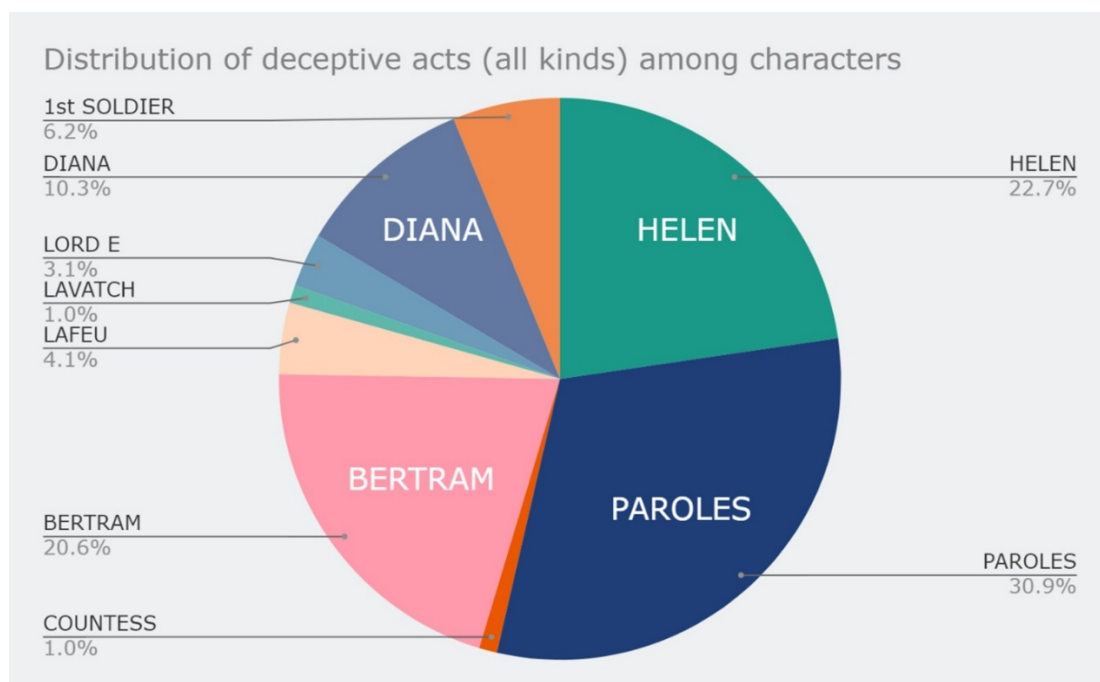


Figure 1. *Distribution of deceptive acts in AW* (Beville 2022: 88)

Figure 1 shows the most prolific “liars” in *AW* in terms of the total number of mendacious utterances, and do not necessarily correspond directly to the major speaking parts in the play. Indeed, some characters with very many lines (King, Countess, etc.) rarely lie. Collectively, Helen, Paroles, Bertram, and Diana account for about 85% of the play’s deceptive utterances, even though their speeches cover less than half of the whole play’s lines (line distribution from Crystal and Crystal 2020). Figure 2 displays the differing strategies of verbal deception among the characters. Helen and Diana prefer to use ORVD strategies, while Bertram and Paroles demonstrate a preference for direct lying. I would argue that this variation in strategy is important both to the overall structure of the play and to the linguistic processes of characterisation.

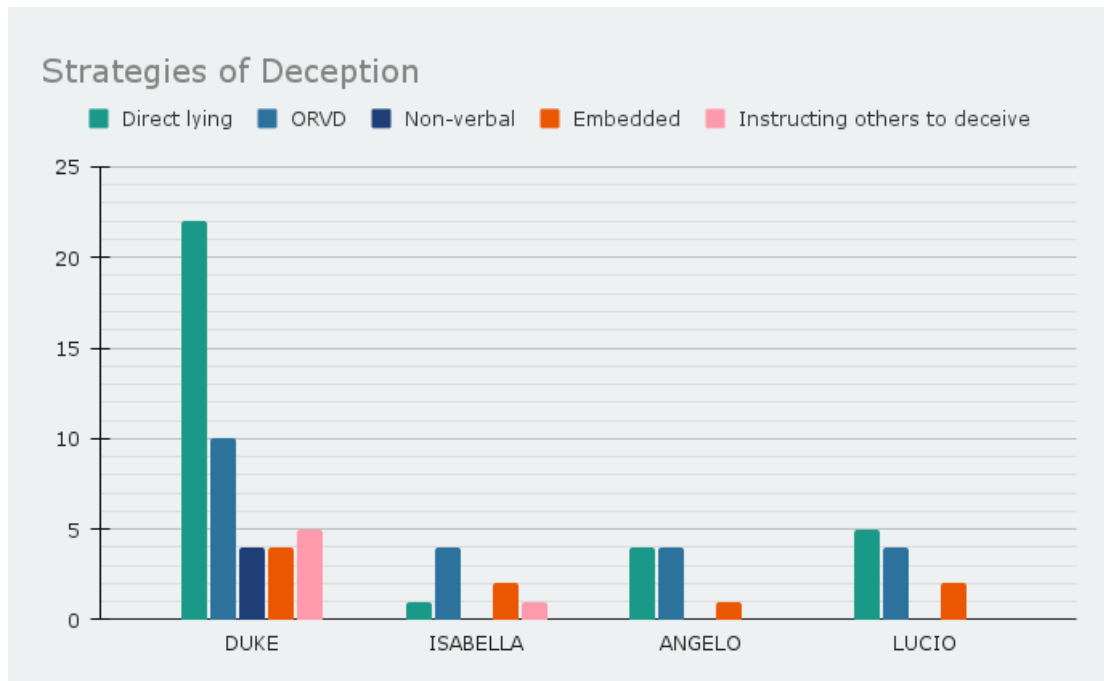


Figure 2. Strategies of deception employed in AW (Beville 2022: 88)

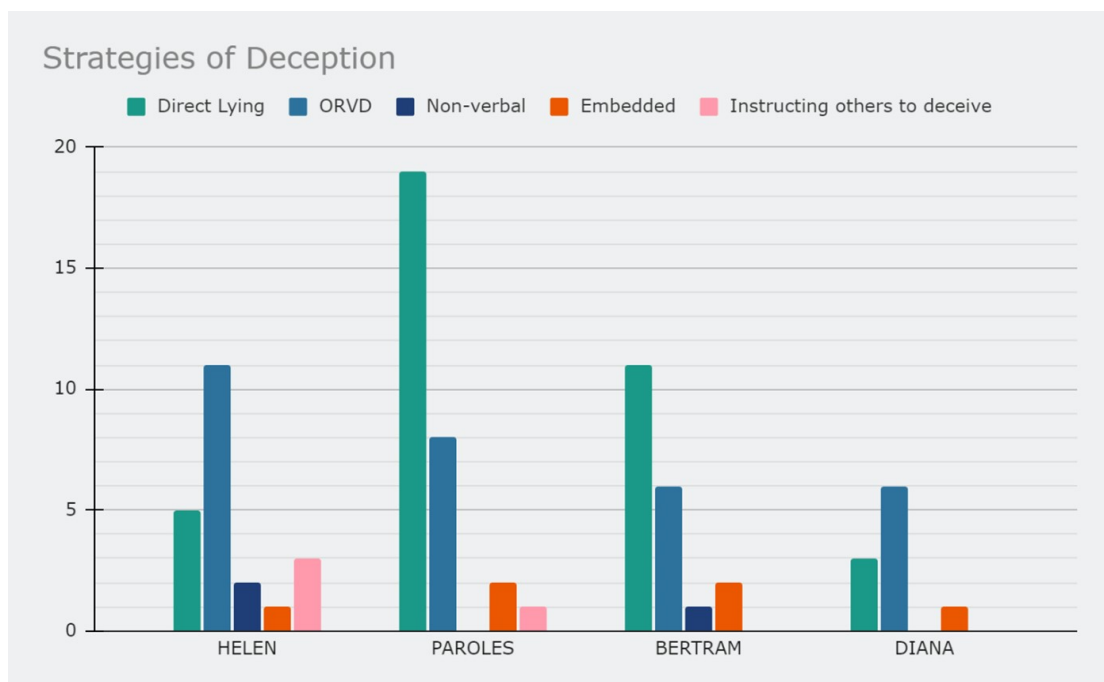


Figure 3. Strategies of deception employed in MM (Beville 2022: 70)

The quantitative analysis of the data for *MM* is displayed in Figure 3. It indicates the various forms of interpersonal deception employed by the principal characters within the play. The Duke is the most deceptive of characters, his lies fuel the plot of the play: the story-world is built upon the premise of his absence; it is modified by his deceptive utterances and it ultimately depends on his verbal authority. His feigned departure sets in motion the events of the play. In the guise of a Friar, he deceptively meddles in his subjects' lives.

This preliminary quantitative information shows both who lies and how they lie. Textual examples will be analysed qualitatively in order to understand what salient examples of mendacity can reveal about the plays, their structure, and their characters.

Bed-Tricks

The following extract is taken from an exchange between Diana – a Florentine maiden and Helen’s co-conspirator – and Bertram, who has been trying to seduce her. Diana, under Helen’s instructions, agrees to sleep with Bertram in order to establish the preparatory conditions for the success of the bed-trick, by which means Helen and Bertram will consummate their marriage. Diana instructs Bertram on how to conduct their planned illicit liaison:

DIANA: When midnight comes, knock at my chamber window.
 I'll order take my mother shall not hear.
 Now will I charge you in the band of truth,
 When you have conquered my yet maiden bed,
 Remain there but an hour, nor speak to me.
 My reasons are most strong, and you shall know them,
 When back again this ring shall be delivered.
 And on your finger in the night I'll put
 Another ring that, what in time proceeds,
 May token to the future our past deeds.
 Adieu till then, then fail not. You have won
 A wife of me, though there my hope be done. (AW, IV, 2, 54-65)

Diana employs multiple strategies in a single turn. She begins with the necessary directives in order to establish the appropriate conditions for the bed-trick (“knock at my chamber”, “remain but an hour, nor speak”). Silence, darkness, and speed are all required so that Bertram will not recognise his wife. Diana deliberately employs ambiguous assertives, creating implicatures which exploit the dramatic irony of the exchange. Whilst the audience is aware of the planned bed-trick and can successfully interpret Diana’s “reasons” for imposing silence, Bertram is not, which is why he will fall prey to the false implicature. Moreover, the “wife” that Bertram will win through this encounter will be the one he had previously rejected, and not, as he believes, the woman he is currently attempting to seduce. It is for this reason that the commissive “you have won a wife of me” is classifiable as deliberate ambiguity; i.e. an off-record strategy. However, between these two instances of ORVD, there is also an example of a (direct) lie. Diana promises that she will give Bertram a ring during their amorous encounter. That she is committed to the truth of this statement but has no intention of fulfilling the promise makes this a false commissive. She lies, on-record, in order to establish the correct conditions for the bed-trick. Indeed, this is her covert intention in the exchange. Diana, therefore, shows flexibility in her use of deceptive strategies. She prefers to go off-record unless she has to lie directly for the positive outcome of the trick.

In *MM* the bed-trick is prepared in a different fashion. Having unsuccessfully attempted to challenge Angelo by threatening to expose his corruption, Isabella has to ally herself with the Duke and his deceitful tactics in order to save both her brother and her chastity. Therefore, she has to feign compliance with Angelo’s advances and prepare him for their sexual encounter. Unlike in *AW*, in *MM* this exchange is not seen by the audience, but merely learnt thanks to Isabella’s report:

ISABELLA He hath a garden circummured with brick

[...]
There have I made my promise
Upon the heavy middle of the night
To call upon him.
DUKE But shall you on your knowledge find this way?
ISABELLA I have ta'en a due and wary note upon't.
With whispering and most guilty diligence,
In action all of precept, he did show me
The way twice o'er.
DUKE Are there no other tokens
Between you 'greed concerning her observance?
ISABELLA No, none, but only a repair i'th' dark,
And that I have possessed him my most stay
Can be but brief, for I have made him know
I have a servant comes with me along
That stays upon me, whose persuasion is
I come about my brother. (MM, IV, 2, 25-45)

Isabella, thus, controls the representation of her exchange with Angelo. Her narrative is not false, it is a truthful retelling of the lies she has told. Isabella's deceptive exchange with Angelo is punctuated by his furtive, guilty behaviour. She reminds us, even indirectly, of the purpose and motivation of her verbal deception. There are two instances of embedded deception in this extract: Isabella has insincerely promised to conduct an illicit encounter in the garden at night (31-33); she has also pretended to lie to her servant in order to create an excuse for the brevity of her stay (41-45). The embedded nature of this deception provides a degree of separation from the deceptive act.

Hoodwinked

The tricking of Paroles can be classed as an “antidote” in which deceptive means are used to cure the most mendacious character in *AW*. Concerned about his friendship with such a notorious liar, Bertram's companions devise a plot to deceive the deceiver. In the extract below the Lords reveal their suspicions to Bertram, who is still “deceived in [his companion]”:

LORD G. [to Bertram] If your lordship find him not a holding, hold me no more in your respect
LORD E. [to Bertram] On my life, my lord, a bubble.
BERTRAM Do you think I am so far deceived in him?
LORD E. Believe it, my lord. In mine own direct knowledge—without any malice, but to speak of him as my kinsman—he's a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker, the owner of no one good quality worthy your lordship's entertainment. (*AW*, III, 6, 3-10)

They conspire to trick Paroles so as to give him a taste of his own medicine (*AW*, III, 6, 17-30). They intend to “bind and hoodwink him” so that in thinking that he has been captured by the enemy, he is made to “betray [Bertram] and deliver all the intelligence in his power against [him]” (*AW*, III, 6, 20; 23-24). The trick has a didactic function: the Lords wish to convince Bertram of Paroles' dishonesty. In order to cure an “infinite and endless liar” (*AW*, III, 6, 9), it will be necessary to apply a tincture drawn from the same caustic concoction of dishonesty. The ensuing unmasking is presented as a kind of foreshadowing of the toxic/tonic trickery that will later serve as medicine to Bertram. The trick comes off as expected. Paroles betrays his allies both

by revealing perilously truthful information to the enemy and by spilling spiteful falsehoods about the Lords themselves (*AW*, IV, 3). The curative function of the ploy is salient within the text: Paroles abandons his scheming and becomes a fool in the house of Lafeu. Notably, after this public vilification he also adapts his linguistic strategies; in the final act when he is called to testify he employs evasive, equivocal tactics that are different from the tall tales and bragging observed earlier in the play. The trick has achieved its purpose: to cure him of his lying. When outed as a traitor and a liar he will wonder: “Who cannot be crushed with a plot?” (*AW*, IV, 3, 265), a question which also rings true for Bertram in the final act.

Lucio is also “hoodwinked” in *MM*. While Paroles is blindfolded and tricked into betraying Bertram and his allies, Lucio is deceived by the Duke-as-Friar’s hooded costume, leading him to express unfavourable opinions of the Duke in his believed absence. Such statements are often on-record, bold-faced lies. Lucio also retells of an encounter with the absent Duke to the faux-Friar, recalling having been brought before the Duke for “getting a wench with child”:

DUKE Did you such a thing?

LUCIO Yes, by Saint Anne, did I; but I was fain to forswear it. They would else have married me to the rotten medlar. (*MM*, IV, 3, 154-155)

Thus, Lucio admits to having perjured himself before the Duke, unwittingly confessing the offence to the very same Duke. This is an instance of embedded deception as it is the retelling of a past lie. The Duke eventually sentences Lucio to marry Kate Keepdown (the “wench” in question). Whilst certainly being the most appropriate remedy given the situation, marriage was not announced as a solution for the woman’s predicament, but because “slandering a prince deserves it” (*MM*, V, 1, 511), it is seen as being the just punishment for Lucio’s actions.

Such a ring as this (AW, V, 3, 78)

Bertram has been frequently insincere throughout the play. He performs insincere commissives when wooing Diana (*AW*, V, 2), making promises that – as a married man – he is entirely unable to keep and has no intention of keeping. He lies often and on-record. It is a risky strategy by which he retains no level of deniability. The aim of his lies is both to avoid punishment (to the King) and to obtain what he desires (from Diana). Eventually this risky strategy will fail. During the impromptu trial of the final scene Bertram will be questioned regarding the ring that Diana promised to give him, which Helen actually gave him during the bed-trick.

LAFEU [...] By my old beard [*Bertram gives Lafeu a ring*]

And ev'ry hair that's on't, Helen that's dead

Was a sweet creature. Such a ring as this,

The last that ere I took her leave at court,

I saw upon her finger.

BERTRAM Hers it was not.

KING Now pray you let me see it; for mine eye,

While I was speaking, oft was fasten'd to't. [*Lafeu gives him the ring*]

This ring was mine, and when I gave it Helen

I bade her, if her fortunes ever stood

Necessitated to help, that by this token

I would relieve her. Had you that craft to reave her

Of what should stead her most?

BERTRAM My gracious sovereign,

Howe'er it pleases you to take it so,

The ring was never hers.

COUNTESS Son, on my life
I have seen her wear it, and she reckoned it
At her life's rate.
LAFEU I am sure I saw her wear it.
BERTRAM You are deceived, my lord, she never saw it.
In Florence was it from a casement thrown me,
Wrapped in a paper which contained the name
Of her that threw it. Noble she was, and thought
I stood engaged. But when I had subscribed
To mine own fortune, and informed her fully
I could not answer in that course of honour
As she had made the overture, she ceased
In heavy satisfaction, and would never
Receive the ring again.
KING Plutus himself,
That knowes the tinct and multiplying med'cine,
Hath not in nature's mystery more science
Than I have in this ring. 'Twas mine, 'twas Helen's,
Whoever gave it you. Then if you know
That you are well acquainted with yourself,
Confess 'twas hers, and by what rough enforcement
You got it from her. She called the saints to surety
That she would never put it from her finger
Unless she gave it to yourself in bed,
Where you have never come, or sent it us
Upon her great disaster.
BERTRAM She never saw it.
KING Thou speak'st it falsely, as I love mine honour (*AW*, V, 3, 76-113)

Bertram is truthful, yet mistaken, in his initial denials (V, 3, 87; 89; 112). To his knowledge, Helen could never have seen the ring. He is convinced that he obtained it from Diana during their amorous exchange. However, his strategy of denial does not work; no one believes his false, yet truthful,¹¹ claim that the ring was not Helen's. When Lafeu, the King, and Bertram's mother, the Countess, propose competing "small stories"¹² which challenge the truth of his contention, he decides to change tack (93), choosing to tell a mendacious story. Thus, he switches to an on-record deceptive strategy, which will ultimately prove unsuccessful. He is committed to the truth of the narrative and adds superfluous detail ("from a casement", "wrapped in paper") in order to convince his hearers of its credibility. Yet he fails to persuade his hearer of the truth of his tale. The King rightly accuses him of speaking falsely, thus, the tellability¹³ of his untruthful tale is called into question. His report will be outed as false about a hundred lines later ("the story then goes false", 227), which is the King's response to Diana's competing untrue story ("and this was it I gave him being a-bed", 226). Diana presents an on-record false assertion, in which she says she did not go to bed with Bertram who was the victim of a bed-trick in which she was substituted by Helen. Yet it is Bertram's deception and above all his decision to lie in order to avoid punishment that is foregrounded in the text. His lies are publicly outed and underlined. Diana's mendacity serves the purposes of the comic structure of the play and is never internally challenged. Instead, it is justified, much like Helen's deception.¹⁴

¹¹ An important distinction: his assertive are false but he is *mistaken* not *untruthful*. He respects both the essential and the sincerity conditions.

