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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

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CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://test-01.dlls.univr.it/teipublisher-cemp/apps/cemp-app/index.html). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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1. Paradoxes of the Real

1

Doing Things with Paradoxes: Shakespearean Impersonations

Silvia Bigliazzi

Abstract

The chapter discusses the functions of figures of contradiction in their various rhetorical and logical articulations in a number of Shakespearean tragedies, arguing that it is the pragmatic context of drama that produces paradoxical effects even when language is not technically paradoxical. In the tragedies this articulation becomes especially complex when paradoxical utterances interrogate the coexistence of being, being-other and non-being, redefining the relation between the ontology and the epistemology of Shakespearean tragedy. The chapter focuses on questions of selfhood and impersonation with regard to theatre and mimesis, as well as identity fabrication. Special attention is paid to selected passages in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, where a whole gamut of figures of contradiction are employed to explore the meaning of simulation in ways that reconfigure the boundaries of self and reality.

Keywords: Renaissance paradox; Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; *Othello*

1. Towards a Pragmatics of Paradoxes

When in 1996 Paul Stevens criticised Rosalie Colie's famous reappraisal of Renaissance paradoxes, he argued that their main flaw was the political noncommitment that paved the way to quietism.[1] One of the examples he brought was Claudius' "brilliant series of paradoxical antitheses" (214) in *Hamlet* 1.2:

> Therefore our sometimes sister, now our queen,

[1] For a similar position emphasising paradox as a dehistoricising device see also Bristol 1985, 11ff.; for a fuller discussion of this point see Platt 2009, 47. A succinct introduction to the debate is in Bigliazzi 2014a.

> Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
> With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
> In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
> Taken to wife. (8-14)[2]

Stevens' conclusion was that "Reassured by these paradoxes, we might ask what are we to do?" (214). Nothing, he replied, in that what follows "is business as usual, and he [Claudius] will take care of it" (ibid.). The first question to arise, though, is whether these are paradoxes at all, and whether any analysis of Renaissance paradox should also consider falsidical ones, which deceive by expressing a non-existent insoluble complexity, or veridical ones, whose apparent insoluble contradiction may in fact be solved.[3] Steven's answer was no (ibid.).

Soon after the appearance of Colie's study in 1966, Frances Yates also found fault in it, selecting the lack of discerning criteria as the reason behind Colie's tendency to find paradoxes everywhere. Although the topic of Renaissance paradoxes had been discussed occasionally before then,[4] it was this book which first argued extensively that paradox was an intellectual and artistic form of political and epistemological subversion, and included different types of contradiction.[5] This position has been defended in more recent years by Platt, with the conclusion that paradox does pose "a challenge to the doxa" (2009, 48).[6] But the question whether clear criteria to identify different types and functions are still needed remains open.

The two main arguments arising from this debate are the agency

[2] If not otherwise stated, all Shakespearean references are to Shakespeare 2005.

[3] See Quine 1966; see also in Stevens 1966 and Platt 2009.

[4] See for instance Rice 1932, Wiley 1948, Burrell 1954, Knight Miller 1956, Malloch 1956.

[5] A stance which has variously been taken up in the following years, for instance by Rabkin 1967, Vickers 1968, Peters 1980, Neill 1981; for references to Shakespeare and paradox see Platt 2009, 45ff. On early modern English paradoxes see also Grimaldi Pizzorno 2007; Bigliazzi 2011 and 2014b.

[6] See also Montrose 1996 and Platt 2009, 51.

of paradox and the need to define what we mean by it within literary and drama texts. If we limit our discussion to theatre, it should be pointed out that the relevance of the pragmatic context requires us to consider a third variable: contradictions, whatever their nature, may or may not produce different effects situationally, and this is an issue that has a profound effect on our sense of paradoxical discourse. If we go back to Stevens' comment that nothing happens after Claudius' speech, we realise that 'nothing' is exactly the effect desired: what Claudius wants is to prevent criticism and carry on with his "business". Claudius' antinomies are part of a politically falsidical speech which elaborates on the rhetorical model of the oxymoron to cover up his own guilt and show moderate happiness in spite of of his brother's death. In other words, it is the pragmatics of the exchange, the intention of the speaker and the nature of the context and the situation which define the quality of the agency inherent in contradictions. Provoking nothing may in fact be exactly what the paradox wants to *do*.

In this particular example, Claudius' antinomies do not flaunt logic but rather the meaning of the words joined in compounds. In this sense they can broadly be called paradoxes while being both veridical and falsidical: the oxymora may be explained as the result of the psychological coexistence of different states of mind, except that this coexistence is factually false (Claudius is not unhappy). By playing on the figures of the oxymoron and the chiasmus, Claudius at the same time flaunts the rules of language and the *doxa*, according to which "joy" cannot be if "defeated". However, this contradiction belongs to the domain of rhetoric which allows for semantic trespass.

This example shows that whatever appears contradictory may be so in various ways and its effects depend on circumstances. In this sense, Hermione turning from stone back to life in *The Winter's Tale* has been considered key to the Shakespearean paradoxical project in ways different from the contradictions just mentioned. As Platt has argued, it is at this point that the audience "fully enacts the play's true meaning" (2009, 201). This episode plays around with the unveiling of the logic behind the impossible embodiment of simulacra which are by definition untrue, so that the counterfactual, impossible transformation of the statue into a

woman eventually finds its explanation in Paulina's story. But, as Platt contends, we are amazed and our amazement requires both acceptance and investigation; we accept unknowing while trying to understand and "complete the play by accepting incompleteness" (ibid.). The paradox is perceived as such as long as we keep our disbelief suspended.

What we sense here are memories of Pygmalion's story as recounted by Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, Book 10). But it is a narrative and its reading does not entail quite the same experience as seeing a piece of stone turned into a body on stage.[7] To find an example somewhat equivalent we should turn to Euripides' *Alcestis*, where we witness Alcestis' enigmatic return from the dead, mysteriously veiled and silent. In early modern England, the story circulated through George Pettie's narrative contained in his 1576 *Petite Pallace of Pettie His Pleasures* (rpt 1608), but it was also easily accessible in Euripides' Latin editions, although in both cases it would have again meant reading the play, not seeing it onstage. Another example might have been Euripides' *Helen*, to which Hermione is indirectly connected by bearing the name of Helen's daughter. Knowledge of this could derive from Ovid's *Heroides* (epistle 8) where she addresses a lament to Orestes about being married to Pyrrhus and having grown up without a mother.[8] Bullough remarks that "The double pathos of wife without husband and daughter without mother may have appealed to Shakespeare, but his Hermione, unlike Ovid's, does not seek relief in copious tears" (1975, 124). All the same, if a connection with Helen may be perceived here through Ovid's Hermione, doubtless this is not Euripides' Helen, although we would have guessed that the radical interrogation of her double status as a woman and as an airy simulacrum raised in that play may have sounded appealing to Renaissance theatre. And yet, the name of Helen recurs in English drama with different connotations. She is not primarily the woman whose double ethereal image rescues her from shame while not preventing the war at Troy, as in Euripides, but the infamous Trojan beauty whose face "launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium"

[7] On the various sources mentioned here see Bullough 1975, 134-5.

[8] See Duncan-Jones 1966 and Bullough 1975, 124.

