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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England
General Editor Silvia Bigliazzi

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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

S K E N È   Theatre and Drama Studies

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://dh.dlls.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp). 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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Robert Wardy was Reader in Ancient Philosophy at The University of Cambridge and a Fellow of St Catharine's College for many years, where he taught Western and Chinese Philosophy and Classics. His research encompasses ancient Greek natural philosophy, the history and theory of rhetoric, the theory and practice of translation, Taoism and seventeenth-century interchange between China and the West, and Plato's *Symposium*. He is also working on two large projects devoted to the history of thought experiments and paradoxes. He is currently Professor of Philosophy at The University of Arizona.

Introduction

Marco Duranti and Emanuel Stelzer[1]

1.

In his *Apology for Poetry* (published posthumously in 1595), Sir Philip Sidney defended poetry from the imputation that it is "the mother of lies" (a Platonically-inflected view of considerable force among Puritan preachers) with these words: "I answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar", because a poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lies" (1975, 123). Poetry makes its own reality and thus makes no truth claims: "the truest poetry is the most feigning", as Touchstone puts it in *As You Like It*, 3.3.13,[2] where feigning may be reminiscent of its Latin etymological meaning (*fingere*), 'to mould', 'to create'. Feigning liberates the poet from being "captived to the truth of a foolish world", as Sidney had written (1975, 111), but what Shakespeare, through Touchstone, stresses is that "if the truest poetry is genuinely the most feigning, true poetry is not an outpouring of emotion, but the exercise of skill in simulating (feigning) that emotion" (Belsey 2007, 38). And theatre is the site where this paradoxical feigning is embodied. As Patrick Cheney suggests: "The word 'feigning' can mean both *imaginative* and *deceptive*; Touchstone means the former . . . but his author also evokes the latter. Shakespeare does so not to agree with Plato, but to draw attention to the *theatricality* of poetry: the truest poetry is the most theatrical" (2008, 106).

Similar explanations of the disassociation of poetry (which could be synonymous with fiction in the early modern period, see *OED*

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1 Section 1 was written by Emanuel Stelzer, and Section 2 by Marco Duranti.

2 All quotations from Shakespeare, unless otherwise stated, refer to Shakespeare 2016.

"poetry", n., 1) from truth claims can be puzzling and have often been criticised: "an assertion that affirms nothing sounds like a variant on the Liar's Paradox and no less confusing or contradictory" (McCoy 2013, 65). One of the foremost literary scholars of the past century, René Wellek, declared himself "content to understand fictionality in the broad sense of 'semblance', *Schein*, illusion (which is not deception), as a man-made, intentional world which draws on the real world and sends us back to it" (2018, 22). Mimetic, illusory "semblance" was understood as a precondition of fiction in the early modern period, too, although an oft-repeated tenet was that the didactic purpose of mimesis should be distinguished from another type of semblances, that of artificial embellishments. As Henry Reynolds put it in his *Mythomystes* (1632), truth remains "plain and simple", although clothed in "silken and thin paradoxical semblances" (A3*r* – 'paradoxical' meaning here contrary to common opinion) lest a poet should produce "mere embroideries upon cobwebs" (E*r*).[3] Reynolds is following Sidney in this statement, who had advocated as follows:

> I speak to show that it is not rhyming and versing that makes a poet, no more than a long gown makes an advocate who though he pleaded in armour should be an advocate and no soldier. But it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by. (Sidney 1975, 103)

But the Elizabethans had a place in which costumes, whether gowns, armours, etc., could actually transform their wearer: the playhouses. Theatre is built on the constitutional condition of make-believe, where "the doubleness of fact and fiction . . . is incarnated in the actor's own body" (Wilson 2004, 147). The problem is that, whereas for some, "theatre elicits . . . complicity rather than belief" (Greenblatt 1988, 119), in certain cultures, such as the early modern one, "complicity and belief are", paradoxically, "inextricably intertwined and involve each other" (Anthony Dawson, qtd in Lesser 1997, 195). And dramatists could foreground these issues, as discussed by William O. Scott:

3 I have modernised the spelling.

> . . . one could say that theatrical performance is broadly similar
> in its very nature to the liar paradox. Umberto Eco . . . considers
> that the mere presence of an actor on stage implies the assertion,
> 'I am acting'; thus 'By this implicit statement the acter tells the
> truth since he announces that *from that moment on* he will lie'.
> This situation is not quite a paradox if the distinction between
> true moments and the ensuing false moments can be held; but it
> often does not hold, as in the many performances where the aim
> is precisely to demolish the boundaries between the performance
> and its context. The lie may be announced by nothing other than a
> lysing show with which we the audience already play at collusion.
> (1990, 74)