¹² On "small stories" as narrative episodes embedded in drama see Bowles 2010: 93-118.

¹³ Tellability, according to Bowles, is a helpful classification in the analysis of narrative episodes within plays (Bowles, 2010: 18-21). There is an inherent tension between the credibility and the worthiness of each tale.

¹⁴ For the justification of Helen's deceit see *AW*, III, 7, 30-48.

To speak so indirectly I am loath (MM, V, 6, 1)

In *MM* there is a desperate search for the remedy that might make this decaying and corrupted Duchy whole again. Claudio's condemnation is the initial malady, which is further complicated by Angelo's toxic hypocrisy. At several points within the play its characters seek a restorative solution. Escalus calls for mercy twice: "there is no remedy" (*MM*, II, 1, 237; 242). Angelo himself repeats a similar phrase ("Maiden, no remedy", *MM*, II, 2, 50) in response to Isabella's desperate "must he needs die?". Isabella proposes good Christian mercy as a potential remedy, reminding Angelo of God's grace ("Why all the souls that are were forfeit once / And He that might the vantage best have took / Found out the remedy", *MM*, II, 2, 76-77). However, the proposed remedy of mercy fails to take effect; it seems that Angelo's noxious nature is a stubbornly resistant strain:

ANGELO Plainly conceive, I love you.
 ISABELLA My brother did love Juliet,
 And you tell me that he shall die for it.
 ANGELO He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love. (*MM*, II, 4, 141-144)

Here Angelo makes his proposal explicit. He does so with a commissive (the kind of Speech Act used to make vows, promises, threats, etc). He promises Isabella that if she sleeps with him, he will release her brother, even though he has no intention of doing so (see *MM*, IV, 2, 105-111). His commissive, therefore, does not respect the Sincerity Condition. He also violates the Maxim of Quality. Angelo goes on record and commits himself to the truth of this promise, whilst being insincere. We can further classify this lie as a case of positive deception and a lie of commission (he adds the false proposition "Claudio will not be executed if you sleep with me" to the common ground). His overt intention is to persuade Isabella to sleep with him, while his covert intention is to never release her brother.

The only cure for the ills of the play are the duplicitous Duke's deceptive tricks. Indeed, the vaccine must often contain a strain of the virus in order to be effective. The Duke's soliloquies offer a representation of his inner thoughts which serve as textual clues in the construction of the character (Culpeper 2001: 170-171). In Act 3 we learn that he intends to "pay with falsehood, false exacting" (*MM*, III, 1, 474) and explains away his own mendacious activities with: "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof" (*MM*, III, 1, 236-237). This justification is echoed by Isabella:

ISABELLA To speak so indirectly I am loath—
 I would say the truth, but to accuse him so,
 That is your part—yet I am advised to do it,
 He says, to veil full purpose.
 MARIANA Be ruled by him.
 ISABELLA Besides, he tells me that if peradventure
 He speak against me on the adverse side,
 I should not think it strange, for 'tis a physic
 That's bitter to sweet end. (*MM*, IV, 6, 1-8)

Here, Isabella is shown to struggle with the morality of the deceptive scheme. However, she eventually condones it (to herself, to Mariana and to the audience) for the benefit of its curative purposes.

Conclusion

The early modern period has been coined the “Age of Dissimulation” (Zagorin 1990). Certainly, the notion of dissimulation and deception was a constant concern and one that found aesthetic expression on stage. The off-record strategies discussed here can be considered as being a kind of linguistic representation of the doctrine of equivocation that was central to the discussion on untruthfulness in Early Modern England.¹⁵ Pudney examines the differing moral motivations behind the deceit practiced by both titular Kings, Richard III and Henry V, observing that “while Richard frequently tells outright lies, Henry’s deceptions are much more subtle” (2015: 166). There is evidence of a similar phenomenon in the quantitative data shown for *AW* and *MM*. While there may be no convincing ethical justification in distinguishing between two levels of deception, “we tend to believe”, as did the early modern audience, “these choices to be morally revealing” (Saul 2012: 91). Thus, the repeated representation of outright deception will influence audiences’ moral judgement of a character, while the degree of distance from the act of deception offered through off-record strategies (ORVD, embedded deception, instructing others to lie, etc) may serve to protect a character from such judgements. Isabella, for instance, has often been criticised as cold or unfeeling, but few would probably judge her as being dishonest.

Deception is symptomatic of the moral decay presented in both worlds. On the one hand, in *MM* Vienna is corrupted by licentious living: Angelo’s puritanical zeal has in actual fact equally toxic powers due to his double nature. On the other hand, in *AW* the ailing king, the body politic, is representative of an ailing kingdom in which deviants like Paroles are left unchecked. Bertram too is contaminated by his relationship with a deceitful friend. The Countess makes such toxic influences explicit, by blaming his influence for her son’s shortcomings: “A very *tainted* fellow, and full of wickedness. / My son *corrupts* a well-derived nature / With his inducement” (*AW*, III, 5, 77-79, emphasis added).

Even though these plays are structurally reliant on trickery and deceit, the theme of deception is not treated in the same way. Deception that leads toward a comic end is justified and goes unchallenged, while the tricks that lead toward a tragic end (i.e. Angelo and Bertram’s empty promises and evasion of marriage) necessitate vindication. Indeed, outrageous liars such as Lucio and Paroles are brought to justice and taught to weigh their words.

It has been shown here that certain deceptive linguistic strategies are used within the play-worlds as an antidote to toxic mendacity and moral corruption. Helen orchestrates a symphony of deceitful tales (pretending she has gone on a pilgrimage, spreading word of her death, the bed-trick, the ring-trick). Her deception (with Diana’s help) serves the comic ends of the play. In *AW* those lies which serve the comic purposes of the play tend to be performed through ORVD in order to fit into the comic scheme. Helen is a *healer* far beyond the first act when she successfully treats the King’s fistula. Her deception serves essentially to “make well” in the much diseased and corrupted play-world. Bertram’s deceptive linguistic choices are made in order to avoid his marriage to Helen and seduce Diana; his deception would serve toxic and tragic ends if it were not checked. Bergeron (1972) notes that the play can be divided into two movements: firstly, the healing of the King; secondly, the healing of Bertram. Thus, there is a physical healing in the first two acts, followed by a more “metaphorical curing” in the rest of the play, which is preoccupied with the “infection of the spirit” (Bergeron 1972: 25). Of course, for Bertram to be curing, his toxic friend Paroles must also undergo the prescribed treatment of trickery.

In *MM* the Duke’s mendacity is not, however, checked by the use of ORVD strategies. He often uses on-record strategies and he is also shown instructing others how to deceive. He

¹⁵ See: Hadfield 2013 and 2017, Berensmeyer and Hadfield 2015, and Pudney 2015.

directs Isabella in how to behave with Angelo in order to prepare for the bed-trick (“answer his requiring with a plausible obedience” *MM*, III, 1, 226-227). His most controversial lie is that of convincing Isabella that her brother is dead (“His head is off and sent to Angelo”, *MM*, IV, 3, 104), which is an outright on-record false assertion. His covert intentions are readily discernible from the brief aside preceding the exchange. He intends to trick Isabella “keep[ing] her ignorant of her good” in order to increase her “heavenly comforts of despair / When it is least expected” (*MM*, IV, 3, 97-99). Thus, the seemingly callous lie is internally justified by the Duke’s directorial intentions. Isabella’s ignorance of her brother’s salvation serves the comic functions of the play. The Duke is a morally ambiguous and equivocal character and his deceptions are both salient and problematic within the play.

Thus, it remains unclear whether the cure provided through deception is worth its collateral effects. As Boas originally stated, these plays “preclude a satisfactory outcome”. Kastan notes the circular trajectory of *AW* and its resistance towards its own ending (1985), while Aebischer (2008) argues that the most satisfactory performances of *MM* are those most “disconcerting” and “open-ended”. Kastan affirms that “Shakespeare’s comedy [...] is neither a mirror of life nor merely a diversion from it. It is neither curative nor anodyne. Rather it is palliative” (1985: 578). This rings particularly true in these problem plays in which trickery and deception drive the comical structure of the work.

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“I have bound thee to't by death”.¹

Italian Intoxication of English Reading Practices

Beatrice Fuga

Introduction

In the twenty-sixth tale of the first volume of his *Novelle* (1554), Matteo Bandello narrates the story of Antonio Bologna and his wife, the Duchess of Amalfi, and how they were killed by her brothers for fear that his inferior social status would taint their family's reputation. As is often the case, the author draws the novella from recent events and collects various accounts from his own acquaintances, including the very protagonist of the story, before his brutal homicide. At the beginning of the narration, the central character of the novella, described as a “gentleman” (Bandello 1942: 355),² cedes to the passion that overtakes him and the young, widowed Duchess; he accepts her marriage proposal, even though they are forced to keep their union a secret for years to come. The events following the discovery of their matrimony by the Duchess's brothers, as well as the ensuing murders, are condemned by the author, who was himself an acquaintance of Bologna and describes the killings as “a thing truly worthy of great pity” (Bandello 1942: 354).

Nevertheless, Bandello's narrative style can hardly be described as tragic: he seeks to evoke scandalous rumour rather than aesthetic horror, especially considering that the Duchess's gruesome death would have been fresh in his audience's memory. Even though the real protagonist of the novella is undoubtedly the Duchess, it is Antonio Bologna who is the apparent subject of the Italian narration and the primary reliable source of the story. The original title reverses the Duchess's agency by stating that “Il signor Antonio Bologna sposa la duchessa di Malfi e tutti dui sono ammazzati” (I, XXVI), whereas, following the events presented in the story, it is undoubtedly the Duchess Giovanna d'Aragona who defies her brothers' orders by marrying a man of her own choosing. Nonetheless, it is hardly possible – partly because of the novelistic and chronicling style Bandello adopts, partly because he does not seem to be particularly concerned with human introspection – to explore, in the Italian tale, the depths of the Duchess's sentiments. Nevertheless, as R.W. Maslen notices, in Bandello's collection

[women] boldly refuse to succumb to the ‘female’ virtues of obedience, chastity, and silence. Instead they follow their own inscrutable agendas, and are often wild: they take on the properties of beasts at will, drain their male lovers with their sexual energy, experiment with sorcery and murder, they practice cannibalism in the bedchamber [and] repeatedly violate the social hierarchy by marrying outside their station (Maslen 1997: 86, 92).

Endowed with such instances of Italianate corruption, the novella of the Duchess makes its way to France and is translated in 1565 by François de Belleforest in the second tome of his *Histories Tragiques*. It is successively rendered in English by William Painter, when it appears in the

¹ *The Duchess of Malfi*, V, 2, 276. Our emphasis.

² Unless specified otherwise, we translate from the Italian.

second tome of *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567). Only a few decades after the horrific events, the English public is thus introduced to “The infortunate mariage of a Gentleman, called Antonio Bologna, wyth the Duchesse of Malfi, and the pitiful death of them both”. From the opening lines of the tale, the translated novella conveniently displays examples of Catholic corruption and unruly female desire, rather than describing a tragic love story. In 1614, developing the main plot from Painter’s tale, the English playwright John Webster stages the events around the life and death of the said duchess and her second husband, entitling his work “The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy”. It is indeed Webster who, for the first time, resituates the Duchess at the centre of the story, by emphasising her key role from the very title of his tragedy. Her violent death, which acquires dramatic hues in the Websterian play, is the result of the Duchess’s ultimately failed attempt to establish her own agency in the matter of love and marriage. Smothered to death by command of her brothers, who cannot accept her decision to marry again, especially below her status, the Duchess is alternatively painted as a femme fatale and a victim, a perfect concoction for a character in a Jacobean play. Moreover, the playwright gives more depth to side-characters in the play, such as those of Bosola and Delio; he also creates a subplot involving old Castruccio and Julia, his wife and the Cardinal’s lover, absent in the prose narrations and yet fundamental for the development of the tragedy. In the play, both Bosola and Julia become ambivalent victims and oppressors who alternatively thwart and assist the unfortunate couple to survive the ire of the Duchess’s brothers.

This article bears as its title an emblematic phrase uttered by the Cardinal of Aragon, brother to the Duchess: in this sentence that he addresses to his mistress Julia, married to Castruchio, he foreshadows her death by poisoning. She is invited by her lover to swear on a poisoned Bible by kissing it, a gesture that will forever seal her lips on the matter of the Duchess’s murder. The Cardinal’s choice of phrasing is particularly interesting: his line refers to the polyvalent concept of “bond” as a connection to a loved one, be it his sister or his mistress, as well as the bond that ties Julia to her vow of silence; finally, the “bond” bears a connection with the material and poisonous binding of the book.³ Soaked in venom, the Bible is transformed into the very weapon of the murder he is about to commit: from sacred text, it is transformed into a poisonous weapon that divides Europe throughout the sixteenth century.

From the mutable notion of “bond” sparks the idea behind this article, which tackles the poisonous and unstable relation woven between Italy and England and takes the novella narrated by Bandello as the starting point to analyse the subjects of dissidence and friction between the countries.

In the first part of this essay, the concept of Italian infection will be clarified through the notion of “Italian stigma” and Roger Ascham’s words. In his famous educational treatise *The Scholemaster* (1580), the author expresses his concern that Italian manners might seduce English readers through the lure of lust and moral dissipation. Women, such as the Duchess of Malfi, are painted as dissolute and unwise, while her brother the Cardinal of Aragon is not spared from the harsh critique towards the Catholic clergy and their misreading of the Bible. The sacred texts have been violated by Italian poison, which menaces to seep into English ears and hands: the translator must therefore warn his readers of a possible foreign infection.

The second part of the essay starts with a comparison between the notion of venom in the Bandellian *Novelle*, which is always perceived as an inner menace in the Italian collection. Venom and poison are indeed often associated with interior feelings in Bandello’s works, whereas in Painter’s the distress is related to a noxious violation from the outside. In order to purify and protect the English language, Roger Ascham (1580) suggests preserving linguistic

³ In England the two guilds were never separated – binding required special sewing and decorating skills and the employment of diverse, sometimes even toxic, substances. As D. Pearson notes, “selling books ready-bound seems to have been more common in Britain than in continental Europe, wherein the tradition of issuing books in paper wrappers, to be bound at a customer’s specification, continued well into the 20th century” (Pearson 2010: 17).

simplicity and discarding Italian excesses. As Robert C. Jones notes, “through patterns of imagery that do not correspond to any landscape or region” (1970: 275), the idea of Italy is recomposed by English translators via the conflation of various sources, engendering an “oxymoronic diversity of fascination and repulsion” (Marrapodi 2019: 7) towards the Catholic country. Ultimately, the protection that should be insured by Elizabethan moralists and translators could become equivocal: indeed, the introduction of Italianate texts into England may lead to a literary and cultural wave which could become impossible to dam.

Italian sin, Italian stigma

As the Cardinal announces to Julia, the final admission of responsibility in his sister’s murder resembles “a secret that, like a ling’ring poison, may chance lie spread in thy veins, and kill thee seven year hence” (V, 2, 260-262). As secrets, words contained in a book can spread beyond its pages and its cover: indeed, they were perceived as enthralling devices of persuasion and one of the most threatening forces in the cultural exchanges between England and the continent. Italian texts, even the very book that contaminates Julia’s lips, the Vulgate,⁴ were perceived as a subtle instrument employed to pollute the chaste and pure English spirit, incapable of defending itself against the refined attacks of the ensnaring Italian tongue. If unleashed, dubious Italian practices could instil morbid curiosity in the English reader, who could suddenly access a foreign and forbidden culture. Italian literature, especially the one concerned with contemporary news and easily digestible prose such as the novella, threatened, if left unrestrained, to leave a mark and to inspire a certain taste for vice in an uneducated readership. The English reader who was familiar with Italian texts was said to be recognizable through a sign, a stigma, a visible imprint of the “Italianate” manner.

The concept of “stigma of print” was introduced by J.W. Saunders in 1951 and has been extensively employed since, in order to describe a shunning attitude towards both writing and publishing practices.⁵ In *Strong History, Weak Voices*, Pamela J. Benson defines the “stigma of Italy” as the ostracism that early modern English writers and moralists applied towards the great majority of texts issued from any Italianate milieu. She argues that it was a “common English conviction that contact with things Italian would result in moral and religious corruption for both men and women” (Benson 2005: 146). Handling a book could therefore create a stigma, a lesion on a reader’s hands and consequently upon their soul: indeed, through these texts, English readers would access Italian culture and literature and expose themselves to the oozing venom of Italianate manners. As Roger Ascham famously wrote, an “Inglese italianato” could turn into a “diavolo incarnato” (Ascham 1909: 80):

the enchantments of Circe, brought out of Italy to mar men's manners in England; much by example of ill life, but more by precepts of fond books of late translated out of Italian into English, sold in every shop in London, commended by honest titles the sooner to corrupt honest manners (Ascham 1909: 78).

⁴At the time of Bandello’s publication, the *Sixtine Vulgata* had not yet been published (1590-1592), whilst the 4th century text had been established as the official Latin translation of the Bible at the beginning of the Council of Trent, in 1546.

⁵According to the critic “the achievement of print, with the imprimatur that it implies of a recognized audience of publishers and critics, has become a rough guide to quality and permanence. But the Tudor poet would have been embarrassed, if not insulted, by the question 'What have you published?'. It would have seemed to him [cfr. the Tudor writer] to introduce a completely irrelevant emphasis upon an unimportant and indeed somewhat discreditable aspect of authorship” (Saunders 1951: 139).