(A 5.1.90-1).[9] Everywhere Helen is the epitome of female devilish power: she is the "wofull wracke of Troy", as in John Hanson's *Time Is a Turne-Coate or Englands three-fold Metamorphosis* (1604, 18; D1*v.*); she is the "faire Helen the Greeke" for whom "poore Troy endured such cruell ruine and destruction", as in Anthony Munday's translation of Ortensio Lando's paradox 2 ("For the hard-fauored face, or Fowle Complexion", 1593, 18; D1*v.*). Several stories circulated at the time about her fate, but none revolved explicitly around Euripides' version casting her as a victim of the gods. Even an early chronograph such as Lodowick Lloyd's 1590 *The Consent of Time* mentions other plausible versions, now suggesting that she had been abandoned in Egypt by Paris and she had met Menelaus there, now that Menelaus brought her back from Troy, but neither version contains the paradox of the two Helens.[10]

It has been argued that Shakespeare "arrived at [Euripides] through the extensive filtration provided by Seneca", and as Gillespie remarks, although this position has been recently challenged, it is still widely held (2004, 162). Seneca's Helen in the *Trojan Women* is no positive figure: she is entrusted by the Greeks with a false narrative about the prospective marriage of Polyxena with Pyrrhus and is attacked by Andromache (888ff.) before she defends herself. In Euripides, Helen acknowledges that her whole life is a wondrous event, unbelievable since the moment of her conception, when Leda was made pregnant by the divine swan.[11] She is the offspring of Zeus and of a woman transformed by him into a beautiful animal; she originates in the seductive appearance of a divine simulacrum; in Collinus' 1541 Latin translation she is a "prodigium", a monster.

[9] Reference is to Marlowe 2005. Even when, as in the case of Marlowe, the idea of the *eidolon* is what is being toyed with. For a fuller discussion see Carla Suthren chapter in this volume.

[10] Reference is to p. 156. Curiously, the glosses in the margin refer to Iosephus Flavius, *Contra Apionem*, Book 1, and Herodotus Book 2, but while the latter is correct (Herodotus 1584, 98-9), the former is not.

[11] φίλαι γυναῖκες, τίνι πότμῳ συνεζύγην; / ἆρ᾽ ἡ τεκοῦσά μ᾽ ἔτεκεν ἀνθρώποις τέρας; (255-6: "Did my mother bear me as a wonder to mankind? [For no other woman, Hellene or barbarian, gives birth to a white vessel of chicks, in which they say Leda bore me to Zeus.]"; trans. Coleridge in Euripides 1938).

Hermione's transformation into a statue and back to a woman also arouses a sense of wonder; it is like an old tale, Paulina says, at the same time claiming that it is not one and metatheatrically implying the double fictionality of the monstrous event on the stage ("That she is living, / Were it but told you it should be hooted at / Like an old tale", 5.3.116-18). But then the event is brought back to normal and a rational explanation is provided in ways that are not extant in Euripides, where Helen herself avows her amazement at her own birth and her duplication into an ethereal simulacrum, and the audience is informed from the beginning that an image of her has indeed been created and is real in its paradoxical unreality. The audience is invited to believe it and the paradox is solved within the wondrous frame of divine agency.[12]

And yet Nuttall has argued that although "between Euripides and Shakespeare there is only the most tenuous and speculative historical connection", "[i]f we read, not as source-hunters but as critics, we shall see that the late Euripides is *like* Shakespeare as no other dramatist is".[13] But may the wondrous palinodic device of the double Euripidean Helen be felt in any way like a Shakespearean paradox beyond demonstrable relations? Or, to put it differently, is the sense of paradox Helen embodies in her birth and in her following Euripidean approach to her own myth comparable to any of Shakespeare's innumerable paradoxes related to unstable appearances challenging our sense of the real? The virtual absence of the version of her story dramatised by Euripides seems to suggest a convergence of suspicions about idola and misogynistic stances in the English Renaissance, traversed as it was by religious tensions about simulacra, which that particular version of Helen's story at the same time embodied and resolved, possibly contributing to checking its circulation.

Moving from Stevens' discussion of Claudius's speech and from the implications of the similarities and differences between Hermione's amazing transformation and Euripides' Helen in the

[12] For a discussion of epistemological and metatheatrical issues related to an experience of paradox in this play, see Marco Duranti's chapter in this volume.

[13] Nuttall 1989, 8, 9; see also Gillespie 2004, 163.

homonymous play, in the following pages I will concentrate on a particular type of paradox concerning identity at the intersection of ontological and epistemological stances in Shakespeare's dramas. Building on the premise that identity on stage is itself a paradox (Platt 2001, and 2009, esp. ch. 4), I will revise the paradox of acting as discussed by Platt and will assume its relevance in a context permeated by the well-known antitheatrical polemics. My other assumption is summed up in Altman's remark that a dialectic between self and subject is at work "in many a Shakespearean dramatis-persona-cum-character" (2010, 290), which favours the articulation of different forms of contradiction and paradoxes. In his words,

> Shakespeare's experience of acting and observing actors . . . led him to think beyond the vaunted flexibility of orator, courtier, and machiavel, and to query the power of a host self to fit itself deliberately to an action, retain control of the shape it assumes, and know the content of that shape. As a result, he represented persons who variously model actors learning to act or playing their parts, some of whom believe they have mastered their roles, some who find the roles have mastered them, some whose actorial consciousness discovers in varying degrees that they are behaving in ways unclear to themselves, having that which passes show. (Ibid.)

Trying to respond to critiques of lack of analytical criteria in the study of Renaissance paradoxes, I will consider the relation between different types of contradiction in drama within a cultural context which was becoming aware of the potential dangers of simulation and dissimulation. I will then distinguish between doxastic, rhetorical and logical paradoxes in relation to pragmatic uses in a few Shakespearean dramas where veridical and falsidical antinomies alternate with radical antinomies and where what looks like an aporia may dissolve into various forms of only apparent contradictions. But what counts is the fact of their pragmatic uses and effects, in other words their *doing things*. It is precisely this doing things with paradoxes that I will examine with regard to issues of impersonation, suggesting that their doxastic definition does not exhaust their performative potential.

2. Wonder, Simulacra, and Lying

In his *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham wrote that when the poet expresses astonishment and admiration at the exceptional nature of the events he narrates, he uses the rhetorical figure of paradox, which he tellingly nicknamed "the Wondrer". In his *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, Cicero had already clarified that paradoxes are "Quae quia sunt admirabilia contraque opinionem omnium (ab ipsis etiam παράδοξα appellantur)" (4; "These doctrines are surprising, and they run counter to universal opinion – the Stoics themselves actually term them paradoxa"; Cicero 1942), a definition which John Florio was to reproduce in his dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) when he said that a paradox is a "marvellous, wonderfull and strange thing to hear, and uncertain to the common received opinion". Ingeniously elaborating on this sense of wonder, in his 1593 *Garden of Eloquence* Henry Peacham had already spelled out that

> This figure is then to be used, when the thing which is to be taught is new, straunge, incredible, and repugnant to the opinion of the hearer, which this exornation confirmeth by the forms of speech before rehearsed. It is well resembled in two kindes of men, that is, in old men and trauellers, from the one sort we haue the benfit of tradition, and from the other the frute of Geographie, the one kind of these men are messengers of auncient times, the other are Ambassadors of farre places. (113)

This recommendation grasps the Janus-faced sense of a figure that in yoking together opposite views is best used by the bearers of exceptional knowledge. Cautiously, these must be reliable speakers and must not lie:

> In the use of this figure the speaker ought to be a man knowne of credit, lest the which he affirmeth be either lightly regarded, or ridiculously scorned: also regard ought to be had, that the things which we report or teach by the forme of this figure be true. A far traveler that is a lyar, filleth the world full of wonders, and an old man delighting in reporting untruths, leaveth many vanities, and

false traditions behind him. (Ibid.)