We believe that drama uses paradoxes in a special way and the resonances of those uses can affect the communication among the *dramatis personae* on stage and between the stage and the spectators, because "paradoxical discourse, in whichever rhetorical, veridical, falsidical or aporetic forms it manifests itself, endows the speaker with agency in the pragmatic context of drama" (Bigliazzi 2022, 73).[4] Early modern English drama inevitably made much of paradox, as has been established by Rosalie L. Colie (1966) and Peter G. Platt (2016): the English plays of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were created and recreated a culture of paradox that was ubiquitously to be found, from art to science, from the engagement with the classics to religious discourse.

In the early 1590s, Henry Percy, the Ninth Earl of Northumberland, nicknamed 'The Wizard Earl' for his love of experimenting in alchemy and mathematics, and a patron of various dramatists, including George Peele, and, perhaps, Christopher Marlowe, commissioned Nicholas Hilliard to paint a cabinet miniature of himself[5] larger

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4 In Duranti and Stelzer 2022, we classified paradox into these three categories: a) statements which contradict the doxa, or common opinion; b) figures which are intrinsically contradictory while being commonly accepted (e.g. the oxymoron); c) logical paradoxes, either veridical or falsidical, which flaunt the principle of non-contradiction. See the Introduction to CEMP 1.1.

5 Sir Roy Strong's attribution of the subject of this cabinet miniature (now at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) to Henry Percy has recently been questioned by Cathy J. Reed (2015), who seeks to identify the sitter with Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex, instead. Hower, this new ascription

than usual portrait miniatures. The picture (which can be seen on the back cover of this volume) shows a fashionably melancholy gentleman lying in a "geometrically ordered but optically tilted garden" (Elam 2017, 237). He is dressed in black, has discarded his book, hat, and gloves, and pensively gazes on the onlooker. Above him there hovers an enigmatic inscription, "TANTI" (Italian for "so many" – or alternatively, a spelling variation of TANT'È, "so much for that!"; Latin for "worth as much"), below a scale, hanging from a tree, which paradoxically balances in a state of perfect equipoise a quill and a spherical object that has variously been interpreted as a globe or a cannonball.

Keir Elam labels the portrait as "a possibly alchemical imagetext" filled with secret and ambiguous references: for instance, "the abandoned book can be read, as it were, as both cause and symptom of the Earl's elevated folly" (239), connecting this iconography with Hamlet. And what about the paradox represented by the scales? Is the fact that the quill is shown as heavy as the other object, as Graham Reynolds suggests, "a tribute to the power of the pen against the world" (1964, 283)? Had the Earl heard of Galileo's legendary experiments involving throwing different weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa? Certainly, there is a general atmosphere of meditation concerning arcane mysteries, philosophical and/or mathematical. Roy Strong goes so far as to interpret the *impresa* as an "illustration of the Archimedian proposition that 'unequal weights will balance at unequal distances, the greater weight being at the lesser distance'" (2019, 151). Or is "TANTI" an expression of elitism as conveyed by Gaveston at the beginning of Marlowe's *Edward II*?

> As for the multitude, that are but sparks
> Raked up in embers of their poverty,
> Tanti! I'll fan first on the wind
> That glanceth at my lips and flies away.
> (1.1.20-3)[6]

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has been contested in turn, see Cachaud 2016.

    6 A connection between this miniature and Marlowe's play has been discussed by Kuriyama 2010, 94-5, and Sivefors 2018, 46-7.

What interests us is that the spectator is faced with a theatrically staged paradox which performs the function that the sitter of the miniature has carefully commissioned. It is not just a riddle which presupposes one correct answer only. "Paradoxes remain open-ended, problematic, challenging. But performative presentations of such contradictions hold out the possibility of an experiential resolution, however partial or fleeting" (Crockett 1995, 28). In a similar way, the essays included in this volume are devoted to showing how paradox in early modern drama can address epistemic crises and interrogate naturalised assumptions.

This book originates as a continuation of Volume 1.1 in the CEMP (Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England) series. Like the previous volume, it is interested in discussing the functions and uses of paradoxes in early modern English drama by investigating how classical paradoxes were received and mediated in the English Renaissance and by considering the dramatists' purposes in choosing to explore the questions broached by such paradoxes.