As the quotation highlights, books were the most direct means through which simple and prudish English men could access the traditionally more licentious (and more fascinating) Italian customs, and, as a visible and tangible object, they became the incarnation of Sin, be it of luxury, gluttony, sloth or whatever other vice English moralists could conceive. Thanks to the fast-paced development of print, Englishmen could count on a growing European circulation of texts, in translation or in the original language. If physical voyages were rarely an option for anybody other than aristocratic young gentlemen, the circulation of printed books was simpler, thus far more difficult to control and censor: hence the continuous concern of moralists such as Ascham, for the poisonous, enthralling power of books. Even more than Sir Thomas Malory and his Arthurian cycle, translated Italian books could empoison the purest of English minds and corrupt them with lewdness, vanity, and inextinguishable passion: “Yet ten ‘Morte d’Arthurs’ do not the tenth part so much harm as one of these books made in Italy and translated in England” (Ascham 1909: 84).⁶ Part of Ascham’s worry was related to the fear that an easier access to printed texts would be particularly noxious for the inexpert reader, who was drawn by curiosity rather than search for wisdom. As Peter Stallybrass suggests:

the fifteenth century was a period of comparable change, and one might want to see the invention of printing less as a displacement of manuscript culture than as the culmination of the invention of the navigable book – the book that allowed you to get your finger into the place you wanted to find in the least possible time (Stallybrass 2002: 44).

Once opened and leafed through, the book would reveal its incantation and leave an ineffaceable mark on the reader, as if immorality could leave a trace on the skin as much as in the mind. Like any material object that the reader owned, the human could interact with the book through the physical contact with the paper, reading it in any order. The reader could finally skim through the text as he/she pleased, using fingers as bookmarks and marking, effectively, with more or less visible traces, the passage through the pages. The book’s materiality became meaningful and potentially dangerous. Even before being opened, the volume lured in, invited like a siren, and could poison even at the most delicate touch, as testified to in the scene of *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Facing the widespread disquiet towards Italian culture and literature, William Painter defines his sources as “good” and “commendable”, thus reassuring his readers that his selection will provide the right dose of amusement and moral instruction. The success of *The Palace of Pleasure* can be ascribed to the ambiguous pull towards a possible linguistic intoxication and the curiosity for the “Other”, which is, nevertheless, kept at a safe distance through the process of translation.

Indeed, the polemical point of view that Painter adopts towards the protagonists of the novella of Antonio Bologna foreshadows little of the contradictory pity that the public may feel for Webster’s Duchess. The English translator follows the moralising tendency which had already transpired from the French edition of the story. Indeed, Belleforest opens the novella by suggesting women should be “an image of meekness” (Belleforest 1567: 13), should be obedient and avert from any desire of independence that may result in the “decadence” (Belleforest 1567:14) of their family.⁷ Both Belleforest and Painter seek to prove how the Duchess’s self-assertion and her independence are as condemnable as her brothers’ plotting and murdering: Belleforest compares her to a she-wolf, whereas Painter claims that her desire to marry Antonio Bologna derives from the need to “remove the ticklish instigations of hir [*sic*] wanton flesh” (Painter 1890: 10) These and other additions in the translations contrast with the

⁶ The chosen edition (1909) presents a modernised spelling. The first edition of the *Scholemaster* dates back to 1580, as specified in the introduction of the article.

⁷ Our translation.

opinion expressed by Bandello in the original version, where the author openly condemns the incapacity to leave the female sex to “govern” itself: the author wishes that “the wheel would turn” (Bandello 1942: 353), and adds that it would be only fair for women to avenge all the abuses they have undergone for centuries. The Italian author seems to be open to the possibility that a woman may choose her own destiny, which would avoid useless “crusades” to preserve her “dignity” (Bandello 1942: 354). Just as Bandello does not linger on the tragic details of the Duchess’s death, so Painter provides no real tragic pietas either, but he does include a severe religious and somewhat political undermining of Catholicism, as his loose translation from the French version of the novella shows:

is thys the sweete observation of the Apostles, of whom they vaunt themselves to be the Successours and followers? And yet we cannot finde nor reade, that the Apostles, or those that stept in their trade of lyfe, hyred Ruffians, and Murderers to cut the Throates of them which did them hurt (Painter 1890: 42).⁸

In the concluding lines of the tale, Painter condemns the Duchess and Antonio for reaching above their status and accomplishing what was socially unacceptable: the couple defies social mores and must pay for their lust. Nevertheless, because they are not the only ones who are guilty, Painter does not hesitate to denounce the Cardinal’s actions. As an unforgiving comment for Aragona’s murderous deliberations, he adds:

the cardinal also was out of quiet, grinding his teeth together, chattering forth of his Spanish mosel Jack an Apes Pater-noster, promising no better usage to their Bologna than hys yonger brother did [...] and what Christianity in a Cardinal, to shed the blood which he ought to defend? [...] But what? it was in the tyme of Iulius the second, who was more martiall than Christian, and loved better to shed bloud than give blessing to the people? (Painter 1890: 33).

Following the French rendition of Bandello’s story, which had already underlined the Duchess and Antonio’s accountability, Painter provides a moral lesson against social hubris: Antonio has “forgotten his estate” and the Duchess cannot “beare the title of well advised [woman]” (Painter 1890: 43) anymore. Nonetheless, the English text underscores the despicable role of the Cardinal as the brain behind the tragic chain of events. Whereas in Bandello’s version neither the Cardinal nor his brother Ferdinand are ever clearly appointed as the masterminds behind the killings, in the French version of the novella Delio reveals to an astonished Antonio the plot woven against him and his wife: Bologna has been “betrayed so cruelly [...] that it is impossible to concoct a more detestable betrayal” (Belleforest 1567: 49).

In the English version of the novella the action is fuelled by the Cardinal’s wickedness and desire to preserve his family’s status. As older brother and member of the clergy, he is the villain of the tale, leaving the reader little possibility to forgive him or to wash the bloodless but somehow damning sins away from his hands.

It is nonetheless in Webster’s tragedy that the fineness and foulness of the Cardinal’s character reaches its apex: the Duchess’ younger brother Ferdinand possesses a hot and raging temper, but he is fundamentally incapable of concocting the plans that his brother the Cardinal sets in motion in order to kill part of his family. The Cardinal’s evil intents seep intoxicatingly into his pawns’ minds at his will: Julia, a puppet in the hands of her lover, is described as a cunning, “lustful” (V, 5, 82) woman and a suitable partner for the anti-hero of the tragedy. However, she is also depicted by Webster as a young bride forced into an abusive marriage. Her

⁸ This paragraph is almost entirely translated from Belleforest; however, the English author does not include himself or his readers among the “successors” of the Apostles. Conversely, Belleforest uses the French third person neutral “on”, which can be translated with the English first person plural, to designate a community in which his readers are included.

death therefore provokes horror among the audience, if not as much as the strangling of the Duchess, at least enough to condemn the Cardinal for his depravities, which become more and more sacrilegious with the evolving and more detailed versions of the story. The “death by the book” that sees Julia as a victim enhances the dramatic and blasphemous actions of the Italian Catholic clergy: the Cardinal poisons a sacred book that had been written to provide guidance and salvation, and he does so with premeditation.

In early modern England, the Bible could be an agent of salvation: condemned men could be spared from the capital sentence if they proved themselves able to read the so-called “neck verse”, the biblical passage that insured a man’s absolution thanks to the benefit of clergy.⁹ When not directly concerned by the “neck verse”, men swore on the Bible and sought refuge and answers in the Word of God; therefore, the Bible should have functioned as a guarantee for salvation and reconciliation. Both Julia and the public have no reason to believe that the sacred text could be tainted with poison, or that it could be a carrier of death instead of the rescuer of a lost soul.

Webster, more surreptitiously than Painter, but with the advantage and the dramatic effects of the stage, does not condemn the Bible as toxic *per se*: he rather rebukes the use that the Cardinal and Italian Catholics make of the Scriptures. In Protestant culture, far from being restricted to religious people, the Bible was meant for laymen and women. The transformation and enlargement of reading practices had been possible thanks to the development of the printing market and the transformation of encrypted Latin texts into intelligible ones that conferred the reader a pseudo-authoritative stance over the text, thus preventing any kind of poisoning of the body or of the soul.

The centrality of the Church represents a relevant theme both in Painter and in Webster’s plays: it is through Painter’s continuous interventions during the narration that we find clear proof of Protestant scorn towards papist intoxicating and corrupting practices. In Webster’s tragedy, the insinuation of poison is actuated by the exploration of an altogether new character: Julia is an enigmatic figure situated at the chimeric border between Good and Evil, ideated by the dramatist as an embodiment, or, better yet, as the scapegoat for Catholic sinfulness. The Cardinal’s mistress represents the demolition and the inconsistency of his religious vows and introduces the notion of a corrupted Italian clergy.

The denigration of the men of the cloth, to whom Bandello belonged (even though we tend to forget it), is also a *topos* in his *Novelle*. Indeed, in Bandello’s text and according to eye-witnesses, the Cardinal himself had been assisted by Sigismund Gonzaga, the Cardinal of Mantua, in the exiling of his sister.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the punctual references to clerical sin tend to stress the human nature of priests and friars, without an explicit attempt to teach a moral lesson. Painter, on the other hand, takes advantage of the exceptional but outlandish event to paint the dreadful reality of Italian religious depravity: the novella loses its sardonic and thrilling effect to promptly provoke the readers’ dread and disgust. What the English author and playwright scorn is not, evidently, the Bible itself, but what it had come to represent in the Italian peninsula. They denounced a perverted Catholic interpretation, which relied on the mediation of a

⁹ “All an accused man had to do was prove that he could read a passage from the Bible – normally the opening verse of Psalm 51. If he could do this, he would be granted benefit of clergy. In practice, this meant that instead of being sentenced to death a prisoner would have the letters M (for murderer) and T (for thief) branded on his thumb and would be then set free. Only if a man came before the courts a second time accused of murder or grand larceny could he be executed. The fiction behind this was that the punishment exacted by the ecclesiastical courts for the first offence had been defrocking, and that the accused, being no longer a clergyman, was now free to be dealt with in the normal way by the lay courts” (Briggs et. al. 1996: 62).

¹⁰ See also Painter 1890: 33. Bandello specifies how the Cardinal of Mantua had been appointed by the very same Julius II as “massimo legato di Ancona”, the city where Antonio and the Duchess take shelter against her pursuing brothers. (Bandello 1942: 363).

corrupted clergy, whilst a Protestant reading favoured a solitary and more personal understanding of the Bible.

The poison within

The first edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), enacting Edward VI's Act of Uniformity, suggested, among other innovative practices, the use of the Bible only during religious ceremonies. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, asserted that it would have been simpler, both for the minister and the parishioners, to follow the text as if it were a chronological story. Reading had to be

plaine and easy to be understood, wherein (so much as maie be) the readyng of holy scripture is to be set further, that all thynges shall bee doen in ordre, without breakyng one piece therof from another (qtd. in Stallybrass 2002: 48).¹¹

The concept of plainness and simplicity echoes Ascham's recommendations against the Italian "enchantments", creating a contrast both with the complicated setting of the Catholic service and the common Italian "apparel" (Ascham 1909: 160). Moreover, the Italian tongue was perceived as poisonous in many instances. By means of the notorious *sprezzatura* proposed by Baldassarre Castiglione, Italian was believed to instil lecherous behaviour in the reader that could tamper with his/her "simplicity" of manners. To the rhetorical prowess of the Italians and of the Italian clergy above all was instead seen to contrast the English language with its plainness and directness, as Maslen notes:

for modern readers of Elizabethan prose-fiction, Roger Ascham looks a little like Umberto Eco's murderous librarian: the self-appointed guardian of a reactionary morality, struggling to turn back the tide of imaginary heresies which is destined to drown the world he knew (Maslen 1997:1).

Ascham, among other writers – themselves educational theorists – understood the value of language and the danger that linguistic exchanges could pose. In the early modern period, there was a "terrifying volatility of words" with "all the powers of Europe [...] fighting over custody of the scriptural Word": it was a religious conflict as much as it was a cultural one. In short, "the policing of the English tongue was as much a matter of national security as the policing of the coasts" (Maslen 1997: 23). This partly explains why the image of incoming Italian translations were seen as part of a bigger form of intoxication, as the poisonous penetration of another language into vernacular English. Maslen accurately defines imported literature as a disruptive element for the uncouth and "rude" English tongue (Ascham 1909: 171): Elizabethan fiction is at the core of Ascham's invectives, and the source of his preoccupation with the importation of evil, poisonous, Circean habits.

According to moralists such as Ascham, who were concerned with the stability of the country, the power of words had to be acknowledged, protected, and tamed by wiser writers. His stress upon the concept of "simplicity" reveals his abhorrence for any misunderstanding

¹¹See also D. Cressy and L.A. Ferrel (1996: 41). By introducing a plainer reading, of a simpler following and comprehension, Protestant readers "arguably initiated the practice which novel readers would later naturalize: the *perverse* habit of reading forward continuously. To imagine continuous reading as the norm in reading a book is radically reactionary: it is to read a codex as if it was a scroll, from beginning to end" (Stallybrass, 2002: 48. Our emphasis). Disrupting the idea of the codex as a severed text and reading it as a scroll is at the basis of the future development of the novel, defined, when it is good, as a "page turner", hence inducing the reader to follow a continuous stream, whilst still holding the ability to leaf to and fro: indeed, the book "derives its devastating destructive powers not so much from the inflammatory nature of its contents as from the *context* in which they are read" (Maslen 1997: 1).

during the translating process. He thus suggests that double meanings, puns, satire and comical effects be removed. In the English rendition of the Italian novella, in fact, little space is left for the imagination: dialogues – the essential element of the novella – become more and more scant in English translations, and few are the interruptions of the narration in favour of references to mundane life. Indeed, even a literary success and a hymn to courtly rhetoric such as was *The Book of the Courtier* had been refashioned and transformed into a didactic tract. Ascham seems to propose it as an “antidote to the poisonous influence of Italian fiction” (Maslen 1997: 40), which turned Englishmen into “marvellous monster[s]” (Ascham 1909: 80). Ascham fears that, in the wake of the Italian tradition, Painter and Webster could use the very same persuasion, the same venom that Italian writers and English fictional authors instil in their readers: as the King of Navarre wittily put it in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* “How well he’s read, to reason against reading” (I, 1, 94). Whilst fending themselves from Italianate lust, English Elizabethan and Jacobean authors dangerously exposed themselves to the “sweet [...] venom” of Bandellian reminiscence (Bandello II, IX and passim).

In the *Novelle*, a number of instances of the term “venom” are related to sudden bursts of passion such as love or rage. Indeed, the Bandellian metaphorical use of the word “poison” usually refers to internal feelings and self-destructive corruption rather than foreign intoxication – if we exclude the few episodes of actual deaths by poison, such as the case of the unfortunate Romeo (II, IX). The symbolic venom of amorous passion, seeping through the skin of the lover, intoxicates heart and mind. This infection prevents the victim from reasoning against any desire, often instigating the most ravenous and disruptive of passions: jealousy. Bandello, in one of his many fascinating oddities, associates poison with courtly gossip – the same court which had provided him with his livelihood and with the main material for the *Novelle* – calling envy and infamous chitchat “pestiferous illness” (I, LIX), “pestiferous vermin” (I, XLIII) and “venomous sting” (I, II). Envy and jealousy are usually depicted as inner feelings; they are mainly directed towards oneself, albeit reliant on the presence of another object. The excess of bile making one “green with envy” is self-centred and self-directed, after all, as it depicts a feeling of inadequacy regarding one’s position in society or in an amorous relationship.

When culturally reappropriated, even the self-referred, *poison-ed* feelings of the Italian collection turn into spreading, *poison-ing* reactions from which the English public has to be sheltered: “this foul melancholy will poison his goodness” (I, 1, 71-72) says Antonio at the very beginning of *The Duchess of Malfi*, in his attempt to salvage Bosola’s reputation. Later on, before realising that his wife’s brothers are beyond convincing, he suggests “draw[ing] the poison out” (V, 1, 71) of Ferdinand, who is determined to kill his sister for the socially inappropriate relationship she is entertaining with Antonio. The Duchess, however, who is not persuaded by her brothers’ pacific intentions, denounces Bosola’s reports from the Cardinal as “poison’d pills [wrapped] in gold and sugar” (IV, 1, 19-20). More than any poisoned pills, it is the characters’ speeches which inflame and intoxicate their spirits, thus fuelling the tragic ending.

In her perhaps slightly outdated *Euphorion*, Vernon Lee suggests that during the Renaissance Italy had come to acknowledge its own vices as some sort of internal, incurable, and perhaps even innate deformity. At the encounter with such a monstrous world, Englishmen were shocked by the violence and the profanity of a culture that did not shy away from its own crudeness. Lee’s argument consists in saying that Italy would have already assumed and accepted its own abnormalities in the early modern period, whilst England still tended to thrust the culpability outside its borders and to apply what Maslen called a geographical and symbolic “polishing of the coasts” (Maslen 1997: 23). To avoid intoxication from the slithering, green venom of envy, language had to be purged too, even though, occasionally, poison could infiltrate itself in-between the bindings of the books.

As the Cardinal's looming proclamation suggests, books can bind one's fate, by enthralling and inebriating one's mind and intentions. Nonetheless, books can be rather literally poisoned and serve as lethal mediums, since they entertain a very physical relation with the human body, as has been recently discovered by researchers at the University Library of Southern Denmark and at the Smithsonian Library. Indeed, a number of books dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth century have been retrieved in recent years and, whilst analysing the paper waste that usually functioned as a cover, scientists have identified the presence of toxic compounds in the green paint used to even out the books' bindings.¹² After accurate chemical testing, scientists have proven that the green paint employed to conceal the paper waste that served as a reinforced cover¹³ contains traces of multiple metalloids, including iron and lead, as well as highly poisonous arsenic. This volatile compound is contained inside orpiment, the yellow pigment mixed together with indigo to give the distinctive colour *vergaut* to the cover (Holck, Rasmussen 2018), and its poisonous nature was, in all probability, unknown to the binder. Thus, we can almost certainly rule out any homicidal intentions from the binder's part – *pace* Guglielmo da Baskerville and his investigations. Even though the use of poisonous substances were purely accidental, the scientific findings in part justify the early modern anxiety towards the noxious power of books, as far contents and material are concerned.