The question of lying is central to the early modern experience of paradox within a society which was increasingly becoming aware of the deceits of appearances. Not being a "lyer" nor a "fonde flatterer" was a crucial recommendation at the end of Castiglione's *The Courtesan*. Manners should not display affectation (*affettazione*), and artifice ought to be concealed by way of "reckelesness", as Hoby translated the Italian *sprezzatura* (1561, "A breef rehersall of the chiefe conditions and qualities in a Courtier"). For Cicero dissimulation was pernicious in public intercourse ("ex omni vita simulatio dissimulatioque tollenda est", *De officiis*, 3.15; "pretence and concealment should be done away with in all departments of our daily life"; Cicero 1913), but in common opinion it was deemed useful.[14] In his essay "Of Simulation and Dissimulation", Francis Bacon distinguished three degrees of a "hiding and veiling of a man's self",[15] secrecy, dissimulation and simulation, of which the third one was considered to be an outright "vice, rising either of a natural falseness or fearfulness, or of a mind that hath some main faults, which because a man must needs disguise, it maketh him practise simulation in other things, lest his hand should be out of ure" (2002, 350-1). Bacon's position was coherent with theories of duplicity of language as described in manuals of rhetoric and oratory.[16] His notorious suspicion towards the heuristic value of words brought him to stigmatise language as the idol of the market in *Novum Organum* (1620, 1.43). Before him, Puttenham shifted the attention to the ruses of figurative language, famously calling all ornament a potential abusive and deceitful instrument of discourse. They invert and transport the sense (metaphor), produce "duplicitie

[14] ". . . quello che ha saputo meglio usare la volpe, è meglio capitato. Ma è necessario questa natura saperla bene colorire, ed essere gran simulatore e dissimulatore" (Machiavelli 1961; "Those best at playing the fox have done better than the others. But you have to know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another": Machiavelli 2009, 70).

[15] Bacon 2002, 350; added in 1625 to his original collection.

[16] Vickers has pointed out that his discussion overlapped with that in Francesco Guicciardini's *Ricordi*, a work which circulated widely in various languages (Bacon 2002, 723).

of meaning or dissimulation under covert intendments" as in the case of allegory, or "false semblant", and spoke "obscurely and in riddle" as in the case of Aenigma (1589, 3.7 "Of figures and figurative speaches", 128). It is no surprise, therefore, that for Puttenham allegory was an intrinsically political figure.

Knowledge of the potential for lying residing in language and a consequent distrust of it was indeed brought about by the Reformation (cf. Zagorin 1990), alongside a distrust of any possible or real disguise of one's identity, a question which came to be typical of discussions on religious conformity and communal wellbeing. This extended to political attempts at securing one's social identity through clothing, which prompted a revival of earlier sumptuary laws by way of new Statutes of Apparel (1562 and again in 1574 and 1587; Vincent 2003, 143). The idea that "'seeming' might not be the same as 'being'" was broadly shared and was one that wild moralists continuously railed against, calling it monstrosity (ibid., 10). The word "sincerity" not coincidentally came into regular use by the end of the sixteenth century. So it is no surprise that

> Shakespeare used the terms 'sincerity', 'sincere' and 'sincerely' thirteen times in his printed works (Sidney and Jonson used the terms twice each, while Milton, by contrast, used them forty-eight times in his prose works alone). The advice Polonius gives Laertes in *Hamlet* 'to thine own self be true' may have been a commonplace but it was a relatively new commonplace. What is more, the term 'sincere' was becoming a fashionable one in other languages during this period, notably Italian and French (Montaigne was one of the first recorded users). (Burke 1997, 19-20)

Thus, in a period traversed by the antitheatrical polemics, where theatre was clearly the epitome of paradoxical duplicity,[17] fear of lying was very much akin to fear of a paradoxical reality which in its wondrous appearances shared in the sense of a potentially unreal reality. It was an age that was the cradle of both sceptical relativism aware of the duality of all truth, and of the metaphysical wit whose unbridled paralogical exuberance raised astonishing and provocative contradictions, commingling entertaining surprise and

[17] See Platt 2009, ch. 4.

an effort to grasp the truth hidden beneath the surface of things. As Anthony Munday wrote in the *Letter to the friendly Reader* in his *Defence of Contraries* (1593), paradoxes are "things contrary to most mens present opinions: to the end, that by such discourse as is helde in them, opposed truth might appeare more cleere and apparent" (A4*v.*). Or, as John Donne would write to his friend Henry Wotton in a 1600 letter accompanying his own paradoxes, "they are rather alarums to truth to arm her than enemies" (qtd in Simpson 1948, 316). In other words, there was a diffuse awareness that paradoxes do not only give access to a wondrous reality and new ways of seeing the world, but they are also expected to do something pragmatically, whether disclosing truth or making up one. Theatre was precisely the place where to explore their functioning and potential for lying.

3. Doing Things with Contraries

In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3, Ulysses calls paradoxes the imitations of their comrades-in-arm which Achilles and his friend Patroclus perform in their own tent, grotesquely counterfeiting their faces and gestures. With clumsy and ridiculous movements, they use,

> All our abilities, gifts, natures, shapes,
> Severals and generals of grace exact,
> Achievements, plots, orders, preventions,
> Excitements to the field or speech for truce,
> Success or loss, what is or is not, serves
> As stuff for these two to make paradoxes. (1.3.179-84)

Ulysses feels indignant about their mockery which disturbingly plays around with nonsensical simulacra in times of war, albeit within a closed tent and without an audience. He is offended by their impersonations, which contradict common knowledge about the soldiers' identities and in so doing subvert the ideology behind the expedition to Troy. Achilles and Patroclus deny names, traditions and the sense of the real. Ulysses resents their laziness and above all their turning a war into a ridiculous farce.

But playacting is not the only way to produce contradictions of the kind suggested here. Contraries may flaunt the *doxa*, or

opinions; they may contradict the rules of language as defined in the dictionary; or, more radically, they may go against logic and factuality. It is one thing to contradict common knowledge by denying the cultural discourse, quite another to flout expected sense through contradictory figures such as the oxymoron, and yet another to controvert the principle of non-contradiction, according to which a proposition cannot be simultaneously true and false, or to deny factual evidence. This tripartition helps us identify different uses of paradoxical discourse depending on whether it belongs to an essentially metadiscursive category concerning opinion (*doxa*) or instead with logic and factuality. This distinction becomes especially relevant in the pragmatic context of drama where actions depend on speech acts tied to their situationality.

Criticism has often shown that Shakespeare was fond of rhetorical contradictions suggesting coexistence of contraries,[18] and Macbeth has often been selected as a prime example of this kind of language. The plot is ignited by an enigma which, as Peacham claims, is "like a deepe mine, the obtaining of whose mettall requireth deepe digging, or to a dark knight, whose stars be hid with thicke cloudes" (1593, 29). Differently from the logical paradox, it has a solution, and in fact "it may be understood of prompt wits and apt capacities, who are best able to find out the sense of a similitude, and to uncover the darke vaile of Ænigmatical speech" (ibid.). However, it may be employed "to seduce by obscure prophecie, as oft it hath bene to many a mans destruction, nor amongst simple and silly persons, which are unapt and unable to conceive the meaning of darke speech, and therefore a vanitie" (ibid.). This is exactly what happens to Macbeth, whose paradoxically monstrous experience of not-nothing, or of a nothing which is neither nothing nor being, as Caygill calls such cases (2000, 105-14), alienates him from factual reality, and produces a subjective experience of paradoxical contradictory states: "nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.140-1). As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (2005), this paradoxical experience identifies a semiotic border between different contradictory articulations of 'non-being': factual, symbolic, imaginary. In the case of Macbeth, his apparent irresolvable antinomy becomes a veridical paradox

[18] Cf. for instance Burrell 1954; Duthie 1966; Hussey 1982, 194; Kranz 2003.

once the temporal states are separated and "nothing" refers to the obliteration of factual reality in the present, and "what is not", instead, to Macbeth's imaginary desire to become king in the future.