2.

The essays included in this volume are articulated into three sections. The first, "Paradoxical Culture and Drama", is devoted to an investigation of classical definitions and theories of paradox and the dramatic uses of paradox in ancient Greek drama which formed the breeding ground for the development of paradox in the Renaissance. In this volume we do not look for specific iterations of a given paradoxical motif, but we are interested in showing how the culture of paradox, also in drama, was born in antiquity and was then developed in the early modern context. The second section, entitled "Paradoxes in/of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama" looks at the functions and uses of paradox in the play-texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Finally, the essays in "Paradoxes in Drama and the Digital" examine how the Digital Humanities can enrich our knowledge of paradoxes in classical and early modern drama.

The first essay deals with the contest between the Stronger Speech and the Weaker Speech in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (889-1114)

in relation to the new education propounded by Socrates. The final victory of the Weaker Speech has been considered paradoxical since antiquity. Alessandro Stavru shows that Socratic education blends the two models of the Stronger and the Weaker Speeches. On the one hand, it is the evolution of the traditional educational system and its temperance (*sophrosyne*) with respect to bodily pleasures. On the other hand, the Socratic education entails the skillful use of rhetoric and eristic which is typical of the Weaker Speech. Paradoxically enough, this mastery of rhetoric allows the Socratic pupils to argue in favour of the satisfaction of all pleasures, thus destroying that same temperance they were proud of.

In the second essay, "Paradoxical Agathon and His Brethren", Robert Wardy reappraises the cultural significance of a dramatist only a few fragments of whose works still survive: Agathon. After discussing the contents and style of these fragments, as well as the ancient testimonies on his life and works (mainly Plato), Wardy extrapolates from the historical and the Platonic Agathon a speculative taxonomy of paradoxes in Greek philosophy. His hypothesis is that the Greek paradoxical culture reveals two lineages: on the one hand the austerely serious paradoxes, on the other, the anarchically seriocomic ones. Wardy fits Parmenides, Zeno, and Plato into the first lineage; Gorgias and Agathon into the second. Thus, Wardy's article aims to pave the way for a more systematic taxonomy of paradox in ancient Greek culture.

The second section, "Paradoxes in/of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama", is opened by Beatrice Righetti's article on Shakespeare's comedies. Righetti detects a causal relation between the character's gender and his/her argumentative strategies whereby female characters tend to prefer commonly accepted ideas and values (what Aristotle would call *endoxa*), whereas male characters employ paradoxes with confidence. This may be traced back to Shakespeare's – possibly unconscious – assimilation of contemporary rhetorical practices. Comparisons between early modern male and female writers show that women usually avoided paradoxical expressions, since they probably perceived the dangers of arguing against common opinion or the rules of logic. As they were struggling to be acknowledged as equal interlocutors in a male-dominated intellectual world, they felt that the use of paradoxes would have

been perceived as outrageous, thus providing male readers with the excuse to avoid addressing the content of female writings.

Rocco Coronato's article focuses instead on Shakespeare's tragic paradoxes, and with a particular attention to *Othello*. Firstly, he points out how the traditional norms of sincerity – as codified in the Western tradition since Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* – are challenged in the paradoxes uttered by Othello and Iago. Whereas Aristotle had praised honesty as a virtue that consists of mediocrity, in *Othello* this virtue clashes with its extreme violations: boasting (Othello) and dissembling (Iago). Dissimulation serves the purpose of concealing the self by creating a free, autonomous space, which Montaigne would call the *arrière boutique*, the backshop. Secondly, Coronato examines the role of defamation in *Othello*, showing that slander gets paradoxically more rampant after the slandered character's death: for instance, Othello's accusations against Desdemona become explicit after he has killed her. Eventually, Othello resorts to self-slandering through boastful exaggeration, talking of himself as if he were already dead. The architect of all this, Iago, a true manipulator of reality thus creates the ultimate undecidable paradox: how to transform non-being into being.