Even though a historical detective inquiry has been ruled out and the unknown binders have been absolved from any murderous attempt, when one looks at the effects caused by substances such as arsenic, the maimed body parts drawn with precise detail in medical books, one cannot help but find a connection with the fear of infection of the early modern body politic. One can understand why, besides the drawing out of the venom, the burning of an illness was a possible urgent procedure to relieve the body of its sickness. We can easily associate the “curative” and preventive burning promoted by the Inquisition, and on the other side of the Channel by a scrupulous royal censorship, with a specific attempt to limit the spreading venom of foreign culture in society. Fortunately – or unfortunately, if we pay heed to Ascham – the *Index of Forbidden Books* was only institutionalised a couple of decades after the publication of Bandello's *Novelle*, thus allowing the collection to escape the ban.¹⁴ The burning of books in order to purge the readership's minds was an effective technique employed by the Counter-Reformation in Italy and throughout the Continent, whereas in England, a country swinging between Catholicism and Protestantism throughout the sixteenth century, censorship was perhaps applied less methodically, though it certainly had a rather political and economic root. Publications and licences were exploited by both printers and the Stationer's Register to control the selling of books, but also by royal censorship, to avoid popular uprisings which might have escalated after a riotous play or the publication of a seditious text. As, M. O' Callaghan notes,

censorship itself was multiform: there was not one censorship that served the whole state but rather multiple censorships that operated in the service of a range of interest groups including the Crown, the peerage, and the City of London, and extending to other individuals and communities operating at a local level. [...] Censorship did not only operate through the regulation of the press, particularly since books tended to come to the attention of the authorities after they had been published rather

¹² “Although the books were printed in diverse places in Europe — Basel, Bologna, and Lübeck — the styles of their bindings indicate that they were likely bound in the same region in the same period. It is further likely that they acquired their arsenic-rich paint as part of the bookbinding process” (Delbey, Holck, Jørgensen, et al. 2019).

¹³ Leather being costly, it was often substituted or just reinforced with old parchments that were not employed. Instead of throwing away the paper, which at the time was still an expensive item, the pages were employed as cover. “[W]rappers of rough plain card (sometimes called cartonnage) began to be used in Italy during the 16th century and can also be found from France and Germany around the same time and later” (Pearson, 2014: 16).

¹⁴ Nevertheless, it must be noted how an already “censored” version of Bandello had been edited by Ascanio Centorio and published in 1560 in Milan with the addendum “corrected with diligence and with the addition of some moral guidances”.

than before. Rather, there were other mechanisms, including laws of defamation, which were intended to prevent or punish publication of illicit and scandalous material (O’Callaghan 2010: 172).

Instead of being mainly a religious instrument, the press was officially and effectively politicized throughout the sixteenth century, going hand in hand with the growing production of printed texts. It is thus “necessary to retain a sense of censorship as a repressive force, but we also need to recognise that it is a socially constructed concept that could be used strategically” (*ibid.* 173).

Not unlike Elizabethan censorship, Painter’s translation of Bandello’s tale is employed by the English author to address the problematic relations between the Catholic and Protestant faith. Whereas Bandello and Belleforest, whose collections had been published in Catholic countries, had adopted more nuanced stances towards the misdeeds of the clergy, Painter labels the entire sect as corrupted by lust and avarice. The purge of Catholic sins, together with an Italianate and libertine way of living, is condemned even in books that are accused of propagating Italian culture. Thus, instead of turning into a lethal poison, Italian literary “venom” is inoculated in Painter’s readers and can be digested without rendering them victims of its effects.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to explore the toxic power of Italian reading in early modern England. Through the exploration of an originally Italian chronicle translated – or “improved”, as Painter puts it – into English, we have sought to show the fear towards any unrestrained translation and transmission of cultural and religious practices that disrupted the ostensible naïveté of English readers and playgoers. Besides the tireless attempts to preserve the simplicity of the English language and to shelter it from the attacks of Italianate “manners”, it would have been inevitable, due to the unprecedented expansion of the printing and binding market, to prevent the infiltration of continental culture and customs, both through the literature itself as well as the physical books, which could carry within (or without) various forms of poison...or *pharmakon*. As Michael Wyatt notes, besides his resolute moralisation,

Ascham emphasizes the symbiotic tactility of language, but whereas direct acquaintance with Greek and Latin effects for him a kind of moral osmosis, contemporary Italian can only bring about ruin, its decadent undercurrents easily transmissible even when turned into English words by the wrong translator (Wyatt 2005: 161).

However, Elizabethan translation was born from the need to establish English as a language dialoguing with the other vernaculars: somehow, Italian “infestation” (*ibid.*) was sought by the translators in order to construct an English cultural and literary identity. As has been wisely noted by a much later observer of the eccentric habits of English society, “the Renaissance knew of strange manners of poisoning – poisoning by a helmet and a lighted torch, by an embroidered glove and a jewelled fan, by a gilded pomander and by an amber chain. Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book” (Wilde, 2001: 140).

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Toxicity and Infection in Shakespeare's England: An Insight from Tilley's *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England*

Laura Pinnavaia

A proverb is wise; it belongs to many people; it is ingenious in form and idea; and it was first invented by an individual and applied by him to a particular situation. (Taylor 1975: 3)

Introduction

In the history of the English language collecting proverbs goes back a long way. Probably the earliest prototypes of proverbial collections are the Anglo-Saxon gnomic poems known as the *Exeter Gnomics* and *Cotton Gnomics*. What we might consider as the first true collection is entitled *The Proverbs of Alfred* and consists of a Middle English poem of 600 lines, which provides an account of King Alfred and then gives a series of thirty-five sayings, each beginning with "Thus quoth Alfred". But it is only after the appearance of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Adagia* (1500) – a collection of proverbs written in Latin – that a tradition of compiling collections of proverbs truly set in in Britain (Taylor 1975). With Richard Taverner's *Proverbes or Adagie: Gathered out of Erasmus* (1539) – a collection of proverbs translated from Latin into English – proverbs gained popularity reaching their peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Proverbs illustrated emblem books and tapestries, they were engraved on cutlery, and were included in all literary genres, from folktale narrative to educational works. They provided titles for Elizabethan theatrical performances (Brenner 1937), and playwrights used them to strengthen their characters' arguments (McCullen 1964: 247). In sum, they became invaluable expressions for artists, actors, preachers, and orators because of the way they exposed the history and philosophy of mankind. It is exactly this richness of moral content that elevated such expressions to symbols of classical eloquence, fostering Renaissance humanists to start studying them closely and comparatively even across cultures. Indeed, it is in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that proverbs also became important tools for teaching languages and their cultures and were diligently included in all works written for pedagogical purposes, from dialogues, and grammars, to bilingual dictionaries. As the seventeenth century drew to a close, there set in a reaction to the enthusiastic use of proverbs with the result that in the eighteenth century "proverbs were first frowned upon and then banished from polite literature, and finally, from polite conversation" (Tilley 1950: viii). And yet, as we all know, proverbs continued to be a constant ingredient of popular literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and since the twentieth century they have been used abundantly in the mass media such as in newspaper headlines, comic strips, political cartoons, and of course in modern advertising too. Proverbs are indeed one of the folklore genres that are still most alive today (see Mieder 1993; Mieder 1994; Mieder & Dundes 1994) and an enlightening glance into what and how people are thinking.

To go back and examine some of the proverbs in use in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature is therefore an attempt to catch a glimpse of the ideas being disseminated in those days. In this essay focus will be placed upon a select number of proverbs comprising words that refer to toxicity and infection, collected in Tilley's *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. The analysis of such proverbial expressions will not only help us to gain some insight into how authors were expressing themselves around the subject of toxicity and infection in Shakespeare's England, but also how much of their lore has been preserved thanks to Tilley's *Dictionary*. Before approaching the research proper – i.e. the method pursued and the results obtained – a few words will be spent on defining the proverb and Tilley's "proverb".

Tilley's 'Dictionary' and his proverbs

Although most would agree that proverbs embody "the philosophy of the common people" (Taylor 1975: 63), one simple definition that suits all is still hard to come by (see, for instance, the contrasts between Seiler 1922; Greimas 1970; Dundes 1975). That said, most scholars would still concur that proverbs are a genre not to be confused with other genres such as clichés, wellerisms, curses, phrases, riddles, jokes, tales, songs, slogans, and aphorisms that are not all and to the same extent "a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with a general meaning, a potential free conversational turn preferably with a figurative meaning" (Norrick 1985: 73, 78). Indeed, in this definition provided by Norrick, three distinguishing features seem to unite all scholars: proverbs are self-contained, didactic units with a general meaning. Firstly, like pictures, proverbs can reproduce a glimpse of life, in however much detail is necessary; testimony to this is Breughel's painting entitled *Netherlandic Proverbs* (1559). Secondly, owing to their concise and simple nature, they are apt for communicating in a didactic manner the experiences of life they depict, accounting for their adoption both by the prophets in *Proverbs* of the Old Testament and by Jesus in his parables of the New Testament. Thirdly, their rhyme and meter as well as their alliteration make them pleasant and memorable, thus creating "a feeling of positive identification and trustworthy authority" for all to understand (Taylor 1975: 48).

Although it includes some proverbs from eighteenth-century authors, Tilley's *Dictionary* covers principally the period from 1500-1700 and is based on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collections of proverbs, along with the dictionaries, grammars, and dialogues that include foreign expressions and their English translations. To this day, it remains one of the most complete collections of proverbs gathered from sixteenth and seventeenth-century literary works (Tilley 1950: v). Although other important collections had been published earlier, such as Apperson (1929) and Smith (1935), they were selective works from which hundreds of sayings were omitted. On the contrary, Tilley attempted to include in his *Dictionary* every English proverb in circulation from 1500 to 1700 (Tilley 1950: v).

While fully aware of the characteristics and boundaries of a proverb, Tilley (1950: v) declares in the introduction to his work that he had to transcend its "limited definition". Guided by a more "elastic conception of what was proverbial", he admits to having included catch-phrases and clichés (which are not strictly speaking proverbs according to Norrick 1985: 73), in order to account for all the material found in the collections published from 1500 to 1700. From a linguistic perspective, therefore, Tilley's proverbs comprise many different types of phrases, both figurative and literal, for which it is difficult to provide one all-encompassing definition. From an extra-linguistic point of view, they are more clearly definable: they are phrases that come from many different writers, cover the whole extent of the reflections on life, sometimes syntactically and semantically in opposition with one another. Defined as "everybody's weapon" (1950: viii), Tilley's proverbs disclose human nature, pointing to the

superstitions, the wisdom, and the contradictions that characterize mankind's way of being. Through a circumscribed analysis of Tilley's proverbs regarding toxicity and infection, we aim here to get a glance at some of the strengths and weaknesses that distinguished mankind in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Methodology

To collect the proverbs, object of our analysis, a series of words were keyed into the electronic form of Tilley's *Dictionary*. Besides the lemmas "toxic" and "infection", the following twenty-four synonyms were looked up: "baneful", "corruption", "contagion", "deadly", "defilement", "disease", "epidemic", "forbidden", "germ", "harmful", "impurity", "influenza", "lethal", "noxious", "mephitic", "pernicious", "pestilential", "poison", "pollution", "septic", "toxic", "venom(ous)", "virulent", and "virus". Once collected, the proverbial expressions were analysed from two perspectives: linguistic and lexicographical.

In the linguistic analysis, the one hundred proverbs collected were examined, firstly, from a semantic point of view to obtain an overview of the messages conveyed, otherwise known as the Standard Proverbial Interpretation (SPI) (Norrick 1985: 1) and, secondly, from a lexical and syntactic point of view to identify the rhetorical devices used to facilitate the SPI. In the third and last part of this research, lexicographical focus was placed upon a circumscribed number of proverbs selected from the one hundred. They are the twenty-one proverbs recorded in the *Dictionary* as appearing in Shakespeare's works, which thanks to Tilley's lexicographical art offer some interesting insight into Shakespeare's toxic and infected England.

Results

The search for proverbs by means of the node words mentioned above resulted in the retrieval of one hundred proverbial expressions, some of which noticeably include one of the node words looked up, but many of which do not. In fact, because in each entry Tilley includes cross-references to other proverbs or variant forms, many other equivalent expressions without the node words were encountered and chosen. For example, the proverb "the bait hides the hook" appears next to its variant "the bait hides the deadly hook" under the headword "deadly". The addition of the modifier "deadly" in fact only emphasizes the already negative nature of the standard proverbial expression, which is the version recorded. Only eight of the twenty-six words looked up in the *Dictionary* led us to the proverbs we were looking for, which have been listed at the end of the essay under the headword they were found or cross-referenced at. They are the words "baneful", "corruption", "deadly", "disease", "forbidden", "poison", "toxic", and "venom(ous)".

The sense of toxicity and infection in the proverbs

Whether or not the proverbs collected include one of the node words looked up was ultimately of little concern: the node words simply allowed us to pinpoint a series of expressions in which the themes of toxicity and infection invest the meaning of these proverbial expressions in the widest possible sense. Indeed, the proverbs collected denote toxicity and infection summarily in three principal ways: by pointing to dangerous behaviour for oneself and for others in society; by warning about the risks of too much pleasure; by offering advice on how to conduct a more serene life in the face of danger and trouble.

As to the first group of proverbs that accounts for people's interactions, a significant number describe the pernicious belief that appearance is reality. The proverbs "the bait hides the hook", "poison is hidden in golden cups", "a honey tongue a heart of gall", "whited sepulchers", "the lily is fair in show but foul in smell", "the vessel of an apothecary has oftentimes poison in the bottom" all teach that it is necessary to look beyond the surface to get a real glimpse of what people are like. Indeed, many proverbs recognize man's cruelty, both in actions ("to send/come with a powder") and in words ("the cockatrice slays by sight only", "the tongue stings", "there is no venom to that of the tongue"). This only reaps further vengeful cruelty: "blood will have blood", "vengeance comes slowly but surely", "malice hurts itself most". Many proverbs indeed denounce man's attraction for evil doing: "what is forbidden is desired", "stolen fruit is sweet", "forbid a fool a thing that he will do", "a woman does that which is forbidden her", and to this even the most innocent of people are prone: "the canker soonest eats the fairest rose", "the corruption of the best is the worst", "the fly has her spleen and the ant her gall", "no viper so little has its venom". It is claimed that evil is stronger than good ("agues come on horseback but go away on foot", "a deadly disease neither physician nor physic can ease", "a desperate disease must have a desperate cure", "the bee sucks honey out of the bitterest flowers") and it almost always gains the upper hand: "he that lies down with dogs must rise with fleas", "a sore eye infects the sound", "a corrupt breath stains a clear glass", "one is not smelled where all stink", "one scabbed sheep mars a whole flock".

That evil prevails even in man's actions towards himself is revealed by the number of proverbs that alert against the perils of bad health ("the words ending in -ic do mock the physician, as hectic, paralytic, apoplectic, lethargic", "diseases of the eye are to be cured with the elbow", "fresh air is ill for the diseased or wounded man") especially owing to a bad diet: "many dishes, many diseases", "whatsoever was the father of a disease an ill diet was the mother", "to drink health is to drink sickness", "to have a sweet/wanton tooth". Indeed, as many proverbs relate, too much self-indulgence is harmful: "no honey, without gall", "no weal without woe", "the greatest hate proceeds from the greatest love", "too much honey cloyes the stomach", "diseases are the interests of pleasure".

Unlike the preceding two groups that characterize a series of proverbs that admonish toxic behaviour of different kinds, this last group features proverbs that provide concrete advice on how to conduct a safer and healthier lifestyle in order to avert the dangers and hardships mentioned above. One first piece of wisdom regards the healing powers of time: "time and thought tame the strongest grief". Another regards the need to be respectful of people ("they that make laws must not break them") and to be good examples for society ("physician, heal thyself!") given that everyone is different ("what baits one banes another", "one man's meat is another man's poison", "all meat pleases not all mouths"). To be knowledgeable ("a disease known is half cured", "a fool's bolt is soon shot") and to learn from one's mistakes ("the fisher stricken will be wise") is also a wise policy to follow, just as being kind to oneself and to one another are the best hopes for a toxic-free life: "the best doctors are Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet and Dr. Merryman". Surely, there is no denying that the sense of toxicity and infection that these proverbs convey remains universal and relevant today.

The rhetorical devices that convey meaning

Even though these proverbs belonging to sixteenth and seventeenth-century works seem to convey meanings that are applicable to life in the twenty-first century too, such meanings are not always so easy to interpret nowadays. Indeed, apart from a few expressions that can be understood at face value (e.g. "they that make laws must not break them", "what is forbidden is desired"), most of them have literal meanings that, while clearly describing the difficult living

conditions and the limited ways available of tackling them in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, do not correspond to their figurative ones or their SPIs. The rhetorical devices that connect these literal and figurative meanings range from synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor to paradox.

Synecdoche

Probably one of the most commonly used rhetorical devices that characterize proverbs is synecdoche. Here the literal meaning of the proverb is a description of a specific scene that can be generalized to yield an abstract truth. For instance, both proverbs “the bait hides the hook” and “the lily is fair in show but foul in smell” describe specific situations whose meanings can be read in more general terms – albeit with different nuances. If the image of “the bait hides the hook” focuses on the difficulty of perceiving the truth, the image of “the lily is fair in show but foul in smell” centers more on the contrast between what is real and unreal. Despite the subtle difference, both images disclose the meaning that appearances often fail to coincide with reality thanks to the species to genus relationship between top and bottom structures.

Metonymy

The species to genus relationship represented by synecdoche includes the device of metonymy. Indeed, also metonymy refers to a specific expression that points to a more general one, but unlike synecdoche, in which the whole expression is interpreted in general terms, metonymy contemplates the interpretation of certain elements only; namely, nominals. This is why we might consider it a type of synecdoche. The abstract truth that people are all different can be expressed by two seemingly similar proverbs “one’s man’s meat is another man’s poison” and “all meat pleases not all mouths”, and yet the meaning of both is not activated in the same way: in the former, the meaning stems from the interpretation of the whole expression or the whole image (synecdoche); in the latter, the meaning is derived by simply relating the nominal “mouth” to people (metonymy). Indeed, “all meat pleases all mouths” satisfies the description of part-whole metonymy, whereby part of the body (“mouth”) corresponds to the whole body (people).

Instrument-function metonymy also figures among these proverbs. Many proverbs showing this type of rhetorical figure also involve parts of the body, which in this case correspond to the functions customarily associated with them. For example, in the proverb “a honey tongue, a heart of gall”, which points to the contrast between what people say and what they think, the “tongue” stands for the organ that allows us to speak and the “heart” for the organ that represents our feelings.

Metaphor

Another type of rhetorical device that, like metonymy, involves the figurative interpretation of nominals is metaphor. In this case, the nominals take on a semantic feature from another constituent in collocation with it. In the expressions “vengeance comes slowly but surely”, “agues come on horseback but goes away on foot”, and “the best doctors are Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet and Dr. Merryman” the meanings make sense only if the abstract nouns “vengeance” and “quiet”, as well as the concrete inanimate nouns agues and diet, are personified and thus interpreted as if they were human beings.