Like this chiasmus, other figures of repetition and inversion produce in Shakespeare a similar sense of antinomic thinking that may or may not translate into veridical or falsidical paradoxes depending on the position of the subject. This implies that, as in this case, more than one perspective may co-exist. The hendiadys, for instance, which Puttenham called the "figure of Twinnes" as it "will seeme to make two of one not therunto constrained" (1589, 147), has sometimes been interpreted as producing paradoxical effects because it may convey a highly complex perceptual and cognitive experience. G.T. Wright has explored its occurrences in *Hamlet* and has found it to be paradoxical in expressions such as "for a fantasy and trick of fame" (4.4.52), by which Hamlet defines the ephemeral reasons behind the Norwegian captain's leading his soldiers to fight in Poland virtually for nothing. While paraphrasing it as for a "deceptive dream of fame", Wright claims that "if we take the words one by one, it is hard to make them and their syntax add up to this meaning" (1981, 169). And yet, this well-known example shows neither semantic nor logical contradiction, but a hierarchical sequence of thoughts: 1. wish of fame, 2. foolish act, a "trick" aimed at gaining fame (see also Kermode 1985).

Differently from these examples, the aporia is by definition an irresolvable contradiction. Othello experiences a sense of paralysis caused by this type of antinomy when he finds himself unable to decide between alternative and equally plausible hypotheses about the honesty of both his wife and Iago: "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not, / I think that thou art just, and think thou are not" (3.3.389-90). Not coincidentally Puttenham deals with this figure, which he calls "the Doubtfull", soon after "The Wondrer", considering it not "much unlike" it (1589, 189). In turn, Peacham emphasises that it is a logical stumbling block in any argument: "This figure most properly serveth to deliberation, and to note perplexity of the mind, as when declaration is necessarily required, and the knowledge either through multitude of matters, or ambiguitie of things can direct nothing, or say very little" (1593,109).

Syneciosis (from *synoikein*, or to cohabit) also joins forcibly

contrary ideas, overturning current perspectives and showing that contraries may have something in common; and yet it is not a purely metalogical figure. Puttenham calls it the "figure of the Crosse-couple" (1589, 172), while for Peacham it "teacheth to conioine diverse things or contraries, and to repugne common opinion with reason, thus: The covetous and the prodigall are both alike in fault, for neither of them knoweth to use their wealth aright, for they both have it and both get shame by it" (1593, 170). "I must be cruel only to be kind" (3.4.162), says Hamlet to his mother when he fashions himself as divine executioner ("scourge and minister", 159), manifesting a psychological tension while justifying himself ethically. In all such cases, except for the aporia, contradictions are not logical, but rhetorical and doxastic or semantic. And yet they may acquire metalogical value and be combined in complex articulations of thought that not only describe a puzzling sense of the real but in so doing perform actions.[19]

4. The Oxymoron

As already noticed with regard to Claudius' speech mentioned above, unlike metalogisms, which are logically contradictory and deny factuality, the oxymoron flaunts opinion. If metalogical figures contradict facts external to language, and this is ascertainable by comparing signs and referents,[20] this comparison is not necessary with the oxymoron. To give a simple example, the expression 'black sun' either refers to an eclipse, and therefore is denotative, or the contradiction may function as a metaphor for melancholy (the sun is a star and influences humours; black is a colour endowed

[19] For other Shakespearean examples see Joseph 1947, 135.

[20] "En somme, le métalogisme exige la connaissance du référent pour contredire la description fidèle qu'on pourrait en donner. Par la voie de métasémèmes associés, il peut d'aventure arriver à modifier le sens des mots, mais en principe il va à l'encontre des données réputées immédiates de la perception ou de la conscience. C'est pourquoi il semble qu'à la différence du métasémème, il doive contenir au moins un circonstanciel égocentrique, ce qui est reconnaître qu'il n'y a de métalogismes que du particulier" (Groupe μ 1970, 125).

with symbolical negative connotations).[21] The expression "today the sun is black" would become paradoxical if we realised that there is no eclipse. The metalogical paradox, unlike oxymora, therefore, concerns those states of affairs and events that constitute the immediate dramatic context of the stage action. The possible metalogical emphasis of other non-metalogical figures depends instead on a specific illocutionary intent in relation to the context.

To give just one example of how reference to semantics and the cultural discourse, in the case of the oxymoron, and to the context, in the case of the metalogical paradox, may have different dramatic effects, let us consider the first lines of two well-known splenetic characters: Romeo and Hamlet. In the famous sequence of oxymora with which Romeo draws his self-portrait as a love melancholic, he speaks the language of Petrarchan sonneteers not with a view to being untrue, but to emphasising the contradictions of a psychological state consistent with stereotypes of unrequited love: "Tut, I have lost myself, I am not here. / This is not Romeo; he's some other where" (1.1.194-5). It consists of an exuberant display of rhetorical clichés of well-known literary origin that only causes pensiveness to Benvolio ("Dost thou not laugh?" Benvolio: "No, coz, I rather weep", 180). His speech has nothing of the complex articulation typical of turbulent thinking in Shakespeare's late plays (Kermode 2000, 16). Its artificial style is appropriate to an exposition functional to the construction of a character who has just appeared on stage and whose strange behaviour the audience has only just heard his father talk about.

Hamlet's use of the oxymoron in his first lines is immediately

[21] As Groupe µ point out (1970, 120), in the oxymoron "La contradiction est absoloue parce que'elle a lieu au sein d'un vocabulaire abstrait, où la negation a cours: 'orde merveille', 'soleil noir'. Nous avons donc une figure où un des termes possède un sème nucléaire qui est la negation d'un classème de l'autre terme. Mais la question se pose en vérité de savoir si l'oxymore est réellement une figure, c'est-a-dire si elle possède un degré zéro. Comme Léon Cellier l'a très bien mis en avant, l'oxymore est une *coincidentia oppositorum*, où l'antithèse est niée et la contradiction pleinement assumée. Elle serait donc irréductible à un quelconque degré zéro. En fait, l'examen des occurrences montre que fort peu d'oxymores sont vraiment irréductibles".

performative in ways that Romeo's are not. His puns on "kin/kind" and "sun/son" are clearly provocative and their metalogical value is politically subversive in targeting the excess of 'kinship' and 'kindness' Claudius 'shows' in his first address to him. Claudius cannot be both father and cousin simultaneously, unless we consider time, social role-play, and a figurative use of language (I'll be *like* your father), which Hamlet unveils by literalising meaning and exposing Claudius' aporetic statement as evidence of his untruth:

> KING Take thy fair hour, Laertes, time be thine
> And thy best graces spend it at thy will,
> But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son –
> HAMLET A little more than kin and less than kind.
> KING How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
> HAMLET Not so much, my lord, I am too much i'th' sun. (1.2. 62-7)

Claudius has just presented himself as the new king with a speech ebullient with oxymoronic imagery suggesting elaborate hyperboles through contrived antonyms. As we have seen, they are not aporetic, but ingeniously descriptive of his pretence of grievous joy. Hamlet's response is to unveil the deceits concealed in rhetoric and this is where the process begins: his strategy is to turn Claudius' oxymora into logical paradoxes.[22]

Hamlet's reply to Claudius, in contrast to the one Romeo addresses to Benvolio, is immediately relevant to the action on the dramatic level, so much so that Gertrude promptly intervenes, urging him to strip himself of the colour of night and reconcile with the kingdom of Denmark. Under the paronomastic pun on "kin" and "kind", evoking the proverb "the nearer in kin the less in kindness", Hamlet shows the possibilities for subtle semantic shifts through sound play and perspectival inversion, eventually overturning Claudius' statement by way of an additional pun ("less than kind": not of the same kind, but also unkind). Layering multiple messages within a single short line counts as exposing the deceitfulness of ornate language. Obscure and yet literal speaking prompts metalingual reflection on figurative discourse as the very

[22] For a discussion of this passage see Serpieri 1986, part 1, chap. 4, esp. 101 and ff.

site of counterfeit, so that the metalogical value of the antithesis functions as an implicitly polemical illocution. By claiming that he is a little more than a relative ("kin") and a little less than of the same 'blood' ("kind"), and therefore less than a son, Hamlet rejects Claudius' address and contradicts the identity fabricated for him, where he is both nephew and (adopted) son of the new king. He then contradicts Claudius' metaphor for his melancholy (his cloudy mood) by polemically implying impatience with being his "son" (he is too much i'th'sun"), and rejecting his own new identity as the (acquired) son of this king, while in fact being one.