Next comes Bryan Crockett's chapter "Paradox in Performance", which applies to early modern cultural plays, especially Shakespeare's, the notions developed by the mid-twentieth century anthropologist Victor Turner. According to Crockett, the early modern theatre became the site of what Turner called a social drama: a series of different stages beginning with a breach of societal norms and ending with a reintegration into society. Such social drama found expression in the language of paradox. In Turner's view, any culture has its central or 'root' paradigms, which are intrinsically paradoxical, "a coincidence of opposites, a semantic structure in tension between opposite poles of meaning" (1975, 88-9). Turner believed that the root paradigm of early modern European culture was essentially sacrificial, involving the individual's rejection of selfhood as a response to Christ's martyrdom. Crockett builds on Turner's theory and identifies Shakespeare's age as a period of crisis, when the paradoxical status of root paradigms was reinforced, and performative negotiations of the crisis tended towards either a conscious embracing of the paradox in all its contradictoriness or a

resolution of the paradox into one of its contrary principles. Within this theoretical frame, Crockett examines some Shakespearean paradoxes involving oxymora.

In the following essay ("The Digges' Family and the Art of War"), Andrew Hadfield examines Leonard Digges' posthumously published *Four Paradoxes, or Politique Discourses Concerning Military Discipline* (1604), and focuses especially on the fourth paradox in this collection entitled: "That warre sometimes lesse hurtfull, and more to be wisht in a well governed State than peace". Hadfield places this paradox in the context of the early modern discourse on war, contrasting it with Erasmus' famous and much cited maxim "Dulce Bellum Inexpertis", comparing it to George Gascoigne's poem *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*, and reading a few early modern plays through this perspective. Hadfield's conclusion is that, in the early modern times, the paradox according to which preparing for war was the best way to keep peace was more familiar and accepted by the readers than Erasmus' plea for peace.

In the last essay of this section, entitled "'Indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers': William Cornwallis and the Fiction of Richard III", Francesco Dall'Olio sets William Cornwallis' paradoxical *Praise of King Richard the Third* (printed in 1616) against the backdrop of the English Renaissance literary tradition on Richard III. Moreover, he illustrates the points of contact between this paradoxical encomium and Girolamo Cardano's "Neronis Encomium", inspired by Machiavelli's political theories. Dall'Olio points out how Corwallis' work reversed the traditional negative judgment about this king, thus laying the ground for his revaluation in later historical works. On a more general level, Cornwallis questions the foundations of Elizabethan historical writing both on the conception of how to write history and in the idea of what makes a good king, while at the same time taking up and developing ambiguous traits present in that same tradition which included Shakespeare's history plays, as well as Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (acted in 1579) and the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (printed in 1594).

The first chapter of the third and final section, "Searching for Ritual Paradoxes in Annotated Ancient Greek Tragedies", shows how digital resources and computational instruments can

effectively help researchers analyse recurring themes and motifs in ancient Greek tragedies. As Gloria Mugelli and Federico Boschetti point out, this analysis can be applied to ritual paradoxes staged in ancient Greek tragedies, based on the contrast between the tragic events and the ritual context of the festival in honour of Dionysus in which the plays were staged. Mugelli and Boschetti then present the annotation system Euporia, created thanks to the collaboration between the Institute for Computational Linguistics "A. Zampolli" (CNR-ILC), and the Anthropology of the Ancient World Lab (LAMA) at the University of Pisa. By applying this system to the analysis of a selected corpus of Greek tragedies, they point out how the mournful tone of tragic rituals was at odds with the festive celebration of Dionysus, thus defining tragedy's paradoxical extraneousness to its ritual context.

In the following chapter ("'It Is a Happiness to Be in Debt'. Digital Approaches to the Culture of Paradox in Early Modern Drama"), Alessandra Squeo moves to early modern English culture, aiming to show how an open-access archive of machine-readable versions of paradoxes like CEMP may be used to gain deeper insights into Shakespeare's drama in relation to the early modern episteme. Squeo focuses on the notion of debt as a rich source of paradoxes, and analyses debt-related discourses in Shakespeare's plays, and especially in *The Merchant of Venice*. Her analysis makes clear that Shakespeare employs debt paradoxes in order to problematise established assumptions related to the value of money in a rising capitalist society.

The last chapter of our book, Michael Best's "'Do you see this?'. Ambiguity and Paradox in *King Lear*", illustrates possible strategies for enhancing the readers' visualisation of paradoxes, thanks to the wide range of presentations and interactions allowed by digital media. For instance, the informatic tools can enable the reader to juxtapose the two variant endings of *King Lear*. Critical readings of the play usually comment that its finale entails a complex paradox, but this view is based on the Folio's more extensive ending. If we read this scene in the Quarto edition, substantial variants appear and the paradox loses its force. Thus, in cases like *King Lear*'s final scene, the juxtaposition of variant versions of the text prompts the reader to evaluate the specific effects of using paradoxes in drama.

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