Paradox

Of all the rhetorical figures that define proverbs, paradox is probably the hardest to make sense of because it involves apparent contradiction. For instance, the expression “to drink health is to drink sickness” sounds illogical. It only makes sense if the two phrases are separated and interpreted in consequential manner: by drinking to your health too much, you will drink too much and get sick. Another proverb that displays paradox reads “those that are stung by the scorpion are healed by the scorpion”. To understand the meaning of this expression, once again it is necessary to decompose the structure into two parts and interpret the first (the scorpion stings) as the malady, which is the cause and result of the interpretation of the second part, the cure (the scorpion heals). Besides paradox, this proverb also displays synecdoche, which allows an animal-connoted image to mean something much more general and abstract.

In sum, unless the SPI coincides with the literal reading, a proverb generally conveys its figurative meaning through one or more of the rhetorical devices described above; i.e., synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor and/or paradox. Such figures, however, are not always easy to grasp and the meanings of proverbs thus not always obvious to readers in the twentieth century. Tilley’s primary objective in compiling the *Dictionary* was in fact “to assist the student of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers to recognize the proverbs of that period and to determine, where possible, their meanings” (Tilley 1950: viii). By collecting and listing as much proverbial material as possible, his aim was, moreover, to highlight the “important characteristics of Shakespeare’s style” and to clear up the obscure passages in his plays (Tilley 1950: v). It is therefore to the proverbs of infection and toxicity used by Shakespeare that we will now briefly turn to in the third and last part of this essay.

The proverbs of infection and toxicity in Shakespeare’s works

Of the one hundred proverbs collected from Tilley’s *Dictionary*, twenty-one appear in Shakespeare’s works with a differing degree of prominence. Ten appear once only in Shakespeare’s plays: in *Henry VI part III* we can find “There is a salve for every sore” (IV, 6, 87) and “Time cures every disease” (III, 3, 76); in *Henry VI Part II*, we can find “Physician, heal thyself” (II, 1, 789). In *Henry VIII* (I, 1, 120) we can find “As surly as a butcher’s dog” (I, 1, 182), in *Richard II* (III, 2, 135) “The greatest hate proceeds from the greatest love”, and in *Richard III* (I, 2, 148) “A sore eye infects the sound”. “What is forbidden (baneful) is desired” appears in *Measure for Measure* (I, 2, 132), “Time and thought tame the strongest grief” in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (III, 2, 14), “Nothing so good but it may be abused” in *Romeo and Juliet* (II, 3, 19), and “The lily is fair in show but foul in smell” in *Sonnet* 94 (line 13).

Six proverbs appear twice: “Beauty and chastity seldom meet” appears in *As you Like It* (I, 2, 40) and *Hamlet* (III, 1, 102). “The canker soonest eats the fairest rose” in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (I, 1, 42) and *Sonnet* 35, (line 4). “A fool’s bolt is soon shot” in *As you Like It* (V, 4, 67) and *Henry V* (III, 7, 131). “Too much honey cloyes the stomach” in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (II, 2, 137), and *Romeo and Juliet* (II, 6, 11). “Whited sepulchers” in *Titus Andronicus* (IV, 2, 97) and *The Merchant of Venice* (II, 7, 69). “He has spit his venom” in *Richard III* (I, 2, 144) and *Pericles* (III, 1, 7).

In three different plays appears the proverb “Full as a toad of a poison”: *Henry VI Part III* (II, 2, 137), *Richard III* (I, 2, 147), *As You Like It* (II, 1, 13). “Blood will have blood” appears in *King John* (I, 1, 19), *Measure for Measure* (V, 1, 412), and *Macbeth* (III, 4, 122). In the four works *The Rape of Lucrece* (line 540), *Romeo and Juliet* (III, 2, 46), *Richard III* (IV, 1, 55), and *Twelfth Night* (III, 4, 214) we can find the proverb “The cockatrice slays by sight only”. In five works appears “A desperate disease must have a desperate cure”: *The Rape of Lucrece* (l.

1337), *Romeo and Juliet* (II, prol. 13), *Much Ado about Nothing* (IV, 1, 253), *Hamlet* (IV, 3, 9) and *Macbeth* (IV, 3, 213). In the seven plays *Henry VI Part III* (II, 6, 27), *Hamlet* (II, 2, 209), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (I, 1, 275), *Othello* (V, 1, 104), *Antony and Cleopatra* (IV, 9, 13), *The Winter's Tale* (III, 2, 105), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (I, 4, 37) appears “Fresh air is ill for the diseased or wounded man”.

Besides being more or less popular, these twenty-one proverbs also show differing degrees of faithfulness to the proverbial structures that Tilley reports.

A93 Fresh Air is ill for the diseased or wounded man

SHAKESPEARE.—1591 3 *Hen. VI* II vi 27: The air hath got into my deadly wounds. 1600-1 *H.* II ii 209: Will you walk out of the air, my lord? Into my grave? 1600-1 *M.W.W* I i 275: Will't please your worship to come in, sir?—No, I thank you, forsooth, heartily. I am very well. 1604 *O.* V i 104: O, bear him out o' th' air. 1606-7 *A.C.* IV ix 13: The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me, That life, a very rebel to my will, May hang no longer on me! 1611 *W.T.* III ii 105: Lastly, hurried Here to this place, i' th' open air, before I have got strength of limit. 1613 *T.N.K.* I iv 37: Bear 'em speedily [of wounded] From our kind air, to them unkind, and minister What man to man may do.

As can be seen in the citations above, none of the expressions used by Shakespeare corresponds perfectly to the expression that Tilley's recognizes and enters in his *Dictionary* as “Fresh Air is ill for the diseased or wounded man”. In *Henry VI Part III* (II, 6, 27) Lord Clifford, who has been stabbed, announces his imminent death with the exclamation “air hath got into my deadly wounds”, while in *Hamlet* (II, 2, 209-10), with reference to Hamlet's foreshadowed death, Polonius pronounces “Will you walk out of the air, my lord? / HAM.: Into my grave”. In *The Winter's Tale* and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the same proverb also appears quite different. To express her distress at having been dragged into court with the charge of adultery, Hermione exclaims “Lastly, hurried / Here to this place, i' th' open air, before / I have got strength of limit” (*WT* III, 2, 105-7), while Slender politely and ironically refuses Anne's invitation to go inside with the expression “No, I thank you, forsooth, heartily. I am very well” (*MWW* I, 1, 277). Even though “air” is mentioned in all the expressions used, Shakespeare continuously adapts and alters what was presumably the canonical and well-known structure of the proverb in order to express the extent of deadliness in accordance with the design of each play's plot and characters.

Shakespeare's creativity is particularly evident if we compare his contemporaries' use of the same proverb. It is in fact no surprise that in Tilley's *Dictionary* the citations taken from Shakespeare are always at the end of the proverb entry, preceded by citations from other authors. It allowed Tilley to introduce and explain the proverbs' meanings through the works of other writers, who often used the proverbs more faithfully than Shakespeare did. In the case of “Fresh Air is ill for the diseased or wounded man”, Shakespeare's examples are listed after the examples found in Pettie, Melbancke, and Jonson.

1576 PETTIE *Pet. Pal.*, II 52: The air whereby we live, is death to the diseased or wounded man. 1583 MELBANCKE *Philot.*, s. Ee4: wound, by the Phisitions prescriptions, must be kepte from the aire. [1614] 1631 JONSON *Barth. Fair* II v 178: Get some helpe to carry her legge out o' the ayre . . she has the Mallanders, the scratches, the crowne scabbe, and the quitter bone, i'the tother legge. 1616 JONSON *Ev. Man in Hum.* II iii 46: It is this new disease . . for loues sake, sweet heart, come in, out of the aire . . the aire will doe you harme.

As can be seen from the example above, these authors are generally more faithful to the proverb structure than Shakespeare is. Pettie (1576), especially, adheres closely to it with the expression

“The air whereby we live, is death to the diseased or wounded man” (II, 52). In disclosing the toxic environmental conditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this citation points to the proverb’s literal meaning from which the other citations distance themselves gradually both syntactically and semantically. Indeed, if Melbancke in *Philotimus* (1583) with “the Phisitions prescriptions, must be kepte from the aire” and Jonson in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) with “Get some helpe to carry her legge out o’ the ayre she has the Mallanders, the scratches, the crowne scabbe, and the quitter bone, i’the tother legge” (II, 5, 178-80) take advantage of the proverb’s literal meaning, adapting it to fit the texts’ communicative purposes, Jonson alters the proverb’s syntactic structure to place more emphasis on its figurative meaning. In *Every Man in His Humour* (1616) with the expression “It is this new disease [...] for loues sake, sweet heart, come in, out of the aire [...] the aire will doe you harme” (II, 3, 46) he underlines the toxic nature of love. To highlight the metaphoric meaning of toxicity is what Shakespeare does too. Because he “could count on his proverbs being known to his audience” (Wilson 1994: 189), Shakespeare could toy as he pleased with their structures in order to expose the multifaceted sides to mankind’s toxic nature.

Conclusions

By means of Tilley’s *Dictionary of Proverbs in England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, it is possible to gauge and appreciate the strength of the proverb as a pliable communicative tool that never fails to tell and teach wisely about human nature. Just like a literary text, the proverb represents one man’s single action that comes to be acknowledged by everyone. Emblematic of a thought, an idea, an experience, it connects man’s passage through time and space, “foregrounding of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence [...] of cultural life” (Allen 2000: 5). As an exceptional writer and wordsmith, Shakespeare was fully aware of the proverb’s versatility. Shakespeare’s manipulations of the twenty-one proverbs regarding toxicity and infection show how he and his contemporaries were fully aware of the linguistic impact proverbs have in telling people about the world they live in. The existence of so many expressions whose literal meanings point to toxicity and infection in sixteenth and seventeenth-century works is no surprise. They are expressions with which people of the time could identify. They describe the environment they were familiar with and through which they could grasp the deeper figurative meanings. Indeed, while formally illustrating the noxious and virulent living conditions of Shakespeare’s England, which in the meantime have dramatically changed, these proverbs semantically disclose man’s nature that has not – alas – changed as dramatically.

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Appendix

Under "corruption" (6)

Nothing so good but it may be abused
Surgeons ought not to be full of sores themselves
The canker soonest eats the fairest rose (flowers)
The corruption of one is the generation of another
The corruption of the best is the worst
The lily is fair in show but foul in smell

Under "deadly" (10)

Beauty and chastity (honesty) seldom meet
Giving is dead nowadays and restoring very sick
One egg is none, two somewhat, three enough, four be too much, five give a deadly blow
Out of debt out of danger
Out of debt out of deadly sin
The greatest hate proceeds from the greatest love

The most deadly of wild beasts is a backbiter (tyrant) of tame ones flatterer
To have a stomach and lack meat, to have meat and lack a stomach, to lie in bed and cannot
rest are great miseries
To look for and not to come, to be in bed and not to sleep, to serve and not to be accepted are
three deadly things
Vengeance (divine vengeance) comes slowly but surely

Under “Disease” (33)

A deadly disease neither physician nor physic can ease
A desperate disease must have a desperate cure
A disease known is half cured
A fool's bolt is soon shot
A knotty piece of timber must have sharp wedges
A sore eye infects the sound
Agues (sicknesses) come on horseback but go away on foot
Diseases are the interests of pleasure
Diseases of the eye are to be cured with the elbow
Fresh air is ill for the diseased or wounded man
God has provided a remedy for every disease
Good words help sick minds
Good words make some amends for ill deeds
He has but one salve for all sores
He that lies down (goes to bed, sleeps) with dogs must rise with fleas
It is good to prevent an evil in the beginning
Many dishes, many diseases
Old age is sickness of itself
Old men are covetous by nature
Pandora's box
Physician, heal thyself
The best doctors are Dr. Diet, Dr Quiet and Dr. Merryman
The physician is more dangerous than the disease
The physician owes all to the patient but the patient owes nothing to him but a little money
The relapse is more dangerous than the disease
The words ending in -ic do mock the physician, as hectic, paralytic, apoplectic, lethargic
There is a salve for every sore
Time and thought tame the strongest grief
Time cures every disease
To be spotted with one pitch
To drink health is to drink sickness
To go to heaven in a feather bed
Whatsoever was the father of a disease an ill diet was the mother

Under “Forbidden/baneful” (4)

A woman does that which is forbidden her
Forbid a fool a thing that he will do
Stolen fruit is (stolen apples are) sweet
They that make laws must not break them

Under “Infection” (6)

A corrupt breath stains a clear glass

One is not smelled where all stink
One scabbed sheep mars (infects) a whole flock
Spilt (puddled) wine is worse than water
Tottenham is turned French,
Whited sepulchres

Under “Poison” (28)

A honey tongue, a heart of gall
A slut will poison thy gut
All meat pleases not all mouths
As full as knavery (As full) as an egg is full of meat
Blood will have blood
Full as a toad of a poison
He has spit his venom
He that bites on every weed must needs light on poison
Know thyself
Malice hurts itself most
No honey without gall
Nothing more proud than basest blood when it does rise aloft
One man's meat is another man's poison
One poison expels another
Poison is hidden in golden cups
The bait hides the hook
The bee sucks honey out of the bittrest flowers
The cockatrice slays by sight only
The earth that yields food yields also poison
The fisher stricken will be wise
The vessel of an apothecary has oftentimes poison in the bottom
To hate (shun) one like poison
To send (come) with a powder
Too much honey cloyes the stomach
Unsound minds, like unsound bodies, if you feed you poison
What Baits one banes another
What is forbidden (baneful) is desired
When Italy shall be without poison, France without treason, England without war, the world shall be without earth

Under “Toxic” (1)

As rises my good so rises my blood

Under “Venom/ous” (12)

As surly as a butcher's dog
Gaming (play) women and wine while they laugh, they make men pine
No man becomes worst at the first dash
No viper so little has its venom
No weal without woe
Seek your salve where you got your sore
The basilisk's eye is fatal
The fly has her spleen and the ant her gall
The tongue stings (is more venomous than a serpent's sting)

Laura Pinnavaia

There is no venom to that of the tongue
Those that are stung by the scorpion are healed by the scorpion
Women, money, and wine have their good and their pine

“Shall Rather at My Hands Haue a Figge to Choake him” or How a Very Ancient Fruit Became a Venomous Antidote to Cure Ignorance and Prejudice According to Thomas Lodge

Ilaria Pernici

Whoso keepeth the fig tree shall eat
the fruit thereof. (*Proverbs*, 27:18)

Introduction

Figs are ancient fruits, or, most properly, infructescences, which originate from one of the most fascinating plants: the *figus* or fig-tree. Sweet and pulpy, figs are listed in countless recipes as delicious ingredients for lavish banquets, and used to cure pain and diseases. At the same time, they can also have noxious and harmful characteristics: their leaves can sting and burn, and their milk can be so poisonous that it can even cause blindness and deadly suffocation: “Odone i Medici astanti la ricetta, e consapevoli che il fico venendo dal verbo officio, ò come altri vogliono Inficio, che vuol dire nuocere, porta anco nel nome danni, e rovine” (Botti 1658: 277). The multifold nature of figs is so engrained in the collective mind that it is no surprise they appear in so many proverbs and common sayings¹.

In early modern England the fascination for figs and what they could represent is evident in many different authors, among whom stand out William Shakespeare and Thomas Lodge, whose interest in the fruit led him to entitle one of his most important works *A Fig for Momus* (1595). In the first part of this essay, I will concentrate on the fig as a powerful and multifaceted symbol, providing literary, mythological, and biblical examples. In the second part I will touch upon some examples of the poisonous nature of figs from Shakespeare’s canon, so as to provide a backdrop for Lodge’s use of the same. In the last section of this contribution, I will illustrate some excerpts from Lodge’s literary output to show how and why he used the different meanings related to figs, thus paving the way for a detailed analysis of his *A Fig for Momus*. I will focus more specifically on the title of this work, as well as on its paratexts and the first of the epistles included in the book “Ad Momum”. In so doing, I will suggest an explanation for Lodge’s peculiar use of the venomous references to the fig, setting the analysis of this work against a broader context – one of translational and cultural struggles, of attacks and defences on writings, of Momuses and Sycophants, and of Hispanic quarrels. This will allow me to show how, in such a literary milieu, figs could for Lodge be a poison, an antidote, and a cure at the same time.

The Seeding: Figs through History

Ancient Greek mythographers as diverse as Pausanias, Hesiod, or Athenaeus, wrote about figs.

¹ The more common and general notions on figs, both historical and mythological, come from Ries 2007; Cattabiani 2015; Ferrari 2015; Carassale, Littardi, Naso 2016.

For some of them, the name of the fig tree, *sycon*, comes from Sykê: one of the eight daughters (each corresponding to a tree) of the god of mountains Óxylos and Hamadryad, progenitors of the whole vegetal world.

In classical Antiquity, both the fruit and the tree of the fig played a significant role. The fig tree was sacred to Hermes/Mercury, god of eloquence and rhetoric, and connected to Dionysus/Bacchus, whose ritual mask was made of fig-tree wood. Figs were also related to words, speech skills, theatre, and namely areas of particular interest to both Thomas Lodge and other Elizabethan authors. Plato, particularly appreciated in early modern England, was called “the fig-lover” or *phylósykos* (Chiesa, Giacobello 2016: 69-73, and Plutarch 1969), both because of his love for the sweet taste of dried figs and because of the widespread idea that figs enhanced knowledge: “desserts [...] consisting of figs, chickpeas, and beans” (Plato 2004: 371e–372d) will be offered as optimum food to the citizens living in his ideal city, especially to the servants, otherwise intellectually unfitting. The pun on “philo-”, “love”, with “-sophia”, “knowledge”, and “-sykos”, “fig”, thus becomes very clear and specifically connected to the concept of the fig as “food for the mind”.

Among different species of fig,² the Mediterranean *Ficus carica* or common fig is particularly interesting both for its popularity and for its duplicitous nature: that of being associated to good and evil, and that of being the favourite symbol for knowledge. With its more than thirty mentions both in the Ancient and the New Testament, the *Ficus carica* is especially known for being the tree whose leaves have been used by Adam and Eve to cover their nether parts after eating the forbidden fruit: an apple, or the very same fig, following different traditions.³ The biblical episode popularly known as “Jesus Curses the Fig Tree” or “The Cursing of the Fig Tree” (Matthew 21: 18-22) is particularly worthy of remark: Jesus curses a fig tree because it has leaves, but no fruits. The withered plant becomes an example, a symbol of spiritual search used to condemn the spiritual sterility of usurers and traitors in general: to have leaves but not fruits – that is to have words but not actions – is not recommended for a good Christian and thus for a good man. Saint Augustine commented on this episode with significant words in his Sermon XXXIX: “The lesson of the Holy Gospel which has just been read, has given us an alarming warning, lest we have leaves only, and have no fruit. That is, in few words, lest words be present and deeds be wanting. Very terrible!” (Augustine 1883: 325).