These are famous lines which hardly need comment, except for the fact that if we consider the different functions of the figures of contradiction and repetition it allows us to grasp their significantly different roles. Romeo's and Claudius' oxymora express artificiality, conveying the sense of stereotypical passionate confusion and of a simulated emotional conflict, respectively. In contrast, Hamlet uses the logical paradox ("cousin and son") with the provocative intent of showing the insincerity of Claudius' line: his paronomasia on sun/son is imbued with a metalinguistic function that unveils the potential ambiguities inscribed in language. In displaying the contradiction immanent in Claudius' construction of his own identity as 'cousin and son', Hamlet provokes an interrogation of the court discourse and of the assumptions of truth in articulated language. This kind of paradoxical speech implies epistemological and hermeneutical questions that demand an immediate tie to the situationality of the action and therefore proves relevant to the pragmatics of drama.

5. The Diaphora

Shakespeare often uses the diaphora with a metalogical value although it too concerns the field of semantics rather than logic. It consists in the use of a noun with a denotative meaning first and then a connotative emphasis (e.g., "a father is always a father"). There are, however, instances where the speaker expresses a subjective sense of contradiction and incorporates negation in the diaphora while tying it to the circumstances of the illocution. At the end of Romeo's lines mentioned above – "This is not Romeo; he's some other where"

(1.1.195) – the deictic "This" underscores the situational context of his line which sounds paradoxical only if we do not keep the Romeo we see now separate from the one he was in the past – it is the temporal conflation that makes Romeo experience the condition of being a living aporia. Likewise, no genuinely paradoxical import has the Antony who is no longer himself, but only a plaything in the snares of Cleopatra's passion in Philo's words ("Sir, sometimes when he is not Antony, / He comes too short of that great property / Which still should go with Antony", 1.1.59-61); or the Othello who has lost his name after killing Desdemona (Lodovico: "Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?" Othello: "That's he that was Othello: here I am", 5.2.289-90); or, again, Hamlet's split identity in his apology to Laertes for the murder of Polonius, which he ascribes to intermittent madness: "Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet. / If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away, / And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, / Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it" (5.2.179-82). In all these cases, antinomy is subjectively perceived as insoluble although a solution may be provided once it is referred to time passing and change: one is not at one time who one is at another. So, the negative diaphora in Desdemona's response to Cassio, who urges her to intercede for him with the Moor, has an explanation, although she does not see it. "My lord is not my lord" (3.4.122), she says, avowing ignorance of what has happened to him and whether in him different personalities cohabit. As we will see later, Othello is simultaneously himself and other ('he is not he'), and his otherness is referred to a temperamental change ("humour altered", 123) which rationalises the paradox, while still leaving Desdemona puzzled. A similar sense of alienation is conveyed by Lear's famous negative diaphora acknowledging his daughters' disowning his royal identity:

> Lear Does anyone here know me? [Q]Why[Q], this is not Lear.
> Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
> Either his notion weakens, [Q]or[Q] his discernings are lethargied
> – Ah! [Q]sleeping or[Q] waking?
> [Q]Sure[Q] 'tis not so. Who is it that can tell me who I am?
> [F]Fool[F] Lear's a shadow. (Shakespeare 1987, 1.4.217-21)

Unlike what emerges in Philo's lines, or in Othello's and Hamlet's

in the previous examples, these lines do not suggest a temporal change, but as in Desdemona's case, Lear conveys his bewildered perception of simultaneously being and being-other. In other words, the diaphora becomes an aporia which defines his mental state, caught in an insoluble, logical and circumstantial, paradox.

How strongly the metalogical diaphora may define the sense of split identities in a specific dramatic context is perhaps no better expressed than by Troilus in *Troilus and Cressida* 5.2. Troilus has just witnessed Cressida's betrayal with Diomedes, and although he refuses to believe that she is the one he has just seen together with the enemy in the Greek field, he cannot deny it. It is precisely this hesitation in the face of the coexistence of two antinomian options which provides the paradoxical knot from which his reflection begins: "Rather, think this not Cressid" (135). Torn between his inner gaze on an ideal and pure love, and what he actually sees with his eyes, Troilus gets entangled in a tortuous argument, attempting to deny to himself what his eyes show him. The speech unfolds through a *sorite* based on a sequence of flawed syllogisms, where each sentence's last word is repeated at the beginning of the following one as in a *climax* ("If beauty have a soul, this is not she; / If souls guide vows, if vows are sanctimonies, / If sanctimony be the gods's delight, / If there be rule in unity itself, / This is not she", 141-5). The conclusion is that Cressida is not Cressida, which entraps him within circular thinking, bringing him back to where he started: "This, she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida" (140). Nonetheless, Troilus cannot fail to notice the fallacy of his own reasoning, which is grounded on a counterfactual, metalogical diaphora ("this not Cressid"), as well as on doxastic and obtusely axiomatic assumptions: 1. beauty has a pure soul; 2. vows come from the soul; 3. therefore they are sincere. Hence, his reflection on the absurdity of his own discourse rooted in flawed reasons disproves the premise that the woman he sees is not Cressida, and he suddenly becomes aware of being subject to a "Bifold authority" (147): a metalogical way of thinking that turns rationality against itself without thereby causing it to be lost ("without perdition", 148), while making insanity ("loss" [of reason]) appear rational without thereby causing it to be turned against itself. We get here at the heart of an insoluble antinomy, pivoting on chiastic duplication,

where reason is equated with madness and madness with reason. In Troilus' distraught mind Cressida's identity is split into two:

> . . . O madness of discourse,
> That cause sets up with and against itself!
> Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
> Without perdition, and loss assumes all reason
> Without revolt. This is, and is not, Cressid!
> Within my soul there doth conduct a fight
> Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
> Divides more wider than the sky and earth;
> And yet the spacious breadth of this division
> Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
> As Ariachne's broken woof to enter. (145-55)

These famous examples suffice to signal the dramatic relevance of the diaphora and its flexible uses in conveying contradictory viewpoints on issues of identity with respect to different types of positionality of the speaker. What is not technically paradoxical may be articulated rhetorically in ways that in fact express its being experienced as such. The puzzlement provoked by an anamorphic sense of double identity was first explored by Shakespeare in the Plautian *Comedy of Errors* and later revived, still in a comic key, in the twinning between Viola and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* as well as in innumerable other examples of cross-dressing with well-known gender implications for characters, actors, and audiences alike.[23] But in the tragedies it acquires a different complexity and poignancy. There, the metalogical sense of the coexistence of being and being-other in the same person is not finally solved in a happy ending, but bears on the tragic unfolding of the story redefining the relation between ontology and epistemology through reflection on the dialectic between being, being-other, and not-being.