In the medieval, biblical, botanical, encyclopaedic work by Lambert of Saint-Omer, *Liber Floridus*, two opposite fig trees are depicted: “arbor bona” on the left, and “arbor mala” on the right, each containing twelve virtues and twelve vices to show, again, the existence and coexistence of the fig as cure and venom for mind and soul (Lambertus 1121: ff.231v-232r).⁴

Nevertheless, figs have an additional, obscene meaning, which was recorded in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*: “Al fine de le sue parole il ladro/ le mani alzò con amendue le fiche,/ gridando: ‘Togli, Dio, ch’a te le squadro!’” (XXV, 1-3). The gesture of “fare le fiche”, or “making the fig”, which can be done by holding a thumb in the middle of the index and middle fingers, has an “apotropaic function” (Delord 2016: 94) that can help to keep away the evil eye, and reminds us of the even more famous *infami digitus* (a raised middle finger), both of which

² For example, the Indian *Ficus religiosa*, or the tree of spiritual awakening, and the African *Ficus sycomorus*, associated with a life and death bond according to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The latter is widely mentioned in the Bible too, and is connected to salvation and redemption. It is especially remembered and mentioned for the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:14), chief of the publicans: he was a short, very rich and mean man living in Jericho, considered to be a sinner by the population. He climbed up a Sycomorus to be able to see Jesus: this is the beginning of a story of atonement and salvation, a specimen of soul improvement from corruption to charity, thanks to the enlightenment brought by Christ.

³ For an exhaustive analysis regarding the fig in a biblical context, especially concerning Adam and Eve, see Carassale, Littardi, Naso 2016.

⁴ It is possible to consult the digitalized manuscript in the Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent Database <https://lib.ugent.be/catalog/rug01:000763774>

are connected with the male and female sex organs.⁵ The gesture was certainly known to the Romans and later reached France and Spain. Sure enough, in Spain, the sentence “una higa para vos” is both a term of insult and a “spell against the consequences of satiric applause” (Douce 1839: 305).

The Growing: Figs in Early Modern England.

Early modern England was not immune to the charm of this meaty fruit and its complex tree, and many authors seem to have been particularly interested in the several metaphoric implications of figs: Ben Jonson and James Shirley, among others,⁶ mention figs both as an obscene insult and gesture,⁷ and, contextually, as a poisonous fruit connected to Spain. Curiously enough, the first recorded mention of “a poisoned fig used as a secret way of destroying an obnoxious person. Often fig of Spain, Spanish fig, Italian fig” dates back to 1589, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) reports,⁸ underlining how the attention to the poisonous nature of the fig and its literary employment was Renaissance matter.

William Shakespeare too made wide use of the fig imagery, playing both with the legendary obscene meaning and with these lesser known and somehow controversial poisonous references in his works.⁹ In *Henry V*, in particular, it is possible to find ambiguous references to poisonous figs. It is Pistol, the lively character inclined to debauchery, alcohol, and visiting prostitutes, who repeatedly mentions the deadly Spanish fig: “Die and be damn’d; and *figo* for thy friendship!” (III, 6, 56); “The fig of Spain!” (III, 6, 58); “I say, the fig within thy bowels and thy dirty maw” (III, 6, 60). Over time, several scholars have provided different explanations for Pistol’s words, which clearly originate from some popular sayings. Most contemporary scholarship tends to interpret them only as a reference to the widespread “contemptuous gesture in which the thumb is thrust between two of the closed fingers, or into the mouth” (OED n.2), and different Shakespearean dictionaries (Rubinstein 1989; Armstrong 1997; Blake 2004) quote

⁵ Another possible position for the fingers is to join the thumb and index in both hands, to better emulate the feminine sexual organ. For this interpretation and other interesting readings about this ancient gesture, with a special focus on Dante’s words, see Baldelli 1997, and Mazzucchi 2003. For a dated and not very scientific, but thorough and poetical survey on the fig gesture (furnished with beautiful iconographic images), see Douce 1839. I quote from this edition because it puts together the two-volume 1807 edition, and iconic pictures are added.

⁶ Ben Jonson writes about a threatening fig in his *Every Man in His Humour*: “And yet, the lie to a man of my coat is as ominous as the *fico*” (II, 1, 4-5), while it is possible to find references to figs in some of James Shirley’s works. In his *The Maid’s Revenge* (III, 2) there is a reference to a “Spanish fig” (I, 2) as an insult, and in his *The Brothers* the allusion is to a poisoned fig, where Alberto says: “There, there’s the mischief; I must poison him; one fig sends him to Erebus” (III, 2). Also, Philip Henslowe recorded in his 1601 diary payment for an anonymous play called “The Spanish Fig” (Henslowe 2002: 137), although there is no text surviving under this name to date (Peery 1952), and another important example is contained in *The Noble Souldier. Or, A Contract Broken, Justly Reveng’d A Tragedy. Written by S.R.*, where two of the characters, the Queen and Malateste, are referring to figs in a dialogue about poisoning: “Queen: Is it speeding?/ Malateste: As all our Spanigh figs are” (Rowley 1634: H3).

⁷ For a wider and more complete list of quotations, and a comprehensive review of the fig gesture in Early Modern England (especially in *Henry V*) see Thomas 2019. In her very interesting chapter “Figging: Spanish Anxieties and Ancient Grudges in Pistol’s *Henriad*”, Miranda Fay Thomas analyses the fig gesture from a sexual/ gender, and social perspective: that of male/female bodies and masculinity/femininity (especially in a theatrical context), and that of Spanish historical conflicts with Elizabethan realm.

⁸ Entry n.1 in OED quotes Martin Marprelate’s *Theses Martinianæ*: “Have you given him an Italian figge?”, where the fig contains deadly poison.

⁹ Just to provide some examples: while in *Othello* (I, 3, 320 and II, 1, 249), and in *Henry IV part II* (V, 3, 117), Shakespeare clearly alluded to the obscene gesture that we can find in Dante, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (I, 2, 31; V, 2, 234; V, 2, 338; V, 2, 350) Shakespeare seemed to suggest that figs have a phallic allusion, and above all, they have a venomous nature: indeed, it was amidst a basket full of figs that Cleopatra found the lethal asp, at the same time poisonous and sexually evocative.

Pistols' words in this very obscene sense, under different entries connected with the fig. Some other scholars, however, try to contextualize these words in the light of the above-mentioned Spanish question (Matei-Chesnoiu 2012: 138-168; Thomas 2019: 50-52), where the obscene seems to mingle with the deadly meanings of the ancient fruit of knowledge. However, the poisonous characteristics of the fig found in Pistol's and other writers' usage are not as easy to explain and contextualise as the sexual ones. As a possible origin for these mysterious poisoned figs, Monica Matei-Chesnoiu mentions some general "clichéd tales told by European travellers crossing international borders" (2012: 154), and quotes John Webster's *The White Devil* to support the idea that this feature of venomousness was strongly connected with a Spanish and Italian killing custom of putting venom inside a fig and giving it to their enemy: the same feature that Thomas Lodge also refers to in *A Fig for Momus*.

It is interesting to note that this baffling bond between figs and poison that was particularly underscored by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics (Shakespeare 1793 and 1813: Douce 1839; Dyce 1904) and contemporary scholarly works and dictionaries (Crystal and Crystal 2004; Vivian, Faircloth 2014; Vienne-Guerrin 2016) was simply referred to in previous studies but without receiving much explanation. Indeed, one of the most quoted scholars is George Steevens, an eighteenth-century Shakespearean editor and commentator, who simply states that Pistol's fig alludes "to the custom of giving poison'd figs to those who were the objects either of Spanish or Italian revenge" (Shakespeare 1793: 378). Similarly, Edmund Gosse, who edited Thomas Lodge's works for the first and only time in 1883, writes in the "Index and glossary" section that the title of Lodge's *A Fig for Momus* is "an expression of contempt or defiance derived from a supposed Spanish custom of destroying an enemy by means of poisoned figs" (IV, 35).¹⁰ To understand how and why Gosse and the other critics came to this conclusion, it is necessary to analyse such expressions that feature figs in the above-mentioned literary works.

A strong relationship between figs, venom, and early modern literature existed beyond such eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarly works, just as there was a tight connection between figs, venom, early modern England and Spain. In this respect, it is worth mentioning a pamphlet published in 1591, called *A Fig for the Spaniard*. This pamphlet was written by an anonymous author, G.B., who was an expert of the Spanish-English controversy, and was highly worried about the Jesuit presence in England. The pamphlet was authorised by Queen Elizabeth in person, and printed by the influential John Wolfe. G.B. speaks of and to the Spaniards with sarcasm and teasing words, with the aim to feed the so-called *Leyenda Negra* or Spanish Black Legend, and thus to incite his readers' anti-Spanish hatred through a kind of psychological war of words. To put it in Eric J. Griffin's words, "As did many of the Black Legend tracts of the 1580s and 1590s [...], *A Fig for the Spaniard* drew parallels between the troubles being experienced by the French monarchy and those that might erupt in England should religio-political heterogeneity prevail over unity of faith" (2012: 106). And also: "The incessant repetition of these anti-Hispanic typologies created a kind of feedback loop that functioned to valorize the ethos of religio-political and ethnic homogeneity that England's absolute nationalists seem to have turned increasingly toward" (Griffin 2002: 101). As we will see, in a similar way, but for very different purposes, Thomas Lodge would use these same sarcastic tones to speak of and to the so-called Sychophants or Momuses – renowned opponents and enemies of the new explosion of knowledge characterising early modern England – motivated by a deep desire for cultural concord.

¹⁰ Throughout the paper I will quote from the 1963 edition of Lodge's complete works in four volumes (reprinting of the 1883 edition). References in brackets allude to the number of the volume in which the quoted work appears, followed by the page number of individual works put by the editor (each work is paginated separately).

The Ripening: A Fig for Thomas Lodge.

A Fig for the Spaniard becomes, therefore, *A Fig for Momus*.¹¹ Thomas Lodge, an important writer of his time, was along with Shakespeare and other Elizabethans, interested in the various cultural meanings connected with the fig, both the fruit and the tree. Investigating his canon, it is possible to find figs mentioned in several works, and with different meanings. To give the most representative examples,¹² *Rosalynde* (1590) is chronologically the first work in which Lodge mentions figs: “because loue hides his wormeseed in figs, his poysons in sweet potions, & shadows preiudize with the maske of pleasure” (I, 129). He is suggesting that poison can be placed inside figs, thus turning them into sweet, deadly potions. It is not surprising that in the title we can read “Fetcht from the Canaries”, and in the “Letter to the Gentleman Reader” we find a mention to Momus “or anie squinteied asse” (I, 8), thus associating, once again, references to Spain and to Lodge’s cultural enemies. *Robin the Diuell* (1591) is instead an obscure tale about good and evil, where Lodge imagines a kind of inverted world dominated by pain and corruption in which philosophers are fed with floutes, and fools are fed with figs (II, 3). In *A Margarite of America* (1596) Lodge refers to an ancient belief shared, among others, by Pliny when he writes that “The wild fig, if a branch be put round the neck of a bull, however fierce, by its miraculous nature so subdues the animal as to make him incapable of movement” (Pliny 1951: 500), and by Plutarch, according to whom “a wild bull is quieted and made gentle if bound to a fig-tree” (Plutarch 1969: 175). In writing that “the wilde bull tied to the figge tree [...] is no more wrathful [...]: but wee rather commend the hearbe that purgeth the disease, then the humour that feedeth it” (*A Margarite of America* III, 54), it seems that Lodge is highlighting the healing power of the fig, both natural and spiritual. Once again, Pliny (1951: 500) writes that “The fiercest of bulls, if tied to a fig tree, becomes quiet, lets people touch him, and completely abandons his rage, as if the spirit were withering within him. This effect is mainly due to the bitterness of the plant, for the fig is the richest in sap of all plants”. Following these classical examples, it can be seen how Lodge alludes to the fig’s potential to cure intellectual evils by the powers of its purging sap. By referring also to Plato’s love for figs as a means to enhance knowledge, Lodge surprisingly excludes the concept of punishment that the fig also points to.

It is in *A Fig for Momus*, however, that Lodge turns to focus on the fig’s poisonous nature and its more erudite references, completely avoiding the most common sexual and obscene puns associated with it. In so doing, he provides his readership with a smart, satirical, and highly contemporary image of this natural product, constantly reminding them of its connections with ancient knowledge. Lodge did indeed live in one of the most distinguishing moments of English history, when the fall of the old learning, and the rise of a new one, resulted in a profound cultural renewal, and in a stronger and more conscious approach to literature, history, philosophy, and humanities in general. Thanks to a cutting-edge educational reform and a prolific translation movement, Lodge and other Elizabethan authors managed to shed new light on classical writers, thus placing in the limelight renewed genres and a renewed sensibility in a real cultural and classical renaissance.

¹¹ The complete title is *A fig for Momus: Containing Pleasant Varietie, Included in Satyres, Eclogues, and Epistles, by T. L. of Lincolnes Inne Gent. Chi pecora si fa, il lupo selo mangia. AT LONDON Printed for Clement Knight, and are to bee solde at his shop at the little North-doore of Paules Church. 1595.*

¹² Other examples are: *Catharos* (1591 II, 11), containing a reference to the legendary fig-tree used for hanging, connected to the story of Timon of Athens, also a famous shakespearean character; *Wits Miserie* (1596), an ambiguous seven-chapter pamphlet in which Lodge alludes to the above mentioned biblical parable of the cursed fig tree: “and let him take heed that hée prooue not that vnfruitfull trée, which must be cast into eternall fire, and that barren figtrée which Christ cursed” (IV, 114); *Treatise of the plague* (1603), where Lodge recommends figs, mixed with other ingredients, in four different recipes to cure or prevent plague and its related problems.

A Fig for Momus is a collection of fifteen literary compositions, comprising different genres and narratives, from satires to eclogues and epistles. Different critics agree that Lodge was a literary pioneer (Rae 1967; Paradise 1970; Whitworth 1973; Hulse 1981), both in terms of his career, and more specifically for writing *A Fig for Momus*: “the formal epistle in verse makes its first appearance in English in this volume, and it way well be that Lodge was the first English writer to experiment with the formal satire on the classical model” (Paradise 1970: 116-117). Lodge himself informed his readership in the letter “To the Gentleman Reader whatsoever” that his epistles “are in that kind, wherein no Englishman of our time hath publicly written” (III, 4). One of the negative outcomes of such an innovative season was, indeed, the existence of opponents consisting of unpleasant, overbearing, coward, bitter intellectuals. They were faithful to the “old learning” and firmly against “The New”, and they copiously wrote and acted against theatre, poetry, and translations.¹³ Usually, and provocatively, these opponents were not called by their real names, but with ironic and disrespectful nicknames, such as Zoilus, Sycophant, and Momus.

The nickname Zoilus comes from the pedantic and hateful critic who had heavily attacked Homer and Plato, and it is very interesting to quote what the translator Thomas James wrote in his “Letter to the courteous and Christian Reader”, preceding *A commentary upon the Canticle of Canticles, written first in Italian by Antonio Brucioli*: “chiefly these spider-catching Zoilusses do shoot the venime of their tongues against painfull translators of bookes [...]. If this be all they haue to say, they say in word somewhat, in effect nothing” (Brucioli 1598). Just like a Zoilus, Lodge would return the ‘venime’ to the opponents of the ‘painfull translators’.

What strikes us more about the term ‘Sycophant’ (i.e., a servile flatterer, parasite, cheater), is its fig-related etymology: it comes from the Greek *sycon*, fig, plus *phainein*, to show or reveal. The term was used in Ancient Greece to refer to the guardians of fig-trees and figs-fruits, which were sweet and precious food that grew in the middle of sacred woods. Because the guardians became corrupt, the term then became, and still is, an accusation for those who slander, cheat, or lie. It reminds us of the parable in Matthew, which with the cursing of the fig tree, addressed to cheaters and usurers, underlines a relation between the classical and the biblical worlds in the light of Renaissance literary quarrels.

Finally, Momus. The name comes from the homonymous Greek god of ridicule, reproach, censure, and mockery. The nickname was probably popularised by Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* who, in turn, was defined a “true Momus” (McClure 2018: 83) by Luther: it became one of the most popular epithets, and a character that appeared in all Renaissance literature, especially in connection with literary debates or religious controversies. This is probably why Momus is the most respectable – and quoted – among the opponents.

Lodge’s choice to dedicate his work to the Momuses, instead of the more ‘negative’ Sycophants, therefore, shows a moderate and sensitive attitude in his writings that are never overstating, but rather determined and yearning to make his voice heard amidst the antagonists and their obsolete thoughts. His inner necessity to defend a kind of literary freedom stands out right from the very beginning of this work, when the author himself explains the reasons that led him to choose this title in the opening letter to the Gentlemen Readers:

I salute the world with so peremptorie a title: [...] I entitle my booke (*A Fig for Momus*.) not

¹³ Since his first literary appearances, Lodge wrote back against these opponents, showing an intense love for humanism, and forestalling Philip Sidney’s most famous *The Defence of Poesie* with the publishing of the so-called *A Defence of Poetry, Music and Stage-Plays* (1579). This text is better known as *Reply to Gosson*, being an answer to the most diverse accusations made by Stephen Gosson in his *School of Abuse* (1579), an “inuectiue against Poets, Pypers, Plaiers, Iesters” as expressed in its complete title (Gosson 1579). Gosson was undoubtedly one of those opponents: an envious writer, who “what [...] understands not, blames, though nought he can amende” (Heywood 1560, unnumbered page).

in contempt of the learned, for I honor them: not in disdaine of the wel minded, because they cherish science; but in despight of the detractor, who hauing no learning to iudge, wanteth no libertie to reprove. Who worthily deseruing the name of Momus, shall rather at my hands haue a figge to choake him, then hee, and his lewd tongue shall haue a frumpe to check me (III, 5).

The first detail that emerges in the analysis of this significant passage is that Lodge defines the title used to “salute the world” a “peremptorie” one. In addition to being a term connected to the field of law (a constant in the Lodgean corpus), meaning “positive in speech”, and “admitting no denial or contradiction”, its etymology comes from the Latin *peremptorius* that has a deadly, destructive sense. This marked meaning and use in Early Modern English is explained by Thomas Cooper, who wrote in his *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (1578): “A perentorie warning given to him that marketh default in appearance”¹⁴, later confirmed by Thomas Thomas who, in his 1587 *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae*, explained: “Perentorie: striking to death, killing without peradventure, deadly”. The second element of interest that emerges is that Lodge was keen to point out that his writings were not “in contempt”¹⁵ of the learned: in other words, he emphasises that he did respect and did not disregard the rules of law: in this case the laws of mutual respect among learned men. The third point to underscore is that Lodge defines Momus a “detractor”, who is “someone that speaketh evill of some bodie that is absent, a slanderer” (Thomas Thomas, 1587), thus highlighting all Momuses’ cowardly personalities. At the same time, however, in line with what John Baret (*An Alveary or Triple Dictionary, in English, Latin, and French*, 1574), Thomas Cooper (*Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*, 1578), and John Florio (*A World of Words*, 1598), among others, had already argued, ‘detractor’ could also refer in Early Modern English to a ‘backbiter’: “an euill tongued knaue, a fowle mouthed villen that cannot aforde a man a good worde” (Thomas Thomas 1587). For this reason, Lodge fills Momuses’ enuiuos mouths with poisonous figs so as to – at least, ideally – choke them, obstructing the escape of inappropriate words. In this passage, therefore, Lodge reverses the accusations he and others like him had received by the numerous Momuses around, and bites back in defining their tongue a “lewd” one, thus accusing them of what he has been unjustly accused of. Finally, Lodge concludes by stating that Momus’s “lewd tongue” will have a “frump to check me”¹⁶: Lodge exhorts Momuses to reproach him, because they will surely misunderstand the true meaning and intent of his words. It is especially from this considered choice of words in the paratexts that it is possible to detect Lodge’s true intention: again, to mildly punish Momuses (“Sheepe are soonest wooried by curdogs, because they are mild”, he writes some lines below). Lodge would like to cure intellectual evils so as to help them understand the new literary expressions, and change their old-fashioned opinions: just as the fig was able to do with savage bulls, to use the above-mentioned classical example. As a matter of fact, a few lines later, he points out that “where detraction is given to chalenge, it is good striking first, for whelpes that are whipt for brauling are quicklie quiet” (III, 6): Lodge is here comparing Momuses to puppies, rascals, uneducated children even, who must be necessarily (albeit mildly) punished for their “brawling”. The (mild) punishment is

¹⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all the ensuing definitions are taken from a selection of Early Modern dictionaries and thesauri that is possible to find in the Lexicons of Early Modern English (LEME), a search engine provided by University of Toronto (<https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/>).

¹⁵ As we can read in Richard Huolet’s *Abecedarium Anglico Latinum* (1552): “Contempte: properlye againste the lawe”; and in William Rastell’s *An Exposition of Certain Difficult and Obscure Words, and Terms of the Laws of this Realm* (1579): “now for contempt he is put out of the law”. Very interesting seems to be Edmund Spenser’s *Shepherds Calendar*: “he sheweth the cause of contempt of Poetry to be idlenesse and basenesse of mynd” (1989: 181).

¹⁶ Probably the proverb was one regarding figs – after all, proverbs were commonplaces among the Elizabethans as the very high number of entries in different dictionaries and compendia show.

obviously the fig, organically sweet, but metaphorically venomous. Building on ancient and modern knowledge, Lodge aimed to educate Momuses with the same (or possibly better and more honest) weapon, in a game of swapping and exchanging of meanings and senses.

Besides invoking the importance of “good *Philosophie*” (III, 13) and quoting some of his masters like Pliny, Aristotle, Virgil, and Cato, the core of the first epistle of the collection, “Ad Momum” (III, 12-15) is represented by the writer’s attempt to provide an answer to a very significant question, which is strictly connected both to Lodge’s purposes and this essay’s development and conclusion: “How prove you that? I heard some Momus crie” (III, 14). The object of the question is that “the creatures being dombe, / Haue some foreknowledge of euent to come [...] The slime-bred frogges, their harsh reports and cries / Foresignifie and prove a following raine” (III, 13); while the answers to the question are “Philosophie” (III, 13 and 14), “Naturall respects” (III, 13), and “imagination” (III, 13). It might be that the three are represented by the image and metaphor of figs. In this Epistle, Lodge aimed to specify that knowledge alone is not enough for proper humanistic and intellectual development: after all, Momuses were all well instructed and learned men, and by no means lacking in natural dispositions. What they did not have, Lodge seemed to accuse, was a certain open-mindedness towards more imaginative arguments and literary products. As Philip Sidney stated in his *Defence of Poesy* “the Philosophers of Greece durst not a long time appear to the world, but under the mask of poet” (Sidney 1989: 213). The issue of imagination, the defence of fantasy, and of the ability of poets and translators to use them in the right way was indeed one of the most delicate and debated issues among the Elizabethan literary circles. As mentioned above, Lodge was a strong supporter and very active in the defence of the most “enlightened” side of the quarrels: in *A Fig for Momus*, and more thoroughly in “Ad Momum”, Lodge seems to stand up for this long-overdue literary freedom using imagination, together with philosophy and nature, to raise awareness in Momuses:

First brutish beastes, who are possest of nought
But fantasie, to ordinate their thought.
And wanting reasons light, (which men alone
Pertake to helpe imagination)
It followeth that their fantasies doe move,
And imitate Impressions from above (III, 13).

Momus however does not seem to understand: “How prove you that, cries *Momus* once againe?” (III,14). Lodge’s second attempt to answer, starts with these words: “Why thus dull dunce” (III, 14). In calling Momus “dull dunce” and later “misbeleeving lad” (III, 14) some lines below, Lodge eventually identifies Momus as the representative of a peculiar kind of readership: those from which he had to defend his works, those who had trouble in understanding the New Learning statements and literary products. Lodge seems to be aware that Momuses will not fully comprehend his answers: nevertheless, he will keep on writing against them. The way he carries out this fight is by means of the fig: the classical, the biblical, the Italian, the Spanish one.

Conclusion

The twofold nature of the fig tree and the fruit has been shown in this essay. As depicted by Lambert, it can have very good or very bad connotations, the tree can be generous or dry, the fruit can be pulpy or searing. All these features have been used through centuries, in different milieux, to convey multiple meanings, and figs have become a highly versatile and diffused

symbol. Early modern England seems to have been particularly interested in the various aspects connected to this emblematic symbol: among them, an almost mysterious, but very common, venomous feature. Thomas Lodge, in particular, proved to be well aware of the multifaceted symbolism of the fig, and often used it in his works. His interest in the intellectual references of figs, mingled with its venomous symbolism, is particularly evident in *A Fig for Momus*, where both the fig and its poison are weapons in a literary clash. The poisoned fig is given to Momus, who embodies the cultural enemy par excellence, and is thus used to fight and destroy his obsolete literary concepts: just like the Spanish fig was given to “the Spaniard”. At the same time, the poisoned fig is an antidote against these same obsolete points of view which Lodge must protect himself from. Interestingly, the first words of the Dedication of *A Fig for Momus* are as follows: “To the Right Honorable and thrice renowned Lord, William Earle of Darbie [...] knowing them [my poems] subject to much prejudice, [...] I haue followed the example of Metabo, king of the Volschi, who desirous to deliuer his onelie daughter from the perill and danger, consecrated and dedicated hir to the sister of the sunne” (III, 3), so as to safeguard her. The comparison, taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, is clear: Lodge identifies himself as the father of his own writings and considers it important to underline both the originality and the authorship of this work, against the claim of having been “uniustlie taxed” of “servile imitation” (III, 6). Lodge / Metabo will save his book / daughter from their enemies because he is supported by a kind of wisdom derived from the classics. He will dedicate his book/daughter to the sister of the sun, that is the goddess Diana, one of Queen Elizabeth’s names. This implicit reference to the Queen is not accidental either. If we think that among her main political and commercial enemies the Spaniards were on top of the list, it is easier to understand, in the light of all that has been said, Lodge’s choice to refer to the diffused idea of a “Spanish killing custom” to defy his opponents. As a matter of fact, if we consider Lodge as representing England, it is also natural to think of Momus as Spain. Besides attacking his own cultural enemies, therefore, it may not be too far-fetched to hypothesize that Lodge also aimed to criticise the English-Spanish conflict in a work whose title may have sounded subtly anti-Spanish. That being said, Lodge’s main aim was not to focus on such a political and social debate, but rather on culture and knowledge, on literary freedom, and on the need to safeguard it, as he had already argued in his *Reply* (1579) to Stephen Gosson, one of the fiercest anti-theatrical polemicists of his age. With *A Fig for Momus*, therefore, Lodge seems once again to reply to Gosson’s hateful comments on “poets”, who were in his opinion “eyther with fables to shew theyr abuses, or with plaine tearmes to Vnfold their mischiefe, discouer their shame, discredit them selues, amd disperse their poyson through all the world” (Gosson 1579: 1). *A Fig for Momus* proves that Lodge kept on writing against Gosson and against a certain mindset that still existed at the end of the century and deserved to be repaid with the same “poison”. In order to do so, he made deft use of the multi-layered metaphors that figs – in their century-old ambiguities – offered him, and in particular the widespread saying about poisoned figs. Whatever the origin of this common saying, be it Italian, Spanish or English, authors like Thomas Lodge evidently used it to convey a powerful image that this essay has tried to dissect and recompose: that of the fig as a vehicle for a wordy and verbal venom. In giving the poisoned fig to the various possible Momuses, Lodge yearned to metaphorically poison and kill all the envious and scornful personalities, the enemies of knowledge, and opponents of literary progress surrounding him. Lodge’s figs and *Fig* thus become, at the same time, the venom and the cure, just like words are. It is the poison and the antidote to cure the ignorance and prejudice which Lodge fought vehemently all his life, following the Gospels’ and Augustine’s advice to support words with actions. This is a struggle that transformed itself into the most powerful, potentially eternal, and healing venom: ink.

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Nero Veneficus: Poison as an Emblem of Feminisation in Matthew Gwinne's *Nero*

Maddalena Repetto

Introduction

In this article we are going to discuss how poison as a weapon in early modern drama is strongly associated with women, and especially Roman women, and how this well-known and accepted correlation is exploited by Matthew Gwinne to emphasise and help establish the emperor's emasculation in his tragedy *Nero* (1603). To do so, I will analyse passages from *Nero* that show how Gwinne manipulates and adapts historiography to suit the narrative of an emasculated emperor, how the *topoi* normally associated with female poisoners also apply to Nero, and how the origins of his evildoing are marked by his decision to use poison.

Women and Poison

The association between women and poison was a long-established notion in medieval and early modern England. In cases of crimes perpetrated within domestic walls, poison appeared frequently as the preferred weapon for women (Demers 2005: 53), and, concurrently, women were historically responsible for a high percentage of killings committed using poison (Thompson 1931: 115). As a matter of fact, in his 1584 *The Discovery of Witchcraft*, Reginald Scot goes as far as to attribute the very discovery of poison to women: "women were the first inventors and the greatest practisers of poisoning" (cited *ibid.*). Due to its surreptitious and unpredictable nature and the impossibility to defend oneself against it, poisoning was identified as "the most odious kind of murder", and the poisoner was ascribed "negative feminine characteristics — weak, foolish, wicked, cunning" (Walker 2003: 144). In a broader sense, criminal women were perceived more negatively than their male counterparts: in depictions of witchcraft men, who enjoyed a far less unfavourable reputation, were usually known as "magicians," and were typically portrayed as astrologers or lecturers; women, on the other hand, were invariably described as "witches," and they evoked highly negative images of "promiscuous poisoner[s] and rebellious anarchist[s]" (Spoto 2010: 57). A thoroughly negative judgement of female witches was also vocally expressed by James I in his *Daemonology*, in which he describes witchcraft as an inversion of the canonical distribution of power on the masculine-feminine axis, going as far as to label Eve, the archetypal woman, as the first witch (Spoto 2010: 54).

Women who chose to administer death rather than life were regarded as "prime example[s] of monstrosity," and poison as a weapon had been systematically associated with women for centuries; consequently, men who opted to murder by poison appropriated a practice traditionally pertaining to the female sphere, therefore undermining their own masculinity (Stelzer 2020: 208-209). Emanuel Stelzer has recently illustrated how the notion of the *venefica*, i.e., female poisoner, was particularly relevant for English Renaissance drama. The dramatic archetype of the female poisoner proved to be especially popular on the early modern stage when depicted

in the context of the early Roman empire and of the Julio-Claudian dynasty:¹ the Julio-Claudian *venefica* was represented “with gusto” in several plays, of which Stelzer analyses three (207).

Matthew Gwinne’s Nero (1603)

One of the plays in which a female poisoner features prominently is Matthew Gwinne’s *Nero*, a tragedy written in Latin and published in early 1603, which chronicles the rise and fall of the Roman emperor Nero. Matthew Gwinne was a physician, professor, and academic playwright. Alongside a successful career as a physician, Gwinne played an important role within the Oxford intellectual scene: he was part of the group known as “Sidney circle” after Philip Sidney, he was friends with John Florio and Giordano Bruno, and he was occasionally responsible for providing entertainment to monarchs and other distinguished visitors on their visits to Oxford (Buckley 2020: 209-210). Although most of Gwinne’s work is now lost, some of his writings survive, including medical treatises, poems, the comedy *Vertumnus*, and, most crucially, the tragedy *Nero*.

Entered in the Stationers’ Register in February of 1603, the play was printed in that same year with a hastily added dedication to the newly succeeded king James and was apparently popular enough to warrant two reprints in 1638 and 1639 (Binns 1974: 215). Dubbed by Susanna Braund “the ultimate Senecan play of the English Renaissance” (Braund 2013: 440), the tragedy comprises over 5000 lines and about eighty speaking parts. These are features that, by Gwinne’s own admission, surely contribute to explaining why it was never performed. In his prefatory epistle, he answers his own question by addressing these issues: “At cur non acta? Non dico, quod non apta; forte nec scripta in hunc finem: etsi vtrumque innuat & personarum multitudo, & longitudo inaequalis actuum, & modus tractandi non plausibilis” (sig. ¶4r),² adding that he did offer it to his own St John’s College, but it was rejected. Nevertheless, the two successive reprints suggest that the play enjoyed some degree of popularity, perhaps revamped during the 1620s and 1630s when other tragedies set in early imperial Rome were written and published.³

Navigating the vast array of characters populating the tragedy, Stelzer explores the role of poison in the play with references to female characters, particularly Agrippina and Locusta who, either explicitly or in their words, embody the archetype of the *venefica* (Stelzer 2020: 207). Yet there is another *male* character in the play, Nero himself, who is presented as a poisoner; this atypical portrayal of a *veneficus* serves, in the economy of Gwinne’s play, to support his depiction of the emperor as a weak and emasculated character.

Nero’s Nero as a Feminised Man

¹ Line of rulers that started in 27 BC and ended in 68 AD; the Julio-Claudian rulers were Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

² “But why wasn’t this acted? I do not say because it was unsuitable, and possibly it was not written to this end. Even if one asserts that it was both these things, one must consider the multitude of roles, the unequal length of the Act, and the implausibility of producing such an intractable piece”. All direct quotations from the play are from Matthew Gwinne, 1603; all English translations in the footnotes are from the edition by Diana Sutton, 2017.

³ Of the plays specifically centred around the figure of Nero, *The Tragedy of Nero*, anonymous, was published in 1624 and again in 1633; *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina* by Thomas May was written in 1628 and published in 1639; though only extant in manuscript, *The Tragedy of the Imperial Favourite Crispinus*, attributed to John Newdigate and written ca. 1627-32, deserves a mention. Other contemporary imperial plays include Philip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (acted 1626, printed 1629) and Nathaniel Richards’ *Messalina, the Roman Empress* (written ca. 1634-36, printed 1640).

The notion of ancient Rome as a distinctively masculine domain and of femininity as a negative trait is not exclusive to Gwinne. On the contrary, ideals of discipline, *fides*, *pietas*, clemency, wisdom, and *gravitas*, as well as the all-encompassing male *virtus*, had been outlined, among others, in historical accounts by Livy and Plutarch, and served as models for the Elizabethan idea of *Romanitas* (Chernaik 2011: 2). Consequently, the Rome presented on stage by early modern dramatists was largely a male-centred setting associated with a specific set of values. Moreover, the opposition between the masculine and the feminine mirrored that between public and private, politics and home, *virtus* and weakness (Kahn 1997: 77-78). For the purposes of this article, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine proposed by Coppélia Kahn should be understood in connection with another distinction, namely the opposition between Republic and Empire.

Both popular in their own right, representations of republican and imperial, particularly Julio-Claudian, Rome were often divergent and marked by a difference in reception. Characters in republican Rome, however controversial, still displayed elements of *virtus* and *Romanitas*, and the myth of Rome still persisted as an ideal to espouse and defend. The early modern perception of early imperial Rome, instead, was clouded by an almost univocally negative consensus — both classical and contemporary — towards the Julio-Claudian dynasty, particularly from Caligula's reign onwards. This, in the Renaissance England that was growing accustomed to identifying Rome as a religious opponent, translated into a general association of imperial Rome with immoral and depraved behaviour and the prevalent opinion that the story of the Caesars “encapsulated all the worst potential problems of a hereditary monarchy” (Hopkins 2008: 2-3). This belief was so ingrained in the early modern social imagination that personalities such as Caligula and Nero were often evoked as the epitome of violence or immorality, as exemplified by this passage spoken by Shakespeare's Hamlet (p. 49):

Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none (*Hamlet*, III, 2, 346-349).

These notions are exploited and interconnected by Gwinne in his play: throughout *Nero*, the dramatist insinuates that the decadence of the Roman Empire is largely caused by Nero's degeneracy and weakness. It is noteworthy that Gwinne espouses academic rigour and strictly abides by historiography, both classical and contemporary, which generally does not allow his play to disregard historical accuracy for the sake of theatricality, thus limiting his opportunities to fabricate or to embellish dramatic episodes. Within these constraints, Gwinne expands upon the opinions already expressed by Tacitus in the *Annales*, partly by attributing a series of stereotypically feminine traits and actions to Nero.

Throughout the play, Nero goes from being manoeuvred by his mother Agrippina in her quest for power to being his lover Poppaea's puppet and thus ultimately resorting to marrying a man, the eunuch Sporus, relinquishing all remnants of masculinity. A hopeless victim of Poppaea's charms, Nero is even prepared to forsake his reign should she require him to do so,⁴ thereby subordinating Rome's greatness to the whims of a woman and demonstrating an utter lack of discipline and authority. In the same dialogue, Poppaea belittles Nero by accusing him of being subject to Agrippina's will, for she has usurped the name of Augusta and rules in his

⁴ “Vrbem, Orbem, Othonem, Caesarem quid non reges? / Tibi thura, vota, Caesar, Vrbs, Orbis ferent” (III, 2, sig. F4v). “City, world, Otho, Caesar — what will you not command? Caesar, the city, the world will offer you incense and prayers”.

stead: “[I]lla regit, illa imperat, / Illa dominatur: tu nec es liber Nero, / Nec Imperator”⁵ (III, 2, sig. G1r). As a matter of fact, under Nero’s rule, masculinity has seemingly abandoned the Roman court altogether, and the only remnant of *virtus* still survives, ironically, in a female character, Octavia; in his praise of her, the philosopher Seneca notes this: “Vincis philosophos foemina, virago viros”⁶ (IV, 6, sig. L2v).