More on this soon. In the meantime, it may be remarked that in these uses of the negative diaphora we perceive the subject strive to come to terms with the sudden awareness of an insoluble duplicity of the self, puzzled by the revelation of the instability of reality when

[23] On the broader topic in Shakespeare's England see for instance Orgel 1996.

the boundary between true and false fades away. Desdemona's line quoted above is addressed as much to herself as to Cassio, just as Lear's diaphora, which in the Folio is responded to by the Fool, yet not in the Quarto. Or, again, Troilus' diaphoric contradictions are the language of a confused state of mind, and his reflection on the meaninglessness of his own reasoning is but the self-reflexive voice of his solitary speech.

More immediately performative at the level of action, on the other hand, is Hamlet's paradoxical line addressed to Claudius, thus representing a case in point, articulating a polemical antagonism towards his interlocutor by combining figures of repetition and metaphorical expressions. This shows the dramatic flexibility of a figure which, while not being strictly paradoxical, may acquire a metalogical function whose performative force radiates on the action even when, as will be seen, it leads to a barrage of meaning. This is especially interesting when language becomes paradoxical while not being logically contradictory, or when the antithesis it pivots on allows for multiple significations depending on the position of the receiver both within drama and as external audience. In such cases, which interrogate theatre through explicit or implicit metatheatrical strategies, language suggests paradoxical short circuits around an ontology of being which is irreducible to received binaries. Demonstrating this are Hamlet and Iago.

6. Impersonations 1

At the end of 2.2, after the player's performance of Aeneas's tale of the fall of Troy and Hecuba's woe, Hamlet famously engages for the second time in a soliloquy where he accuses himself of laziness and lack of passion:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all the visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his all function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.

For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? (2.2.552-62)

In her re-evaluation of the reception of Greek dramas and models in early modern English theatre, Tanya Pollard has recently read Shakespeare's choice of Hecuba as allowing him to "explicitly explore the effects of tragedy, and especially of a tragic protagonist, upon audiences". More precisely, the figure of the Trojan queen would hint at a specifically female tragic experience unexpectedly viable for a male tragic hero as a tragic paradigm (2012, 1077). This reading grafts a gender paradox on to the more traditional paradox of acting confronted by Hamlet through the Player's Hecuba speech, complicating the levels of impersonation: the male player empathises imaginatively with a tragic Queen who provides the Prince with a contrastive model for his own passion. Platt has seen this speech as the occasion for Hamlet to be both troubled and empowered (2009, 155) in so far as, following the sudden revelation of the effect of theatre upon the audience, he ends up accepting the paradox. The actor is and is not Aeneas and himself at the same time, and his acceptance of this paradox prepares him "for the paradox of being and dying" (164). In this light, theatre is not only a practical device whose usefulness Hamlet intuits and then handles in order to provoke Claudius' reaction validating the words of the Ghost. It is also the instrument leading him to a fuller understanding of life and the acceptance of non-being as part of it.

I will argue that the levels of impersonation interrogated here, beyond gender troubles, imply an even more articulated approach in terms of simulation and otherness, and that the tensive relation with being complicates the traditional being/non-being antinomy. My reading of the scene suggests a climax of Hamlet's sinking into doubt, rather than the opposite. It is precisely his inquiry into the ontology of seeming as being-other, or being-like, rather than not-being, which makes it irreducible to the traditional being-versus-seeming binary as two opposed categories, and eventually translates into an aporia with a specific effect on the unfolding of drama.

Both Pollard and Platt concentrate on the latter part of Hamlet's meditation upon the actor impersonating Aeneas who tells the

story of Hecuba, underlining the effect of the play on the audience. Polonius asks that the acting be stopped for excess of pain and this pinpoints the power of theatre over the spectators – an influence that was famously feared by the antitheatricalist polemists, worried that the audience might be deeply corrupted by spectacle (Platt 2009). Yet Hamlet's initial focus is on the workings of impersonation and the power of the "nothing" which is Hecuba to move the actor to tears, not the audience. The actor is two steps away from the Trojan Queen; he is speaking as Aeneas about the massacre of Priam and what first comes to mind is Aeneas' tale to Dido in Book 2 of *Aeneid*, a most famous tale at the time. The first four books, particularly 2 and 4, were more frequently read in Tudor grammar schools than any other passage from Virgil's epic (Burrow 2019, 56) and its first seven books were translated by Thomas Phaer in quantitative verse in 1558 (the whole twelve books were first published in 1573). In the same heroic Latinate metre Richard Stanyhurst translated the first four books in 1582, while Books 2 and 4 were also translated in blank verse by Henry Howard Earl of Surrey already in 1557. So, what the player is doing here is very likely declaiming a poem or possibly a piece from a closet drama, rather than performing the kind of play Hamlet will ask the actors to put on to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.607). What he is puzzled by is not only that acting may result in the simulation of such a passionate remembrance of Hecuba's despair, but that it also causes the actor to show visible signs of inner pain, prompting the first part of his question: What's Hecuba to him? This is riddling, of course, and yet reasonable: Hecuba is the woman Aeneas suffers for first by eye-witnessing her tragic fate in Troy, and then by recalling it now. Through the imagination the actor becomes Aeneas, Hecuba is the object and cause of his suffering, and this was no surprise for anyone who knew Quintilian's famous comparison between the orator and the actor.[24] At that point, the player is both himself and other-than-himself – he is the real actor in a real context and an unreal character in a fictional space. But above all, as far as his identity is concerned, he is himself and other at the same time.

This concern becomes an insoluble conundrum in the latter

[24] Inst. Orat. 6.2.35-6; cf. Altman 289 and n10, 406.

part of Hamlet's question: what is the actor to Hecuba? He is the player who revives the narrative of her tragedy by impersonating Aeneas. However, Hamlet's provocative question implies a specific relation in the context of passionate playing: causation. While it is clear why Hecuba causes pain to the actor through Aeneas (she is the "nothing" he suffers for within the fictional world of the play), there is no reasonable answer to what the actor causes her once he steps into the world of playacting. This is a purely speculative question, but in its being raised at this point it suggests anxiety and uneasiness about both the epistemology and the ontology of impersonation as a specific process distinct from audience reception to which he will move shortly. While the first part of the question is perfectly sensible and goes straight to the heart of the nature of simulation, the chiasmus of the second part produces a logical short-circuit pointing to the paradox inherent in impersonation once the relation between being and being-other is inverted. These two views bifurcate into two different directions: on the one hand, the extraordinary fact that acting may passionately affect the audience induces Hamlet to devise the Mousetrap; on the other, the aporia of the reciprocal, chiastic commerce between reality and fiction plunges Hamlet into an even deeper crisis of knowing. If the relation works well, albeit mysteriously, in one direction, why should it not work in the opposite one too?