Examples of the Emasculation of Nero in Other Tragedies

Gwinne’s approach to the character of Nero and his portrayal as an effeminate man evidently had some influence on subsequent depictions of the emperor on the stage of early Stuart England, as demonstrated by two other playwrights, who later featured the character in their plays: the anonymous author of *The Tragedy of Nero* (1619) and Thomas May with *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina* (1628).⁷ In the anonymous *Nero*, the discourse of Roman masculinity is invoked by different characters who seek to highlight Nero’s weakness: the emperor is not so covertly shamed for forsaking military ambition in favour of artistic pursuit and for relinquishing his imperial power to the whims of women. The character of Lucan goes as far as to frame explicitly Nero’s incompetency and immorality as an expression of “womanhood:”

we need not
Haue fear’d to goe again the well try’d vallor
Of *Iulius*, or stayednesse of *Augustus*,
Much lesse the shame, and Womanhood of *Nero*. (sig. C4r)⁸

And again later:

It is not now,
Augustus grauitie, nor *Tiberius* craft,
But *Tigellinus*, and *Crisogorus*,
Eunuckes, and women that we goe against. (sig. F3r)

The fiercest blows to Nero’s masculinity, however, are delivered by Poppaea, who, in every scene in which she appears, openly mocks her husband for shortcomings attributable to his lack of virility, often by unfavourably comparing him to other men or by parading the power she holds over him, as in the lines she utters to her suitor Antonius: “He whom the World obayes / Is fear’d with anger of my threatning Eyes” (sig. C1r).

The notion of Nero’s fear of women is also a reiterated point in May’s *Julia Agrippina*. Set in the early years of his reign, the play focuses heavily on the relationship between Nero and Agrippina, particularly on Agrippina’s continued refusal to surrender the power she holds over her weak son. Having come to terms with the necessity to get rid of his mother for the sake of his reign, Nero repeatedly confesses to fearing the “cruell plots” of Agrippina, whom he defines his “greatest feare” (sig. E3v).⁹ May also draws inspiration from Gwinne in depicting Nero as a puppet in the hands of more capable women: throughout the play, several characters accuse the emperor of bestowing his rule in the hands of several female figures, namely Agrippina (sig.

⁵ “She rules, she issues orders, she plays the master. You are not free, Nero, nor an emperor”.

⁶ “A woman, you defeat the philosophers; a heroine, you surpass the men”.

⁷ I accept Martin Wiggins’s dating of the anonymous *Nero* (Wiggins 2016: 217); as for *Julia Agrippina*, the play was first published in 1639 but, according to the title page, first performed in 1628, though we do not know where and by whom.

⁸ All references and quotations from the play are from Anonymous, *The Tragedy of Nero*, 1624.

⁹ All references and quotations from the play are from Thomas May, *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina*, 1639.

C8r, sig. D4r, sig. E6r), the freedwoman Acte (sig. D7r), and Poppaea (sig. E2r). Especially noteworthy is this unequivocal admission of emasculation in Nero's own words:

Behinde, my mother *Agrippina* lives;
Shee lives my rivall, nay my partner still,
Nay more then that my Queene and Governesse.
I am no Prince, no man, nothing at all
While *Agrippina* lives (sig. D9r).

However, despite demonstrating their debt to Gwinne by accentuating Nero's feminine characteristics, neither the anonymous author of *The Tragedy of Nero* nor May choose to employ poison as a tool to emphasise Nero's villainous femininity.

Nero Veneficus

The theme of femininity in Gwinne's *Nero* is crucially reinforced by its connection to poison. In the play, the emperor's irreversible shift to evil is signalled by a monologue that he utters at the beginning of II, 6. After what Agrippina perceives to be a major slight at the hand of her son Nero, in II, 5, she — rather unwisely — threatens revenge on him and vows to help his half-brother and legitimate heir Britannicus ascend the throne. In doing so, she reminds Nero of the numerous acts of “fraudem” (deceit) that she has committed for his sake and which she will not attempt to conceal any longer: among these are her marriage and “*Meum venenum, proh scelus, potius tuum*”¹⁰ (II, 5, sig. E2r). Agrippina realises she is no longer in control of her domain, poison (Stelzer 2020: 214), and thus utters her final, desperate-sounding threats invoking the ghost of her murdered husband.

What she leaves unsaid is expressed by the monologue Nero delivers immediately after these words. Nero initially struggles to believe what he has just heard. His shock is developed through repetitions and anaphora, and through the obsessive use of words epitomising femininity, such as “*mater,*” “*mulier,*” and “*foemina,*” as though to mark the defining quality of Agrippina's evildoing. He debates whether to punish his mother for her insolence, and slowly comes to the realisation that the best and, possibly, only solution is to murder Britannicus. In making the fratricidal decision, Nero slowly but definitively forsakes the possibility of redemption:

Vivit puer

Britannicus: non vivet, ut noceat mihi:
Hunc tolle matri, spem, modum tollis mali.
Puer est. virilis indoles puerum negat.
Puer est: facilius premitur imprudens puer.
Puer est: futurus Hector, et Ulyssis metus,
Mea timendus matre, non annis suis.
Nihil ille meruit: illa sed meruit nimis.

[...]

Matri cadis, Britannice, mihi, tibi innocens (II, 6, sig. E2v).¹¹

¹⁰ “My poison — or rather (oh, the wickedness!) your poison”.

¹¹ “The boy Britannicus lives. He will not live for my harming. Remove him from his mother and you remove her hope, her means of making mischief. He is a boy. His manly bearing contradicts the fact. But he is a boy. An impudent boy is all the easier put down. He is a boy. A future Hector, a source of dread for Ulysses. He is to be feared because of my mother, not his years. He has not earned his death, but she has very much earned it for him. [...] Britannicus, you die for my mother's sake, innocent as far as you and I are concerned”.

Despite his insistence that the blame be placed upon Agrippina, Nero is perfectly aware of Britannicus's innocence, and the anaphora "Puer est" prompts a series of increasingly irrational reasons to murder him, thereby only emphasising the atrocity of the crime. By his own admission, Nero commits an act of cruelty and injustice by sentencing to death a man, or rather a boy, whom he *knows* to be innocent.

Immediately after waging war against Agrippina and pronouncing Britannicus's death sentence, as though to signal the definitive metamorphosis into his mother, Nero summons the famed poisoner Locusta: "Pollio, Locustam, quam veneficii ream / Custodiendam tradidi imprudens tibi, / Huc affer"¹² (II, 6, sig. E2v). Nero's very first deed as a villain is a markedly feminine one and it mirrors Agrippina's resolve to murder her husband Claudius with the help of Locusta in I, 4, a decision that is explicitly framed in the context of feminine power and wrath: "[F]oemina irata, et potens. [...] Ira et potestas fulgur et fulmen Iouis: / Et vtroque maius foemina"¹³ (I, 4, sig. C2v).

The dialogue between Nero and Locusta reveals that a previous attempt to murder Britannicus had failed: because of her disgust for the crime, she had given him an antidote, instead of poison. The *venefica*, whom Agrippina introduces to the audience as a seasoned murderer — "iam sceleris rea"¹⁴ (I, 4, sig. C3r) — and who has shown no moral qualms in committing regicide, does not dare to carry out Nero's orders until he threatens her with an ultimatum: kill or be killed. Forced to comply, Locusta is invited to brew the deadly poison in Nero's own private chamber, *cubiculum*, thus making him an active party in the crime and effectively a *veneficus*. Nero emulates Agrippina's cruelty and surpasses it: although they adopt the same "womanly" means, Nero's viciousness pushes and transcends previously established moral limits.

Nero's villainy and metamorphosis into a *veneficus* is prophesied by the ghost of Claudius, who opens the second act of the play with a monologue. Up until this point, the sole villain of the play is Agrippina: she alone has concocted the plan that brought her and her son to power, and Nero himself only speaks two short lines throughout the entirety of the first act. After mourning his fate and briefly cursing Agrippina, Claudius' speech foretells the advent of a "falsus Nero" who will depose the true Nero, Britannicus:

Epulae parantur Atrei mensae pares.
Redit ad venena natus in caedem Nero.
Sed cui parantur? O manum retine impiam,
Venefice.¹⁵ (II, 1, sig. D1v)

Claudius describes Nero as "born for murder" but destined to "return to poison," as though tacitly acknowledging the emasculation of Nero, who renounces his natural male inclination in favour of feminine deviance. The antithesis between *caedes* and *venenum* as two opposite manners of killing is seemingly an established concept in the play, for it is expressed again by Nero in IV, 3: "Petit veneno, an caede?"¹⁶ (IV, 3, sig. K2v). The accusation is reiterated by the use of the vocative *venefice* in the masculine form at the beginning of the line.

The fact that poison is a defining quality for Nero is stressed once again by another ghost, this time Agrippina's, who opens the fourth act. The vengeful Agrippina also accuses her son of being responsible for the murder of Claudius: "At mihi maritus alter, at pro te, cadit; / Cadit

¹² "Pollio, fetch that convicted poisoner Locusta, whom I was so imprudent as to entrust into your care".

¹³ "Woman is irate and powerful. [...] For wrath and power are Jove's thunder and lightning – and Woman is an even greater thing".

¹⁴ "[A]lready convicted of evildoing".

¹⁵ "A banquet is prepared equal to the feast of Atreus. Nero, born for murder, returns to poison. For whom is it being readied? Oh, poisoner, stay your evil hand".

¹⁶ "Is he seeking me out with poison or murder?"

veneno, quia tibi prodest, tuo”¹⁷ (IV, 1, sig. I4r). Although Agrippina instigated the crime, it is Nero who is made to be the culprit; the phrasing of the accusation is particularly interesting, for, rather than generally condemning Nero’s moral responsibility, Agrippina refers to the weapon used, which is clearly “Nero’s poison.”

Poison becomes so integral to Nero that Seneca, upon discovering that the emperor has sentenced him to death and sent one of his freedmen to carry out the task, immediately and rightly assumes the chosen weapon to be poison: “iubet / Nero, venenum mihi meus praesens ferat / Libertus?”¹⁸ (V, 3, sig. N3v).

Finally, in the moments preceding and leading to Nero’s downfall, Locusta is once again summoned by the emperor, this time to provide him with poison. Indeed, informed of the revolts against him led by Vindex and Galba, he falls into despair and finally decides to commit suicide rather than being caught and killed by his enemies. As soon as the *venefica* enters the stage, Nero utters these lines:

Vt moriar igitur, Caesarem vt par est mori,
Locusta ferat huc toxicum certum & citum.
Themistoclis, Mithridatis, Annibalis modo
Moriar. Venenum hoc quale?¹⁹ (V, 11, sig. S3r)

Nero compares himself to three great leaders who allegedly committed suicide with poison but, despite his claim that he wishes to die like a Caesar, none of the historical figures he mentions is a Roman: indeed, Mithridates and Hannibal are renowned as two of the most ferocious opponents of ancient Rome. His grandiose assertion, which he pronounces in front of a rather underwhelming audience consisting of his freedmen, the eunuch Sporus, a nurse, two tribunes, and a poisoner, is therefore instantly downscaled, with an almost comical effect. Nero is handed the poison in a golden box, which he intends to use “at the final moment.”

In the following and final scene of the play, tormented by the ghosts of his victims, Nero is prepared to kill himself, but the ghosts take away the box. With this stratagem, Gwinne strips Nero of the chance to discard the poison willingly and opt for a more honourable death without being forced to accept it as inevitable:

Redeo ad venenum: at pyxis, amota est; nimis
Forsan Neroni sit leue veneno mori.
[...]
Ardet, nec audet, animus audenter mori.²⁰ (V, *ultima*, sig. S4v)

With his final act of weakness, Nero fulfils Claudius’ prophecy that he shall “return to poison” and thus opt for *venenum* rather than *caedem*. Although Gwinne’s faithfulness to history prevents him from rewriting the emperor’s death, his intent is clear: had Nero been able to choose, he would not have dared to die bravely.

To fully understand the meaning of Nero’s suicide as a last resort decision and his choice to die poisoned, suicide, death, and poison continue to be central themes throughout the rest of the play: indeed, these topics are by no means limited to the scenes mentioned so far. Often mistakenly regarded as a mere “academic exercise,” with its numerous corpses, many of which

¹⁷ “But my second husband died, though for your sake: he died by your poison, since his death was for your advantage”.

¹⁸ “Does Nero order that this freedman of mine to [*sic*] bring me poison?”

¹⁹ “And so that I might die as befits a Caesar, let Locusta bring poison, speedy and sure. I shall die like a Themistocles, a Mithridates, a Hannibal. What manner of poison is this?”

²⁰ “I return to the poison. But the box has been removed. Perhaps it would be too easy for a Nero to die by poison. [...] My mind burns to die bravely, but does not dare”.

killed on stage, the play in fact displays a taste for visual violence and is closer to the gory tragedies that “[cater] to tastes for the lurid and the macabre” (Sutton 2017: §29n00). Of the thirteen deaths included by Gwinne in his narration, ten occur on stage, and another is described in graphic detail; out of the total number, eight are suicides (including voluntary deaths, suicides issued by the emperor, and Nero’s own suicide), and five can be classified as murders. Whether directly or indirectly, Nero is personally responsible for twelve deaths out of thirteen, the only exception being the murder of Claudius, which is orchestrated by Agrippina.

Although some of the murders are theatrically rewarding and offer the chance for lyrically inspired dialogues or monologues, Gwinne’s way of dealing with suicides is especially interesting. He makes a point not only of staging all the suicide scenes except Lucius Silanus’ (possibly to avoid historical inaccuracy, for Silanus’ chosen means of suicide is unknown), but also of making each character, albeit briefly, comment upon his or her imminent departure. Whether ordered to commit suicide by the emperor or deciding to do so as a last means of achieving an honourable death (“honest[a] mor[s],” V, 5, sig. P4v), all accept the circumstances of their demise boldly and gladly (“Natura, repete; reddo tibi gratus, libens,”²¹ V, 6, sig. Q2v). Almost all the suicides shown on stage are committed by the slitting of wrists, with the only exceptions of Epicharis, who strangles herself with the torture bonds restricting her, and Seneca, who after cutting his wrists accepts poison from his physician “quo cecedit olim Socrates”²² (V, 6, sig. Q2v) to accelerate the process, which is slowed down by his old age. The frequency of deaths intensifies as Nero gets closer to his downfall, with half of the fifth act being devoted to increasingly defiant suicides.²³ Gwinne builds pathos by parading a series of men and women who accept and even embrace their “bloody” deaths, only to shatter the climax and the audience’s expectations rather comically by having the main character cry, lament his fate, and beg for painless poison.

In fact, during his long-drawn suicide scene Seneca utters a remark that, only a few scenes later, could double as an apt comment on Nero’s lamentations before his dreaded suicide: “Maerere duret degener, fortis mori”²⁴ (V, 6, sig. Q1r). His wife Paulina, who is portrayed by Gwinne as equally dignified as Seneca, expresses a similar sentiment: “Piaculum sit, si reluctetur mori / Devota morti victima, ut scelera expiet”²⁵ (V, 6, sig. Q2r). Seneca’s death serves as a foil for Nero’s in more ways than one: Seneca and Paulina imagine their death as the beginning of their eternal life, whereas Nero is not capable of envisioning survival beyond material existence — a sentiment stressed by Epaphroditus who, upon discovering Nero’s dead body, comments as follows: “Caesar en caesus sibi: / Restatque de Nerone tam magno nihil”²⁶ (V, *ultima*, sig. T2v). Seneca compares himself to two great Romans, Cato and Julius Canus, while Nero attempts to evoke the glory of Rome but erroneously cites Themistocles, Mithridates, and Hannibal as Romans, thereby magnifying the comical circumstances of his death scene. Finally, Seneca makes a point of mentioning how Paulina does not wail, despite it being appropriate for a woman (“Moeror mulierem si deceat,”²⁷ V, 6, sig. Q1r); Nero, on the other hand, as stage directions pointedly confirm, spends a good portion of his final moments complaining about his destiny, crying, and weeping.

²¹ “Seek me out, Nature. I return myself to you gratefully and gladly”.

²² “[B]y which Socrates once perished”.

²³ The sequence of suicides, interrupted only by Poppaea’s death scene, occurs thus: Epicharis (scene 4), Piso (5), Seneca and his wife Paulina, who survives (6), Lucan (7), Petronius (9), Thrasea Paetus (10).

²⁴ “A degenerate endures in grief, a brave man chooses to die”.

²⁵ “Deem it a sin, if the victim, consecrated to the expiation of crimes, struggles against death”.

²⁶ “Caesar has killed himself, and nothing remains of great Nero”.

²⁷ “Even if wailing befits a woman”.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, Matthew Gwinne's emphasis on Nero's role as a poisoner throughout his reign is certainly compelling, and, for an early modern viewer or reader accustomed to the archetype of the *venefica*, it would have probably stood out as rather exceptional. Moreover, the fact that *Nero* was written before February 1603, while Elizabeth was still alive, must have elicited a comparison with the Queen, especially as Gwinne himself draws attention to the parallels, or lack thereof, between the two monarchs in the final dedication to Elizabeth: "Tam fama, facta, fata, disparia, ut magis / Nihil esse possit, quàm Anglica Neroni dea"²⁸ (*Chorus*, 5, sig. T3r). Therefore, Nero seems to be a negative foil for Elizabeth and, rather paradoxically, his active abandonment of masculinity in favour of feminine traits and his embracing of poison are major factors in distancing the two rulers. Recognising femininity as an undesirable quality in a monarch, Elizabeth had "disarmingly acknowledge[ed] her femininity and then eras[ed] it through appropriating the prestige of male kingship" through her own speeches. As Mary Beth Rose (2000: 1079) puts it, she overcame the "impediments" that her own sex constituted and thereby defied expectations, much like Paulina does by slitting her wrists and refusing to weep at the prospect of her death. Nero, on the other hand, despite being male, moves in the opposite direction and fails to recognise the qualities required of a good monarch, thus reinforcing the implication that his behaviour was the main cause behind his demise. In this context, Gwinne draws upon the imagery and the typical *topoi* of early modern Roman plays and chooses to adopt poison as a tool to subtly point out and foreground Nero's increasingly feminine characteristics and his renunciation of masculinity, in order to offer a more nuanced portrayal of the evil emperor than previously conceived.

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²⁸ "Her reputation, deeds, and destiny are so disparate that nothing can be more different as our English goddess from Nero".

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