But here questioning stops short at the insolubility of the aporia. It is another turn of the screw about the possibility of knowing one from the other beyond doubt and to understand their mutual relation, as well as how the "nothing" of Hecuba may translate into the tangible and visible 'something' embodied in the physical presence of the actor, while not allowing for reciprocity. Such a chiastic question impedes to reach a stable sense of what being is. Not coincidentally Hamlet will soon compare himself to the actor blaming himself for vicious laziness, as if the real passion for revenge he should be moved by were compatible with any actorial impersonation of passion. 'If this actor felt the passion I should feel he would cleave the general ear and would make the audience mad', he says; 'but I only keep prating and do nothing'. Although determined to use theatre in order to obtain confirmation of Claudius' guilt on account of the effective proof of the audience

response to the Hecuba tale, the 'to be and not to be' meditation will follow soon afterwards before the staging of the Mousetrap, shifting the question from the meaning of the paradox of acting in relation to reality, with the correlates of being and being-other, to a radical questioning of the alternative between life and death.[25]

In this sense, Hamlet's journey towards the acceptance of a divinely scripted life according to which readiness is all and providence decides for him, is clearly connected with the aporetic question raised in this scene on the reversible relation between Hecuba and the actor. And yet it does not descend from it. It is not the solution of that paradox and the acceptance of simulation as part of life that ignite that journey. On the contrary, it is once he disentangles himself from the trappings of simulation and its paradoxes that he eventually contemplates life from the point of view of death – the possibility of his own radical, irreversible non-being. His witnessing the passage of the Norwegian troops who "for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds" (4.4.60-1) is the first step in that direction – for the first time this 'untheatrical' vision of men directed to their possible death pushes him to commit himself to "bloody" thoughts (65). Then the discovery of the deadly plans Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are charged with on the way to England suddenly frees him from the fetters of questioning, from an epistemology of doubt grounded in the aporetic interrogation of the relation between Hecuba and the actor – a scene that had not solved that epistemology, but contributed to strengthening it. Back from his voyage to England, Hamlet moves beyond those questions and is finally prepared to present himself as "Hamlet the Dane": no longer the tragic hero fraught and paralysed with doubt, stuck in self-scrutiny and in epistemological conundrums, but an epic-like hero eventually endowed with agency, bearing the heroic legacy of his own dynasty and name, ready to die if heaven so wants.[26]

Those few lines from the Hecuba scene draw an ontology of

[25] Which, as Colie points out, is still envisioned through figures of life: "It was not fear of not-being that held him back from taking his life as much as it was fear of some continued exacerbation of consciousness ("conscience," in the older idiom) in the sleep of death" (1966, 493).

[26] For a more elaborate discussion see Bigliazzi 2001.

seeming as being-other which goes beyond the traditional being/non-being polarity, questioning the very nature of impersonation. Hamlet's interrogation results in the apprehension of an unresolvable antinomy which can be overcome only if he moves away from it to consider the performative effects of theatre on the audience. This suggests to him the stratagem of the play within the play although it does not avoid his engagement within the circle of seeming and playacting. In order to sidestep that antinomy and escape the paralysis caused by his questioning of being and being-other he must proceed to a different type of impersonation – one which does not assume a gap between being and being-other (the playacting of his antic disposition and the duplicity of Claudius), but that incorporates in his own identity the role of Hamlet the Dane as the avenger of his murdered father.

7. Impersonations 2

Like Hamlet, Iago too creates logical short circuits about being and being-other that play around with an ontology of seeming. And he too, albeit for different reasons, manages to formulate an extreme type of insoluble paradox while being able to use "paradoxes that could have come from the books of Lando, Munday, and Donne" (Platt 2009, 88):

> IAGO O, beware, my lord, of jealousy.
> It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
> The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss,
> Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger:
> But O, what damnèd minutes tells he o'er
> Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!
> OTHELLO Oh, misery!
> IAGO Poor and content is rich, and rich enough,
> But riches fineless is as poor as winter
> To him that ever fears he shall be poor.
> Good God the souls of all my tribe defend
> From jealousy! (3.3.169-80)

Iago's mock encomium of the cuckold unaware that he is one and of the poor man who does not know his misery has an immediate

perlocutionary effect on Othello, who suddenly wants to *know*, not imagining that Iago will never bring unequivocal factual evidence. But the ensign's strategy of falsification of truth does not begin here, as these lines are only a step in the process imbuing deceit with the credibility of doxastic wisdom. Although Iago's "verbal playfulness" in 2.1 shows delight in handling doxastic knowledge (Altman 2010, 238), he is at his best when he simulates logical paradox through convoluted contradictions (Bigliazzi 2005, 124-35). The play has just opened and his first self-presentation on stage consists in the famous negative diaphora "I am not what I am" (1.1.65) often read by critics as a blasphemous inversion of the "I am that I am" for God's name in Exodus 3.14.[27] This expression is now generally identified with Iago, but it was first used by Shakespeare in *The Twelfth Night* when Viola, aware of Olivia's attraction for her own androgynous self, tries to shun her homoerotic advances by hinting at her own disguise as Cesario:

> OLIVIA Stay. I prithee tell me what thou think'st ? of me.
> VIOLA That you do think you are not what you are.
> OLIVIA If I think so, I think the same of you.
> VIOLA Then think you right, I am not what I am. (3.1.135-9)

As in the case of Viola's veridical paradox, Iago's "I am not what I am" may be rephrased as "I am not what I seem", a meaning which is entirely consistent with his self-presentation as a hypocrite in the previous lines. He has just told Roderigo that by professing to follow the Moor he only pursues his own interest. After all, "Were I the Moor I would not be Iago" (1.1.57), he says, suggesting that Othello would not like to be his ensign while being the General in the Venetian army. And yet, his intention remains unclear as "would" may and may not have the implied sense of 'willingness' suggesting

[27] The expression "I am what I am" does not appear anywhere in the Geneva Bible, but only in 1 Corinthians 15.10 in King James' Bible, which however followed Shakespeare's play. At any rate, in that point it does not define God but Paul, who is what he is thanks to His grace: "But by the grace of God, I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vaine; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me".

his craving for advancement. If it had, Iago would state the obvious: the Moor is not Iago, a claim whose glaring evidence would raise questions on the need to state it, unless there is something unsaid about the definition of 'being' and the reciprocal relation between the two of them through projection and negation.[28] Desdemona's reply to Cassio, who pleads for her intercession, "My lord is not my lord" (3.4.122), reinforces this sense, while clearly, and more simply, referring to Othello's change of mood since his arrival in Cyprus, except that the change implies a deep and inexplicable mutability of his self.

But to return to Iago's negative diaphora: the fact that the line has come to be associated with him is also because it bears overtones not present in Viola's use. Elsewhere in the play, mention that seeming is not the same as being crops up when Desdemona avows that she is not merry due to Othello's absence from Cyprus, so her apparent cheerfulness is only a pretension ("I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am, by seeming otherwise", 2.1.125-6). The language she uses makes it clear that being and seeming are kept separate, suggesting a stable self ("the thing I am") behind the visible mask of apparent joyfulness. This implies that she too knows 'seems', and yet in ways different from Iago, whose knowing it appears to be a defining feature of his 'being' in a deeper sense. Iago's line implies a stratification of meanings connected with the causes of his behaviour, whose final explanation is continuously deferred. All the reasons he adduces in his soliloquies never fully explain why he "hate[s] the Moor" (see 1.3.378-82 and 2.1.290-306; Bigliazzi 2005, 131-3). And yet the end frustrates expectations, because Iago's final puzzling tautology disallows access to causality, and silence is his only answer: "Demand me nothing. What you know you know".

So, by looking back at Iago's initial negative diaphora, we are led to sense a subtle articulation of an ontology of seeming that challenges ideas of selfhood through the positionality of the subject. What is Iago's position here and how does he relate to the other characters beyond pretensions, and to what extent do these contradictions define his own relation to himself? If 'I am not what I am' assumes that 'I am' is different from 'I seem', then what is 'I

[28] For a fuller discussion see Serpieri 2003.

am'? As already recalled, the soliloquies do not provide satisfying answers, but rather define 'I am' circumstantially: through an unspecified hatred of the Moor, his desire for revenge about possible cuckoldry (his doing his own office in his sheets, 1.3.179-80), his lust for Desdemona (2.1.290ff.), as well as his revenge over Cassio whom he fears "with [his] nightcap too" (2.1.306). Are these different facets making up what Altman calls a "host self", or are they rather discontinuous "circumstantial" selves (190)? And if so, is there a "host self" at all?

Of course, the main problem in Iago's line is the "what", as it does not define *what* Iago is. But being so undefined, his "what" can only point to an encompassing, if vague, essence. Are we to understand that that core of selfhood shifts situationally and plays around with different levels of disclosure? One should ask whether he is sincere with Roderigo at that point, and to what extent his not being what he is formulates two different messages intended for his interlocutor on stage and the external audience. Is he impersonating a hypocrite for the sake of Roderigo or is his self-portrayal the only possible epiphenomenon of shifting subjectivities, at a deeper level composing the *what* of his being?

The aporia cannot be solved, but what matters is that it is dramatically and tragically relevant precisely as an irresolvable paradox. Its articulation differs from both Viola's negative diaphora as a veridical paradox, and Hamlet's aporetic questioning of impersonation through a reflection on the irreversible causality between being (the real actor as person) and being-other (the persona). In Iago's case it is hard to identify his shifting positions because he is not playacting in a play, where characters are scripted, but in life, where he is continuously scripting himself. Reality is not the same as theatre, and the life-as-a-stage metaphor remains a trope (as in *As You Like It*, 2.7.139ff.). The troping of the subject through that metaphor is precisely what reveals the gap between world and stage, the one being *like* the other, not identical with it. This is the gap that separates actorial impersonation within the fictional world and 'being' as 'being-other' in the real world. In other words, the question with Iago is whether a sequence of being-others makes up an ontology of being where the assumed "host self" is lacking.

The parasitical attitude towards the Moor detectable in Iago's

self-projection into the general's social position and identity in the line recalled above is not isolated, and this reinforces the sense of a reciprocal mirroring also at the level of paradoxical discourse. When Lodovico, amazed by Othello's violent reaction to Desdemona's attempt to intercede with him on behalf of Cassio, asks whether the "noble Moor" might be mad ("Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?", 4.1.271), Iago finds no better expression than the allusive "He's that he is" (272), which resonates with his initial negative diaphora ("I am not what I am") as an inverted figure of it. Iago's reticent allusion is to the Moor's character and, implicitly, to his psychological (and cultural) strangeness as part of what he is – a Moor, albeit a noble one, is still a Moor and therefore other than them.[29] "I may not breathe my censure", Iago continues, "What he might be. If what he might, he is not, / I would to heaven he were" (272-4). Iago's empty signifier "what", which refers back to "that" in the previous diaphora ("He is *that* he is", my emphasis), strengthens the paradoxical ambivalence of his statement, whose variable meanings depend on how we interpret "might". If temporally, it alludes to what the Moor could *become*, and the line could be rephrased as follows: I cannot say, except by litotes, what I think about how violent he will grow; if his present violence is not yet what he will be capable of, I pray heaven that what he has done be the worst he can do. This is spelled out in his following lines as a gloss: "Faith, that was not so well; yet would I knew / That stroke would prove the worst" (275-6).

But the line may also be read differently, for instance, as an aporetic subtext descending from the equally aporetic acceptation of Iago's initial negative diaphora: Othello too is not what he is. In this case, the conditional does not draw a different temporal scenario, but rather suggests the uncertainty of all interpretations, so that Iago's statement would sound like a comment on his "He's that he is", metadiscursively pretending that he cannot say explicitly what the diaphora means. 'I fear that deep down he might be worse than he appears to be (what he is), and if this is so I pray heaven

[29] Although it is true that here Lodovico does not refer to his barbarism, it is undeniable that that implication is active from the start; all deviance from the Venetian norm is quite naturally connected with his otherness.

to be wrong'. Whichever way we read the line, it projects on to Othello the possibility that he be not what he is, in a perverse game of projections and assimilations resulting in veridical paradoxes as well as, simultaneously, in logical short circuits. Lodovico only response is one of astonishment ("What, strike his wife!", 274).

Between this exchange and the first "I am not what I am" the plot of deception unravels. At its centre, in 3.3, it is Cassio's turn to be woven into Iago's own net of contradictions and ambiguities:

> IAGO   For Michael Cassio,
> I dare be sworn I think that he is honest.
> OTHELLO I think so too.
> IAGO   Men should be what they seem,
> Or those that be not, would they might seem none!
> OTHELLO Certain, men should be what they seem.
> IAGO   Why then, I think Cassio's an honest man. (3.3.129-34)

The conditional mode expresses hope, as reference is to certain men, not everybody, and this is what renders the syllogism fallacious: 1. one should not appear different from what one is; 2. those who do not seem what they are should not appear as if they were what they seem; 3. Cassio is honest. But the argument is flawed for other reasons too. Iago appears to be obsessively repeating his own self-portrayal by making continuous variations on similar antinomies about others, as if that first diaphora were the matrix of all his subsequent fabrications of other people's identities. In this case, if "none" refers to "Or those they be not", Iago claims that 'those who appear different from what they are' (and therefore are not honest) should not appear as 'those who appear different from what they are': i.e. they should not seem dishonest, which is nonsensical – why should anyone want to appear dishonest? One would if somebody made them look so. But his final claim is that Cassio is honest and this is inconsistent. If instead "none" refers to "men", Iago would claim that those who are not what they seem should not look like men since they are monsters. As Colie remarks,

> In his paradoxical sentence [I am not what I am] Iago lies and does not lie; for he *is* in fact what he is not since he is, and proves himself by the action of the tragedy to be, not really a man, a member of

> human kind. As he says of himself, in an ultimate deceit, telling the truth out of context. (1966, 243)

The argument is so convoluted and peppered with equivocations that Othello cannot but feel that there is more in it, and wants to know more ("Nay, yet there's more in this. / I prithee speak to me as to thy thinkings", 135-6). Iago has definitely *done* something with paradox here.

Iago's final tautology tells us that knowledge is not achievable; it is not an awareness of not knowing, in a Socratic sense, but is identical with not-knowing. This is his final word which eventually inverts the negative diaphora into a tautology. It suggests meaning while finally eroding all possible sense.[30]

8. Coda

The actor is simultaneously himself and someone else in a context which is real (the stage) and fictional (the drama world) at the same time. In this intrinsically contradictory space, Iago and Hamlet interrogate the self/other experience of impersonation in ways that suggest, albeit differently, that seeming and simulation are not identical with not-being, prompting a reflection upon a paradoxical ontology of appearance irreducible to the traditional being *vs* seeming binary. If 'not to be' for Hamlet is 'to die' in his famous soliloquy, theatre is something quite different. It has existence in ways different from factual reality, and it is precisely this otherness which defines it. In this sense, Hamlet's interrogation of impersonation does not lead him to accept 'not to be', but instead gets him stuck in the act of interrogating the paradox of the irreversible causality of 'being' and 'being-other'. In *Hamlet*, the paradox is an active, provocative figure of speech which denies quiescent approaches to the dialectic between being and seeming; in *Othello* it represents the paradigm of double identity, not hierarchically articulating the "being/ appearing" alternative, but suggesting a 'being ↔ being-other' relation that challenges conceptual traditions. Hamlet eventually

[30] After all, also the tautology is an argumentative figure in so far, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend (1969), it never suggests absolute identities, in that being close to the diaphora.

overcomes the paradox of an ontology of 'seeming' hinged on the reversibility of being and being-other by posing that question, which he leaves unsolved; Iago lets us glimpse the antinomian symmetry and paradoxical coexistence of being and being-other in the world. In either case, paradoxical discourse, in whichever rhetorical, veridical, falsidical or aporetic forms it manifests itself, endows the speaker with agency in the pragmatic context of drama – a *doing* that is not denied even when it results in a questioning which cannot go beyond illogical reversibility or result in anything other than tautological silence.

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